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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 22 July 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

1. **Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce waiting times at A&E departments. [905319]

2. **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce waiting times at A&E departments [905320]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): This Government inherited an intolerable situation in A&E, where over a decade of Tory failures left patients waiting in pain. We are doing the hard work needed to start repairing that damage. Our new urgent and emergency care plan is backed by nearly £450 million, which will mean 800,000 fewer A&E patients waiting more than four hours this year, new urgent treatment centres, mental health crisis centres and almost 400 replacement ambulances. Those are just some of the steps that we are taking to rebuild our national health service.

Lillian Jones: I welcome the progress this UK Labour Government have made in reducing A&E waits in England. That sadly contrasts with a crisis in Scotland, where recent figures revealed 2,472 Scots waited over eight hours to be seen. Jackie Baillie rightly warned that

“Lives are being put at risk”

under the SNP, and it has been years since the Scottish Government last met any of their targets. Does the Secretary of State agree that only Labour in Westminster and in Holyrood has a serious plan to back NHS staff and cut waiting times?

Wes Streeting: I agree with my hon. Friend. There is no sign of the SNP Members this morning. They have obviously clocked off for the summer—or maybe they are just sparing their blushes, because the party has been in power for close to two decades in Scotland and has been steadily driving the NHS into the ground. The chair of BMA Scotland has said, “the NHS is dying before our eyes”

with the SNP. It is on its fifth NHS recovery plan in less than four years. Scotland needs a new direction with a Scottish Labour Government. Working in partnership, we will fix the NHS across the United Kingdom and make it fit for the future.

Sojan Joseph: One of my first visits after being elected last year was to the A&E department at the William Harvey hospital in my constituency, where 19 patients were being treated in the corridors and others faced long waits for treatment. I therefore welcome the progress that has been made so far on reducing A&E waiting times. However, too many people end up at A&Es like the one at the William Harvey because they have no other option. What are the Government doing to increase care options in local communities, including the use of virtual wards to ensure that more people are treated closer to home and that patients in A&E are those in an emergency?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is unacceptable that corridor care became the norm under the Conservatives. We will not accept it as normal; it is not acceptable. Ahead of this winter, we will require local NHS systems to develop and test plans to significantly increase the number of people receiving urgent care services outside hospital, including more paramedic-led care in the community, more patients seen by urgent community response teams, and better use of virtual wards. Together, we will improve our emergency services and make sure that people get the right care in the right place and at the right time.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The Government have spoken passionately about how minor injuries units, such as the one at Mount Vernon hospital in my constituency, help to take the pressure off A&E by diverting less urgent cases for treatment elsewhere. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his time for a brief discussion about that last week. Will he now respond to the 25,000 local people and my constituency neighbours, including the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who are joining my campaign to save the minor injuries unit? Will he intervene with the Hillingdon hospitals NHS foundation trust to prevent the unit's closure?

Wes Streeting: Configuration of services is a matter for local commissioners. However, let me take this opportunity to reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have taken into account representations received from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), as well as his letter. I apologise to him for the delay in response, but I assure him that he will get one.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): In June, just 66% of patients admitted to Woking's local A&E at St Peter's hospital were seen within four hours. That is way below both the national target and the national average of 76%. Will the Secretary of State agree to investigate that to find out why my constituents of Woking are facing such lengthy and unreasonable waiting times?

Wes Streeting: As the hon. Gentleman knows, urgent and emergency care services have been struggling right across the country, but he is right to identify where there are serious and significant variations in performance. One of the focuses of this Government is to try to reduce unwarranted variation from one NHS provider to another, so that we get consistently good standards of care across the country. I commit to write to him to further explain why there are particular challenges in his area and what we can do together to help resolve them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Respiratory syncytial virus—RSV—is a common reason for attendance at A&E and admission to hospital among older people, and I have raised this repeatedly. Last week, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommended that the RSV vaccine programme should be extended to the over-80s and those living in adult residential care homes. Can the Minister confirm that these vaccines will be available in time for this winter season?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly reassure the shadow Minister on this. The Minister for Public Health has already accepted that recommendation and is working at pace on implementation. May I wish the hon. Lady well in the Opposition reshuffle?

10-Year Health Plan: Perinatal Mental Health

3. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the 10-year health plan for England on perinatal mental health. [905322]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The 10-year health plan sets out ambitious plans to boost mental health support across the country, including for women during the perinatal period. During the year to April 2025, a record 64,805 women accessed maternal mental health services or specialist community perinatal mental health services, such as those at the Whiteleaf centre in Aylesbury. The Department for Education is also investing £500 million to roll out Best Start family hubs to all local authorities in England, which will also support new mums.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I am really grateful to the Minister for her answer and for her focus on this. I would like to ask about midwives, who do incredible work supporting parents and babies, including identifying and supporting women who are facing mental health challenges. We desperately need more of them, yet the Royal College of Midwives has found that eight out of 10 student midwives who are due to qualify this year are not confident that they will find jobs. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that newly qualified midwives are able to find work?

Karin Smyth: I recognise my hon. Friend's great work in this place to support women on this issue. We recognise that newly qualified midwives are experiencing challenges in gaining that first role. That is partly due to the record number of midwives in post and to better retention rates. NHS England is working with employers, universities and regional midwifery leads to help midwives find those roles after qualification and to transition into workforce, and we will keep a close eye on that with them.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): In assessing the impact of the 10-year plan on perinatal health for England, can the Minister assure us that the lessons learned will be shared across the rest of the United Kingdom, to enhance care quality and reduce regional disparities, especially in Northern Ireland?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the important need to share the learning across the United Kingdom, and I will make sure that we do indeed make efforts to do that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Over the weekend, *The Guardian* reported that the number of women dying in the perinatal period had risen sharply since 2015. Families that have been failed, and health professionals feel that whether it is perinatal depression or unsafe births, lessons are not being learned and the same errors are repeated in review after review. Alongside the inquiry that the Secretary of State has launched, will the Government immediately implement every action from the Ockenden review and put an end to this national scandal in maternity service?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady has raised a really important issue. She highlights the work that the Secretary of State is putting in place to address these issues and finally bring all that together to produce a plan that will assure people, and we are working at pace to ensure that those recommendations are implemented.

Neighbourhood Health Centre: Long Crendon

4. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of siting a neighbourhood health centre in Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire, as part of the 10-year health plan for England. [905323]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): This Government aim to establish a neighbourhood health centre in every community by 2035. We are starting in areas of greatest need where healthy life expectancy is lowest, including rural towns and communities with higher deprivation levels. Planning work has already begun. The hon. Gentleman will know that I updated colleagues yesterday in a “dear colleague” letter around integrated care boards and local authorities being invited to apply to participate in the national neighbourhood health implementation programme.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. He will have heard me put the case for Long Crendon many times over many years, and given the proposals for neighbourhood health centres in the 10-year plan, Long Crendon offers a very quick win. The community has the land, the planning permission and a GP practice willing to serve there; it just does not have the funds for the bricks and mortar to build it. Can I ask the Minister to meet me and the members of Long Crendon parish council who are leading on this, so that the Government can get a quick win on neighbourhood health centres?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Member is clearly a doughty campaigner—I am sure that will mean something good will happen for him in the reshuffle that we are all watching with bated breath. I am happy to have that discussion with him. As I said, the neighbourhood health process will be driven primarily by identifying areas where healthy life expectancy is lowest and deprivation is highest. Clearly, he makes a case for his area, and I would be happy to have that discussion with him.

Mr Speaker: The question is on Long Crendon, so we will see how Josh Fenton-Glynn does.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Before I start, I pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), who faces his last set of Health questions. He is an incredibly kind man—we spoke after the loss of my brother—and a fantastic shadow Secretary of State. I am not sure how they will replace him.

One of the key shifts we need to see in the 10-year plan is from hospital to the community. Key to keeping people out of hospital is tackling the dental deserts, with dental problems being the biggest cause of children aged five to nine going to A&E. Will the Minister assure me that the new neighbourhood health centres will include dentistry—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not linked to the question. That is why I was really bothered when I called the hon. Gentleman.

Mental Health Research Funding: Eating Disorders

5. **Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): What recent estimate his Department has made of the proportion of mental health research funding allocated to eating disorders. [905324]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Department is committed to finding new ways of tackling eating disorders through research. We are supporting research projects, including the eating disorders genetics initiative—one of the largest studies of its kind—and have a £4.25 million collaboration with other UK research funders to build new partnerships in eating disorder research. We are also strengthening support for people with eating disorders by recruiting more mental health workers, expanding mental health support in schools and embedding it in young futures hubs.

Mr Quigley: Eating disorders cost the UK an estimated £9 billion each year, yet research into these serious conditions receives just 1% of all mental health research funding. That is despite eating disorders affecting around 9% of people with mental health conditions, the consequences of which are delayed diagnosis and treatment and often lengthy hospital admissions. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the eating disorder charity Beat to discuss how the Government can break this cycle and ensure that eating disorder research receives the attention and investment that it urgently needs?

Stephen Kinnock: I know that this subject is close to my hon. Friend's heart, and I pay tribute to him for his work on it. We recognise the devastating impact that an eating disorder can have, and the earlier the treatment is provided, the greater the chance of recovery. The Department continues to work closely with NHS England, which is now refreshing guidance on children and young people's eating disorders. I commend the work of Beat, and I would be happy to discuss this further with my hon. Friend.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The eating disorder issue is escalating, as the Minister rightly points out. Will he agree to hold discussions and consultations with the devolved structures in Northern

Ireland, Scotland and Wales, so this issue goes to the top of the list of issues that have not really been dealt with in the past but need dealing with now?

Stephen Kinnock: We remain in close contact with all our colleagues in all the devolved Administrations. I will certainly be following up with officials as we develop the research programmes that we are working on, and as we integrate eating disorders into the broader work we are doing around mental health. Getting 8,500 more mental health workers and creating Young Futures hubs and mental health crisis centres is just some of the work that this Government are doing on this important issue.

Urgent Eyecare: East Yorkshire

6. **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of urgent eyecare in east Yorkshire. [905325]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): The right hon. Member's constituents can access urgent eyecare services from Hull University teaching hospitals NHS trust 24 hours a day, seven days a week and from a range of high-street optical practices locally. Integrated care boards are responsible for commissioning primary and secondary eyecare services to meet local need. As part of our 10-year plan, we are keen to explore how we can make best use of our primary eyecare workforce as we consider shifting more healthcare into the community.

Graham Stuart: Would it were so. My constituent Scott Young, a 34-year-old father-to-be from Beverley, was left permanently blind in one eye after NHS failures, including a two-month delay to urgent surgery following a diabetic haemorrhage, which the trust now blames on admin mistakes. When the same issue threatened his remaining sight, identical delays occurred until I intervened. Yet the Hull University teaching hospitals NHS trust response contained factual errors, including claiming that a heart condition delayed surgery even though it had not been diagnosed when the delay occurred. Does the Minister agree that such failings demand accountability, and what steps can he take to improve the administrative processes within our hospitals?

Stephen Kinnock: I am very sorry to hear of Scott's experience. What the right hon. Gentleman has outlined is clearly unacceptable. I will absolutely follow up on that issue with officials and report back to him. We cannot allow that sort of poor performance to exist, and those responsible must be held to account.

Electronic Patient Record Systems

7. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve electronic patient record systems in the NHS. [905326]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): My hon. Friend will know that trusts have responsibility for securing—using the approved procurement framework—an appropriate electronic patient record system that delivers all the core capabilities set out in the digital capabilities framework. Since 2022, £1.9 billion has been invested in digital transformation, including in the roll-out of EPRs to NHS trusts that do not have one and in support to optimise existing ones.

Gareth Snell: The Minister will be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and I have been working on a replacement system for the University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust in north Staffordshire, which would improve public and patient experience, and productivity, at those hospitals. Will the Minister meet us so that we can consider how further to unlock that funding to improve productivity and patient experience in good time?

Karin Smyth: I commend my hon. Friend, and our hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), for their diligent work with their trust and local system. Progress is being made on that EPR, which will have huge benefits. I will ensure that he has a clear outline of progress to the final planned operating of the go-live date for that issue. I am happy to meet him.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Blocked beds cost Pembury hospital £18,000 every night, yet discharge teams have to manually phone care homes to place people there. My constituent Debbie has created a dashboard—it is basically like Skyscanner—to accelerate discharges by matching discharged patients to care beds. It has already received seed funding of £200,000 from Kent county council, and could save up to £7 million a year in Pembury alone. Will the Minister meet me and Debbie to discuss that idea?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman highlights the serious problem of staff operating in an analogue age in the NHS, which we keenly highlighted in the 10-year plan. We want to move the system into a more digital age. We would be very happy to hear more about the scheme that he outlines and the great work that staff are doing to get over some of the problems that they are working with.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My constituent Lee Armstrong contacted 111 when he was suffering from an Addisonian crisis. Lee and his partner provided full details about his condition to 111, and when his condition worsened, they called 999, but what neither Lee nor his partner knew was that the electronic record details given to 111 would not be available to 999, and neither would his patient records. As a result, the ambulance was not dispatched with the urgency required and Lee died. Will the Minister set out how the improvements in the digitisation of electronic records will cover the integration of the 111 and 999 services so that lives like Lee's can be saved?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend outlines a horrific case in her constituency, where she has been a fantastic campaigner since last year. Information sharing between 111 and 999 already exists in many places. We want standards in place to ensure that that happens safely across the country. That is a key part of what we are trying to do in our 10-year plan by bringing together single patient records and records within systems. I am very happy to follow up with her in more detail on the case she mentions, if that would be helpful.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Many GPs say that their buildings are not fit for purpose and lack digital infrastructure. Without fully integrated electronic patient records and better systems, including the electronic prescription service across all hospitals and community

trusts, we risk wasting time and money while increasing pressure on frontline staff. Will the Minister outline the steps being taken to full integrate the electronic prescription service across all settings in Dorset?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Member highlights the importance of getting this right not only from hospital to discharge but, crucially, in primary care, where 90% of patient contacts happen across the system. That is why a central plank of our 10-year plan has been moving the entire system from the analogue to the digital age. We have allocated £10 billion, particularly in this spending review, to address this issue and make sure we get this right for the system and for patients.

10-Year Health Plan: Prevention of Ill Health

8. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the 10-year health plan for England on the prevention of ill health. [905327]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): The 10-year health plan sets out how we are transforming our approach to preventing ill health through a set of ambitious measures that make the healthy choice the easy choice. Among those measures is our mandatory partnership with food businesses, through which we will make shopping baskets across the country healthier, and our landmark Tobacco and Vapes Bill, to help deliver our ambition for a smoke-free UK by gradually ending the sale of tobacco products across the country.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister for her response. Sickle cell disease disproportionately affects people from African and Caribbean backgrounds, yet systematic inequalities persist. A recent NHS Race and Health Observatory report reveals that research funding for cystic fibrosis is 2.5 times higher, despite similar prevalence. Will the Minister commit to addressing the chronic underfunding and ensure equitable investment in research and workforce specialist training for sickle cell patients across the NHS?

Ashley Dalton: The Government are committed to addressing health inequalities experienced by people living with rare conditions such as sickle cell disorder. Pioneering research is a cross-cutting theme of the UK rare diseases framework, but we know that there are a small number of rare conditions with a large amount of research, while many more have little or no funded research. I want to confirm for my hon. Friend that the National Institute for Health and Care Research welcomes funding applications for research into all and any aspects of health or care, including sickle cell disorder.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Minister talks about her 10-year health plan, with “Fit for the Future” splashed across the front cover, but really, it is a plan from “Back to the Future”, with no new ideas that have not been discussed since Alan Milburn tried to do this in the year 2000. It will only be successful if the Government deliver, but there is no detail in there on how they will deliver. Can the Minister help us: how will she deliver on the priorities, including preventive ill health? Where can we read the “how”, or is it all still fermenting in Ministers' heads?

Ashley Dalton: We are already delivering. As I have said, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill is making its way through Parliament at the moment. We are tackling the obesity crisis through tackling junk food advertising to children. We are working on school food standards, and we are also bringing in rules around planning for junk food establishments near schools. We are supporting people to make healthier choices when it comes to alcohol, and we are tackling air pollution, which particularly affects working-class communities. The list goes on and on, and I would be more than happy to give the hon. Member another list if he needs one.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Urinary tract infections are estimated to impact on the lives of up to 5 million women and girls. In 2023-24, there were over 679,000 hospital admissions, and in 2023, 4,323 deaths. Outdated diagnostic techniques and inadequate treatment for acute UTIs results in the condition becoming recurrent and chronic. Better education of clinical staff and updated guidelines, diagnostics and treatments can help prevent the spiral of ill health that destroys so many women's lives. Will the Secretary of State engage with me and other campaigners to recognise chronic UTIs as a condition and work to prevent this horrendous, pervasive illness?

Ashley Dalton: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and commend the work she has done on this issue and her wonderful contribution to the Westminster Hall debate that I responded to recently. It is a really important issue and something we are keen to explore further. The Secretary of State and I would be delighted to meet with her and other campaigners.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The NHS 10-year plan identifies antimicrobial resistance as "a critical threat requiring urgent action."

AMR kills 35,000 people in the UK every year and 5 million globally and rising. Why on earth are the Government covertly axing the Fleming Fund without telling Parliament? Will the Secretary of State publish an impact assessment of the effect of the Fleming Fund's closure on our domestic health security?

Ashley Dalton: There is nothing covert about the decisions on the Fleming Fund. It has been perfectly open and clear that the existing funding has been cut. Having said that, the work and partnerships that have been developed on AMR continue. The UK continues to be a global leader on this issue, and our ambassador, Dame Sally, continues to do sterling work on it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Last month, the Government published their 10-year plan. It took a year to write, and it contains promises to make even more plans—a cancer plan, a maternity and neonatal plan, a workforce plan and an HIV plan—which we are still waiting for. Careful planning is important, but taking too long will delay improvements in care, so when do the Government expect to publish those plans and to start delivering?

Ashley Dalton: We are already delivering. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to identify that a number of plans are being brought forward. We take this matter

very seriously, and we want to ensure that we get it right. We plan: we plan so that we perform effectively, and we plan for success. The national cancer plan will be coming later this year, and I am sure that we will be able to outline a timetable for all other plans. I assure her that planning is not doing nothing; planning is making sure that we get this right and that we deliver.

Metachromatic Leukodystrophy Screening

9. **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase metachromatic leukodystrophy screening provision for infants. [905328]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue and congratulate his constituent David Kiddie on the 190-mile walk he completed earlier this year to raise awareness and funds for those with MLD and their families. The Government are committed to listening to those with MLD and their families and acting with compassion and care to support them. The UK National Screening Committee, which advises the Government on all screening matters, is consulting on the outcomes of an evidence review looking at whether to screen for MLD.

Josh Dean: In 2024, two-year-old Lily Stock was diagnosed with metachromatic leukodystrophy, a rare and progressive disease that will, in her family's words, "slowly take Lily away". Libmeldy, a lifesaving gene therapy, is available through the NHS, but I understand that it must be administered before symptoms develop. Sadly, that means it is too late for Lily to benefit from the treatment. Emily and Sean, Lily's parents, are campaigning for MLD screening to be added to the heel-prick test on newborns, so that MLD can be identified early and treated effectively and no family will have to go through this devastating experience. Will the Minister and her officials look into adding MLD screening to the heel-prick test, and will she and the Secretary of State join me to meet Lily's family and hear their story at first hand?

Ashley Dalton: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. Lily's story really lays bare the heartbreak that rare diseases can bring and the vital role that early diagnosis can play. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and Lily's family. May I suggest that we meet when the UK National Screening Committee has completed its review, so that the Government have received advice on this important matter? We can then discuss that advice together.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): In my constituency, there is a little boy called Teddy, who was diagnosed with MLD—one of the most cruel and degenerative diseases, which is now treatable if diagnosed at birth. Teddy was diagnosed too late because there was no screening. He has lost his ability to walk and talk, and he even fights to smile—a battle that no child should ever have to face. The Minister knows that the treatment is now available, yet MLD has not been added to the simple heel-prick screening tests. Will she also agree to meet Teddy's family when she meets the family mentioned by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) to discuss this issue? It is too late for Teddy, but for so many other children it is not.

Ashley Dalton: As the hon. Lady points out, for Teddy and Lily it is sadly too late for that treatment. That is why we are looking at screening. I would be delighted to meet with Teddy's family once we have the outcome from the screening review.

NHS Hospitals: Parking

10. **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve car parking provision at NHS hospitals. [905330]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The Department has published guidance that trusts are expected to follow to manage the provision of car-parking spaces for patients, hospital users and staff. Responsibility for hospital car parks lies with each individual trust, and provision must be managed alongside the existing policy, providing free parking for those in the greatest need.

Josh Babarinde: Parking at Eastbourne district general hospital, where I was born, is woefully inadequate. The car park is often full, so patients have to park way away up the Rodmill hill, and car park services are crumbling. More than that, lower-banded NHS staff now face a near doubling of car parking charges to cover the cost. Given that the Government have delayed investment in our new hospital and, therefore, in a new car park until the 2040s, what support will they provide in the meantime to upgrade our DGH car parking facilities without our NHS heroes being expected to foot the bill?

Karin Smyth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the discussions about any advanced works arising from the new hospital programme are ongoing. I am very happy for the Department to continue to discuss with the trust how future investment can best meet the needs of the future.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): University hospital Coventry and Warwickshire suffers from really poor car parking facilities. I have had to take both my parents there over recent years to use its specialist cardiology services. The poor quality of those car parking facilities causes additional stress for patients visiting those services, which they can ill afford when they have suffered strokes or heart attacks. It is becoming extremely vital that something is done, so will the Minister meet me and other local MPs to discuss the crisis in car parking at the hospital?

Karin Smyth: The provision of car parking remains an issue for trusts. I recognise the stress caused by trying to get patients to hospital, particularly if they have mobility problems. I commend the many hospitals across the country that have really good active travel plans and are working with their local communities to resolve some of these issues. We need to hear more from the trust about what provision it is putting in place to serve my hon. Friend's constituents.

Health Inequalities

11. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle health inequalities across the country. [905331]

20. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle health inequalities across the country. [905340]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): The driving force behind this Government's approach to health is the principle that whoever a person is and whatever their background, they should receive the same world-class services as everyone else, based on need and not the ability to pay. That is why at its core, our 10-year plan for health looks to stamp out health inequalities, freeing up billions to move critical resources such as medicines and equipment to the regions and patients that need them most. Only a Labour Government will protect the NHS as a service free at the point of use, rebuild it, and make it fit for the future for everyone in our country.

Mr Speaker: I call Perran Moon.

Perran Moon: Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Carn to Coast runs GP surgeries across my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency, including the surgery where my father practised for over 30 years. It is struggling under intense pressure, with deep-rooted health inequalities linked to the surrounding areas of deprivation. While I welcome the review of the Carr-Hill formula as part of the 10-year health plan, will the Secretary of State come to Cornwall and visit a Carn to Coast health centre with me, to see the innovative work that is already being undertaken and to discuss how the reforms will support health outcomes in the most deprived areas?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that commitment. The damage that was wreaked by the previous Government, not just across our health service but across every other part of Government, means that the gap between the health of the poorest parts of our country and that of the wealthiest has widened enormously. We have seen real challenges in general practice, which is why there are 300 more patients per GP in the poorest communities compared with the richest, and that particularly affects rural and coastal communities with higher levels of deprivation. We are going to carry out a review of the Carr-Hill formula. That formula has to work for general practice, and I would be delighted to come and see the work that the team at Carn to Coast are doing.

Joe Powell: In Kensington and Bayswater, there is now a staggering 19-year gap in life expectancy between men living in Notting Dale and those living in Holland Park—which are just hundreds of metres apart—and that gap has grown in recent years. The Minister knows that this is a whole-of-society issue to do with housing, employment and education, but can he outline what steps the Department are taking to help inner-city areas with very high levels of health inequality, such as that experienced by my constituents in Kensington?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out those stark differences in healthy life expectancy within a single inner London borough that contains some of the richest people on earth, as well as some of the poorest in our country. As for what we are doing as a Government, in addition to making sure that funding follows need and that we are tackling deprivation, our

approach to neighbourhood health should make sure that we are working proactively in those communities that have the highest level of need, including pockets of deprivation within areas of higher affluence. Of course, as our plan recognises and as our mission-driven approach addresses, there are so many social determinants of ill health, including poverty, a lack of good work, damp housing, dirty air, and an inability to access culture and leisure opportunities that are affordable for everyone, not just the privileged few. Those are the issues that this Government are addressing, consistent with the Labour values that got us elected.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): For residents of New Court Place care home in Borehamwood, wheelchairs are their lifeline. However, they are being badly let down by AJM Healthcare, their NHS wheelchair provider, with multiple unresolved assessments, bad communications and waiting times for repairs and replacements unbelievably extending to four years. Residents with physical and intellectual disabilities feel let down, overlooked and traumatised. In tackling health inequalities, can I urge the Secretary of State to look urgently at this provider and come to the aid of people who desperately need our help?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that my Department will look into the provider that he raises. One reason I was proud that this Government increased the disabled facilities grant is that it means not just more ramps, handrails and accessible kitchens and bathrooms, but dignity, independence, freedom and quality of life. That is precisely what the right hon. Gentleman's constituents are being deprived of if they do not have wheelchairs that meet their needs. I would be delighted to look into this, and I am extremely angry that the failures he raises require me to do so.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that public health is at the heart of addressing the long list of inequalities he has just highlighted? I am deeply concerned that a major reorganisation of local government and the cutting of budgets to the integrated care board will undermine the co-ordination that currently exists in Oxfordshire to deliver public health. Can the Secretary of State assure me and my constituents that public health will continue to be a priority at the heart of the prevention strategy, and that funding for public health will rise in future years to make that possible?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman reassurance that the work we are doing to streamline and rationalise the amount of money we are spending on NHS bureaucracy means that we will free up resources that can be spent on the frontline, improving patient care and public health. Thanks to the decisions taken by my Department, the Deputy Prime Minister and, of course, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, investment in public health is rising and the spending power of local authorities is improving. That is all good news for public health.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Tackling health inequalities requires a strong workforce. I recently met a constituent who is about to qualify as a nurse, but she has been unable to find work. She is not alone; this is a widespread problem. The reasons she has been given include recruitment freezes to save money and nurses brought in from overseas instead. We need more nurses to tackle health inequalities, so will the Secretary of State ensure that trusts are funded to support and employ new nurses, and to prioritise British nurses for British jobs?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly assure the shadow Minister that the chief nursing officer and I are working proactively to deal with nursing unemployment. We are also working with the leadership of the NHS to make sure that we are reducing our reliance on overseas workers. Grateful though I am to all the healthcare workers who come from overseas to work in our health and care services—the service would fall over tomorrow if they all left, so we should be extremely grateful—there is certainly an overreliance, and that is what we are addressing. I have to say to the shadow Minister, though, that both those issues are a result of appalling workforce planning, for which the previous Government bear a huge amount of responsibility.

Neighbourhood Health Services

12. Michelle Scrogam (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support neighbourhood health services. [905332]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (**Wes Streeting**): It is only with proper investment and reform that we will bring care closer to people's homes and into the community. Our 10-year health plan will roll out a neighbourhood health service in every community, as one-stop shops for health and care services that meet the needs of local populations, including rural and coastal communities like my hon. Friend's constituency. The previous Government failed to move care into the community. We have already hit the ground running on delivering the 10-year health plan, and launched the national neighbourhood health implementation programme on 9 July to start that work at pace.

Michelle Scrogam: My constituents in Barrow and Furness very much welcome the Government's move towards delivering more neighbourhood health services, but my right hon. Friend will be aware of the great concern locally about the proposal from Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board to permanently end level 3 critical care at Furness general hospital. More than 10,000 people have signed my petition just this week to oppose that move. Will the Secretary of State please ensure that decision makers meet me and representatives locally to explore an alternative path forward that ensures patient safety, protects the integrity of our hospital and reflects the area's growing population?

Wes Streeting: That was just one of many instances in which my hon. Friend has made the voices and views of people across Barrow and Furness heard loudly and clearly in this place and across government. In response to her question, I say yes, absolutely: on such an important matter her local commissioners should be meeting her,

as the local Member of Parliament, and I think I can commit to that on their behalf. While such decisions must be made locally and clinically led, they must also be made in partnership with the local authority and the local community. We must ensure that we are engaging democratically elected representatives, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend secures that meeting.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): My constituents in Cranleigh have no train service and no direct bus service to the Royal Surrey County hospital in Guildford, which is a big issue for older residents who do not drive. Does the Secretary of State agree that some of the empty rooms in Cranleigh Village hospital could provide a very good opportunity for the expansion of neighbourhood health services, and if he has not been briefed on this pressing issue by his officials, may I brief him, or one of his Ministers, on it in the autumn?

Wes Streeting: That sounds like another bid for a neighbourhood health centre in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I am sure that local commissioners will be delighted to hear the case he has made, given the experience that he brings to bear.

Industrial Action

13. **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of industrial action on NHS services. [905333]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Before this Government came to office, strikes were crippling the NHS. Costs ran to £1.7 billion in just one year, and patients saw 1.5 million appointments rescheduled. Strikes this week are not inevitable, and I sincerely hope that the British Medical Association will postpone this action in order to continue the constructive talks that my team and I have had with its representatives in recent days. Our priority is to keep patients safe regardless, and we will do everything we can to mitigate the impact on them and the disruption that will follow should these totally unnecessary and avoidable strikes go ahead.

Robin Swann: In a previous role, I found that health workers took industrial action only in extreme circumstances, so I agree with the Secretary of State that if the strikes can be prevented, they should be. During previous resident doctors' strikes, elective or scheduled procedures were usually postponed, or planned to be postponed, to free up senior doctors to cover their work, but I note that the chief executive of NHS England has instructed hospitals to continue those procedures. Has the Secretary of State made any assessment of the impact that would have not just on patients but on the staff who would have to remain?

Wes Streeting: The approach we are taking is different from that taken during previous periods of strike action. NHS leaders have made it clear to me that those earlier strikes caused much wider harm than had previously been realised. There is no reason why planned care—appointments relating to cancer, for example, as well as other conditions—should be treated as being less important than, or playing second fiddle to, other NHS services. That is why the chief executive of NHS England has

written to NHS leaders asking them to keep routine operations going to the fullest extent possible, as well as continuing priority treatments. It will be for local leaders to determine what is possible given staffing levels, which is why it is so important for resident doctors to engage with their employers about their determination—or not—to turn up at work this week, and why I must again spell out the serious consequences for patients should these avoidable and unnecessary strikes go ahead.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Healthcare assistants at Blackpool teaching hospitals NHS foundation trust have been underpaid on the wrong band for years, but the trust has consistently failed to put that right, and as a result staff have been left with no choice but to be balloted for strike action by Unison from today. Healthcare assistants play a vital role in our NHS, but is it any wonder that they often feel undervalued and demoralised when they are not paid the correct rate for the duties that they undertake? Does the Secretary of State agree that Blackpool's healthcare assistants are worth just as much as those in the rest of the north-west and that the trust should pay up now?

Wes Streeting: I should declare that I am a member of Unison. The issue that my hon. Friend raises is a serious one. We obviously do not want to see strike action impacting on her local constituents, and my Department will do everything we can to help bring an end to the dispute.

I will make a more general point: these sorts of choices and trade-offs about resources are precisely why the BMA resident doctors, having received a 28.9% pay rise from this Government in the last year, ought to remember the responsibility that I and they have to some of their lower-paid colleagues. Resources are finite, and it is important that I act in the interests of all NHS staff and have particular concern for those who work extremely hard but are not properly rewarded.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): The resident doctors' strike is unnecessary, irresponsible and wrong. Recently, and again today from the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State has been resolute in not giving in to the BMA resident doctors committee's demands. Although I do not know the details of the current status of his discussions with the committee, may I encourage him to remain firm in his stance and, while being fair to doctors, to always ensure that he puts the interests of patients and taxpayers first?

Wes Streeting: Once again, the House is speaking with one voice, and I hope that the BMA understands the strength of feeling on both sides of the House about the unnecessary and irresponsible nature of the proposed strike action this week. Discussions in recent days have been constructive, and I hope that gives grounds for the postponement of strike action so that we can work together to avert it—not just this week, but altogether.

Topical Questions

T1. [905344] **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Under this Government, waiting lists have fallen by more than a quarter of a million in our first year, but strike action puts that hard-won progress at risk. If strikes do go ahead, we will do everything we can to minimise the disruption to patients, who will bear the brunt of cancellations. We continue to work with the BMA resident doctors committee in the hope that its members will do the right thing and call off the strikes. None the less, if they go ahead, we stand ready, responsive and resolute.

Lewis Atkinson: There were 5,448 drug-related deaths in 2023—the highest figure ever—and an 84% increase from the number that led the previous Government to publish their drugs strategy, which was supposed to save lives. Does the Secretary of State agree that the existing drugs strategy is not fit for purpose, and will he urgently start work on replacing it with a public health-led drugs strategy to tackle this public health emergency?

Wes Streeting: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. The number of drug-related deaths remains far too high, and we are committed to saving lives through access to high-quality treatment. For 2025-26, my Department is providing £310 million in addition to the public health grant to deliver the recommendations from Dame Carol Black's independent review, but there is much more to do. We look forward to working with my hon. Friend to achieve success.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): Dementia is one of the greatest health challenges that we as a society face today and in the future, but too many people with dementia end up in hospital, rather than being treated in more appropriate community settings. The 10-year NHS plan offers a real opportunity to shift care into the community and away from acute settings, including for dementia. Will the Secretary of State commit to working with Dementia UK, the Alzheimer's Society and other fantastic charities as he develops the implementation of his 10-year NHS plan to ensure that it truly delivers for people with dementia and those who care for them?

Wes Streeting: I absolutely agree with what the shadow Secretary of State has said. All three shifts—from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention—ought to benefit people with Alzheimer's, dementias and other neurological conditions, as will the pioneering science that we need in this country, which I know he is so passionate about.

Edward Argar: Maintaining the focus on local communities, the fantastic St Mary's birth centre in Melton Mowbray, in my constituency, has recently been temporarily closed by the local NHS trust for six months due to staff shortages. Although I appreciate that the Secretary of State does not have powers over such temporary closures and that local NHS leaders have engaged constructively, many local people fear that "temporary" could risk becoming permanent. If that risk looks like becoming a reality by the end of the summer, will the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers pre-emptively agree to meet me at that point to discuss it?

Mr Speaker, if I may briefly crave your indulgence at what is my last Dispatch Box appearance for the foreseeable future, may I take the opportunity—after seven years, almost continuously, on the Front Bench in government and in opposition—to thank you, to say that it has been a privilege, and to tell the Secretary of State that it has been a pleasure to shadow him? I think he knows it, but I genuinely wish him well.

Wes Streeting: I absolutely give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that I would be happy to meet him about his constituency issue, or indeed anything else. For all of the exchanges that we have across these Dispatch Boxes on issues of disagreement, what is not always readily understood beyond this House is the extent to which those on both sides work extremely constructively together, on the enormous number of issues that we have in common, in pursuit of the national interest. The virtues of wisdom, kindness and selfless dedication to public service are not the preserve of one side of the House. The right hon. Gentleman has those qualities in abundance, and we wish him very well, personally and professionally.

T2. [905345] **Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab):** UK doctors and nurses have been volunteering their time in Gaza. There are shocking reports this morning that Israel's ground offensive in central Gaza has compromised the efforts of the World Health Organisation after its facilities came under attack. In the light of that extremely concerning news, does the Secretary of State agree that those supporting the health response in Gaza, including UK doctors, nurses and volunteers, must never be targeted, and that Israel must comply with its obligations under international humanitarian law?

Wes Streeting: I deplore Israel's attacks on healthcare workers, as well as those on innocent civilians trying to access healthcare or vital aid. These actions go well beyond legitimate self-defence and undermine the prospects for peace. I will be in touch with the World Health Organisation to offer my support following the intolerable incident yesterday. I sincerely hope that the international community can come together, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been driving for, to ensure that we see an end to this war, but also the recognition of the state of Palestine while there is still a state of Palestine left to recognise.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Carers across the country have launched a protest from home today, with the Carers Trust. Their faces are projected on screens around Parliament Square because they are unable to leave their loved ones to protest in person. The Government's pledge for the carer's allowance review to report by early summer looks set to be broken. Can the Secretary of State today commit to ending the cliff edge for carer's allowance and to introducing a statutory guarantee for respite care so that carers know that he is listening?

Wes Streeting: I thank the hon. Member for her question, and for making everyone aware of the powerful protest taking place today, which so visibly reminds us that lots of people's voices may not be heard if they cannot participate in person. It is a reminder of the challenges that people face. I will undertake to raise her

concerns with my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary, and I give carers across the country the assurance that we are working as fast as we can. Having delivered the biggest expansion of carer's allowance since the 1970s, we want to ensure we deliver for this extremely important group of people, whom we are lucky to have in our society.

T3. [905346] Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency of Stoke-on-Trent Central has some of the deepest ingrained health inequalities anywhere in the country. My constituents are just as deserving of first-class healthcare as anyone else, so can the Secretary of State set out how the 10-year health plan will help reduce those health inequalities and ensure that, across Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire, my constituents have the healthy lives they should expect?

Wes Streeting: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that reassurance. It was appalling that the previous Government not only cancelled lots of the deprivation-linked funding put in place by the Labour Government but threw all that progress into reverse. That is not the approach that this Government will take. We will have funding based on need, not pork barrel politics. I can assure my hon. Friend that his constituents in Stoke-on-Trent will benefit from our sincere commitment to tackling health inequalities.

T6. [905349] David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): To take the Health Secretary back to his promise to provide regional healthcare, the integrated care board is opening a consultation on the future of the hospital in Goole, after a decade of almost positively running it down. Will he instruct all the health services in the country to make the most of the valuable assets they have, not shut them down or misuse them, and actually deliver a local service for local people?

Wes Streeting: I can certainly give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that we are looking right across NHS estates to make sure we are making best use of them, particularly in the context of neighbourhood health. I have heard the case he has made about how neighbourhood health services could be provided on that site. I hope commissioners have heard the case, but if not I will make sure that they do and that he gets the relevant meetings he needs.

T4. [905347] Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): My ADHD—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—diagnosis in May this year helped to answer questions about my life and to put support in place to improve it, but we know that over 300,000 children are waiting for an assessment and that untreated ADHD affects educational attainment, employment prospects and health outcomes. Will the Secretary of State set out the Department's plans to improve access to assessments and treatment for ADHD? Will he work across Government to develop a long-term, joined-up approach to ADHD care?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I commend my hon. Friend for bringing his personal experience to bear on this important matter. NHS England's independent ADHD taskforce is looking at how to provide support for people with ADHD and how to improve it. We are

considering the taskforce's interim report and look forward to the final report later this year. The taskforce is joined up with expert groups established across Government to provide advice on meeting the needs of neurodivergent children and young people in education, and on boosting neurodiversity inclusion at work.

T7. [905351] Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister confirm what steps the Department will take to build neighbourhood health services in partnership with charities, such as Macmillan, that have a proven track record of designing and delivering community-based services for people with long-term conditions? How can we ensure that this is a UK-wide service, and not a postcode lottery for cancer services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): The cancer plan will reflect the three shifts in the 10-year plan, including from hospital to community. Macmillan, Cancer Research UK and Cancer52 all sit on the steering board for the cancer plan, and I meet them regularly. Last week, we announced the Diagnostic Connect partnership with the third sector, linking patients with third sector services on diagnosis. The cancer plan will cover this for the whole of England and build on the commitments in the 10-year plan.

T5. [905348] Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): The most recent figures for the three NHS cancer waiting time targets for diagnosis, referral and treatment showed that those targets were missed. Longer waiting times can have a serious adverse effect on cancer patients, so can the Minister confirm whether those targets will be given a high priority in the national cancer plan when it is published?

Ashley Dalton: The national cancer plan for England will have patients at its heart and will cover the entirety of the cancer pathway, from referral and diagnosis to treatment and aftercare, as well as prevention and innovation. It will seek to improve every aspect of cancer care, including establishing targets for delivery right through the cancer pathway.

T9. [905353] Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Will the Minister give an update on the progress being made to introduce nationwide screening and improved treatments for prostate cancer?

Ashley Dalton: We are looking very carefully at the arguments for national screening. The hon. Member will be aware that there are concerns. We have to look at this very carefully to ensure that screening programmes do not cause unnecessary harm, but targeted and widespread screening for prostate cancer is something that the Department is looking at and will report on in due course.

T8. [905352] Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am so delighted to have two questions on health this week that I am not even going to mention ferries!

As my hon. Friend will know, the process for securing an education, health and care plan is complex and can lead to delays in accessing vital support. That can have a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of young

people and children. What steps is the Minister taking to improve the health element of EHCPs for families navigating the process, including those in my constituency?

Stephen Kinnock: We have inherited a system that is utterly failing to meet the needs of children with special educational needs. This Government are reforming the SEND system, ensuring that there is joined-up support across education and healthcare. We are also supporting inclusive environments and earlier intervention for children through the early language support for every child programme, or ELSEC, and the partnership for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools programme, or PINS.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Eight years ago, Weybridge community hospital burned down. After a long journey, the replacement finally received planning consent last week; all it needs now is for the Secretary of State to sign the cheque on the dotted line. Will he do so as soon as possible?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The business case for the rebuild of the health centre has been submitted to NHS England for review, and NHS Property Services will in parallel be asked to approve the capital funding. Subject to those approvals, a new health centre will be fully completed in 2027.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): Phlebotomists across the country play a vital role in our NHS. Will the Minister consider making the job role band 3 across the nation to ensure that everybody is paid fairly?

Karin Smyth: Phlebotomists are paid on an “Agenda for Change” pay scale, which is underpinned by the job evaluation scheme. It is something the Secretary of State and I discussed with the trade union Unison last week; I should declare that I am a member of Unison. It is working closely with the trust in question, but I am happy to discuss the matter with my hon. Friend further.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Many carers have told me how much they rely on respite care to protect their own physical and mental health so that they can continue to care for their loved ones day in, day out. The wonderful Chesil Lodge day centre in Winchester has recently been threatened with closure, and I have been fighting alongside constituents to keep it open. How will the Department ensure that respite services such as those at Chesil Lodge are consistently available and are not subject to a postcode lottery? Can I also—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Minister.

Stephen Kinnock: Our 10-year plan will boost support for family carers via digital tools such as My Carer and include them in care planning and shared decision-making processes. We have raised the carer’s allowance earnings limit to £196 a week—the biggest increase since 1976—and we have launched the independent commission into adult social care, which will look at unpaid carers’ needs. The hon. Member raises an important point about respite care; I am chairing a cross-ministerial group on our carers strategy, and I would be happy to update him outside the Chamber.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Last autumn, there was not a single NHS dental practice in Derbyshire Dales accepting new adult patients other than those referred for specialist care. The lack of NHS dentistry has led many of my constituents to experience severe economic hardship, with one telling me he had to spend £100 to have a single tooth fixed and another spending £2,000 on dentures. Will the Government provide increased funding for NHS dentistry to ensure that more people in rural areas like Derbyshire Dales can access NHS dentists?

Stephen Kinnock: The mess we inherited from the previous Government beggars belief, with 14 million adults with an unmet dental need, while for children between five and nine years old, the most common reason for hospital admission was to have their rotten teeth removed. This Government are determined to get NHS dentistry back on its feet. We are targeting the areas most in need, including rural areas, by delivering 700,000 additional urgent dental appointments, and reforming the dental contract. Our consultation is under way, and I encourage my hon. Friend to participate.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I was really disappointed that there was not one mention of eating disorders in the NHS 10-year plan, which is particularly troubling given that some of the proposed measures to reduce obesity may inadvertently harm those affected by eating disorders. When will the Government finally commit to an eating disorder strategy, as recommended by the eating disorders all-party parliamentary group?

Stephen Kinnock: This Government are investing an extra £688 million this year to improve access to mental health services. We are transforming our mental health services with 24/7 neighbourhood health centres; I was very pleased last week to visit the centre we are launching in Bethnal Green. I would gently say to the hon. Lady that she is part of the political party that propped up the Tories in government—this lot opposite—which led to some of the desperate situations we see across mental health today.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Parkrun is a global public health phenomenon. Will the Minister meet me and the new Parkrun chief executive to talk about future collaboration?

Ashley Dalton: Parkrun is a fantastic organisation that is doing amazing work. We know that movement saves the NHS around £10.5 billion a year, but 12 million adults are still inactive, and we need a team effort to succeed in getting millions more moving. There is a lot we can learn from Parkrun, and I would happily consider any invitation to meet it.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): The House has already heard the recent announcement about the closure of the urgent care centre at Mount Vernon hospital. My hon. Friends the Members for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) and for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) and I are all concerned about the quality of healthcare for our constituents, especially as the Labour Government have delayed the new Watford general hospital until at least 2032. What steps is the Minister taking to improve the quality of healthcare in our areas, instead of just making it worse?

Wes Streeting: When this Labour Government came to office, we promised 2 million more appointments, but we have actually delivered 4.5 million. We have cut NHS waiting lists month after month, and they are now at their lowest level in two years. Of course there is more to do. I regret that we had to delay Watford general hospital; the previous Government left a plan that was not credible and had no available funding. We are cleaning up their mess, and the hon. Member has a cheek to complain about it.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): The report, “Barriers for adults with Cerebral Palsy on achieving full life participation”, published by the former all-party parliamentary group on cerebral palsy, highlighted the cliff-edge in support for those with cerebral palsy when they transition at the age of 18 and the need to end the separation of neuro and musculoskeletal knowledge within the NHS, given that cerebral palsy is a neuromusculoskeletal condition, and that those living with it need easy and ready access to both areas. I would therefore be grateful if I could understand—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me help the hon. Gentleman. If you have a main question and I call you in topicals, you really need to shorten your question in order to let other Members in.

Ashley Dalton: NHS England has worked with key stakeholders to develop a framework to aid integrated care systems to commission high-quality services for children and young people with cerebral palsy, including as they transition to adult services. Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence on cerebral palsy in the under-25s also sets out key considerations in transition planning.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Data published last week shows that despite the Government’s initial action, the proportion of dentists working in the NHS in Norfolk and Waveney continues to drop. I am pleased to hear about the Government’s work on the dental contract, but the Public Accounts Committee is clear that this will work only if it is backed by sustainable funding. I will give the Minister another chance to answer the question: will the Government ensure that the extra funding that has been put into the Department is actually reflected in extra funding for NHS dentistry?

Stephen Kinnock: One thing that I made clear to officials when I came into this post was that every penny that is allocated to NHS dentistry must be spent on NHS dentistry. We are in a crazy situation where demand for NHS dentistry is going through the roof, yet we have had underspends. That needs to stop. We will focus the spending on where it is most needed, including areas that are under-served, such as the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): My constituents Marie Brewis and Denise Coates are bravely using their own experience of breast cancer treatment to campaign for a dedicated cancer support centre in Luton. Does the Minister agree that Luton could benefit from the wraparound care of a cancer support centre locally, and will she meet me to discuss this?

Ashley Dalton: The national cancer plan, which will be introduced towards the end of this year, will cover cancer facilities across England. I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the particulars in her constituency.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Brierley Park medical centre applied for funding from the primary care utilisation and modernisation fund earlier this year. It has been successful, but it has not yet had the money, and the money must be spent by the end of the year. Will the Secretary of State please tell my medical centre when it will receive this vital funding?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the timeliness of decision making and the need to release funding when it is allocated. I shall make sure that my Department looks into that, and write to him with an answer.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my right hon. Friend for his work on reducing waiting lists, but at the Homerton in Hackney, because of a system-wide funding failure, deficit reduction money was removed three months into a 12-month agreement, which reduced the opportunity to drive down waiting lists still further. Will he or one of his colleagues meet me to discuss this issue and see what we can do to drive down those waiting lists?

Wes Streeting: We are taking action to deal with the over-running of budgets and the reckless spending across the NHS and to bring deficits under control, but I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Spelthorne residents Emma and John lost Holly to cancer in October last year. They set up the charity Holly’s Heroes in her name. Before she died, Holly was given a wheelchair by the NHS, and Emma and John cannot now give it back to the NHS for love nor money. I have raised this with the chief executive of the trust, but can the Secretary of State reassure me that this practice is not replicated nationwide?

Wes Streeting: We absolutely need to look at reducing waste in the NHS, so I would be delighted to pick up that case. Can I also say an enormous thank you to Holly’s family for the work they are doing in such unimaginable circumstances? I really admire people who put themselves forward to serve others in that way after such a painful experience.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Last Friday I brought together GPs, housing developers, the local authority, the ICB, and anyone else you care to name, to try finally to solve the issue of our having one of the most under-doctored areas in the country for primary care. Among the many issues raised was a particularly niche one: thanks to NHS Property Services demanding a late payment from a couple of GP surgeries, which were unaware that they were due to pay this rent, those surgeries now face the possibility of having to pay a bill that equates to the cost of one GP’s salary for a year. That cannot be right.

Wes Streeting: I would be delighted to look at the issue that my hon. Friend raises. I am only sorry that I missed the party last week.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board is having to make savings of £142 million this year, and the backdrop to that is a loss of wards at Barrow, Lancaster and Kendal. We hear a lot about additional money for the NHS. Why is none of it coming to Cumbria?

Wes Streeting: It is not the case that none of the money is going to Cumbria. We are taking action to deal with the persistent overrunning and over-spending of NHS budgets, which was an intolerable situation that we had to get a grip on. We are investing £26 billion more in the NHS, and that will rise over the course of this Parliament. We will make sure that every part of the country gets its fair share, not least through the deprivation-linked funding that I mentioned. I know that it is bumpy for ICBs as we get them back to balance, but believe me it will be worth it in the end when we have a sustainable NHS that is fit for the future.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): In 2020, a consultation was carried out to give prescribing rights to operating department practitioners, but despite positive discussions with the Department we are no further forwards and OPDs and allied health professionals are being held back. Does the Secretary of State agree that expanding their roles within scope of practice will improve efficiency, patient care and professional development?

Wes Streeting: We are keen to address these sorts of issues through our workforce planning and to ensure that staff are working to the top of their licensing capability, always within the training provided. That way we can get the best possible value for taxpayer money and, most importantly of all, the best outcomes for patients.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with me about the importance of step-down provision, provided by community hospitals such as Petersfield and Alton, both for patient care and for relieving pressure on acute hospitals, such as Queen Alexandra and Basingstoke?

Wes Streeting: Yes, and that is why we are reforming the better care fund.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Key to the shift to prevention is making sure that people can stay in their own homes or get home from hospital. The Health and Social Care Committee found that such provision costs the NHS £1.9 billion every year. Can the Secretary of State update me on what we are doing to get the social care system working?

Wes Streeting: Thanks to the decision that the Chancellor has taken, spending power in social care is rising—not just through Department funding but in the spending power of local authorities. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have to get the right care in the right place at the right time. That often means better care for patients and better value for taxpayers.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): At midnight, *The Times* published an article on the ME final delivery plan, carrying quotes from three ME campaign groups. The charity Action for ME published a five-page briefing at the same time, and “BBC Breakfast” also featured the plan, so they had all read the plan. I checked with the relevant officers and went to the House of Commons Library about half an hour ago, and no plan has been published. More than 12 hours after the Department’s press release, no MP can access the plan. Is this how it should be?

Ashley Dalton: I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue. That is not what I was expecting. A written ministerial statement has been tabled, and I will speak to officials and make sure that that plan is available as it should be.

Prax Lindsey Oil Refinery

12.49 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if he will make a statement on the closure of the Prax Lindsey oil refinery.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): In my oral statement on 30 June, I informed Parliament of the deeply disappointing news that the Prax Lindsey oil refinery had entered insolvency and that the court had appointed an official receiver to manage the situation on the site and determine the next steps. Since then, we have worked urgently to ensure the safety of the refinery site and the security of fuel supplies, and to protect workers. That also allowed time for bidders to express an interest in the site. Following a thorough process, the official receiver has rigorously assessed all the bids received and concluded that sale of the business as a whole is not a credible option.

I visited workers at the site on 17 July, and I will be meeting them again shortly today. I know that this will be hugely disappointing news to them, their families and the wider community. They are all in my thoughts at this time. A package has been offered to all directly employed at the refinery which guarantees their jobs and pay over the coming months. Alongside the usual support that is offered to workforces in insolvency situations, the Government will also immediately fund a comprehensive training guarantee for those refinery workers to ensure that they have the skills needed and the support to find jobs in, for example, the growing clean energy workforce.

Furthermore, we understand that the official receiver continues to explore various proposals for assets on the site. I therefore remain hopeful that a solution will be found that creates future employment opportunities at the Immingham site. The refinery will continue to process crude for the rest of the month, and the official receiver will continue selling refined products for a number of weeks, giving buyers time to adjust their supply chains.

The former owners left the refinery in an untenable position and gave the Government little time to act. That is why the Energy Secretary immediately demanded an investigation into their conduct and the circumstances surrounding the insolvency, and why I have repeatedly called on the owners to do the right thing and provide financial support to the workforce at this difficult time.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Bowie: When the Prax Lindsey refinery closes its doors in October, there will be only four oil refineries remaining in the United Kingdom, following the news about Grangemouth a few months ago. This is the second oil refinery to close in the United Kingdom in only six months, prompting serious questions about our energy security and resilience. In Immingham, people are waking up today to the reality that redundancies are now inevitable. It is estimated that about 625 jobs will be lost. For the community in Lincolnshire, that is seismic.

As the Minister said, we are aware of the long-standing financial issues with Prax Group, and I reiterate my support for the Government's investigation into its directors. What progress has been made on that investigation? When does he expect the report to be made?

We cannot escape the fundamental crisis facing our manufacturing sector. As Jim Ratcliffe has said, the sector is "facing extinction" because of

"enormously high energy prices and crippling carbon tax bills."

The Minister's Department knows that to be true and has exempted some industry from paying the net zero levies, recusing specific businesses from paying the extortionate green subsidy costs. That is a ridiculous situation that sees subsidies being paid by the Government to businesses to exempt them from the charges being imposed by that very same Government—we are truly talking through the looking glass. The Department is wilfully talking down the oil and gas industry with hostile language and an impossible fiscal regime while overseeing the deindustrialisation of the United Kingdom through the perpetuated high cost of industrial energy. This is not simply managed decline; it is accelerated decline driven by ideology and steered from Whitehall.

Will the Minister tell us what work is being done to ensure the future of the four remaining oil refineries in the United Kingdom? What, if any, assessment has been made of the UK's resilience, given the steep reduction in our refining capacity over the past six months? What, if any, assessment has been made of the increased reliance on imports that will be necessary as a result of the reduction in British refining capacity? Will he please change course and start speaking up for our oil industry—upstream and downstream—which sees from the current Government a disregard for it, its workers and the communities that rely most on it?

Michael Shanks: I agree with the shadow Minister, who was right to point out the impact that news like this will have on the workforce, who are hearing it this week, as well as the wider impact it has on their families and the community. That is why it is so important that we provide that support.

On the investigation, there is not much that I can update the House on at the moment. The Insolvency Service is carrying out that investigation, and it would be wrong for Ministers to interfere in that, but we have obviously given the direction that we expect it to be completed as quickly as possible. Given the mess we found the company in, I would not be surprised if it takes a bit of time for the investigation to get to grips with what was going on there, but that is for the Insolvency Service to resolve.

On resilience and fuel supplies, we have been really clear throughout that we have done everything we can to try to find a buyer to keep the site operating as a going concern, which is important for the workforce as well as for local resilience, but Prax Lindsey oil refinery comprises about 10% of our remaining refinery capacity; Phillips 66—a much larger refinery—is immediately next door. In the past few weeks, we have already seen fuel supplies adjusted and commercial contracts renegotiated. Although we clearly wanted the refinery to stay open, our assessment suggests that there is not an immediate risk to fuel supplies locally or in the wider area, but we will continue to monitor that.

On the shadow Minister's wider points, I will first repeat what I have said on a number of occasions: we do support the oil and gas industry. I have spent a lot of time with the industry understanding some of its challenges, which are long standing, particularly around jobs lost over the past decade, and we consulted widely on what the future of energy in the north-east should look like to give confidence to the industry. We inherited the fiscal regime from the previous Government. We have consulted quickly on what the future of the energy profits levy should look like to ensure certainty about the fiscal landscape. The Treasury will respond to that consultation in due course. We want to give certainty, but we also want to recognise that this is an industry in transition, and burying our heads in the sand and pretending that that is not the case does nothing to protect the workforce in the long term. We will therefore continue to invest in the new industries of the future and in that wider strategy.

Refineries are important to our economy and will continue to be important. That is why I brought all of industry together in a roundtable to discuss the challenges facing the refinery sector. I was shocked to discover that that was the first time there had been such an invitation from the Government in 13 years. I ask the shadow Minister to reflect on who was in power for 14 years.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right—so was the shadow Minister—to focus on the jobs and the communities affected by the worrying news coming from Lindsey. He was also right to say that the problems are the result of shockingly bad management. My Select Committee will look at the future of refining in this country in a one-off session in the autumn, and we will be able to take further evidence at that point.

In response to what the shadow Minister said about energy prices, will the Minister confirm that the way to get industrial energy prices down—just as with domestic energy prices—is to reduce our reliance on the volatility, uncertainty and high prices that are determined by Vladimir Putin and the petrostates, and that we have to manage the transition, not shut our eyes to it or somehow play into culture wars as Reform wants us to do?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right. Separate from all the wider issues facing the refinery sector and the oil and gas sector generally, it is right we recognise that this week there are workers hearing some devastating news. Detailed work will be going on into how much of the site we can utilise in the future, and assessments are under way about how credible some of the bids are. We will do more work on that, and I am sure that his inquiry will be useful.

On energy costs more generally, one of the conversations I had when I met the refinery sector was about how we could do more to bring down its costs. We are looking at how we could support refineries more through including them in the energy intensive industries compensation scheme, which would obviously cut costs and help UK refineries with their competitiveness. That is not straightforward, but we are determined to look at that.

On my hon. Friend's final point, he is right that the overall context of what we are doing as a Government is driving forward the transition to clean power, because it gives us back our energy security and takes away the volatility in prices that has been so devastating to households and businesses over the past few years. It is also the economic opportunity that helps drive forward refineries into what could be profitable businesses in that transition. They will continue to play a part in that, and we will support them to do so.

Mr Speaker: We have a lot of business today, so if we could help each other, that would be very useful. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The closure of Prax Lindsey oil refinery is deeply troubling, with up to 1,000 jobs at risk across the supply chain. It is a devastating blow to workers, their families and the communities that rely on the refinery. We need a clear strategy to support those whose livelihood is in jeopardy. That means practical help with reskilling and retraining. This is also an opportunity for targeted green investment in industries that can offer decent, secure jobs for the future.

This crisis speaks to a wider failure. The UK still lacks a proper plan for a just transition that gives oil and gas workers real confidence about what comes next. We need to wind down fossil fuels in a way that provides genuine opportunities—well-paid green jobs, clean energy infrastructure, and proper support for the communities that have long powered this country. As other parties embrace climate denialism and internet conspiracy theories, the Liberal Democrats call on the Government to ensure that we do not backtrack on our climate targets, undermine green investor confidence, and abandon our leadership on the world stage when it comes to climate change.

First, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that contingency plans are in place, so that those whose jobs are at risk are guaranteed support and opportunities to redeploy their skills? Secondly, how are the Government ensuring that investment in skills and regeneration is targeted, so that it has the greatest impact where it is needed most? Finally, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that the transition to renewable energy makes the best use of the skills and experience of oil and gas workers in the places affected, such as the Humber estuary?

Michael Shanks: I wrote down the hon. Gentleman's points, and then he came on to specific questions, but I will respond to the points. He rightly says that this has been devastating news for the workers. He also said something that I want to echo, and which I said to the workers when I met them last week: this decision, and what has happened to the company, is no reflection at all on the incredible, very skilled work that they are doing. I want to reiterate that. So often in these cases, the workers bear the brunt of decisions taken by the company, and that is a great shame. He is right, and we will support the workers. My Department is funding the training guarantee to make sure that all those workers are given an assessment of their training needs and future employment desires, so they can be given tailored support. We will make sure that is rolled out in the coming months.

[*Michael Shanks*]

On the hon. Gentleman's wider point about the transition, he is right to say that we need a proper plan. That is why we consulted on the future of energy in the North sea, both through a series of questions, and through a much broader question about what the future of our energy sector looks like. It will have oil and gas for many decades to come, but already thousands of jobs are being created in other offshore industries, and we want to support that.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that investor confidence is critical. It is shameful that people would seek to damage investor confidence in this country in the name of net zero rhetoric. The truth is that there has been more than £40 billion of investment in clean energies in this country. That means jobs and opportunities in all our communities across the country, and those who would talk that down should be ashamed.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of the GMB trade union. The Minister said that he was engaging with workers. Will he set out in more detail what engagement he is undertaking with the trade unions that are those workers' representatives? Will he give the House an assurance that the detailed modelling work undertaken by the Department includes the impact on the wider supply chain?

Michael Shanks: I also declare that I am a member of the GMB trade union; that is recorded in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I have engaged with both the Unite trade union reps who are on the site, and with day shift workers who are not represented by a trade union, to make sure that I hear from them. I met them earlier this month and last week at the refinery, and I will meet them in about an hour's time to talk through this more. We want to continue that engagement with them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Obviously, my first concern is my constituents who work in the refinery in the neighbouring constituency, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers). I am sure that the Minister will give them reassurance about enhanced redundancy. Also, may I ask a question on behalf of my rural constituents in North Lincolnshire—and I declare an interest, as I live there? This is a deeply rural area, where we rely on heating oil because we are not on mains gas. What impact will closure of the refinery have on the price of heating oil?

Michael Shanks: On redundancy, because of how the company went into insolvency, the workers will be entitled to statutory redundancy. That is not acceptable, given the role that they played in delivering for the company for many years. That is why I have publicly asked the owners of the company to put their hands in their pocket and improve the redundancy package. It is not possible for the Government to improve the package directly, but I am still hopeful that the company owners

will do the right thing. We are providing a training guarantee to the workers, from Government funds, to make sure that they have that enhanced support.

I am happy to take away the point about heating oil. We have been assessing the situation over the past few weeks, including a number of weeks during which fuel has not left the refinery at its normal pace, to see what the impact is on supplies across the region. That impact has been minimal. That is partly because a significant amount of fuel and products come from the refinery next door. However, we will continue to monitor that, and if there is an impact on prices, I am happy to look into that.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Much like the ceramics sector, the refinery sector is an energy-intensive industry that is at the mercy of industrial energy prices, which are beyond its control but have a huge impact on its viability. It is welcome that the Minister thinks that the energy-intensive certification programme could expand to include the refinery sector, but he will know that the business level test is a huge barrier that needs to be overcome; it means that many companies will not be eligible for the programme. He will also know that the British industry competitiveness scheme is not due to come online for another two years; indeed, consultation on that scheme has yet to be opened. Refineries and ceramics companies are looking down the barrel of ever-increasing industrial energy bills. Will he give them some indication of what help and support is available now, before the new schemes come online, so that we do not have more statements about closed factories in the next few months?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right, and it is deeply frustrating that we inherited many of these issues, which were unresolved for such a long time. These are not problems that arrived in the past 12 months. Bringing in the refinery sector for talks with Government about the challenges would have been a fairly obvious thing to do at least once in the past 13 years. Clearly, that did not occur to the previous Government, and we have inherited challenges.

My hon. Friend is right to say that consultations will take time, unfortunately. It is right that we conduct a proper consultation to make sure that there are not any unintended consequences. The Minister for Industry, who is a Minister in both the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Business and Trade, is looking at how we can do that as quickly as possible. I am happy to follow that up with her. My hon. Friend is also right that nobody wants to be talking about redundancies in any part of our economy, and we are doing everything we can to bring down prices to prevent redundancies.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): This is a massive blow to my Brigg and Immingham constituency—most particularly to those directly employed by the refinery, but also to the wider economy of the sub-region. Will the Minister reconsider what he just said about statutory redundancy? I want the maximum support given to those workers.

I will raise two other points. First, North Lincolnshire council published a green growth zone document last year about the future of the regional economy. As we discussed yesterday, I urge the Minister to consider an

urgent meeting, at which all involved are brought in for a roundtable discussion. Secondly, if he is not doing so already, may I urge him to speak to his colleagues who are local government Ministers? North Lincolnshire council will lose £2.6 million in business rates. Needless to say, that is a massive blow that would affect the delivery of services.

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, and for meeting me to discuss the matter yesterday. I appreciate the impact that the closure will have, not just on those refinery workers who are directly impacted, but on the wider economy. We absolutely appreciate that there are ripple effects from a closure like this.

On the statutory redundancy point, we have looked at this, and have pushed to see if there is more action that the Government can take to change or give additional payments. It is not possible for Government to do that, not least because the Insolvency Service has to follow specific rules on creditors and how they operate in the event of an insolvency. However, the owners of the company have profited from this business, and they should do the right thing by the workforce that delivered that for them.

I have agreed to hold a roundtable discussion, and I previously met the two council leaders to talk about this. I am happy to arrange that discussion, and to have it with whoever is useful and wants to participate, because the hon. Gentleman is right about the opportunities. I am happy to engage on the point about North Lincolnshire and business rates. Although the refinery will not continue to be a going concern, we are assessing bids from those who are interested in the site; we hope those bids will deliver jobs and economic benefit, and that business rates income will come from new industries on the site. That is not as good as retaining the refinery in its current form, but we hope we can make some progress.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and particularly for the news that there will be a thorough investigation. I have two quick questions. First, are the reports correct that the previous Government did not meet representatives of the sector for 13 years? I know the Minister said that he had met them recently. Secondly, families will be in crisis when they hear this news, and they will struggle to deal with it. Does he agree that the owner, who I understand is not short of money, has an absolute moral obligation to ensure that those families are supported? Statutory payments are welcome, but the moral obligation has to be made clear.

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for both those points. My understanding from the sector and from the Department is that a meeting has not happened in the past 13 years. *[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), on the Opposition Front Bench, wants to find me dates when her Government met the sector, I would be really happy to look at them, and at any minutes from those meetings. That would be helpful. There are particular issues for the sector, but also for individual refineries; some are more profitable than others, and some have transitioned to doing other pieces of work. It is important that they learn from one other, and that the Government do what they can.

On my hon. Friend's final point, I agree that there is a moral obligation here. Having met the workers on the site, I know that they have done nothing wrong. They have worked hard over many years to keep the refinery going, and to deliver a profit. Those who have taken money out of that business should now do the right thing and fund those workers, and I hope that they will respond to my letter in due course.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): With the Grangemouth refinery in Scotland having closed, and Prax Lindsey facing the same fate, there is clearly a missing element in the UK Government's just transition policy. There can be no just transition if skilled jobs are lost when that transition is made. What assurance can the Minister give that the Government have taken a wider view, in order to stem these closures and address what is clearly a deeper issue with policy?

Michael Shanks: I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of recognising that the most important thing to get right is the transition of workers. I have said that in other answers. That requires us to recognise that a transition is under way, and to put in place a plan, which has not happened in the past decade, during which we lost more than 70,000 workers in this industry. It is really important that we grapple with those issues, and it will not be easy. The starting point is to bring together everyone with an interest in this, as I have done—everyone from the trade unions and industry to those making the green investment that is driving this forward—to make sure that we deliver on jobs, and to make sure that training and support are in place, so that workers can transition. He raises an important point.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about Grangemouth, it was not breaking news that Grangemouth was in a precarious position, and the previous Government could have done more to ensure a just transition there. I met the investment taskforce yesterday, along with my colleague Gillian Martin, the Energy Minister in the Scottish Government, to look at the prospects for the sites. There are some interesting propositions coming forward; there are 84 bids in total for £200 million from the National Wealth Fund, and I hope that we will have good news on jobs and investment in Grangemouth soon.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I thank the Minister for his briefing yesterday, but there is a pattern developing, is there not? Some 800 jobs were created every single day in the 14 years of the Conservative Government, but unemployment has gone up every single day under this Labour Government. Some 400-plus jobs have been lost at Vivergo, on the north side of the Humber, and perhaps 600 jobs will be lost directly, and others lost indirectly, on the south side of the Humber. Can the Minister reassure those affected that this Government will not destroy our industrial base, and that there is a future for us, because it looks like we are heading in the wrong direction?

Michael Shanks: I will avoid the wider political points in a week when workers are finding out about job losses, because that is obviously devastating for them. I will just say that the Government have published their industrial strategy, and this is the first time the country has had an industrial strategy in a very long time. *[Interruption.]*

[*Michael Shanks*]

Well, let us say a credible industrial strategy, if the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) thinks he had one before. Again, I ask him to present it to me. We are investing in the industries of the future, and delivering thousands of jobs on the Humber and right across the country. We are making sure that investment comes forward in jobs for the future. [*Interruption.*] The problem with the right hon. Gentleman's point is that his party opposes that investment. It opposes the very thing that will deliver the jobs of the future, and I am afraid that is simply an untenable position. Either he is for or against investment in jobs; he has to say which it is. The industrial strategy is the way to deliver that.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): The last time we discussed Prax Lindsey, I asked the Minister to support my energy jobs Bill—a plan for the redeployment and retraining of oil and gas workers that is proactive and industry-wide rather than reactive and crisis by crisis, and that would be paid for by the companies. That is what the workers and the unions want, but the Minister said he did not agree with it. He has now said that the Government will fund a training guarantee for these refinery workers and is asking this company's owners to make voluntary contributions to support workers. That is progress, but will he now turn this into a proactive and industry-wide plan, and please go beyond asking the company nicely to do the right thing and require it?

Michael Shanks: I think the hon. Lady slightly misses the point. The company went into insolvency. The workers are therefore entitled only to statutory redundancy. I do not think that that is acceptable, so I have called—not nicely, but directly—for the owners of that company to do the right thing, put their hands in their pockets and fund proper redundancy for those workers. That is separate from a wider piece of work we are doing around the transition. I think she also misses the point about the importance of delivering investment in oil and gas that is also investment in renewables and in carbon capture, utilisation and storage to deliver the jobs that come next, so that there is a transition for those workers. I have said that I do not support her proposal, and I am happy to say that again because it would do neither of those things. It is essential that we support the oil and gas industry in its current form, but recognise that it is in transition. We still have decades of oil and gas to come in this country, but we are already building up the industry that comes next. That needs investment, and it also needs us to build infrastructure, which many people in her party seem to oppose.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): While the Minister is right to point out that this refinery produces a small amount of the UK's refined fuel overall, the site does provide around 50% of the fuel into Warwickshire Oil Storage, a key site at Kingsbury in the west midlands that supplies fuel into the west midlands, which is obviously a very large demand centre. What is the Minister's assessment of the impact on the supply and demand balance of road fuels in the west midlands as a result of this closure?

Michael Shanks: I am happy to follow up on anything specific with the hon. Gentleman, but I can tell him that I get daily updates on assessments on exactly that point. Clearly, the first week of the insolvency saw some disruption to supplies leaving, but our evidence pointed to the fact that those commercial contracts were able to be renegotiated and to adjust to that. We are continuing to monitor to ensure there is no disruption, and there is no assessment at the moment that would suggest any impact at all on fuel security. Clearly, we will continue to do that, and if I can follow up on specifics, I will do so.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): What a pathetic turnout today from the party of the workers: just four Labour MPs have turned up to speak out on behalf of the Prax Lindsey workers. What I want to know from the Minister is if it is true that a foreign company has already been lined up to asset-strip and decommission this site—yes or no?

Michael Shanks: First, I think the hon. Gentleman is misjudging the mood of this question, which is about workers affected by redundancy. I hear nothing from him on those workers who are hearing the news this week. On his point, we assessed a number of bids for the business as a going concern. None of those bids were credible, which is why the official receivers made the decision to cease refining. Some bids are interested in parts of the site for a range of different things, but I am not party to those bids. They are commercially sensitive bids that will be assessed on the basis of how many jobs can be retained and the industrial opportunities on that site, which is what we are driving forward. I would just say to him that spreading nonsense and rumours, either in this House or on social media, does absolutely nothing to support the workers on that site.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I have listened closely to the Minister's answers, and he is rightly highlighting the importance of the jobs and the redundancies, but I think we need to be a bit clearer and more open with people about what the new jobs in the renewables sector that the Minister refers to are about. These jobs are not comparable to a lot of the ones that will be lost in the oil and gas sector. A lot of them are not full-time jobs; a lot of them are part time or temporary jobs during construction phases. We are losing a huge number of workers across the country, and we will continue to do so because of the Government's policies on oil and gas and the speed at which the sector is being demolished. Can the Minister please outline directly to these workers across the country, whether at Prax or in the north-east, how their jobs will be supported into the future? I am talking about comparable full-time jobs, not just the temporary ones.

Michael Shanks: A key objective of this Government is to deliver good, well-paid trade-unionised jobs, and we have been driving that forward. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been pushing on trade union recognition, partly to ensure that terms and conditions in the clean energy industry are as good as those in, for example, the oil and gas industry. We will continue to push on that, and we have already had some successes.

I gently say that the investment going into clean energy that is delivering thousands of jobs and will deliver tens of thousands of new jobs across the country comes against a backdrop of opposition from the Conservatives on Great British Energy in the north-east of Scotland delivering those jobs. We are also announcing today the final investment decision on Sizewell C—10,000 jobs are being created in nuclear after years of dither and delay by the hon. Member's party. We are getting on with doing this, and we will do everything we can to ensure those jobs are comparable on terms and conditions and pay. I say to her that if she wants these jobs to be created, she should support some of the policies that will deliver them in the first place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. Bearing in mind that the refinery was responsible for supplying some 10% of British fuel—fuel for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—it is absolutely essential that a way forward is found, and found quickly. Part of that solution must be a common-sense approach to using fossil fuels. What discussions has the Minister had with his Cabinet colleagues to provide a long-term assurance that there is a future for this refinery, even at this eleventh hour, so it can be sold as a going concern, as it should?

Michael Shanks: The Government have pushed, over the past four weeks we have been aware of this issue, to try to find a route whereby the refinery can continue as a going concern. That was obviously our No. 1 objective. The official receiver assessed the bids that were made and found that none were viable to deliver that. The Government are not going to nationalise this refinery—we are not in the business of nationalising loss-making businesses—so, unfortunately, that is not a route we will take. But we have done everything we can, and what we now want to do is assess the bids for the future of the site to see what the maximalist approach is that, crucially, will keep as many jobs on the site as possible, but also will deliver on the industrial opportunities of that site for the wider community. We will continue to have those conversations.

Birmingham Bin Strikes

1.22 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if she will make a statement on the Government's response to the Birmingham bin strikes.

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Members will be aware of the continuing disruption caused by industrial action in Birmingham. I want to be clear that Birmingham city council is an independent employer and that this dispute is between the council and Unite the trade union. The Government are rightly not a party to it, but of course we have an interest in it, recognising the impact on local residents. This Government's priority remains Birmingham residents, and we will continue to support the council to keep Birmingham's streets clear while the dispute remains ongoing. Thousands of tons of waste have been removed, and routine collections have been restored. The council continues to monitor the situation closely to ensure that waste does not build up again.

The background to the dispute is the historical equal pay issues the council has faced, which have been the source of one of the largest equal pay crises in modern UK history, and that has to be front of mind. The council has been in negotiation for many months, making a fair and reasonable offer to Unite and being clear about the need to protect its equal pay position. The union rejected the council's offer. The council has worked hard to offer options to affected workers, including a transfer into other roles in the council on the same grade and, in some cases, to upskill those workers in scope. An enhanced voluntary redundancy package is also available for those who wish to leave the service, and there has already been significant uptake.

Given the union's rejection of the offer, as of last week, the council is now entering a period of consultation to resolve the dispute while protecting its equal pay position. I urge the union to work with the council on a sustainable way forward that is fair to workers in the council and to the residents of Birmingham.

Finally, hon. Members may be aware that earlier today Max Caller announced that he is retiring as lead commissioner in Birmingham, and I wish him well for the future. Tony McArdle OBE has today been appointed by the Secretary of State as the new lead commissioner, and he will take up his position tomorrow. Tony brings a huge wealth of expertise, and I am confident that he will continue to deliver on the recovery plan to secure improvements for Birmingham's residents.

Ayoub Khan: The bin strikes in Birmingham have now dragged on for over four months, and Birmingham's 1.1 million residents are paying the price. The Government have repeatedly scapegoated bin workers, yet they refuse to address the root cause and real reason why residents have seen their public services crumble and their council tax bills rise by 21%. At the heart of this crisis lies 13 years of mismanagement and incompetence under a Labour-run council. The Minister wants to blame the equal pay settlement for cuts, but conveniently forgets that the council has had this settlement looming for over a decade. Over 13 years, there has been endless council waste: an athlete's village that housed not a

[Ayoub Khan]

single athlete sold off at a loss of £320 million, £216 million spent on an IT system that failed, and £53 million spent on consultants. Now the Government stand idly by while their own council cuts up to £8,000 from bin workers. This Government should be defending frontline workers, not their own incompetent council.

The biggest betrayal is the Government's deliberate downplaying of their involvement. For months, Ministers claimed that this was a local issue, yet it is now clear that Government-appointed commissioners must approve any deal. Just last week, the commissioners rejected a deal that could have ended the strike, despite the council's managing director being inclined to accept it. The misery in Birmingham has been prolonged not by the workers, but by the commissioners and therefore the Government. This Government have the power to end the strike, and yet they have actively dragged their heels in reaching a deal. That raises serious questions about the Government's commitment to workers' rights. The council's action amounts to fire and rehire. With the Government's role in these negotiations, we must ask: are they complicit in aiding and abetting the very practices they are legislating to ban?

Finally, will the Minister confirm that the Government have the power to remove the commissioners who are blocking a deal? Will he personally commit to opposing the fire and rehire practices that the council is using?

Jim McMahon: I hear the hon. Member's characterisation of the issue, but it bears no relationship at all to the reality of the situation. The council is an independent employer. It is not for the Government to go council by council negotiating trade union disputes or terms and condition changes. It is for the councils themselves as the employers to negotiate with their workforces, and that is exactly the same in Birmingham as for other councils, as he knows. The commissioners are of course appointed by Government and have to act with professional expertise in giving advice to the local authority on whether its plans are affordable and lawful, but the negotiations are taking place between the council itself, and Unite the trade union and the council's workforce.

On this idea that we are scapegoating the workers in this dispute, no party has done more for workers' rights than Labour. No Government have done more on workers' rights in a generation than this Government, headed by the Deputy Prime Minister. When I hear Members of this House talking in a way that degrades that, that is a complete and absolute failure to accept not just the legacy we inherited as a Government—that includes, by the way, Birmingham city council and its local taxpayers—but our determination to put that right.

Finally, of course Birmingham could and should have made some big financial decisions much earlier. That is a matter of fact, and that is why commissioners are in there today. But the local government finance settlement had an increase in core spending power of 9.8%—that is, £131 million of additional money into Birmingham. That included the largest settlement through the recovery grant of any council in the country.

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

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): As the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) alluded to, the House knows that the origins of the dispute in Birmingham are in the 2017 settlement of the equal pay arrangements, which created a £760 million liability for that local authority under the Labour party, and which have been undermined at every turn by the relationship between Labour's administration in Birmingham and the unions. It is clear that that local authority and its leadership have been dodging scrutiny and accountability at every turn. They refused even to debate the local authority Conservative group's proposals for a plan to end the strikes and clean up the city.

I have a series of questions for the Minister. What guidance will he give his seven-strong commissioner team to bring about an end to the strikes? What public health assessment are the Government carrying out of the impact of more than 21,000 tonnes of uncollected rubbish and a huge increase in the rat population in Birmingham? Will he consider withdrawing the facility time for Unite the union, which is currently refusing to go about the process of bringing an end to the strikes? Will he tell his commissioners—including Tony McArdle, whose appointment has been announced today—that Birmingham's besieged households must not be held to ransom by the unions for a day longer? Will he tell the House who he thinks has failed the households of Birmingham more? Is it the Labour council, in leaving rats on the streets and 21,000 tonnes of uncollected rubbish in a heatwave, or this Government, who have failed to intervene to bring an end to this blight on residents' lives?

Jim McMahon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, which I will try to answer in turn. Let me say, though, that we will take no lectures at all from the party that was in government for 14 years and saw the downgrading of local authorities across the country, including in Birmingham.

Although these are our commissioners, as the hon. Gentleman says—that is correct: they are Government appointed—let us not forget which Government appointed them. They were appointed on the watch of the previous Government. Today we are just announcing a change in the lead commissioner. We need to be careful not to politicise those people, who believe in public service and are helping out the local authority and supporting the Government in trying to turn that council around. Let us leave the politicisation of the commissioners to one side and deal with the facts.

Last time I was in the Chamber, the Conservatives were talking down the role of bin workers, as if somehow that work was degrading. At that time, I think they were suggesting that the armed forces might be brought in to collect waste and that that would somehow degrade their role. That was never going to be the case, but it was a glimpse into how the Conservatives view the workers who are affected. One thing that is absolutely certain is that the Labour party believes in the power of frontline workers and in the importance of these frontline roles. We absolutely value the role of refuse collectors, and we see the implications of waste not being collected. But we have got to be clear, too, that whatever settlement is on the table has to be lawful and affordable, and it cannot cross the red

line of undermining the equal pay negotiations that are taking place. I hope that we can agree at least on that basis.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for outlining the Government's work to maintain vital collection services for residents, who want to see their city cleaned up rather than another summer of this, given the recent heatwave.

Strike action has now passed the six-month mark. As the Minister just outlined, it is important that we consider the hardship felt by many of the striking workers. Many of them do not want to politicise this; they just want to do the right thing by their families. One recently told the BBC:

"Morale's quite low... Everyone's trying to stay strong and together, but it is very difficult. The union has tried to help us out with strike pay, but for a lot of people it doesn't cover their...bills. It puts a massive strain on our family. Kids, money—money's tight, credit cards are maxed out".

Nobody should be put in that position. I hear the Minister's calls for the commissioners, Birmingham and the unions to resolve this issue, but what more can he and the Government do to bring everyone around the table so that we can finally bring an end to the dispute?

Jim McMahon: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her comments—we agree on much. She speaks to why a resolution on this issue is so important. At the heart of this, there are working people with rent and mortgages to pay, who want a resolution. To be clear, the council has been in negotiations over many months and has made a fair and reasonable offer to Unite, which, unfortunately, the union rejected. The council has also worked hard to offer options to affected workers, including their transfer to other roles in the council at the same grade, and, in some cases, has agreed to upskill in-scope workers. A generous redundancy package is available for those who wish to leave the service; we have seen an uptake in that. In the end, none of us wants this to roll on indefinitely; we want to see a resolution for the affected workers and for the taxpayers of Birmingham, who quite rightly expect their local public services to be delivered to a good standard.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Birmingham wants its refuse and recycling service back as quickly as possible to end the risks to public health and the environment, especially in the most densely populated parts of the city. The Liberal Democrats pay tribute to the volunteers and emergency services, who were out there cleaning up the city by dealing with refuse, waste pile-ups and fly-tipping while the council and unions could not agree and continued clashing hammer and tongs.

For years under the previous Conservative Government, councils were expected to do more and more with less and less, and that has borne fruit in Birmingham and many other places. The Government must now grasp the nettle and tackle that funding crisis, particularly in

social care and local government generally, so that what is happening in Birmingham does not spread across the country. Given that one-off clean-ups have cost the council £3.9 million already, is it not time for the Government to fund a complete clean-up of the remaining refuse so that residents do not have to foot the bill and spend the rest of the summer living alongside disgusting rubbish. Will any clean-up ensure that waste is properly dealt with and recycled where possible, given that the city is already ranked third from bottom in waste recycling?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman makes fair observations about the funding crisis in local government, but it would be remiss of me not to take him back to the coalition years, which started austerity in local government. The Liberal Democrats were not just casual observers of the demise of local government but active participants in it. In those very first years, when the cuts really bit for local authorities, they aided and abetted.

Our job, after 14 years of the impacts of those decisions, is to find a way through, and we are getting on with that. We are rebuilding the foundations of local government. We have announced a consultation on the fair funding review, which will see a redistribution of funding across the country towards the areas of high deprivation that need it most. We are taking into account all the different service pressures. We are grasping the nettle on the structural changes needed in devolution and reorganisation to ensure that the sector is fit, legal and decent at the end of the process, and we are repairing the broken audit market alongside that. We are getting on with repairing the foundations of local government, but we need to be clear that this is a localised dispute, and of course we do not want to see it impact on local people.

I say to the House—because I have heard this a number of times and should have called out the first example—that there are not tens of thousands of tonnes of waste accumulating on the streets of Birmingham. That was the case, and it was dealt with efficiently. In most cases, collections are taking place for most households at most times, and there is not the accumulation of the type we saw earlier. Clearly, the situation is fragile and we do not want it to return to how it was, which is why we remain in regular contact with the council.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I welcome the appointment of the new lead commissioner. As the Minister knows, we have had many discussions about the intervention, including at times from a place of concern. I look forward to working constructively with Tony McArdle on behalf of the citizens of Birmingham. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of the GMB and Unison unions, which are the claimant unions in the equal pay case in Birmingham.

I feel compelled to round out the partial account that we have heard today in the Chamber. Will the Minister confirm that by far the largest share of Birmingham's equal pay liability of more than £1 billion was incurred when the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats ran the city, and that over the past decade to 2024, Birmingham suffered the sharpest reduction in spending power of any unitary authority in the country, with devastating consequences for every constituency in Birmingham?

Jim McMahon: That is a fair point. I forgot that the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) had a brief stint as a Liberal Democrat councillor. Actually, the people of Birmingham want us to put the party politics to one side. I think what matters to local people is, first, that they are treated fairly when it comes to local council tax levels and, secondly, that they get a good level of public service for the tax that they pay.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) rightly says, there has to be accountability. It is a matter of fact that some of these big decisions should have been taken much earlier, and that goes back to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat-run council. His fundamental point about the importance of equal pay and the liabilities, which are big numbers because of the size of the council and the historic issues there, cannot be undermined. The worst outcome of this dispute would be that a decision is made for the short term that does not address the medium and long term, completely unravels the equal pay negotiations and, by doing that, undermines the women workers in scope.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I commend my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), for bringing this urgent question to the House before it rises. I also pay tribute to Max Caller, whose retirement has been announced in the last few hours; he has dispatched his Herculean task with considerable distinction.

The Minister will be aware that Labour is now imposing the contract, which the Conservative Opposition leader, Councillor Bobby Alden, urged the Labour leadership to do a year ago. Does he understand that my constituents in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, who come under Birmingham for local government purposes, have had their patience tried beyond endurance by this bankrupt Labour council? Is he aware that recent polling suggests that only 5% of Birmingham residents are likely to vote Labour next May? My constituents—and, I have no doubt, those of the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr—are counting the days until next May comes and we can get rid of this dreadful council.

Jim McMahon: I thank the right hon. Member for taking my advice and not making this party political—a bit more refining and we will get there in the end.

Surely the right hon. Member would expect that the local authority would enter a trade union negotiation in good faith and would go as far as it can lawfully go in making a settlement offer that respects the workers who are losing pay as a result of equal pay, because that is surely the right thing to do. I hope he would not expect the council to disregard that entirely. The council rightly cares about its workforce, not least because many of them will be Birmingham city residents themselves, and it wants to make sure that it supports that process. The council, like us, was not happy that the offer was rejected by the union, but that is not to say that we cannot use this time for the conversation to continue, so that we can reach a resolution that puts the people of Birmingham first.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Could the Minister explain this? I understand the issues of equal pay, and I think equal pay is essential, important and legally necessary, but what we have here is a reduction in

pay for a significant group of workers. How can they possibly be held responsible for the financial problems that Birmingham city council has? Is their case not entirely justified—that they are protecting their own wages and conditions, as any good trade union would do in any negotiations? Cannot he simply accept and understand that, and that be the basis on which a settlement is agreed, so that they can return to work?

Jim McMahon: The way the right hon. Member starts is where I would hope most local authorities do when looking at equal pay, but the reality is that there will always be winners and losers in equal pay where women have been underpaid for a long time. Councils have options here: they can either compensate and pay upwards for all the female workers in post to the comparable male worker, which for most councils in most circumstances will not be affordable, because there are huge sums attached to that; or, to make a package affordable, they have to equalise it out in consultation with the trade unions. That is exactly what has happened in Birmingham.

The issue in Birmingham is very particular to the waste service, where a previous agreement was reached that honestly does not hold when assessed against equal pay in terms of the tasks that are carried out by those workers. In the end, it does not pass the equal pay test, but that is not to say that we are not urging the council and Unite the trade union to continue negotiations to resolve this. We absolutely want the right outcome for the workers and the residents of Birmingham.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for tabling this urgent question. I also thank the Minister for his answers, and I sympathise with his position, but replacing this workforce, policing the dispute and paying the legal fees has cost the already overstretched council £4 million. All the while, the good people of Birmingham—the very people who voted in a Labour council and many Labour Members of Parliament—are living in foul misery. Does the Minister agree that it would save millions of pounds, improve our relationship with the dedicated bin workers and restore a basic necessity to the people of Birmingham if he intervened to get us out of this stink?

Jim McMahon: Our starting point, of course, is that we want all parties to negotiate in good faith, and we want the local authority to do its best to table a deal that goes as far as it can go, but the red line has to be that it cannot compromise and completely unravel the equal pay negotiations that have taken place, to which all the trade unions—not just Unite—have been a party. Therein lies the issue.

The hon. Member could rightly say—I think this is what he indicates—“Surely you just pay what it takes to resolve the issue with the striking bin workers,” but for the equal pay package to hold, a comparable payment would need to be made to all the female workers in scope, so the numbers he talks about are fantasyland. They are not single-digit millions; they are tens or hundreds of millions of pounds, which goes above both legality and affordability for the local authority. We have urged the council to negotiate in good faith with the trade union and to go as far as it can go, provided that it is lawful, affordable and does not undermine the equal pay liability so far.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on tabling this urgent question and thank the Minister for his response. The Birmingham bin strikes are not just about waste. They are about what happens when the state retreats from local services without proper reform. The UK must confront the legacy of austerity, rethink how local government is funded and run and treat frontline workers with the respect and fairness they deserve. Failure to do so risks further breakdowns in public services and public trust not just in Birmingham but all over our country. Will the Minister explain what steps the Government are taking to analyse how we got into this mess in the first place and to ensure that no other council faces the same situation anywhere in our country?

Jim McMahon: We have to accept that there are some issues here that are unique to Birmingham. For instance, many councils across England dealt with equal pay over a decade ago, and Birmingham did not, which is why the liabilities have escalated in the way they have.

On the hon. Member's fundamental point about fair funding and ensuring that local public services can be rebuilt, we can agree. We believe that most people's local neighbourhood services have been impacted so heavily by not only austerity but the growth in demand in adult's, children's and temporary accommodation that we have to completely rethink both how we fund local government and how we reinvest back into prevention and early intervention to prevent that crisis management model.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and wish him well in his endeavours to enable a solution to be found. The Government have stated that they are committed to a "sustainable resolution" to the severe backlog of uncollected waste and the ongoing pay dispute. The workers state that they face cuts of some £8,000 per year, which would be a devastating loss for those with families and responsibilities. Will the Minister acknowledge that reducing current wages is not the way forward and that the Government must intervene now, to make workers feel worthwhile and to sustain trust between the council and the workers?

Jim McMahon: Whoever is negotiating in this environment will have the same guardrails as the local authority does. The local authority has to be mindful of the equal pay package that it has agreed with all the trade unions, and it cannot do anything in this very narrow dispute—however impactful it is on the workers and local residents—that means completely unravelling the equal pay package. I share the hon. Member's concern about the impact, but it is important that the local authority and Unite the trade union continue those talks and try to find a resolution. With that being the final question, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you and other Members of the House a peaceful recess?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Thank you.

Orgreave Inquiry

1.49 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement regarding this Government's commitment to establishing the truth about events at Orgreave in 1984.

The clashes at Orgreave coking plant in 1984 are etched indelibly into our nation's memory. The clash marked a pivotal moment in the nationwide miners' strike that was ongoing during that period. Some 95 picketers were arrested and charged with riot and violent disorder, but all charges were later dropped after evidence was discredited. As a result of the violence, there were serious implications for the relationship between policing and coalfield communities at that time, and the passage of time has not diminished the impact on those present and their families.

On Thursday last week, the Home Secretary visited the site of the former Orgreave coking plant, along with campaigners from the National Union of Mineworkers and the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, as well as a number of Members of this House and the Mayor of South Yorkshire. I know that the Home Secretary was very grateful to all those who took the time to attend and that she was moved by the experience they shared and by walking part of the route that picketers walked on that day 41 years ago. It is this Labour Government's commitment to get truth and justice for those coalfield communities.

It is important to note that there have been significant changes in the oversight of policing since 1984 and the way in which public order is policed. Nevertheless, questions about the specific events at Orgreave have remained unanswered for far too long. More than four decades may have passed, but those questions must still be answered. That is why we committed in Labour's manifesto to ensure, through an investigation or inquiry, that the truth about events at Orgreave comes to light. Yesterday we made good on that promise, as the Home Secretary announced the establishment of an inquiry into events surrounding the clashes at the Orgreave coking plant in 1984.

The Rt Rev Dr Pete Wilcox, the Bishop of Sheffield, has agreed to chair the inquiry. The bishop is a very well-respected member of the local and wider regional community in South Yorkshire, and his credibility and impartiality will stand him in very good stead to deliver this inquiry. He will be supported by a small panel of independent experts who will be appointed in due course, in a similar vein to the Hillsborough panel chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool in 2010.

The purpose of the inquiry will be to aid public understanding of how the violent clashes and injuries caused at Orgreave on 18 June 1984, and the events immediately afterwards, came to pass. It will be a statutory inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, with the appropriate powers to compel the provision of information where necessary. The direction of the inquiry's investigation will be a matter for the chair. As the sponsoring Department, the Home Office will provide support and ensure that the inquiry has the resources needed to fulfil its terms of reference, but it will have no other say in the conduct of the inquiry or the conclusions that it may reach until it is time for us to respond to them.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

It will be key for the inquiry to have access to all information that it deems relevant. For that reason, the Home Secretary has recently written to all police forces, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing and all Government Departments to ask that all material they hold relating to the events at Orgreave be retained, in order that it can be provided in a timely manner to the inquiry if requested. Recognising the need to deliver swiftly while avoiding any undue impact on individuals' wellbeing, I hope the inquiry will look to previous examples of good practice, such as the Hillsborough independent panel, to inform its method of delivery.

The Home Secretary is in the process of consulting the inquiry chair on proposed terms of reference. She has asked him to engage with key stakeholders, including the National Union of Mineworkers and the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, as part of that process. We will place a final copy of the terms of reference in the Libraries of both Houses at the earliest opportunity thereafter. It is our expectation that the inquiry will launch in the autumn.

For the police to perform their critical functions effectively, it is essential that they can secure and maintain the confidence of the people they serve. That is why this Labour Government have made rebuilding trust in policing an integral part of our plan for change. Of course, much of that effort is concerned with strengthening forces for the challenges of now and the future, but where historical events cast a long shadow that stretches into the present day in our coalfield communities, we must shine a light on what happened and ensure that any and all lessons are learned.

Questions about events at Orgreave have gone unanswered for too long. This Government committed to putting that right, and the upcoming inquiry will work independently, fairly and without fear or favour to establish the truth about what happened. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.56 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. Growing up in the north-east, I know the emotions stirred by the miners' strike; decades after the events, they continue to cause significant division and disagreement in our communities. Regardless of people's views on the rights and wrongs of the incident, historic events such as this, which saw conflict and violence on our streets, will always be deeply regrettable.

We must acknowledge that in the decades since, no Government—including the last Labour Government, which had 13 years—deemed it necessary to establish such an inquiry. That Labour Government included three current Home Office Ministers, with the current Minister for Border Security and Asylum, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), serving in the Home Office at the time. If this inquiry has a real contribution to make, why did the then Labour Government not hold one? What has changed?

As Members will know, there have been previous calls for such an inquiry, but when the decision was made not to grant one, it was based on reasoned grounds. There has been a passage of time, and there have been significant legislative and systematic changes in the decades since. As the Home Secretary said in her written statement,

“there have been significant changes in the oversight of policing since 1984, and to the way that public order is now policed”.

Does the Minister believe that an inquiry is likely to result in any meaningful and relevant lessons for today's policing system?

The Minister is a long-standing advocate for those impacted by infected blood—a case of truly disgraceful systematic treatment over decades. Similarly, the Hillsborough panel highlighted the deep injustice of a tragedy involving this police force, but both those inquiries understandably came at considerable cost. Will the Minister outline what the Department anticipates that delivering a proportionate and meaningful inquiry on this issue will cost?

The press reports on the proposed chairman raise serious questions about his ability to act in a politically neutral and independent manner. Can the Minister assure the House that the inquiry will not be political in nature and that it will listen to the views of all parties present on the day, so that it is not merely an example of the Government putting the interests of the unions ahead of the police? As with so many issues recently, this raises questions about the commitment of the Government to supporting brave police officers, who act within the law to do their job. Can she confirm that the Government are committed to supporting police officers who put themselves in harm's way to keep public order and comply with their training and instructions?

Finally, I note from the Government's publication that the inquiry will be statutory, with powers to compel individuals to provide information where necessary. That sounds remarkably similar to a request that we have made to the Government, which was repeatedly rejected. The victims and survivors of rape gangs deserve detailed updates on the progress of that inquiry, yet the lack of information about how the new inquiry will be set up and how it will compel evidence leads me to conclude that the Government have prioritised the miners over the minors who suffered horrific exploitation at the hands of rape gangs. This Labour Government's union paymasters should not determine the pecking order of justice in this country. There are still perpetrators of child sexual exploitation and those who covered it up who have gone unpunished, yet the Government have chosen to prioritise this inquiry. In her audit, Baroness Casey spoke of the need to implement inquiries that are time limited. I ask the Government to focus on this issue and, given their initial refusal to do so, ensure that action is taken at a much greater speed to bring about justice for those young, vulnerable women who suffered at the hands of rape gangs.

Dame Diana Johnson: I was going to start by saying that I welcomed the shadow Minister's initial comments, in which he recognised how the situation at Orgreave all those years ago still casts a shadow over communities in Yorkshire, the north-east and other parts of the country. I must say that I was surprised by some of his comments, because I know that he is a good man and is trying his

best to fulfil the role of shadow Policing Minister. I will answer his questions, and will come on to the issue of grooming gangs that he raised in the latter part of his contribution, but I must say that I found his comments extremely distasteful, as well as not accurate or correct.

First, I will deal with the question of why we are having this Orgreave inquiry. Our manifesto committed us to ensuring that there was a thorough investigation or inquiry, so that

“the truth about the events at Orgreave comes to light.”

We are delivering on that manifesto commitment today. As I said in my statement, we are also committed to rebuilding public confidence in policing, and campaigners and mining communities have spent decades searching for answers about what happened. The purpose of the inquiry will be to aid the public understanding of how the events at Orgreave on 18 June 1984 and immediately afterwards came to pass. I hope that explains why we are taking this action today.

The shadow Minister asked about the cost. We have been very clear that the Home Office will meet the cost of the inquiry. We are also mindful that we want the inquiry to be as expeditious as possible, and to be value for money. That is why we have looked at the model of the Hillsborough independent inquiry—we think that is a good model to follow. Certainly, there will be conversations with the chair about the projected cost and the timeline that he will want to set out.

Turning to the issue of the chair, again I was really disappointed by the shadow Minister’s remarks about the bishop. Bishop Pete has previously supported calls for an inquiry. It is important to note that that was in the context of his pastoral role, in which he has supported members of the diocese of Sheffield who were impacted by the events at Orgreave. He certainly did not show any favour towards either the police or the picketers when calling for that inquiry. I do not think that that call detracts from the necessary credibility, impartiality and independence that I believe Bishop Pete will bring to his role as chair of the inquiry. He has the backing and support of the key stakeholders in taking that role forward. It is also important to remember that the chair of the inquiry will be supported by a small group of independent members, who will have expert knowledge in certain areas to help the chair fulfil his terms of reference.

As the shadow Minister said, the inquiry is statutory. That is because we recognise the importance of ensuring that documents can be brought forward. It is important that people can be compelled to produce documents and that witnesses can be compelled as well.

Finally, the shadow Minister referred to the issue of grooming gangs. He will know that a great deal of work has been done to make sure that the hideous, appalling situations that have been uncovered around the grooming gangs will now be dealt with. The Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), has given statements to the House, as has the Home Secretary, and there has been a clear list of the actions that are being taken. It is absolutely right that that work is done. Of course, when the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse was set up under the previous Government, there was support across the House for the work of Professor Alexis Jay. It is a great pity that the previous Government did not enact any of Professor Jay’s recommendations. That is the hugely shameful state of affairs that this Government inherited,

but I am absolutely clear that this Government are dealing with grooming gangs. That is the right thing to do, but equally, setting up the Orgreave inquiry today is the right thing to do.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I very much welcome the Policing Minister announcing to the House the actions that the Government will be taking. I was active at the time of the miners’ strike, and I now represent 23 former mining villages. Many of the men I represent were at Orgreave, and if we were to take even a small sample of opinion as to what those men think happened there, they would say that the finger points in one direction only: at No. 10, and at people closely associated with Mrs Thatcher.

I want to ask about the inquiry’s terms of reference. On the day, 90-odd men were arrested on trumped-up charges, with evidence falsified by police officers. I have met some of those police officers, and they say that they had orders from above telling them what to say and what to write. That is a serious matter: men were put on bail, put in prison or even hospitalised, all on trumped-up charges. Will the inquiry’s terms of reference allow the bishop—who is a good man—to pursue the trail of evidence wherever it leads, in order to determine once and for all how that injustice was organised by people in the Conservative party?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question; I know that he has a great deal of experience and knowledge in this area. As I said in my statement, the terms of reference are currently being discussed with the chair, but it is very clear that the inquiry should look at the evidence, and should hear testimony if that is what it wishes to do. It will do so without fear or favour, wherever the evidence leads it to look.

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

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I came into the Chamber for this statement to hear and speak about the Orgreave inquiry, so it was pretty shocking to hear the shadow Minister use it as an opportunity to yet again play politics with child sexual abuse and exploitation. As a survivor myself, I find that particularly appalling.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the announcement of a statutory inquiry into the events that took place between police and miners at Orgreave on 18 June 1984. For years, those caught up in the harrowing events of that day have had to carry the painful trauma of that unresolved injustice—not just the injuries sustained, but the police charges that were subsequently dropped. Over 40 years on, we must come together to ensure that this inquiry reaches its full potential and uncovers the answers that those impacted deeply deserve. That must include proper consultation, which will be key to rebuilding public trust. I would therefore welcome more details from the Minister about how local communities, campaigners, and impacted miners and their families will be involved throughout the inquiry.

Inquiries can be a powerful tool for uncovering the truth about injustice, but they will only reach their full potential when there is a duty of candour that requires public officials and authorities to co-operate fully. As such, although the Government have committed to

[Josh Babarinde]

bringing such a duty of candour into force, will the Minister take this opportunity to provide a clear timeline for introducing a Hillsborough law to Parliament?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. To put things in context, the Home Secretary and I have met a range of key stakeholders already to hear their respective views on the scope and nature of the Orgreave inquiry and what it should seek to achieve. There has already been a consultation with the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, the National Union of Mineworkers, South Yorkshire police, the Mayor of South Yorkshire and many Members of this House who have an interest in this issue, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), as Orgreave lies in her constituency.

We have also met other interested parties in the field of law. One of them whom I met personally was Michael Mansfield KC. He was the lawyer who represented a number of those who were charged at Orgreave. We have also met academics, because we know that there is value in looking at what academics can show us about what works with inquiries. We have therefore already engaged in a lot of consultation. There is further ongoing consultation on the terms of reference, and that is the responsibility of the chair. I expect that all the parties we have met will be engaged again.

There is active work being done on the Hillsborough law at the moment. I cannot give a timeline today, but I know that it will be brought to the House shortly.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is a privilege to be in the Chamber today to hear that we are finally getting the inquiry that has long been campaigned for by the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, the NUM and many in my community and across South Yorkshire. They are simply asking for the truth. The shadow Minister has just said that the inquiry should not be politicised, but does the Minister agree that Orgreave is political? It is one of the most political things that has ever happened to South Yorkshire, and it is incredibly important that the inquiry is put on a statutory footing so that it can compel people to give evidence and get to the truth of something that many in our communities still bear the scars of.

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge about how Orgreave has affected her community so many years on. She makes the important point that there is a political context to this inquiry. Those of us who were around then know that it was a very political time, with the miners' strike and all that. It is absolutely right that we have this opportunity to look across the piece at what happened at Orgreave. As my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) said, there was perhaps the involvement of other politicians, so it is important that we recognise the political context. That is why, again, it is so important that the inquiry will be put on a statutory footing, to allow documents to be demanded and witnesses to be compelled to give evidence.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): First, I welcome the statement that has been made by the Minister today. It is an enormous step forward, and we should pay a

huge tribute to the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, and in particular Kate Flannery and Chris Peace and their colleagues, for all the great work that they have done for a long time. Labour pledged to hold an inquiry in its last three manifestos—in 2017, 2019 and 2024—so this is a good step forward.

Will the Minister bear in mind carefully what the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) said in his excellent question? Lives were ruined. People were badly injured as a result of Orgreave. They suffered for many years and were unable to work because they were blacklisted and for other reasons. Charges were made on trumped-up evidence and consequently people suffered. It has gone on for a long time.

We need to know a number of things. Will the terms of reference allow evidence to be taken under oath from wherever it needs to be taken, and from whoever was there? Arthur Scargill and many others, and all those surviving miners who were there must be given time to explain exactly what happened. We also need to know the role of South Yorkshire police in the attacks that took place against those miners, so that we can get to the truth. I realise that putting a timetable on an inquiry is a slightly difficult thing to do, because we do not want to prevent the inquiry from getting all the evidence it needs, but we also do not want the inquiry to run on forever and lose its impetus and purpose. Can the Minister therefore give us some idea of roughly how long she expects the inquiry to take to report? Is she prepared to accept interim reports, so that rapid progress can be made?

Will the Minister assure the House that where the evidence leads to the culpability of Ministers, police officers, senior civil servants or many others throughout the command chain for the events that the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth explained, prosecutions will follow, with evidence put before the courts and, if necessary, people brought to justice for it? We have to bring justice to the totality of this event.

Dame Diana Johnson: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about paying tribute to the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign. I had the privilege to meet some of the members of that campaign, and I fully acknowledge and appreciate how lives were ruined and families have suffered a lot. Not just the people there on the day, but the wider families have suffered. It is absolutely right that we set up this inquiry; lives have been ruined.

I know that the chair will take note of the right hon. Gentleman's comments about what he would like to see in the terms of reference. As to the timetable, I absolutely agree. I want this inquiry to be conducted as quickly as possible, but as thoroughly as possible. We were looking at a timeframe of around two years, but that was in the early discussions that we had. I obviously cannot prejudge the recommendations of the inquiry; we will need to look at those recommendations when they are made.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): As chair of the coalfields group of Labour MPs, and on behalf of the group, I welcome this statement. It is an historic moment, and I know that Orgreave Truth and Justice campaigners and many more Labour colleagues would have been present had they had a little more notice.

The Minister will know that, even last year, organisations such as Northumbria police were destroying documents. Those actions could hinder this inquiry, and it is vital

that individuals and organisations are held accountable, not just for what happened 40 years ago, but for any attempts to undermine justice by destroying evidence. Will the Minister confirm that the inquiry will have access to all information and evidence, and that no further documents will be destroyed or evidence withheld? Will the inquiry have the power to compel witness testimony?

I hope that this inquiry will not only uncover the truth, but make recommendations to right the wrongs done to many miners, including some of my constituents, who were wrongly convicted under riot and unlawful assembly laws. Ray Patterson, now sadly no longer with us, is one of those miners. I thank the Minister and the Government for honouring the manifesto pledge.

Dame Diana Johnson: First, I will deal with this issue around documents. The Home Secretary recently wrote to all police forces in England and Wales and all Government Departments to remind them of the relevant legislative frameworks for records management and to ask that information relating to the events at Orgreave on 18 June 1984 be retained. The Home Secretary has asked, if any documents have been destroyed, what those documents were and why they were destroyed. It is also worth reminding the House that under section 35 of the Inquiries Act 2005, it is a criminal offence to destroy or conceal information relevant to a public inquiry.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her statement, and for her carefully chosen words on a contentious issue. I ask her this question gently from experience. Does she appreciate that, similar to the prosecution of veterans and service personnel in Northern Ireland, asking a retired officer why he made a split-second decision 40 years ago, what was happening in detail when he made that decision and the exact wording of directions given to him is and can be incredibly distressing and upsetting? Those officers are now in their 80s or perhaps even their 90s. What support can the Minister offer them to enable them to cope with the re-traumatisation that they will undoubtedly suffer?

Dame Diana Johnson: That is an important point. This is not the first time a Minister has had to stand here and agree to an inquiry into events that happened a long time ago. The hon. Gentleman and I have worked together on the infected blood inquiry, so he will know that it took a long time to arrive at that point. I fully recognise that the length of time involved means some people, sadly, will have died, while others will be very elderly and having to recall what happened. This is not how we would want it to be, is it? As for the hon. Gentleman's point about those who will be called to give testimony to the inquiry, I know that the bishop will be considering what support should be provided to help the witnesses, whether they are police officers or picketers and their families, and I am sure that that will be uppermost in his mind.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): As one who represents a constituency in the heart of the Durham coalfield, I recognise the pressing need for an inquiry into the events that occurred at the Orgreave plant on 18 June 1984, and, like others, I send a huge thank you

to the members of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, who have worked for decades for this moment. Does the Minister share my frustration at the length of time it has taken the House to invoke such a crucial inquiry, and will she commit herself to investigating the role and involvement of central Government in the planning and instruction on how to allocate resources—financial and otherwise—in the lead-up to, during and after that day at the height of the 1984-85 miners' strike in Rotherham?

Dame Diana Johnson: I bitterly regret the fact that it has taken so long for the inquiry to be established. As I have said, there were a number of other causes, but we should have been looking at this far earlier. I think it helpful that Members are expressing their views about what should be covered by the terms of reference for the inquiry, because I know that the bishop will want to note what the House and its Members have to say and ensure that they form part of his discussions about those terms of reference.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): It was alleged that Amber Rudd refused to hold an Orgreave inquiry because it would slur the memory of Thatcher. Can the Minister confirm that this inquiry will have a statutory power to compel witnesses to provide evidence, and that politics will not get in the way of uncovering the truth once and for all?

Dame Diana Johnson: I can absolutely confirm that this is a statutory inquiry, with all the legal powers that a statutory inquiry has to compel the provision of documents and of evidence from witnesses and to go wherever the evidence leads it.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for miscarriages of justice and a lifelong trade unionist, I welcome the long overdue announcement of a statutory inquiry into Orgreave and pay tribute to all who have campaigned for truth and justice, particularly the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign. However, given the serious concerns about evidence that has been destroyed, tampered with or withheld, will the Minister confirm that any inquiry will be underpinned by a clear legal duty of candour to guarantee full transparency and accountability on the part of all those involved, including the police and former Government officials, so that the victims and campaigners receive the full answers that they deserve?

Dame Diana Johnson: We gave careful consideration to the role played by the Hillsborough independent inquiry, because we think it would be very useful for the chair of this inquiry to look at the model that it provides. I take my hon. Friend's point about the duty of candour, and work is being done on putting that into statute, but the bishop will be looking at all these issues.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I remember clearly the miners' strike of 1984 and, in particular, what happened at Orgreave, and I know that it has many painful memories for a lot of people, so let me first thank and commend the Government for holding this statutory public inquiry. It appears that after four decades we will finally secure some truth and justice in relation to what happened on 18 June 1984, and also what happened to the 95 miners and how they were

[*Warinder Juss*]

treated. Will the Minister please assure the House that if the inquiry does reveal evidence of misconduct and wrongdoing, the necessary action will be taken, and that we will learn lessons to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. It is clear that once the inquiry has been established we must let it do its work and make its recommendations, and we will then seek to respond to those recommendations.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and for launching the inquiry, thus keeping our manifesto promise. In coalfield communities such as mine, many former miners still bear the scars, physical and mental, of what happened at Orgreave 41 years ago, and our towns and villages still feel that collective sense of injustice. A great many men want to share their stories of that day, to ensure their own closure but also to ensure that the truth will out. Will the Minister assure my constituents, and ex-miners up and down the country, that they will have an opportunity to contribute to the inquiry?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am sure that the bishop will listen carefully to the comments that Members have made. I know that some people would feel very comfortable talking about what happened, explaining and giving testimony, while others would not want to do that. It will be for the bishop to decide on the best way forward,

to ensure that the inquiry hears from individuals and has access to the documents, and he will be setting out the terms of reference shortly.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Minister's statement and the fulfilment of that manifesto commitment and, like others, I pay tribute to the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign.

I am sure that Members across the House will have been disturbed by reports of the destruction of potentially relevant documents—a point that has already been ably raised. The Home Office is currently considering the case for instituting a public inquiry into the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings, and I do not expect the Minister to pre-empt that today, but in respect of the preservation of records, will the Department consider taking the same actions to preserve potentially relevant documents, including those held by external bodies, in advance of that decision? The Northumbria police case highlights the particular risk of accidental loss or deliberate destruction in advance of that legal protection kicking in. I would welcome the chance to discuss this matter further with the Minister.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very happy to discuss this matter with my hon. Friend. I think it worth pointing out that police forces are independent of Government and that decisions concerning the management of their records are for them to make in accordance with their respective reviews and policies on retention and disposal. The Government expect any such decisions to be made in accordance with relevant legislation and national guidance and, as I have said, it is a criminal offence to destroy documents that may be relevant or to conceal information that would interest a public inquiry.

Music Streaming: Label-led Principles

2.28 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): And now for something completely different. With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement about the Government's progress with industry on the remuneration of artists in the music sector.

Music is not just the food of love. It does not just set our hearts dancing and express our deepest desires. It does not just showcase the UK to the world. As part of our dynamic creative industries, which we have identified as one of the eight priority growth sectors in our industrial strategy, it is key to our economic future as well. That is why music is at the heart of our new 10-year creative industries sector plan. Our new music growth package will more than double Government funding for the industry to £10 million annually for the next three years. That will help UK artists to achieve domestic and international success, while nurturing our grassroots music scene.

We want the UK music industry to thrive, but we know that it will not unless artists receive their fair share of the rewards, especially in the new era of streaming. The stereotype of artists starving in garrets is not a model for a successful industry. Musicians deserve their fair reward, and the industry will only flourish if new generations of musicians are able to make a living, so it is with pleasure that I announce today an important milestone: UK record labels have agreed to new measures that will boost the earnings of legacy artists, songwriters and session musicians.

The UK music industry is a global powerhouse. Coldplay, Adele, Stormzy, Ed Sheeran, Dua Lipa, Raye, Bryn Terfel, Alfie Boe, Iestyn Davies—our country has been the birthplace of genre-defining talent that has shaped the soundtrack of generations, so it is no surprise that we are the third largest music market in the world, and the second largest recorded music exporter. The first music streaming service started in 2001, and streaming now accounts for a majority of music revenue. This has created a series of challenges for the UK music industry, radically transforming how audiences experience music, how musicians earn a living, how record labels treat their artists, and how artists access different markets.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee sought to address some of these issues in an important report on music streaming in 2021. In response, the Competition and Markets Authority completed a market study into music streaming, and the Intellectual Property Office conducted research on potential copyright reforms. In spring 2024, three years after the Committee's report, the then Government finally launched the creator remuneration working group, which is tasked with

“exploring and considering industry-led actions on remuneration from music streaming for existing and future music creators”.

The Government convened the group once before the general election, and I chaired my first meeting with it within a month of taking office. I am pleased to announce that after six meetings and a series of bilateral discussions—some of them quite difficult—this work has resulted in a set of measures from UK record labels that they estimate will deliver tens of millions of pounds

of new investment to support UK artists by 2030. Central to this is a new set of principles that will be adopted by the British Phonographic Industry and the Association of Independent Music, and recommended to their UK label members.

Some independent labels are already implementing the principles, and I am delighted to say that the three major labels—Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group—will adopt them and introduce bespoke packages to boost the earnings of artists, especially legacy artists who signed up before streaming came on to the scene. In order to address the specific challenges faced by smaller labels, the BPI and the AIM are encouraging them to provide targeted support that is appropriate for their size and resources.

The principles will commit labels across the UK to providing targeted support for legacy artists, songwriters and session musicians. For legacy artists, this includes disregarding unrecovered advances, bespoke support to increase streaming engagement, and much greater clarity about the process of contract renegotiation. For songwriters, the support includes the payment of per diems for the first time, with major labels Warner UK and Universal UK committing to a payment of £75 per day, in addition to expenses. Sony UK will fund a bespoke new songwriter support programme, in partnership with the Ivors Academy, to provide financial support and assistance to songwriters; these payments will not be charged as a recoupable cost from their advance. For session musicians, the support includes an increase in session fees, agreed at the end of last year, and a commitment to reviewing their income from broadcast and public performance.

The principles announced today will complement the industry code of good practice on transparency, and the industry agreement on metadata, which we published in 2024. They mark a major milestone in the Government's work with the music industry in response to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's 2021 report on the economics of music streaming. Some concerns remain with regard to the deal for session musicians, which is why I will convene a further meeting with industry to discuss those issues.

We want these measures to be delivered in full, so that artists see real improvements. The Secretary of State and I want legacy artists to see their work revitalised and introduced to new audiences, and to have their unrecovered balances disregarded and their contracts renegotiated. In order to track progress and measure success, we will work closely with members of the creator remuneration working group, including the Council of Music Makers, on implementing a robust monitoring process, through which we can evaluate the extent to which the principles improve earnings, as intended. The Government will then assess the need for further intervention to ensure that this package delivers on its objective of bringing about real change for creators.

This is neither the end of the road nor the lifting of the needle on the record, but it is a pivotal point. If the principles we have discussed are truly implemented, they have the potential to improve the lives of artists across the UK. I am deeply grateful to the BPI, the major labels and the Association of Independent Music for engaging with this work. I want to recognise the dedication of the Council of Music Makers, which includes the Featured Artists Coalition, the Ivors Academy,

[Chris Bryant]

the Music Managers Forum, the Music Producers Guild and the Musicians' Union, for its tireless commitment to its members. Finally, my thanks go to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and its predecessor Committees for shining a powerful light on this issue. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): A love of music is something we all share. All of us have favourite songs that make up the soundtrack to the most meaningful moments in our lives—moments of joy and sorrow. They are songs that live forever. Our music industry is a true global success story; it has global stars like Adele, Ed Sheeran, and my favourite band, Oasis, and world-class cultural institutions such as the Royal Academy of Music and the London Symphony Orchestra.

Our music industry remains one of our greatest and strongest exports to the world. It not only showcases our talent on the world stage, but contributes £8 billion to our economy. It is truly a jewel in the crown of our thriving creative sectors. As the Minister has noted, streaming has transformed the music industry, benefiting both listeners and artists. Audiences now have access to more music than ever before, and artists can reach listeners on a scale they could only dream of in the past. However, as the Minister identifies, there is concern about whether artists receive a fair deal in this delicate ecosystem, and the Opposition share that concern. Although contracts between artists, labels and streaming platforms are private commercial agreements, I know that Members on both sides of the House agree that the success of streaming should not come at the expense of artists' livelihoods.

In 2022, the previous Conservative Government asked the Competition and Markets Authority to conduct a study into the music and streaming services. I was encouraged to learn that the CMA found no evidence of publishing revenues being suppressed by distorted or restricted competition, and that the share of streaming revenues going to publishers and songwriters has increased from 8% in 2008 to 15% in recent years. However, concerns remain, especially around the use of artificial intelligence across the creative industries. I know that the Government have commissioned independent research on the impact on creators, performers and the wider industry of potential changes to copyright law in the areas of equitable remuneration, contract adjustment and rights reversion. Furthermore, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation has completed research on the playlisting algorithms used by streaming services.

I can assure the Minister that Members on both sides of the House want a better deal for artists, songwriters and performers. That is why we broadly welcome the Government taking an industry-led approach to this issue. If only they did that elsewhere! I must, however, press the Minister to provide assurances to the House. First, what consequences will there be for labels that fail to comply with the new principles, and what percentage of artists does he believe will benefit from today's announcement? Secondly, what message does he have for creatives and publishers who remain deeply concerned that they are not being fairly rewarded for their hard work? Lastly, will the Government commit to reviewing these reforms within 18 months, to ensure that they are working for the industry?

Chris Bryant: Incidentally, I see that the former shadow Secretary of State is here, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), now shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. We wish him well in his new job.

It is a great delight to hear from the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), but he is always so grumpy when he actually wants to say, "Well done." I do not know about you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I sometimes think of the Conservatives as the "all fur coat and nothing else" party, because they make nice statements but never actually do anything. It is fascinating to hear him say, "We have a concern about the remuneration of musicians." Why did they do absolutely nothing on this subject when they were in government? It has taken a Labour Government to sit down with industry and creators to make sure that we delivered a change for people.

The hon. Gentleman asks what happens if people fail to comply. I am absolutely confident that all the labels that we are talking about will want to adopt the principles, because they have been part of the negotiating process. We had to have tough conversations at various points, but they have signed up to the principles and will deliver on them. I am confident that if any legacy artist says to their label, "I want to renegotiate my contract," they will have a chance to renegotiate, although the precise terms of that renegotiation will of course be a matter for the artist and the label.

Some people who signed a contract before streaming came into existence might have been on a rate of something like 8%, 9%, 10% or 11%. They will be able to negotiate that up to a digital right more like 20%, 25% or 30%. That will make a significant difference to legacy artists. Many people have made the very strong point that it is all very well increasing the number of streams of a legacy artist's work, but if they do not get any more money as a result, that will not really benefit either the record label or the legacy artist. I am very confident that this package will deliver.

The hon. Gentleman asked about having a review in 18 months' time. I can do better than that: as I have said, we will review this in 12 months' time, because if the package has not delivered, we reserve the right to bring in legislation. I made this point several times. In the EU, there is an equitable remuneration clause in legislation, and if we felt the need for that, we could progress that. However, after our really good discussions with all the parties, I am very confident that all of them want to comply with this package.

I will make one other point about songwriters. Lots of people know the famous names we all talk about—the hon. Gentleman referred to Ed Sheeran, Oasis and so on—but a lot of those who really deliver are the songwriters; they create the things that rattle around our brains for years and years. Making sure that they are not out of pocket was one of the really important principles I wanted to adopt. I am really proud that, for the first time, there will be per diems—£75 a day, plus expenses—to make sure that no songwriter is out of pocket. That is matched with the deal that the Ivors Academy is doing with Sony, for £100,000 a year. We have to invest in the songwriters of the future, so that we have the strong music industry we want for the future, but I am not impressed by his fur-coatery.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): On famous names, I call Paul Waugh.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, I declare an interest, in that my son Fin is a member of the band Big Huge New Circle, whose latest single “Pearl” is out on Spotify, and is recommended by *Clash* magazine, which calls it “beautifully complex”.

I welcome today’s announcement, particularly the introduction of per diems and the session musician uplifts. I thank the former Member for Cardiff West, who is sitting in the Peers’ Gallery, for all his work on this. It is hugely welcome, and perfectly timed for the Musicians’ Union delegate conference this week. Given the widespread concern about fair pay for streaming, and how long it has been since our Select Committee first reported on this, can the Minister explain what further powers the Government hold to intervene if these industry-led measures fall short?

Chris Bryant: First of all, can I wish—was it Big Huge New Circle? *[Interruption.]* Yes, Big Huge New Circle. So we have got it in *Hansard* three times now. I will take my fee later—10% obviously. Or 15%; it is 15% for lots of agents these days.

Obviously, the future of the music industry in the UK depends on having a pipeline. The single most important thing we can do is make sure that every single child has an opportunity to be a musician at school. Creative education in our schools not only delivers by providing musicians, but is a force multiplier for lots of other forms of education. That is something on which I am working very closely with the Department for Education.

I note that Lord Brennan is up in the Gallery—that is another song from music hall, I think. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Lord Brennan, who was on the Select Committee, was one of the driving forces making sure that there was not only a first report, but a second report in the last Parliament; he held the Government’s feet to the fire. I am determined to do precisely the same when it comes to the record labels. I honestly believe that we will now have one of the best arrangements in the world for the remuneration of artists from streaming, and I am sure that the record labels will stick with the arrangement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Britain’s musicians have long been our most beloved cultural treasures. In the crowded field of excellence in our creative sectors, our musicians are some of our proudest exports. They are part of a £124 billion industry that drives our economy, so support for our legacy and session musicians is completely overdue and very welcome. The musicians covered include the Devines in Berkhamsted, upcoming artists like Myles Smith, and national treasures like Elton John—I agree that Adele is one of our national treasures—and, as was mentioned, all those around them: songwriters, producers, and those who support them.

Technological change means that online streaming now constitutes the vast bulk of music consumption, and 120,000 new tracks a day are uploaded to music platforms. This often leaves a hole in musicians’ income,

so it is absolutely right that the Government are taking this issue seriously. We simply need to get this right, so I ask the Minister to clarify for the House how much confidence we can really have that the principles he is spelling out will finally lead to a more equitable distribution of streaming revenue. Ultimately, this is a label-led, voluntary framework; where is the independent oversight? Crucially, what guarantees are there of consistency or enforcement across the industry?

We have raised this issue many times in the past, but it remains true that if we are serious about protecting artists’ right to remuneration, we need to ensure that copyright, which has underpinned success for decades, works in our digitally evolving world. Musicians and creatives face an AI tsunami, which could pose a threat to their livelihoods; we need to tackle it seriously. I conclude by asking the Minister once more to consider swifter action from the Government on copyright and data mining, in order to support our musicians and creatives, as well as innovation across the UK.

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Member is in danger of becoming a national treasure herself. *[Interruption.]* Oh, I see that I have not united the House on that, but—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Daventry cannot keep heckling; he is the shadow Health Secretary now.

The important point is that the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) asked what confidence we can have that this will be adhered to, and I am very confident that it will. I have had face-to-face conversations with all the chief executives of the major record labels, and although sometimes I have been asking them to go further, they have gone that extra mile, and I am absolutely sure that they will deliver on this. I am confident that any legacy artist who wants to renegotiate their contract will be able to do so. We will be looking at precisely how that happens.

If anybody is not happy with their renegotiation, we have included in the principles a means of appealing. That is obviously a major role of the Musicians’ Union, but if by the autumn we suddenly find that lots of musicians are saying, “Excuse me, but I haven’t managed to renegotiate with my label”, then we will be returning to this issue. The record labels are fully aware of that, but they are determined: each is going to put together a bespoke package to try to revitalise legacy work. They are also looking at wiping off unrecouped balances and making sure people can earn more into the future.

The one thing I have always been nervous about it is that I do not think Governments should be writing contracts. This is really important. Julie Andrews, when she took the role of Maria in “The Sound of Music”, decided—or this is how the negotiation ended up—that she would just take an up-front fee, and she never got paid any royalties thereafter. That was probably a poor decision, or she was not given any other choice. However, I think Schwarzenegger, when he made movies, quite often decided to take the royalties and did not take any up-front fees. Different artists will enter renegotiation in different ways, but we wanted to rebalance the equation so that it is more in the interests of the musicians, and that is what we have done.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome this statement; it is brilliant. Three weeks ago, I had the most fantastic visit to Universal Music—thanks to Charlotte

[Samantha Niblett]

Allan for sorting that out. I also spoke to the chief executive, Dickon. Their support, love and continued passion for bringing in new artists was really transparent and obvious to me, so to hear this arrangement for legacy artists is just wonderful. It was not done in a timely enough manner, but it is wonderful that, just over a year after getting into power, we have effected this change; I thank the Minister for that. I am also very pleased to see in the statement a commitment to having more conversations with session musicians on ensuring that they get the recognition they should be getting. Will he give me some idea of the timeframes for those next steps?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what she said about Dickon. He was really very helpful at Universal in the process of getting us to this place, particularly on the issue of per diems—the £75 a day—which was one of the major asks of the Ivors Academy, and I am really pleased we were able to do that. She is right that we need to look at session musicians, and of one of the undertakings I have made is that I will be getting the BPI and the Musicians' Union together to discuss that matter again this autumn. I hope that will be in the first couple of weeks of September.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the Minister's helpful references of a sartorial nature to his opposite number, may I congratulate him on his carefully understated choice of necktie today? I shall certainly remember to bring my dark glasses next time he is on parade. Can he explain to me—as an ardent Swiftie myself—what protection performers, such as the son of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh), have against their tracks being uploaded by anyone to a service such as YouTube, whereby it is possible for people to enjoy their music without apparently paying them any royalties at all?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for the comments about my tie. I would say that it is understated compared to some of the other ties I have worn, so I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his commendation on my sartorial elegance. But he is wrong about YouTube. YouTube is one of the streaming services and people are remunerated. One could argue that they should be remunerated more, but if people are breaching copyright, that is an offence and it needs to be pursued. Record labels are pretty keen on doing so on behalf of their artists, but, as I say, YouTube is one of the streaming outlets.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and his work along with the Government. We will now be among world leaders in supporting our creative industries, especially on streaming remuneration. Will he outline how he will ensure the changes fairly benefit all artists, including legacy performers, session musicians and those outside major labels? What steps will be taken to enforce industry-wide implementation, especially if voluntary measures fall short?

Chris Bryant: The argument for doing this is partly because all musicians simply do not earn enough to make a living. That is the truth of the matter. Having

12 million streamings might equate to earning a theoretical amount of money, but the musician will not earn that amount because it will be diluted by the various processes it goes through—the money the agent takes and all the rest of it. Maybe that is why so many artists have produced songs about poverty—even Destiny's Child, with “Bills, Bills, Bills”. It has been an obsession for many artists. There is sometimes the impression that an artist, in music or in any other creative industry, can only be really good if they have struggled a bit, but the truth is that we want people to be able to make a living out of their creative industry. A key part of being a Labour Government is being able to deliver that.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): May I invite the Minister to congratulate Isle of Wight band Wet Leg on reaching the top of the albums chart, a particular achievement given that it has beaten Oasis, which I know has personally disappointed my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French)?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I am more Wet Leg than Oasis as well.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on music, I commend the Minister on doing an excellent job of bringing record labels into these new provisions. The history of the music industry is sadly full of tales of exploitation, and the industry has proved notable for its intransigence. Protecting the dignity of British songwriters by putting money in their pockets is a welcome step, and it is pleasing to see greater transparency over artists' renegotiations. However, it is clear that the label provisions, as helpful as they are, do not change or rectify the economic injustice of the streaming model as it stands.

As the Minister knows, copyright law was not brought up to date for streaming, never mind for what is approaching with AI. More than half the membership of the Musicians' Union earn less than £14,000 a year. I commend the Minister for his efforts, but can he also offer Members reassurance that this is not job done, when so many music creators and workers are still so poorly served by current arrangements? What more is he going to do for new and emerging artists in terms of the streaming model?

Chris Bryant: The one bit we have not been able to address is the amount of money that goes from the streamers themselves directly to the record labels. That is an international settlement, so it is more difficult for us to address. There was a time, when I first arrived in the House, when musicians were getting absolutely nothing and the amount of money going to record labels and musicians fell off a cliff because of pirated music. Spotify and other streaming services then came into the equation and managed to rectify some of that, but the situation is far from ideal.

I wish more of the money was going directly to the artists. It is my own personal decision that I do not stream music; I buy music, because I think more of the money goes to the artists that way. But of course, for millions of people in the UK—even for the Swiftie over there on the Opposition Benches, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)—I am sure that streaming is a convenient way of accessing music that they might never have come across otherwise.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I welcome today's announcement, not least because I am the mum of an aspiring composer and performer. I was pleased that the Minister mentioned the work of teachers and the Department for Education in supporting music in schools. Credit should go to Mr Wardrobe from Downlands community school in Hassocks for putting together the band Room 3, by literally putting them in the practice room, room 3, when they were at school. They are now doing really well and performing regularly in Brighton. How can the Minister ensure that the benefits announced today are not just concentrated in London, but benefit all the regions, including Sussex?

Chris Bryant: I commend Mr Wardrobe, who has made the room where it happens musically. I commend all music teachers. I remember when I was at school, our music teacher decided that the boys' choir should sing a song from a musical. Unfortunately, it included the lines, "I don't know how to love him...And I've loved so many men before" and he suddenly decided that we would not be singing it anymore—so music teachers do not always get it right, but sometimes they are courageous.

It is really important we ensure that this is about not just London, but the whole UK. That is one reason that it was important that we got the per diems issue sorted. Songwriters from across the UK sometimes do have to travel into London for song camps, writing camps or whatever, and making sure they get their expenses plus a per diem is a really important part of ensuring that this does not just apply to some people in our cities.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I really welcome the statement, which provides more support for grassroots music creators. It is also important that grassroots music creators have the grassroots music venues to play in, including the fantastic Acoustic Couch in Bracknell. Will Minister update the House on the Department's plans for supporting grassroots music venues across the country?

Chris Bryant: Yes, and I commend Acoustic Couch. I have not visited, but I am sure an invitation will be on its way very soon. We want to preserve as many of our small music venues as we possibly can. That is why we are pushing as hard as possible the idea of a £1 levy on arena tickets. I am delighted that the Royal Albert Hall announced yesterday that it will be first venue across the UK to implement that. I have pushed Live Nation to step up on this and it said, "Yes, yes, yes," but it felt a bit like, "Maybe, maybe, maybe", so I am still saying, "Quando, quando, quando".

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I welcome this industry-led approach—that is the right thing to do—but we also need to bear in mind the artists who need remuneration at the end of it. They are not doing it for the money, but they do deserve to be paid. What plans do Ministers have for the independent monitoring of the implementation? I ask that so the Minister does not himself have to retain an eye of the tiger at all times.

Chris Bryant: Oh dear, the hon. Gentleman is worse than me. [*Interruption.*] Oh yes he is—and it's not even panto season yet! [*Interruption.*] He has a very moderate tie, though.

It is important that we have proper evaluation. We are in the process of working out precisely how we will do that. I have said to the group that we will convene in a year's time. By then, we will have evaluated fully whether this has really worked. I am honestly very confident that it will deliver the goods. The hon. Gentleman says that artists are not necessarily doing it for the money. I went to see Alison Moyet at Kew Gardens a couple of weeks ago. She was absolutely magnificent. At the beginning of her set, she said, "I'm not necessarily going to play what everybody wants me to play, because this isn't karaoke. I'm an artist and a musician, not just a celebrity." That balance is really important for lots of artists and musicians. They need to earn a living, but they are also artists who have their own conditions and they need to be able to pursue what lies in their heart.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I start by—[*Interruption.*] Oh, that is a bright tie, Minister. I start by echoing earlier comments thanking the former Member for Cardiff West, the unions and the Ivors Academy for their important campaigning on this issue, and I congratulate the Minister for getting this important deal over the line. The music industry has long suffered with issues of transparency, and I have no doubt that the Minister will want to ensure that these announcements make a real-world difference. Will he therefore tell us a little more about the independent scrutiny that will be in place to ensure that these new measures are implemented, and will he say whether there is a means of auditing what benefit music makers will see from these changes?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to ensure that the new measures are implemented. As I say, I do not want to undermine confidence in that, because I do not want to give anybody a get-out clause for not implementing them. We will be working over the next few weeks with both the BPI and the Association of Independent Music on putting together a proper evaluation process over the next year, and I hope I will be making a statement in a year's time—although obviously that will not be up to me—on precisely how it has worked out. As I said earlier, I reckon this is worth several tens of millions of pounds of extra investment in the British music industry, and I think we will see that it has delivered.

Just returning to the issue of my tie, Madam Deputy Speaker: it is a Day of the Dead tie by Van Buck.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The Minister does very well to shake off the abuse about his tie from the Swiftie on the Opposition Benches—it is mainly empty spaces there—the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). His reputation remains unscathed.

Calder Valley has a thriving creative sector with lots of small and independent artists who have lost out to streaming. Today's announcement is welcome, of course, but small artists face the twin threat of both AI and streaming. Will the Minister assure me and the House that he will do more to ensure that those small artists can get the money in their pockets, where it belongs?

Chris Bryant: The point I made about the remuneration of musicians, and all forms of artists, applies equally to streaming and to AI. The Secretaries of State for Culture,

[Chris Bryant]

Media and Sport and for Science, Innovation and Technology held their first meeting last week with the creative industries and AI companies to discuss how we proceed on the issue of AI and copyright. There is a broadly outlined set of principles, one of which is undoubtedly that those who made the original work must be remunerated when it is used to create some other form of work and some other form of value.

I agree with my hon. Friend on his point about empty spaces on the Opposition Benches—empty chairs at empty tables.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Today's news is great, especially for the artists and musicians in my constituency who regularly play at the Bootleg, a fantastic venue that we must ensure stays open for future generations to enjoy as my dad and I have enjoyed it. What plans are in place to engage with artists, representatives and the trade unions to ensure that today's welcome changes deliver meaningful improvements for artists at all stages of their careers?

Chris Bryant: It is good to see my hon. Friend in his place. I gather that the pier is for sale—

Chris Webb *indicated assent.*

Chris Bryant: I am not sure whether he is intending to buy it himself. Of course, many acts have appeared on the pier over the years.

My hon. Friend makes the point again about the importance of having small venues where people can perform to start and build their career and end up as the kind of household successes that we know. Not everybody

will earn millions from music, but we do want many more people to be able to make a decent living out of their music in the UK. Establishing good terms of trade and having a strong copyright regime is absolutely key to delivering that. The Musicians' Union was a key part of the discussions that we held throughout the last year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): For the final question, I call Chris Vince.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. There was some mention of national treasures earlier; to quote Alison Moyet, "Only you". [Laughter.] I won't be called last next time.

From the Newtown Neurotics to Don't Worry and The Subways, Harlow has always had a vibrant music scene. What plans does the Minister have to engage with artists at all stages of their careers to ensure that these welcome changes provide meaningful improvement?

Chris Bryant: Well, I am "All Cried Out" that I was not on my hon. Friend's list of national treasures.

He makes a very important point. We need to ensure that these changes apply across the whole of the United Kingdom. In her performance at Kew, Alison Moyet also made the point that every child is a musician and an artist until they are persuaded not to be at some point in their life. This is what I really want to embrace in everything that the Government do in this area, in relation to the creative industries; we talk about film and the big, famous successes that we have in the UK, but actually, a lot of it is about real hard graft by people who have had to learn how to perform well, what it is to be in front of an audience, how it is to market their performance and all the rest of it. It is tough, tough, tough. Half the time, all those musicians are saying to the record labels is, "You pay my rent."

Points of Order

3.5 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if I could seek your guidance. It has now been 36 days since the Home Secretary came to the Dispatch Box to give a statement on the possibility of a national inquiry into the grooming gangs; indeed, it has been seven months since the Home Secretary, back in January, indicated at the Dispatch Box that there would be five local rape gang inquiries. This is causing a huge amount of concern for many victims and survivors of this heinous crime. Yet here we are on the last day before recess without an update from the Home Secretary at the Dispatch Box on the timings, who the independent chair will be, the funding arrangements, and, dare I say, whether Keighley and the Bradford district will be included. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker: under Standing Orders, is there any mechanism for you to ensure that the Home Secretary comes to the Dispatch Box before the end of the day to provide an update on the national inquiry into grooming gangs?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for notice of his point of order. I have to say that I have received no notice from Ministers that they intend to make a further statement on this matter, but Ministers on the Front Bench will have heard his point of order.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At the start of this month, I submitted a number of parliamentary questions to the Department of Health and Social Care on the subject of the independent commission into adult social care. A number of those questions, despite being due for answer on the 7th of this month, remain entirely unanswered as of today, the 22nd of this month. The Department has also declined to estimate the number of hours spent on the commission by the Department since July 2024 on the grounds that the cost of such an estimation would be too great. I ask your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, about how I can get those questions answered for the benefit of my constituents, and so that I can fulfil my duty in holding the Government to account.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. The timeliness and adequacy of answers to written questions are not matters for the Chair, but all hon. Members are entitled to expect full and helpful answers on time. She might like to raise the matter with the Procedure Committee, who I know take a close interest in these matters.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will know that long ago—indeed, before we were

born—tens of thousands of young men were sent to a far off place to witness the first British nuclear tests. Ever since, some of us have been campaigning for their interests. Earlier this year, the Government announced that there will be a review into the blood and urine tests taken at the time of those tests; you will appreciate the significance of that, Madam Deputy Speaker, because of the risk of radiation poisoning. The Government have said that the review will be published, but we have no clarity as to when. There are tens of thousands of these records, which are being examined as we speak. Have you had any notice from Ministers on when they will come to the House with an interim report? These men are now elderly; they are dying, of course, because of their age, by the week and month. However, I, along with the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and the descendants of these men, will not give up this fight. It is vitally important that the Government are clear about when those tests will be published—I wonder if you could help in that regard, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for notice of his point of order. I have received no notice from Ministers that they intend to make a statement on this matter. He has, however, placed his point on the record.

BILLS PRESENTED

UNPAID CARERS (RESPITE AND SUPPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No.57)

Alison Bennett, supported by Ed Davey, Helen Morgan, Dr Danny Chambers, Jess Brown-Fuller, Wendy Chamberlain, Steve Darling, Vikki Slade, Olly Glover, Gideon Amos, Bobby Dean and Cameron Thomas, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that unpaid carers are offered respite breaks; to make provision for and about such respite breaks; to require the Secretary of State to publish guidance relating to respite breaks, including guidance about funding; to make provision about support for unpaid carers; including support following the discharge of a cared-for person from a hospital or other medical setting; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September, and to be printed (Bill 292).

WASTE TYRES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No.57)

Tessa Munt, supported by Mr Alistair Carmichael, presented a Bill to abolish the T8 exemption from environmental permit requirements regarding disposal of end-of-life tyres; to make provision about including end-of-life tyres as a category of notifiable waste; to make provision about the processing, recovery, and export of end-of-life tyres; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 September, and to be printed (Bill 293).

Crown Immunity (Prisons)

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

3.10 pm

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to remove Crown immunity as it applies to prisons for the purposes of health and safety legislation.

Katie Allen lived in Clarkston in East Renfrewshire. She had a loving family and a very happy childhood. She was bright and did well at school. She took herself off to Malawi to volunteer, and she returned from Africa determined to help people. Instead of studying geology at university, as she had intended, she switched to study human geography, because she decided and realised that it was people whom she cared about and not rocks. She was excited about the future. She had moved into her own flat. She was full of life. She was beautiful and she was loved. She was found hanging in a cell at 5.50 in the morning on 4 June 2018 at His Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institution, Polmont.

The problem of prison deaths is UK-wide, but these losses are a particular problem in Scotland, and the loss of young people in prisons is felt especially. Research in April by the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research found that our prison death rates are akin to those in Azerbaijan. An earlier study by the Council of Europe found Scotland's prison suicide rate was more than two-and-a-half-times higher than the average and about double that of England and Wales.

I begin with Katie's story because focusing on her case helps makes sense of why this problem is so alarming, so acute, and so avoidable. In 2017, after a night out, Katie drove home after drinking, clipped the kerb, and lost control of her car. She had not realised it, but she had hit and injured a pedestrian. She had no previous convictions. Her victim asked for her not to be given a custodial sentence, but she was jailed for 16 months anyway. If anyone deserved a second chance after a stupid, youthful mistake, it was Katie. That second chance was taken away because of failings by the Scottish Prison Service.

We cannot mention Katie without also mentioning William Brown, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) represents. William also died from suicide in Polmont. The fatal accident inquiry into the loss of both those precious young people found their deaths to be preventable. Thanks to the sheriff's findings, the failings of the prison service in these cases are now well documented, detailed and damning. One thing out of the 400-page report, with its many findings and recommendations, especially sticks in my mind. When we look into prison suicides, we learn an awful new vocabulary. We come across terms such as "ligature anchor". For William, the ligature anchor was a bunk bed that the inquiry found could have been removed and, worse, had been used previously for suicides in the prison. In the case of Katie, the ligature anchor was a simple doorstop high up on the wall of her cell. A doorstop that would have cost a few pounds to replace—a small cost for saving a young life, but it was not believed to be worth it.

Years after both deaths, nobody in the prison or the prison service had thought to remove the doorstops, or to replace them with safer, sloping alternatives. The bunk beds had not been removed. The fatal accident inquiry into the deaths found that internal reviews carried out after both deaths had not even mentioned the possibility of removing fixtures in cells that could have been used again for further suicides. For me, nothing signifies the institutional lack of care more than these failings for which somebody, somewhere should have been held legally responsible.

Before a fatal accident inquiry, there is an investigation. The police and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service concluded at first that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute. The families of Katie and William challenged that conclusion, and eventually the authorities said that, yes, there was enough evidence to charge the Scottish Prison Service with breaches of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.

However, there was no prosecution. Why? Because of Crown immunity. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act places duties on state-run prisons, but Crown immunity means that they cannot be prosecuted for breaching those duties. If the two people had died in a privately run prison, there would have been a prosecution. In theory, individual prison officers can be prosecuted, but in practice they rarely are when their employer is not also prosecuted. Indeed, the reason those prosecutions do not happen is that it is argued that individual shortcomings happen in the context of systematic failures. In theory, the prison services can also be prosecuted under corporate manslaughter legislation, but in practice they are not because the systematic failings are often judged to take place at the prison level, rather than at the senior management level of the overall service. Those at the bottom pass legal responsibility upwards; those at the top pass it back.

Even with the support of the dogged campaigners at the charity Inquest, which focuses on state-related deaths, nobody is found legally responsible. The best that the families of the lost can hope for in such circumstances is a censure by the Health and Safety Executive, but even that toothless sanction is almost never used—in a decade, only one prison has received a censure.

We have been here before. Three decades ago, Crown immunity was removed from the NHS and it has had an impact. To take one grimly comparable case, the Essex partnership university NHS foundation trust was fined £1.5 million for allowing suicides after failing to manage the risks caused by ligature points on its estate. Our prisons are responsible for many more such deaths, but they are untouchable because of Crown immunity, and an untouchable service remains unaccountable. Institutional impunity removes the incentives for institutional change—institutional change that is needed at the local Scottish level and the UK level. Locally, a review of mental health at Polmont warned that it needed a suicide prevention strategy, but instead it opted for another review—a review that was never finished.

In Scotland, the Human Rights Commission has warned that recommendations agreed decades ago have still not been implemented across the Scottish Prison Service. Just last week, the inspector of prisons for the whole UK issued an urgent indication warning about conditions at Pentonville and a failure to address repeated concerns following recent suicides. Without legal

consequences, prisons across the country appear to be incapable of learning lessons or making changes. Every day of immunity brings the risk of more avoidable deaths.

The Scottish Prison Service and the Government in Edinburgh have called for Crown immunity to be removed, but they need us in this place to do it. I want to be very clear: this campaign should not be used as an excuse for inaction now. These places should not have to wait to be prosecuted to fulfil their responsibility to protect lives, but if those running our prisons will not act—and they have not done so—they should lose their protection from legal consequence.

In conclusion, I remember a friend of mine who lost a child saying how a parent grieves twice for such a loss: once for the young person known and loved, and a second time for the life that they would have gone on to live. For Katie's family, the knowledge that she wanted to live a life devoted to helping and serving others invites them to imagine all the change that she would have made as she grew into adulthood. Instead of a life that would have changed the world, we in this place are left with the tragic responsibility of making sure that it is her death that changes things.

Katie's extraordinary mother, Linda, told me that she said of her experience in Malawi in Africa:

"you know mum, prayers are great, but what people really need is practical help."

Katie's family, William's family and the others who have lost dear loved ones due to these institutional failings do not need our prayers, our sympathies or our condolences. They need action. They need us to provide the accountability that will avoid future tragedies and change the culture that allows these deaths. That is why it is time to end Crown immunity in prisons in Scotland and across the UK. I urge Members to support my Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Blair McDougall and Martin Rhodes present the Bill.

Blair McDougall accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September, and to be printed (Bill 294).

Backbench Business

Sir David Amess Summer Adjournment

3.21 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I should say, for the benefit of new Members, that this is quite rightly called the Sir David Amess debate, because this was his debate. I remember a poor Minister having to respond to him after a five-minute time limit had been put on speeches but he had still managed to raise 27 topics. It was his absolute dream to have this debate, and somewhere he will be looking on and observing what we all have to say. May he rest in peace. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

We seem to be over halfway through 2025, yet it seems like only yesterday that we came back from the Christmas break. In true British style, the weather cannot decide whether we should have Saharan sunshine or tropical rainfall—all of which makes the tube journey into this place even more of a challenge. It has been a busy few months for Parliament and across my constituency. I have been doing my job hosting residents' tours and events, speaking in the Chamber, visiting schools and local businesses, piloting a presentation Bill and chairing the Backbench Business Committee and the 1922 committee—and finally, after 17 years, Tottenham Hotspur has won a trophy.

I am pleased that Backbench Business debates have become very popular with Members, and it is encouraging that so many have made applications to the Committee. I would like to place on record my thanks to the Committee and the Clerks for all the hard work they have done over these past few months. We now have a waiting list, and if anyone applies for a debate in the Chamber, I am afraid they will have to wait until 2026 before one will be granted, because we have such a long waiting list. I thank the Leader of the House for meeting me on occasion to discuss the work that the Committee does and to ensure that Back Benchers have the opportunity to raise their own topics.

In the true tradition of these Adjournment debates, I will raise the subject of making Stanmore station step-free. We seem to actually be making some progress, because Queensbury and Canons Park tube stations on the Jubilee line are now on the shortlist to get lifts. That is great news for my residents and cause for some celebration. However, Stanmore station is still not on the list. Commuters there face the choice of climbing 48 steps to the main entrance hall, 16 steps via the car park or 24 steps at the side to the bus stop, or taking the current so-called step-free route, which is 140 metres long and has a steep ramp that even the great Paralympian Tanni Grey-Thompson could not go up unaided.

Transport for London and the mayor consider Stanmore station to be step-free and will not consider any further work, but I have discovered through a 2017 freedom of information request that there is no legal definition of a step-free station. It is up to each individual train operating company—in this case TfL—to determine what it means. Taken in conjunction with the Transport Committee's excellent report on accessibility issues faced by disabled people in the transport sector, I am now exploring how

[Bob Blackman]

we can get TfL or the Government to take action. If we can get a proper definition of “step-free” agreed, we can apply pressure on TfL to de-list Stanmore station as step-free so that it meets the requirements to be considered for a new lift or travelator.

The world has never been so dangerous, and that is particularly true of London. The news that police station front desks will be closing not just in Harrow but across London is incredibly worrying. This comes at a time when knife and street crime are at an all-time high in the capital, with total crime increasing by 5.6% this year alone. Additionally, there has been a 30% increase in gun crime, a 10% increase in robbery and a whopping 82.5% increase in business robbery. The timing of the decision to cut police stations’ resources is another example of the Mayor of London’s impeccable timing. It is important to me and our residents that the desks remain open, because they provide a vital service, allowing victims to report crime in person and to seek safety.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bob Blackman: I will not, because many Members want to get in.

The justification for these “tough choices” is the need to address a £260 million funding gap, yet this is not the right area in which to be cutting vital support. For years, Sadiq Khan has told us how much better London would be with a Labour mayor and a Labour Government, but we now have a Labour mayor and a Labour Government, and London is no better as a result. I have created a petition calling on the mayor to keep Harrow police station fully functioning, and I urge everyone in my constituency to visit my website and add their name to this important cause.

Tomorrow, Barnet’s strategic planning committee will decide whether to approve the Broadwalk redevelopment, which is a proposal for 3,828 housing units across 25 towers, most of which are above 20 storeys high, with the highest reaching 29 storeys. It would demolish Edgware’s existing bus station, bus garage and car park, with no guaranteed replacement. I reject this development in its entirety until a safe, deliverable transport plan can be guaranteed. The plan currently depends on an underground electric bus garage that the London Fire Brigade has objected to, calling it a very serious safety risk with no existing regulations or precedents. TfL has claimed that the alternative—the diesel fallback—is not viable, is uncosted and is not supported by an engineering plan. If the scheme is approved, Edgware could lose its core transport infrastructure permanently. I have created a petition against these plans, which can also be accessed on my website, and I urge everyone to sign it.

We are all very conscious of the escalating situation in the middle east, and my prayers are with all those who have been impacted. The events that have unfolded in the middle east since 7 October 2023 have been unbearable to witness. Israel suffered the worst terror attack in its history at the hands of the Iran-backed terrorists Hamas. Innocent civilians were brutally murdered and hundreds were taken hostage, including babies, children and the elderly. The hostages have been held in appalling conditions, and the accounts given by those

released have been distressing and harrowing. Only last week, I welcomed Keith and Aviva Siegel into Parliament to recount their horrific experiences.

As a direct consequence of Hamas’ actions on 7 October and their use of civilian infrastructure to undertake terrorist operations, Palestinian civilians face a devastating humanitarian crisis in Gaza. My thoughts are with the families of those still held hostage and every innocent life lost or impacted by the conflict. I firmly support Israel’s right to defend itself against security threats, but we must also ensure that the civilian population of Gaza is protected.

It is welcome news that the US has facilitated a ceasefire between Iran and Israel, which must be upheld to secure regional security. The Government and the Foreign Office must clarify their role in relation to that ceasefire. Iran must never be allowed to obtain nuclear weapons, as it is a prolific state sponsor of terrorism with a stated intention of annihilating the world’s only Jewish state. My colleagues and I are clear that the recent actions taken by the United States alongside Israel to degrade Iran’s nuclear weapons programme and military capabilities were indeed necessary. I am concerned that the UK has not given a strong voice on that outcome.

The UK faces an increasingly complex and concerning landscape of malign foreign influence. Iranian influence in particular has been persistent and insidious in trying to harm our civic institutions and challenge our democratic resilience. One of its shocking tactics is exploitation of our charity sector, with such charities having become the nerve centre of the Islamic Republic of Iran on British soil, advancing a foreign policy rooted in regional destabilisation and ideological extremism.

It was revealed by United Against Nuclear Iran—published in *The Times*—that Labaik Ya Zahra, a UK-registered charity based in my constituency, went to Iran, met senior commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and signed an agreement with the propaganda arm of the highest military authority of Iran’s regime, the head of which is sanctioned in the UK, pledging to spread the ideals of jihad, martyrdom and resistance in the UK. That is in clear violation of the Government’s foreign influence registration scheme and the National Security Act 2023, as well as violating British sanctions, yet the charity remains open today.

Hostile states are increasingly testing the resilience of our democracy. In the light of the recent Intelligence and Security Committee report detailing the IRGC’s direct involvement in such threats, including plots on UK soil and direct interference in the UK public sector, more than 100 parliamentarians have signed a letter co-led by me and the hon. Member for Bristol North East (Damien Egan) to be sent to the Prime Minister today urging the Government finally to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. It states that should the Government decide not to take that essential step, they must urgently and immediately put forward for adoption alternative legislative measures as recommended by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation Jonathan Hall KC to address the growing danger posed by state-backed threats.

It is disappointing that the Tobacco and Vapes Bill has stalled somewhat in the other place, with no set date for its Committee. There is a risk that because the smoke-free generation policy in the Bill has an implementation date in 2027, the Bill is not seen as

urgent. That is not the case. While we delay, tobacco companies are marketing heated tobacco products in supermarkets, and children are exposed to them. The marketing is working, and children's awareness of such products is at an all-time high, with 24% of 11 to 17-year-olds knowing what heated tobacco is, up from 7.1% just three years ago. Will the Minister confirm that the Bill is a priority for the Government and that its Committee will begin before the conference recess in the autumn?

The same is true for nicotine pouches. I am sure that many hon. Members will have seen when travelling into London on the tube brightly coloured adverts for these products. Children are seeing them, too, with a record 43% level of awareness among young people. There is currently no age-of-sale limit for those products, so a nine-year-old could legally purchase them. Will the Government put a stop to that madness and urgently schedule a date for peers to begin scrutinising the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which was overwhelmingly passed by this House?

This year alone, I have visited 12 schools, and I know that many colleagues will have visited schools in their constituencies. I welcome the Government's commitment to breakfast clubs for primary schoolchildren, but every primary school in my constituency is unable to provide the space for a breakfast club to take place, so even though they want to implement them, they cannot. I was glad to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), recently to discuss further how we can achieve that.

I am pleased that the consultation has finally closed on the regulations for my Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023. I hope that that can be spurred on to the next stages so that we finally see those measures enacted, preventing the countless rogue landlords operating in the sector from exploiting vulnerable tenants. It is my understanding that the Deputy Prime Minister is currently in breach of the law, given that she was due to create a supported housing advisory panel by August 2024. We are yet to see that in action, and she could—literally—implement it tomorrow.

The situation in Bangladesh is really concerning. With the coup that took place and the new regime, we have seen attacks on minorities in Bangladesh increase. I have raised this in the House several times, yet our Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office does not seem to take proper action to call that out for what it is, which is an attack on minorities.

Similarly, we had the horrific terrorist attack in Pahalgam and India's subsequent counter-terrorism action, Operation Sindoor. I remain deeply appalled and saddened by the barbaric attack on the innocent tourists, which claimed the lives of 26 people, including women and children, Hindus, Christians and a Nepali national. My thoughts are with the victims and their loved ones, and I continue to stand in solidarity with them and the people of India.

On the response to that, it is good that there is currently a pause and a truce between India and Pakistan; however, that truce is very fragile and there could be a return to war. As someone who has stood with the Kashmiri Pandits and their right to return to the Kashmir valley, and with India's sovereign right to defend its people and territory, I think it is outrageous that such

terrorism, sponsored by Pakistan, continues in Jammu and Kashmir. It is therefore right that we stand in solidarity with India.

Last week, we heard that the Home Office would finally be un-pausing claims relating to Syrian nationals, which I am sure we all welcome. I bring that up because my office has several cases that pertain to Syrian nationals in limbo with the Home Office, awaiting updates and decisions, one of which was first brought to my attention nearly two years ago. Clearly, the Government's Home Office policy changes have created confusion and delay. May we therefore have an update on when Syrian nationals can expect to have their cases processed so that we can close some of them for the benefit of the individuals? While we are on the topic of the Home Office, once again I pay tribute to the wonderful caseworkers at the Home Office MP account management team, who have been fantastic in dealing with the many cases that my office sends through.

It is said that a week in politics is a long time. Well, the last three years have been transformational in Conservative-run Harrow. We took over the council when it was just 18 months from declaring bankruptcy, with dwindling reserves and corruption in the highways department—a matter that I have raised in the House before. Yet now, it could hardly be thought to be the same organisation. Everyone asks about the state of roads, pavements and potholes. When we took over the council, we faced allegations of corruption and kickback schemes, but now the administration has committed £14 million a year for the next three years to invest in our ageing infrastructure. Furthermore, Harrow was the first London borough to use new machinery such as the JCB PotholePro, otherwise known as Pothole Pete, which can repair potholes in as little as a few minutes. It has been revolutionary, and even though there is more to be done, and many more roads to be repaired, things are heading in the right direction.

Fly-tipping is down 33%, culprits are being fined £1,000 each and the council has launched a wall of shame to deter people and catch culprits. Bin collection rates are heading in the right direction, with fewer missed collections, and for the first time in a generation Harrow has expanded the number of green flag parks, adding to the list Chandos recreation ground in Edgware in my constituency and Hatch End riverside park in the neighbouring constituency. We also began one-hour free parking, the most generous free parking offer in all London boroughs, which has been used millions of times by residents to support our local businesses and high streets. Even though there is a lot more to do, it is clear that Harrow is heading in the right direction as the Conservatives put residents first. I hope that they are returned at the local elections next year to carry on that good work for another four years.

We will all shortly go on our summer recess and Members and staff will take a well-deserved break, but at the beginning of August, I will be hosting my annual work experience programme. I will welcome to my constituency 25 work experience students a week for two weeks and I will teach them what it is like to be an MP and how they can get involved in politics. Over the last 15 years, I have welcomed thousands of young people into the programme, with many going on to work in my office or elsewhere on the parliamentary estate. It is a great way to engage with

[Bob Blackman]

constituents and the younger generation and to inspire them to get involved and learn about the parliamentary processes.

I shall conclude my remarks by wishing everyone a lovely summer recess and a well-deserved break. I hope everyone can get some rest and recuperation with their family, enjoying good food and good company with their loved ones. I also wish all the staff of the House a chance to get a break from all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I am sure we can all say amen to that. There are 34 Members seeking to intervene in this debate, and we need to go on to the wind-ups at about 6.30. Work it out for yourselves: that is about five minutes a head. I am not going to put a time limit on at this stage, but it may mean that some people drop off the end if colleagues are over-zealous with their time.

3.40 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I recognise that it is a privilege to speak high up the list in this important Sir David Amess debate.

Just over a year ago, we welcomed not only a new Labour Government but the creation of the new Blaydon and Consett constituency. It is fair to say that there was some bemusement locally about our new boundaries. The new constituency spans towns and villages in both Gateshead and County Durham, all with strong identities of their own, but we have plenty in common, from the keelmen on the Tyne to the steelworkers of Consett, and not forgetting the vital role played by our women in our history or our strong mining history. We have a really powerful industrial past and a strong community spirit. My constituents are passionate about fairness and access to opportunity, and they know the real division is not Gateshead or Durham, but whether you are black and white or red and white.

I have had many highlights over the years serving my wonderful constituency, but top of that list has to be securing wave 1 funding for the new hospital in Consett to replace Shotley Bridge. After years of broken promises from the last Government, we are now expecting construction to begin by 2026-27. I want to say a massive thank you to Kevin Earley and the Shotley Bridge hospital support group, and to everyone in the local community for their efforts. That work continues, and we welcomed the Health Secretary to Consett earlier this year to discuss progress. I am grateful to the support group and the trust for working with me to ensure that we get everything in the right place to deliver for people in Consett. There is currently concern about the out-of-hours urgent treatment service in Shotley Bridge. This is an issue I have been raising and I would encourage my constituents to submit to the ongoing consultation, as I will be.

This year, the Government made transformational changes to employment rights, strengthening sick pay and moving towards fair pay agreements in adult social care. In April, the real-terms increase in the minimum wage meant that one in seven workers in the north-east saw a boost to their pay packet. This is what a Labour Government mean to my constituents.

We have had more constituency wins this year. Moorside primary became an early adopter of our free breakfast club programme, Shotley Bridge school received funding for its nursery, and we have had investment for the Oakfields GP practice in Hamsterley Colliery. I welcome Government funding to restore the Tyne bridge, a vital part of our regional infrastructure. Finally, we have also had the launch of the Gateshead safe haven, led by Gateshead citizens advice bureau and North East Counselling, to support people in mental health crisis, and 58,000 children across Gateshead and Durham will now benefit from a mental health support team in their school—an issue particularly close to my heart. None of this would be possible without the work of local people on the ground, so I thank all of them for everything that they do.

If there is one issue that remains high on the agenda for my constituents, it is bus services. After years of deregulation and slashed routes, residents feel unable to rely on our buses. That needs to change. I am proud that this Government's Bus Services (No. 2) Bill will hand back control to our communities, and I look forward to working with our Mayor, Kim McGuinness, to ensure that that is the case. This year, I have talked to staff at Consett Empire about how we can keep the theatre thriving. I have heard the concerns of staff at Villa Real school about the state of their building, which desperately needs improving. I will continue to raise those issues going forward.

Road safety and speed limits are another major issue for my constituents, and I look forward to working with Ministers on the road safety strategy to resolve those concerns. I was proud to join the Rowlands family from Consett at a ministerial meeting. They spoke eloquently about their son Andrew, who lost his life in an accident involving an uninsured under-age driver. I pay tribute to all the families in my constituency campaigning for change after going through difficult times. Another shout-out must go to Terry Archbold and his daughter Bea from Burnopfield, who have been raising awareness of organ donation following Bea's lifesaving heart transplant.

It is an honour to have a front-row seat for the fantastic work happening across all our communities in our schools, NHS, shops, libraries, care homes and leisure centres. This year, I have tapped my feet to the fantastic Ryton Singers and Winlaton's Northern Phoenix brass band, and admired photography by Ryton camera club and Consett in Focus. I have met local environment pioneers at the Crawcrook repair café, the Chopwell regeneration shop, Blackhill Park's community garden and the Greenside community orchard. That is not forgetting our small businesses, including those who met the Minister when he visited Consett last year. Thanks to all who showed him what our patch has to offer and spoke about their experiences.

I am always inspired by young people in our constituency. This year, we have had visits to Parliament from St Joseph's in Blaydon, St Mary's in Blackhill, and Derwentside college, and I hope that more schools will have this opportunity in future. I thank Parkhead, St Thomas More and St Patrick's in Dipton for opening their doors to me, as well as High Spenn and Ryton primary schools for their fantastic local murals and artwork. I got a good grilling from students at Consett academy, and the pupils' Parliament in Shotley Bridge showed me how democracy is done—Westminster will be in good

hands if we put the children of Blaydon and Consett in charge. I thank all the school staff for their hard work. I was pleased to meet headteachers from across our constituency to hear about the issues they face, and they have provided me with insights that I will feed back to Government.

I pay tribute to the fantastic volunteers supporting our community. There are too many to name, but I want to give a quick shout-out to Moorside baby bank, Newcastle United Foundation's walking football in Blaydon, Consett Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, Derwent Valley car club and Ryton's Men's Shed. I can only hope that I can match their passion and commitment for our communities.

Finally, I want to thank my constituency team. Since the election, we have opened a second office in Consett, and they have processed over 8,000 cases. I thank the Doorkeepers and House staff for everything they do to keep Parliament running. I thank my constituents, new and old, who make Blaydon and Consett a fantastic place to be. It is an honour to represent this constituency, and I will continue working every day to ensure that our people have the opportunities they deserve.

3.47 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I rise to talk about Lord Anderson's report on Prevent and the death of our wonderful fallen colleague and my dear friend, Sir David Amess, which was published last week. It is obviously appropriate to make this speech today, in the Sir David Amess Adjournment debate, which is rightly named in his honour. However, it is sad that this speech aims to draw attention to the way in which he and his family have been and are being let down by the Home Secretary and this Government.

The House is well aware that the Sir David Amess family would like a full statutory public inquiry into the death of their beloved father and husband. Last March, they met the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary at 10 Downing Street. They were supported by their former MP Anna Firth, leading London lawyers, and public affairs expert Radd Seiger, all of whom continue to support and help the family on a voluntary basis. At that meeting, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister asked the family to go away and work with Lord Anderson, to see if he could answer the dozens of questions they still have about why the killer slipped through the state's safeguarding nets. Against their better judgement, the family did just that. They met Lord Anderson, along with their advisers and Anna Firth, in his chambers in the Middle Temple. They provided Lord Anderson with all the questions that they still needed answering, and they waited patiently for his report, enduring several more months of stress and anxiety. Both the Home Secretary and Lord Anderson specifically promised the family that they would see the report first, and in good time, so that they had time to read and digest it, and take advice, before being subjected to the glare of the media. You can only imagine, Mr Deputy Speaker, how deeply distressing the whole media circus is for the family.

Unbelievably, yet again, that did not happen. The family first learned that the report was imminent from an article in *The Guardian*, and when they received a text from a journalist saying that the report was due to

be published soon. Clearly, rather than keep their word to the Amess family, the Government chose quite deliberately to leak the report to the press first. That is an absolute disgrace. The Amess family should have seen the report first, not last. That is a simply unacceptable way to treat any grieving family, let alone that of a distinguished parliamentarian. Once again, the Amess family were bombarded by the media, causing them great pain. All the media wanted, of course, was their individual soundbite, before the family had any opportunity to even read the 170-page report. The Home Secretary should feel thoroughly ashamed. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to apologise to Lady Amess and her family for this latest insult. The Government really need to do far, far, better on how they treat the victims of heinous crimes.

Critically, however, there is now no doubt whatsoever, following Lord Anderson's work, that there must be a full public inquiry on why the string of failures that led to Sir David's murder were allowed to happen, and on who was responsible, who will be held to account, and what will be done to ensure that there is no repeat. The Amess family have been told repeatedly by the Home Secretary and successive Ministers that lessons had been and would be learned by Prevent, including the lessons set out in the Prevent learning review, which took place shortly after Sir David's death and was published earlier this year. Heartbreakingly, Southport happened three years later. The two cases are virtually identical. In both, the killer was well known to the authorities and to the Prevent programme, yet was allowed to slip through the safeguarding net. It seems, therefore, that lessons have not been learned.

The Amess family feel that both the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister were paying lip service to their agonising search for real answers when they finally met them at No. 10 in March. The family were assured by both the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary that they took the family's concerns extremely seriously, that they too felt the loss of Sir David acutely, and that they would leave no stone unturned to help the family find the answers that they needed.

I will finish with the words of Katie Amess herself—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend finishes, will he give way very briefly?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. No.

Mr Francois: All right. Sorry.

Sir Edward Leigh: I will end with the words of Katie Amess herself—

Mr Francois: Sir David was my best friend, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Sir Edward Leigh: He was.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think the Father of the House was reaching his peroration. I am fully aware of the friendship between the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and Sir David, but he will have the opportunity to make his case shortly.

Sir Edward Leigh: In the words of Katie Amess herself,

“Despite Lord Anderson’s review, the vast majority of our questions about Prevent’s failures remain unanswered. We still do not know why basic checks like social media monitoring or verifying school attendance were not carried out before the perpetrator was released from the programme. He was meant to have seven sessions. He had one, over a cup of coffee at McDonald’s, and was then released. That is simply not good enough, yet Anderson skates over it, ignoring the catastrophic consequences that followed for my family, and our country.

Critical records, including minutes from panel meetings and vulnerability assessments, have either been withheld or were incomplete. That does not help any of us. Transparency is essential, yet we continue to face obstacles in accessing these documents.

Other than the killer himself, there has been no accountability for my family. The review revealed alarming gaps in the handling of the killer after he was referred. Unsubstantiated claims were made about his supposed progress, yet no one has been held to account. This isn’t about process, it’s about people’s lives and our right to see that those who let my dad down are held fully responsible.

Key individuals involved in the case were not interviewed, and the Coroner refused to engage with Lord Anderson, having already refused us an inquest. A full statutory inquiry would compel all those involved to give evidence under oath about the failings. My dad gave his all to this country, and yet he, and we, are being denied the most basic of human rights. It feels like they are trying to hide something, to shut this tragedy down.

A statutory public inquiry is the only way to compel witnesses to testify and documents to be disclosed... On behalf of my family, I now call on the current Home Secretary and Prime Minister to do the right thing and to order the inquiry, just as they rightly did for Southport. They told my mother and me and Anna Firth that we could come back to No 10 if we were not happy with Lord Anderson’s review. Well, we most certainly are not happy with it, and I will be asking my team to write to them to request that further meeting they promised us. A public inquiry would honour my father’s legacy by ensuring real accountability and preventing future tragedies.

Lastly, my father dedicated his life to public service. The very least he deserves is a thorough investigation into how his murder could have been prevented. We owe it to him and to every potential future victim to get this right. We have had review after review since my father died. We now call for a public inquiry.”

Let right be done.

3.56 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to that exceptional and powerful speech from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh); I am sure those in authority will have listened carefully to his remarks.

I will be very brief. I want to pay tribute to Sir David Amess. An issue dear to his heart that he spoke about frequently was hepatitis patients, and that is what I want to speak about. I hope the House will agree that it is a timely and appropriate occasion, because next Monday, 28 July, is World Hepatitis Day. Sir David Amess was a most powerful advocate for hepatitis patients, and a member of the all-party parliamentary group on liver health. If it is not presumptuous, may I draw Members’ attention to early-day motion 1699, which I have tabled?

I would like to say a few things about this condition. Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that disproportionately affects disadvantaged and marginalised communities. It is preventable, treatable and curable. Indeed, the United Kingdom has already committed to achieving the World Health Organisation’s goal of eliminating hepatitis C as a public health concern by 2030. That would have a

huge impact on health inequalities. It would be encouraging if the UK Government were to celebrate World Hepatitis Day on 28 July by reaffirming their commitment to meeting the WHO 2030 target, and if that were reinforced by a comprehensive hepatitis elimination action plan.

Many people do not realise that they have hepatitis C, but if left untreated, it can cause fatal cirrhosis, and even liver cancer. The efforts of our NHS and harm reduction services have led to considerable success in finding, engaging, testing and treating people who are at risk. The UK is within reach of meeting the World Health Organisation’s target of hepatitis C elimination by 2030. That would be a tremendous public health achievement for a Government who are committed to addressing health inequalities and public health issues, but to sustain the success that we have had so far, we must overcome stigma, avoid complacency and support effective efforts and commitments to achieving positive public health outcomes.

3.59 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am delighted to have been called in the debate on the summer Adjournment, which I am very pleased is now traditionally known as the Sir David Amess debate, after our fallen comrade and great friend Sir David.

Following the brilliant speech by the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), all I would say is that this matter is very close to the heart of the Amess family. If it is not possible to have a separate public inquiry, which is what they desperately would like, perhaps, as my right hon. Friend alluded to, the other alternative is to slightly amend the terms of reference of the Southport inquiry so that the matter could be investigated via those means. The additional cost would be miniscule, and the family could have their say. I merely repeat that request.

Perhaps the most pressing issue in Wickford in my constituency is the fate of the old dilapidated Co-op supermarket site. It was purchased several years ago by an overseas developer named Heriot, which singularly failed to find a new tenant. In fairness, it attempted to negotiate a deal with Morrisons, which fell through. It instead tried to negotiate a deal with Asda, which fell through too.

I am afraid that in the recent Wickford Park by-election, the Labour party claimed in its literature that a deal with Asda had been “secured”, and it was thus trying to take the credit. In fact, it turns out that that was simply untrue. I recently received a letter from Mr Allan Leighton, the chief executive of Asda, which unfortunately confirmed that after over a year of negotiations, it had reluctantly decided not to proceed with the redevelopment of the Wickford site. I have to say that that has not enhanced Asda in my eyes.

Nevertheless, back in February Heriot applied to Basildon borough council for planning permission for a new store, but the council repeatedly dragged its feet and failed to determine the application to the point that, I understand, a developer could appeal to the Planning Inspectorate on the grounds of non-determination. It is absolutely vital that that planning application is passed by Basildon borough council in the hope that Heriot can find an alternative tenant, such as Lidl or another supermarket group.

Having tried for nearly four years to achieve that, if Heriot is not able to do so, perhaps the time has finally come for it to sell the site to an alternative developer with more experience, which might have more luck. Either way, I can report to the House that my constituents are thoroughly fed up with the whole drama of the old Co-op supermarket, as am I. For the sake of all my constituents in Wickford, I hope that we can somehow bring this prolonged saga to a successful conclusion and provide them with a new supermarket fit for the 21st century.

Let me end my contribution with a few remarks on so-called devolution and local government reform. This has been a torturous process in Essex, made more difficult by the fact that there is absolutely no public demand at all for the changes. I can confidently report to the House that in 24 years as an Essex MP, I have never once had a constituent tell me on the doorstep that they wanted a mayor of Essex. None the less, Ministers recently wrote to Essex MPs to confirm that they are going ahead with a mayor of Essex, loosely based on the Sadiq Khan model in London, with a related combined authority. That will result in mayoral elections across the whole of Essex in spring next year.

The Government's proposals would in effect replace the current two-tier system with another two-tier system. At present, we have Essex county council as the upper tier and a lower tier of district, borough and city councils. Under the Government's plan, that would give way to an upper tier of an elected mayor and a combined authority, with a lower tier of multiple unitary authorities beneath. The third tier of town and parish councils would remain unaffected. However, it is not yet clear whether the Labour Government still intend to press ahead with their plans to create several unitary authorities in Essex—a matter that has led to much consternation and considerable disagreement, not least among the potential constituent authorities themselves.

As of today, there are multiple different potential configurations. Essex county council seems to want three unitary authorities. Rochford district council and some other councils would prefer four. The Labour party appears to be agitating in favour of five. Contrary to the position of its own party, Labour-led Thurrock council has just announced that it would prefer four, the constituent local authorities of which it is yet to reveal. Indeed, at a meeting of council leaders earlier this week, some Labour council leaders were openly disagreeing with each other over all this. The whole process is rapidly descending into a total farce, and having followed this issue closely for many years, I have yet to hear a truly compelling case for why any of these new authorities would genuinely be more efficient. As ever, we are promised efficiency savings in year 5, but as a former Minister, I have to tell current Ministers from long experience that year 5 never comes.

To conclude, I say in all sincerity to Ministers that if they press ahead regardless and impose a solution via ministerial order with no consensus, it will still take a Parliament to implement. In the meantime, local government will almost grind to a halt, and many of the best officers will leave. It definitely will not save the money that has been promised, and therefore the game simply is not worth the candle. If I could offer Ministers

in the Department some honest advice, it would be this: pull stumps now while you can. If you must go ahead with the mayor, do that, but drop the unitary idea and let the local district, borough and city councils get on with the job of representing their people, and let us have elections for those councils.

4.5 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): Children are 20% of the population, but 100% of our future. I see that every time I visit a school in Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend. We know that the first few years of a child's life are crucial, laying the foundation for their overall development. For that reason, I am delighted that Battle Hill primary school in Wallsend is in the initial cohort to benefit from the Government's expansion of school-based nurseries. That school is in one of the most deprived areas of the ward, and has always done a fantastic job of supporting families. It previously had a Sure Start facility, and as someone who used to be a ward councillor and a governor, I was always proud to say that it cared for children from birth to 11 years. I am excited to say that that is the aspiration once again.

To remain on the topic of our young people, the north-east mayoral combined authority recently approved an £8.5 million investment for the expansion of the energy academy in my constituency. The offshore energy industries along the Tyne are a source of enormous pride. The Tyne is open for business, and the expansion of the energy academy only strengthens that case. That funding will be used to create a new energy campus, tripling the number of students who will be able to enrol each year. The offshore renewable energy sector is set to create an additional 4,500 jobs in manufacturing and engineering along the river over the next decade. It is right that a young person growing up in any of the wards in my constituency should have the opportunity to compete for new green jobs.

However, if companies and local officials are moving the earth to ensure that the jobs and investment are there, we cannot allow obstacles to get in the way. When I say "obstacles", I mean it in the literal sense; for eight years, I have led a campaign to remove the power cables over the Tyne, which are a barrier to businesses securing work for large renewable energy structures. Last year, the Institute for Public Policy Research identified Newcastle as the travel to work area with the third highest green potential in Britain. However, the current situation puts at risk possible net gross value added benefits of up to £1.2 billion. It has been proposed that the removal of the cables will be completed in 2032. That is too late—the race for green jobs is now.

Over the years, few have championed Tyneside's industrial strength as powerfully as the Shepherd family, and I take this opportunity to thank them for their tireless work. The employment they have created along the Tyne is commendable, and they have convened some of the sharpest minds in the private sector to help solve some of the biggest problems we face.

I welcome Walker North's inclusion in the list of trailblazer neighbourhoods announced at the spending review. That area will receive up to £20 million over the next decade to support its renewal, and I look forward to working with the community to ensure that that funding is used where it is needed.

[Mary Glendon]

As chair of the responsible vaping all-party parliamentary group, I remain concerned that efforts to reduce the number of smokers continue to plateau. Action on Smoking and Health's research that 13% of adults in Britain smoke, and that this figure has remained at the same level since 2021, is alarming. Over half of adults who smoke and who would benefit from switching completely to vaping wrongly believe that it is equally as harmful as smoking, or even more harmful. I hope that when the Tobacco and Vapes Bill returns later this year, that misperception about relative harms will not be made worse. I encourage the Government to make clear in other health-related announcements that vaping is a safer option for smokers looking to quit.

I will end on a happy and congratulatory note. I recently tabled two early-day motions celebrating the hard work of individuals who have dedicated their life to public service. The first motion applauds Dame Norma Redfearn after a long and successful life in education and as the elected Mayor of North Tyneside. The long list of achievements in my EDM explains why she is widely known in the north-east just by her first name. Norma's involvement in the creation of the Greggs Foundation breakfast clubs in 1999, after setting up her own as a headteacher, changed countless lives.

The second motion concerns Gary Kent, who has worked in Parliament for 38 years and has been my researcher for 14. After two decades of Anglo-Irish peace work, he was secretary for nearly 20 years of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq. MPs used his experience as a cross-party and transnational activist, and the group helped build a stronger Kurdish-British relationship. Such people in public life can inspire others and advance the common good.

4.10 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Before I begin, may I associate myself with the remarks from the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) in respect of a public inquiry for Sir David?

I will raise an important issue that has been raised on a number of occasions by Members: private management companies, their management of housing estates and the outrageous charges that they make. The land management firm Greenbelt manages the open spaces of Scartho Top in the part of Grimsby that I represent. Many residents of Scartho Top have complained to me about the onerous fees they are required to pay for the upkeep of those public spaces.

The charges exacerbate the existing cost of living pressures that many residents face, and that is not to mention the unfairness of a subset of residents being tied into paying estate charges for public spaces. Some of the charges that my constituents have highlighted include tree works at a cost of £3,110, planting works at a cost of £2,989, site management inspections at £11,664, and the cost for contractors amounting to almost £45,000. As such, on behalf of my constituents, I am calling on the Government to address this unfairness and implement the recommendations highlighted by the Competition and Markets Authority following its study into house building.

As Ministers will be aware, the CMA called on the Government to implement mandatory adoption of public amenities on new housing estates. I note that the Government's response to the CMA's study states that while they welcome the CMA's work, they

"intend to consult publicly on the best way to bring the injustice of 'fleecehold' private estates and unfair costs to an end".

They intend to gather evidence to supplement the CMA report. I understand the Government will be inviting views from a range of experts, and I hope that can be concluded quickly.

The CMA also called for the introduction of "enhanced consumer protection measures, underpinned by a robust enforcement regime, for households living under private management arrangements."

These measures would include: increasing the amount of information that homeowners are entitled to receive to understand what they are paying for; introducing a right to challenge the reasonableness of housing management charges at the first tier tribunal in England, or at leasehold valuation tribunals in Wales; and, giving homeowners the right to apply to a tribunal to appoint a manager in the event of a serious failure. The Government accepted those recommendations in principle while highlighting that secondary legislation is required to implement them. Once again, a public consultation would be required.

Finally on this topic, I note that the Minister for Housing and Planning, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) made clear in a written ministerial statement on the issue during the winter that we need to act as quickly as feasible to implement these provisions. However, echoing the Government's response to the CMA's recommendation, the Minister noted that the provisions need to be enacted and detailed under secondary legislation.

Earlier today, there was an urgent question following the announcement that the Prax oil refinery in my constituency was likely to close, which will have an enormous impact on the local economy. That leads me to return to a subject that I have raised scores of times in the House. If the local economy is to thrive and the Government's growth agenda is to be met, we must have more transport connections to northern Lincolnshire. The A180, which serves the ports of Grimsby and Immingham, is in an appalling state, consisting of only a two-lane dual carriageway. Its enhancement to make it a full motorway is essential. Access to our major ports is, I believe, still a Government priority—it certainly was when I was a member of the Transport Committee—and I hope that the Government will address this issue, as well as joining my campaign, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, for the renewed rail connection between Cleethorpes, Grimsby, Market Rasen and King's Cross.

Sir Edward Leigh: Hear, hear.

Martin Vickers: I knew my right hon. Friend would say that.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you and everyone else a very happy recess.

4.15 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is an absolute honour to speak in my first Sir David Amess Adjournment debate. Sir David, as we all know,

worked tirelessly for his constituents. He set the right example for us all by demonstrating that politics at its best is about service, not spectacle.

It remains the honour of my life to speak up for the good people of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. People in our area have had a tough time of it. It was heartbreaking to see our community hollowed out by 14 years of austerity. Today, however, I am proud to say that the tide is turning. After years of decline, we are finally starting to fix what has been broken. We are giving our young people the best start in life. I recall, long before I became an MP, hearing heartbreaking stories of kids arriving at school hungry. We got to work, and over the past few months we have started to roll out free breakfast clubs at Milton and Greenways primary academies, and I thoroughly enjoyed visiting both of them. Breakfast clubs will soon be available at all primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, and that fills me with pride.

Smallthorne primary academy is doing fantastic work at the heart of the community. For years, parents throughout our area have missed out on opportunities because of the lack of affordable childcare, but now, with a Labour Government determined to ease the burden for families, we have secured funding for a school-based nursery providing much-needed places, and I will be pressing the Government for more school-based nurseries in my constituency.

I am excited at the prospect of returning, this Friday, to a very important organisation that shaped my life and my values: YMCA North Staffordshire. It is where I worked for nearly two decades before I became an MP, and it is where I learned what it means to serve. I cannot wait to go back to open its brand-new youth hub, a place of hope, guidance and opportunity, and a place where young people can see that someone believes in them.

None of the work that I do would be possible without the tireless efforts of the team I have around me. In the past year, we have made more than 200 visits to schools, charities, businesses and residents' groups, and we have responded to more than 4,000 individual pieces of casework on behalf of local people—for instance, securing a place for a child in Fegg Hayes to go to a local SEND school after the family had been turned down, restoring a £27,000 maternity payment to a mum in Talke after an incorrect deduction, and securing a 19,000 back-payment of pension credit for a Burslem resident who had been waiting for over a year. All that work transforms lives, but there is still so much more to do.

A few months after I was elected, both Moorcroft and Royal Stafford, which had sustained our local economy for many generations, announced that they were closing down. It was a devastating blow to our area and our ceramics industry. Happily, though, there are glimmers of hope. Will Moorcroft, the grandson of Moorcroft's founder, has stepped in to safeguard the future of this iconic brand. He has protected a skilled workforce and preserved a name that carries real pride across the Potteries. Meanwhile, down the road in Burslem—the mother town of our potteries—T. G. Green has stepped in to produce fine products at the Royal Stafford site.

This is personal for me, because my mum and grandad both worked in the potbanks of Tunstall and Burslem. I know what the industry means to local families, and

I have kept my word by pressing Ministers for support whenever I have had the opportunity, including in a Westminster Hall debate that I secured back in March. I am pleased that ceramics is now recognised as a foundation industry in the industrial strategy and that support with electricity costs will come in 2027, but I will continue to raise with Ministers the need for additional support for the sector between now and then.

Meanwhile, too many of our historic buildings still lie empty, decaying and increasingly beyond repair, but with the right support many could be brought back into use. They could be converted into affordable, high-quality homes that protect our heritage, meet urgent housing need and help to sustain our high streets and town centres. Under Labour, we must go further and faster to make that a reality, and I urge the relevant Ministers to proactively engage with me to look at what steps can be taken. I would welcome visits to my constituency so that they can see its potential at first hand.

Finally, I cannot stand here today without paying tribute to Charlotte-Sky Naglis and her family. Charlotte was only six years old when she was tragically killed by a driver who was twice the legal limit for alcohol and under the influence of drugs. Since then, her family have shown remarkable strength and determination in their campaign to amend the law on blood testing after fatal road collisions. I have continued to press for the Road Traffic Act 1988 to be amended to allow for blood samples to be tested without consent in the most serious cases where a life has been lost. I am grateful to the Transport Secretary, the Roads Minister and colleagues in the Department for Transport for their engagement on this matter, and I look forward to that continuing.

Our community has known hardship and difficulties, but we are strong. We have been knocked down, but Stokies will never, ever be knocked out. Now, with a Government who finally have our backs, we can start building a better future for every child, every family, every person and every neighbourhood across Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. We are beginning to play “beat the clock”. I understand that the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) has some important information about the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster that I am sure Members will wish to hear, so I do not propose to impose a time limit immediately. After he has spoken, I shall impose a time limit of five minutes.

4.23 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Hiding in plain sight, but not discussed in this Chamber since the general election, is the spending of millions of pounds on the repair of this building, with Members expected to commit later this year to spending billions of pounds into the future. The lack of debate or any meaningful transparency comes despite the majority of Members of this House being newly elected last July. Instead, the detailed costs and any vote on options are being delayed until later this year—ironically, they will probably come at around the same time that the House is expected to vote on a Budget, which many people expect to include tax rises. Members of the House, and

[Steve Barclay]

members of the public, might reasonably ask why the Leader of the House has not held any such debate since coming into office.

This issue speaks to a wider principle. Are decisions best formulated in private when some of the numbers remain uncertain, with reliance placed on internal controls and external advisers giving assurances, or is it better to have transparency—not least on an issue of great public interest? A lesson that, as a Minister, I learned from covid is that it is better to have transparency and an open debate about the trade-offs early than to hold discussions in secret and allow the benefit of hindsight after the event.

Supporting greater transparency has been a theme of my time in the House, whether in my initial four years on the Public Accounts Committee or when as a Minister I overruled official advice to disclose information to the National Audit Office during covid. Since being elected as Chair of the House's Finance Committee, I have repeatedly raised concerns in private about the financial management of the House and the multibillion-pound restoration and renewal programme, but I feel it is necessary to raise these issues on the Floor of the House today.

Before doing so, I place on record my thanks to Mr Speaker, because I know he cares deeply about taxpayer value—an issue he has championed on many occasions. I want to reassure Members that I will not disclose any information I have received in my role as Chair of the Finance Committee or in a private capacity.

The crux of the issue is that there needs to be a complete reset of the R and R programme. The books need to be open to the public, and we need to bring the public into the debate about how we balance the needs of a world heritage site with modern security, accessibility—for example, for those with a disability—and value for money. Updated costs need to be presented. Currently, millions of pounds are being spent working up multiple options, despite our now being in the fifth year of this work. Indeed, those options are gold-plated, often based on decisions taken by Members who are no longer in the House. There is remarkably little visibility of this issue.

The most recent costs presented go back to 2022, and even then the cheapest option was £8.6 billion to £13.8 billion, with others costing more, and that is without inflation and with no other significant additions. Those costs exclude the work Members will see on the northern estate, which is not part of the R and R programme, yet the public would associate the two, not least because that work is a key part of any decant. We also know that there are precedents for costs increasing massively. If we take the example of the Elizabeth Tower—the most recent example in this House—the costs started at £29 million and finished at £89 million, which is a 209% increase. If we look at this morning's news, we can see how the costs of Sizewell C have increased.

There are known risks in plain sight. In its first report, the National Audit Office cited changes to programmes as a key risk, yet we know that the sponsor body set up at the start has been scrapped. We know that we started with one option and then went up to two and then three, but with A and B options, so in essence we have four options. Who knows, but there could be a fifth on the way.

The governance is opaque. Let me give the House an example. The key body that oversees the programme has met only once this year and only twice since the last annual report. However, if we look at what is in the public domain, the first paragraph of the annual report says that

“the R&R Client Board and R&R Programme Board will mean sufficiently robust and detailed information will be available to the new Parliament to support decisions on the way forward for R&R.”

We have not debated it once, and the governing committee has met only once this calendar year.

I am conscious of the time, so I will canter through some of the other issues. In short, security is often presented as a reason for not being transparent, but I would draw Members' attention to the very welcome intervention by Baroness Smith in the House of Lords in her exchange with Lord Hayward about the Carriage Gates, which cost £9.6 million. I am told that they still do not work particularly well. Just last week, this House debated a mistake that was made by an official in the Ministry of Defence, with Members complaining about both the cost to the taxpayer and whether that was covered up. How confident are Members that no similar examples exist?

I simply ask Members: are they aware of the costs of the work on the northern estate, of the trade-offs and how they are being shaped, or of the cost of any delay? How confident are they that when they are asked to make such decisions alongside a Budget, they will have the information they need?

I will finish with one final example. Just as with High Speed 2, hiding something in plain sight involves producing lots of brochures and lots of literature. Colleagues can see that one of the recent quarterly updates states on page 4:

“R&R Surveys...ONGOING...

Budget...ONGOING...

Develop House of Commons...Plans...ONGOING...

Costed proposals...ONGOING...

Invitation to tender...NOT STARTED”.

It includes no meaningful information. Indeed, the annual report has financial information only on the final two pages, pages 29 and 30.

This is not a new issue. Lord Morse, in his 2022 report, noted:

“Parliament has a historically poor reputation for its contract management and commercial acumen.”

I believe issues should be shared with the public, the trade-offs discussed, and Members of this House, particularly new Members, given sight of these issues. I have called repeatedly in private for there to be greater debate. Today, I want to do so on the Floor of the House.

4.30 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a huge honour to speak in the Sir David Amess summer adjournment debate. My one story about Sir David relates to a late friend of mine, Julian Ware-Lane, who was often the Labour candidate who stood against him in general elections. Sadly, many years ago Julian was diagnosed with cancer and spent long periods of time in hospital. Sir David often visited Julian in hospital to see how he was getting on, which shows us what kind of man Sir David was. On one such visit he discovered that, despite having stood for election in Southend on a

number of occasions, Julian had never actually had the opportunity to visit this place. Sir David was incensed—I suppose that would be the right word—and was determined to ensure Julian had the opportunity to visit Parliament. Sadly, Julian passed away before he had that opportunity, but it goes some way to show the sort of man Sir David was. He put party politics aside when it came to humanity and I think that is really important for us all to remember. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

I would like to take a moment to put on record my thanks to the Health Secretary for putting up with my constant lobbying on behalf of the people of Harlow for the future location of the UK Health Security Agency. I am delighted that last week he confirmed that this Labour Government will see it through, securing Harlow's future. As the Health Secretary said last week, it is no longer a case of the Oxford-Cambridge corridor; it is the Oxford-Cambridge-Harlow corridor. I am extremely proud that it is Harlow and the people of Harlow who will be on the front line of the fight against biological warfare. However, for me it is about much more than that. It is about securing the jobs and careers of the future.

I visit schools across Harlow and the villages very week. From Purford Green to Hare Street, Pemberley to Matching Green, Jerounds to the Downs, Milwards to Harlowbury, St James's to Holy Cross, I see the incredible potential that young people in Harlow have, and in Harlow College, Passmores academy, Sir Frederick Gibberd college, Mark Hall academy, Stewards academy and Burnt Mill academy, I see the opportunity for that potential to grow. However, for too long that potential has not always been realised. As a former teacher—have I mentioned I used to be teacher?—one of my No. 1 aims is to see that change. I know that the UK Health Security Agency will be a huge part of that, along with the investment that will come with it.

It is an exciting time for our town with this Labour Government: a clear and achievable timeline for a new Princess Alexandra hospital; more police on our streets—I taught one of them. I am pleased that, as part of the safer streets initiative, and after I brought it up in my first question in this House, this Labour Government are tackling the issue of cross-border taxi hiring; and now we have secured the jobs of the future in Harlow.

It is an exciting time for Harlow. Despite the challenges of being a new MP, as I look forward to recess I am still incredibly proud to represent my town and my community, which boasts so many great community organisations and charities: from Rainbow Services to Butterfly Effect, to Streets2Homes and Action for Family Carers—I declare an interest, because I work for both of them—and the Harlow Stroke Rehab Association.

However, I would not be ambitious for my town if I did not want even more for Harlow and the greater constituency. The Health Secretary suggested that I should start lobbying another Department, but I am sure he would recognise the challenges of mental health provision in west Essex. Speaking to my constituent Ken and his wife, Sue, while out door-knocking at the weekend in Harlow, I heard how they felt let down by the current system. I am determined that this Labour Government will address the inequality—the lack of parity—between mental health and physical health.

I am really running out of time, so on a lighter note I wish Harlow Town all the best of luck for the rest of the season. I thank my team, my family, the House staff

and everyone who has helped me during my first year in this place. Being an MP remains a huge honour—I would say it is the biggest honour of my life, but if I say that, my wife might divorce me.

4.35 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to speak in this debate, named after the late Sir David Amess, to whom I wish to pay tribute. I also use this opportunity to pay tribute to the late Ian Gow, one of my predecessors as a hard-working Member of Parliament for Eastbourne, who was appallingly assassinated in 1990, and whose shield is on the door above the entrance to this Chamber. I thank all those involved in keeping MPs and our teams safe today, with special mention to PC Will Bayley, who has helped my team and me to manage some concerning threats to us.

It has been an action-packed first year as Eastbourne's Member of Parliament. Working with incredible campaigners from across our town and beyond, we have: secured the reopening of Eastbourne district general hospital for births after months of closure; won our campaign for a direct train from Eastbourne to London Bridge and back; successfully led a national campaign to reform the law on domestic abuse; worked with campaigners to save Linden Court day centre for people with learning disabilities from closure; worked with local residents to protect the Sovereign Centre, where I learned to swim, from losing its pools; worked with Government and others to lock in £20 million in neighbourhood funding, which we thought we might lose after the election, to regenerate our town; and much, much more. However, one year in, after taking up more than 11,000 cases for residents, and more than 200 mentions of Eastbourne in the Chamber later, there is still much more to do.

We need to fix our temporary accommodation catastrophe, which has been triggered by a housing shortage that can be addressed only if we build more housing and properly regulate temporary accommodation. We have a particular shortage of three-bedroom homes in Eastbourne, which is causing a huge challenge.

As many other Members have said of their constituencies, we need to address the SEND crisis in our town, because families such as the Wilcocks and hundreds of others are left without the educational provision that they need.

We need Southern Water to get a grip of the foul stench its water treatment works have been emitting across our town in recent months, blighting the lives of residents in Langney Point and beyond. We need a fix to this problem now, not next year, as Southern Water has said. Frankly, the CEO should be denied his outrageous pay rise while this issue remains and until local residents have been properly compensated.

Beyond our shores, in response to the appalling situation in Israel and Gaza and on the west bank, the Government must continue to push for the release of all hostages, urge for aid to be let unobstructed into Gaza, ban arms sales to the Israeli Government, recognise a state of Palestine, and further sanction the Israeli Government when they infringe international law, and that includes sanctions on Netanyahu himself.

It is an honour to have been elected to represent the town that made me the person I am—the town whose teachers believed in me, whose scout leaders challenged

[Josh Babarinde]

me and whose local businesses took a punt on me by giving me my first job. I hope to be able to represent our town for many, many years to come.

As we draw to the end of our time before the summer recess, I would like to extend a very open invitation to Eastbourne to any hon. Member who has not yet booked their summer holiday. Eastbourne is officially the sunniest town in the UK. It has more hours of sunlight than anywhere else in the country—to the disdain of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths). I hope that Members will come and sample some of the best of Eastbourne delights.

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

Josh Babarinde: I will not take the hon. Member's intervention, unless he is going to confirm my point. [Interruption.] Okay, I will take his intervention.

Adam Jogee: One of the highlights of my first year has been being confused with the hon. Gentleman on several occasions, including being left with his dinner receipt in the Members' dining room. So, if I do go to Eastbourne, I hope that he will pick up the bill for once.

Josh Babarinde: I certainly owe the hon. Member one, but that is not quite as bad as when I was mistaken for another mixed race Member when I once forgot my pass and was granted a pass of somebody else—who may or may not be the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty). I did not settle the bill left with the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), but I look forward to continuing to exchange stories about mistaken identity in the WhatsApp group—the DEI crew—that we have created. Currently, I think it is 11-5 to me in being mistaken more times than the hon. Member for Huntingdon, but I am sure that there will be many more adventures and shenanigans on that front as time goes on.

I will if I may return to my point in my last 30 seconds. I say to hon. Members that Eastbourne is open for business. It is open for their custom and it is open for their leisure. Our 94 individual beaches await.

4.41 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I join colleagues from across the House in paying tribute to Sir David Amess.

Luton is my home and I love it. I want to put on record the work that people in my constituency do to make it such a thriving community. Whether it is people motivated through their faith, such as the amazing Luton Council of Faiths—the churches, the mosques, the mandirs and the gurdwaras, which support people across Luton North—or people's individual values, our community is motivated by a shared purpose to see a thriving town full of healthy people and a successful future shared by all. We are fortunate to have people who go above and beyond for our town, including Robbie and Lisa Herrick and all those who signed my petition to secure a safer Putteridge Road outside the school, and those of us who are continuing to fight for a speed limit of 20 mph in both directions and improved traffic-calming measures. We have seen far too many examples of dangerous driving in Luton, but especially outside schools.

Then we have the work of the brilliant Chidi and Enitan, who run the over-50s black men forum, giving older black men spaces to meet and socialise across the region, and all the public health benefits that come with that. I really wish them the best of luck when Luton take on Essex at their next table tennis match.

Groups such as Greenhouse Mentoring and Luton Someries Rotary club put the success of future generations at the heart of all that they do—from raising funds for polio vaccinations abroad to working in our town, mentoring children through tough teenage years. The Luton Rotary club had a brilliant result in supporting children through their SATs—seeing an improvement from 58% to 83%. Spending time with these groups is seriously good for the soul. Our bodies—our very, very tired bodies—such as Luton Jets, Luton Town Ladies and litter picks with Kevin Poulton's ABCD-in-Luton, all contribute quietly but powerfully to our community fabric. They make our town happy and healthy. I have loved joining the litter picks throughout the year and seeing so many young people join in, taking pride in our local environment.

On growth, we have had £5 billion-worth of investment in our local economy in and around Luton—from our airport and Universal Studios to Goodman's taking over the Vauxhall site. They are the biggies, but I give a shout-out to small and local businesses across Luton North every single Saturday. Many innovative small businesses are part of our amazing community and I have loved meeting every single one of them, including Stylise Autos, and Grand Bazar supermarket which I opened on Leagrave Road. If ever anybody is at my office, they should pop down Marsh Road and speak to Mashud and Maroof at Tamarind Restaurant, and they will make sure you do not go hungry. I have just completed my 200th Small Business Saturday, and I hope that businesses in Luton North know that I am here for them and that I will continue shouting about how good they are.

So far, my team has managed nearly 4,000 cases on behalf of people in Luton North, but still the single biggest issue is the increasingly desperate situation in Gaza, where tens of thousands of people have been killed. Israeli forces have destroyed every hospital in Gaza, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency struggle to provide schooling to starving children among the rubble and continued attacks.

Until the international community takes further action, Netanyahu's pursuit of an ethnically cleansed Palestine will not end, and the horrors of genocide will become a waking nightmare for those still alive to witness it. At the earliest opportunity, our Government must recognise a Palestinian state, extend arms embargoes and ensure that aid safely reaches those who need it. More than this, we need a vision that goes beyond recognition—a vision of building a Palestine and middle east of safety and freedom, free from terror and violence.

Closer to home, pensioners in the UK have had an anxious time, but something that has not yet hit the headlines was brought to me in my last surgery at Warden Hill community centre. Thomas Lee has done the right thing all his life: he saved and paid into a pension to secure his future in later years. However, his contracted-out additional pension scheme was the state earnings-related pension scheme, or SERPS. The scheme ended in 2002, meaning that Thomas and some 2 million

like him have lost out. It would be really welcome if any review of the pension system ensured that those like Mr Lee did not continue to lose out.

Like many in this place, my thoughts will soon turn to going home, and as they do, I really wish that Leagrave station had the lifts that it was promised by the last Government. Nearly 2 million journeys are made from that station, and it is high time we had lifts, not scaffolding holding up our broken bridge. There is so much I would have liked to talk about today, in one of the nicest debates in Parliament, but I will not take up more time. I will only say that I feel lucky to live and work in Luton North. I could not ask for better people to work alongside, so let us keep walking down that road together.

4.46 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the Sir David Amess Adjournment debate. One of the highlights of my year is my annual summer surgery tour; I hold over 75 surgeries in towns and villages across my constituency over 10 days. This is in addition to my usual monthly surgeries. The summer recess gives me the opportunity to get to the more remote and isolated parts of my constituency with my Scottish Parliament colleague Rachael Hamilton MSP. There are still a few appointments available, so I encourage anyone out there who would like one to get in touch and book one.

It has been another busy year. I want to focus on some of the campaigns in the Scottish Borders over the last year, and the incredible work of those in the Borders who make our community such an amazing place to live. Access to cash is a huge issue there. Residents in Eyemouth and Selkirk have been left without adequate banking facilities for far too long. I was delighted to present a petition in the House of Commons, signed by over 1,400 local people, calling for new banking hubs to be created. The Scottish Borders need more banking hubs, so that local people have access to the essential services they need. The hub in Jedburgh in my constituency is a very good example. It serves local businesses and residents, and is supported by local staff from the post office.

The Scottish Borders are under attack: there are far too many windfarms, solar farms, battery energy storage units and pylons. The Borders is a beautiful place to live and visit, but that beautiful landscape is being blighted by new energy infrastructure. I have been leading a campaign against these developments, and we formed a group called Action Against Pylons Scottish Borders to lead the campaign in our local communities. I particularly pay tribute to the outgoing chair of the group, Rosi Lister, for all her work in getting it up and running, and for her support in leading this campaign. I also thank the dozens of other residents who have supported this cause.

One of the big, controversial stories in the Scottish Borders in recent months has been the Scottish Borders council's attempts to shut or mothball several nurseries. Local residents were quite rightly furious about the council's initial proposals. The decision was wrong and needed to be reversed. I met so many parents who were concerned that their young children would be forced to travel long distances to go to nursery. Many other parents were going to be forced to give up work, simply to look after their kids. It was a disgrace that the council

was ignoring the views of so many parents and families across the Borders, but I am pleased that the council rightly saw sense and is reviewing the decision. To make matters worse, the council is now considering a consultant's report on closing further public services, such as libraries, swimming pools and leisure centres. I am completely against most of those proposals, and will continue to campaign against them.

I pay tribute to volunteers across the Scottish Borders. I started my "volunteer of the year" awards to celebrate the many dedicated and selfless people in the Borders who do whatever they can to help others. I received hundreds of entries, and it is hard to choose who to award, but I will mention a few. Kyle McKinlay, who coaches young teams at Tweedbank Thistle football club, is making a big difference in his community. David Shepherd is involved in organisations including Presenting Coldstream, Coldstream football club and Coldstream bowling club. There are also all the volunteers at Lavender Touch in Galashiels, who provide incredible support to people living with cancer and their loved ones. Their work and support make incredibly difficult times for people a little bit easier.

Finally, I pay tribute to Kelso cyclist Oscar Onley, who at the age of 22 is competing in the Tour de France as we speak. He is truly an inspiration to many young cyclists, not only in the Borders but across Scotland and all parts of the United Kingdom. I have fond memories of Oscar, because when I was training to do my ironman back in 2014, he, at the age of 11, showed me how to cycle up some of the very steep hills in the Scottish Borders. Even at that young age, he demonstrated mastery, and what a great cycling talent he was going to be. I am sure he has a fantastic cycling career ahead of him. I wish him well in the Tour de France over the coming days, and with his future cycling career.

4.51 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): As we rise for the summer recess, I want to take a moment to reflect on the real work happening back home in Warrington South in our schools, our community spaces, our hospitals and our homes. Parliament may not be sitting much longer, but that does not stop the work at home to deliver the change that our communities voted for last year. In recent weeks, I have visited schools and education programmes for children and young people, including Evelyn Street and Willow Green, and I have had the pleasure of welcoming pupils from St Philip and Barrow Hall to Parliament. Every conversation I have had with teachers, parents and education staff comes back to the same message: we need to get inclusive education right from the start. That means making sure that children with additional needs can access the right support early, and that specialist child and adolescent mental health services are not a postcode lottery.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on inclusion and nurture in education, and as an officer of the APPG on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, I see the national picture. In Warrington, I see the issues every day in the families I speak to, the schools I visit, and the casework that comes through my inbox. I hear from families who are doing everything they can, and teachers who are going the extra mile, but too often they do not have the right support or specialist provision for their young people.

[Sarah Hall]

At the heart of everything I do is the simple belief that every child, every family and every constituent should feel safe, seen and supported. That is why I have backed the Government's plan to expand free school meals to every child whose family receives universal credit—a change that will support thousands of families across Warrington South. With new, free breakfast clubs on the way for every primary school, we are taking real steps to ensure that no child starts the day hungry. That is practical, compassionate and reflects something I hear time and again from parents and teachers alike: children learn best when they are fed, focused and ready to learn. While I am glad to see the Government moving in the right direction, there is still a way to go. I will keep fighting for a system that works for every child, not just the lucky few.

Inclusion does not end at the school gate; it extends to places where communities come together, such as our local leisure centres. Broomfields in Appleton is a much-loved facility that plays a vital role in keeping people active, connected and healthy, but it is ageing and needs serious investment. If we are serious about public health, we must invest in the everyday spaces that make it possible, and repair and refurbish leisure centres like Broomfields. We have seen what is possible when local facilities get the investment they need. In Bewsey and Dallam, we now have a proper community hub—a space that I was proud to help bring forward. Let me be clear: places like Broomfields deserve that same level of care, investment and attention.

When it comes to services and infrastructure, our local hospital matters, but after 14 years of under-investment, my constituents are being let down by a system that is struggling to keep up with demand. In the past, false promises were made. I refuse to do that; I want to be honest with my constituents about the situation we find ourselves in. Securing a brand-new hospital is a complex, long-term challenge. Many of the hospitals in the Government's new hospital programme that are ahead of us in the queue are not expected to be completed until well into the next decade, so it is clear that this problem will not be solved overnight. Warrington deserves a new hospital; that is why my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and I will keep campaigning to make that a reality.

At the same time, we have a duty to act now to tackle the immediate pressures facing our local health services, and to make a difference where we can. That is why, a few months ago, at Prime Minister's questions, I made the case for a new urgent treatment centre in Warrington. Since then, I have had a meeting with the Health Secretary to set out just how transformational that project could be for our town. The plan is practical and ready to go, and has been designed to ease pressure on A&E and improve access to urgent care for residents. It is now with NHS England. I thank everyone involved, especially our brilliant NHS teams, including Nik and Lucy, for their vision, dedication and tireless commitment to improving healthcare in Warrington.

The focus on practical, local solutions does not stop with the hospital; it carries through to the everyday support being delivered in our neighbourhoods. Just down the road, the Bread and Butter Thing at Dallam continues to support families with dignity and care, and

in Bewsey, the community shop, which I helped to open, has become a lifeline, offering affordable food and a welcoming space at the heart of the neighbourhood.

Flooding causes real worry in parts of Warrington South. On new year's day, I was out supporting residents, directly helping people find alternative accommodation, delivering hot meals when the power was out, and launching a fundraiser to support families. The impact of the flooding was devastating, and for many, the recovery is ongoing. Residents of Sankey Bridges, Penketh, Dallam and Bewsey know all too well what it means to live with the constant risk of flooding. That is why I have worked hard to secure over £2 million in additional funding to move the Sankey brook flood risk management scheme into its design phase, and why I will keep fighting for that important scheme.

As Parliament rises for the summer, the work continues. For me, being an MP is not just about what happens in this Chamber, but about the conversations on the doorstep, the support we offer in moments of crisis, and the changes we fight for every single day. I will keep showing up, listening and doing everything I can to make sure that Warrington South gets the future it deserves.

4.56 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this summer Adjournment debate, fittingly named after my dear friend and colleague, the late Sir David Amess. However, it is with regret and sadness that I feel the need to draw to the attention of the House the way in which Sir David's family has been continuously mistreated. As I have said time and again, including at Prime Minister's questions, there must be a statutory public inquiry into what happened to David.

Last March, the Amess family met the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary at No. 10 Downing Street, supported by their former MP Anna Firth, who continues to do commendable work for the family and their campaign for justice. As many have noted, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the family were petitioned to work within Lord Anderson's process. Again they tried to do the right thing; again they tried to comply with the Government's approach; and again, as it turns out, that was a grave mistake.

The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and, indeed, Lord Anderson, promised to keep the grieving Amess family front and centre of the process. The family were meant to have a guiding—indeed, a leading—role, but that did not happen. Instead, they were kept to the sidelines, and were not treated as being in a unique position; and the media received information before they did. The treatment of the Amess family has been simply outrageous. The process should have been followed more diligently, and the Amess family should have been treated with significantly greater dignity.

Having lost their father and husband, who was a wonderful friend to us all, the Amess family should have been first, not last, in the pecking order. His Majesty's Government should show some more respect for the memory of our late dear colleague, and as I have said before, there must now be a full public inquiry, not only matching the Government's words with appropriate action, but ensuring that lessons are learned. From the Government, we must see an urgent effort to establish

the full facts, learn the full lessons from the failings of Prevent, and determine what will be done in future to avoid a repeat of such a crime against this House and, indeed, democracy.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) referred a few moments ago to the late Member for Eastbourne, Ian Gow, a dear friend of mine who was also murdered. He was murdered by an IRA bomb on 30 July 1990, 35 years ago. Ian was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Margaret Thatcher, and he first introduced me to Mrs Thatcher in 1982. He was cruelly murdered by the IRA in 1990. In the 35th year since his murder, let us remember him as well. He was a great man and a bulldog of a politician—a great British bulldog. We still miss him today.

As Members will know, I am proud of being from the county of Essex, as indeed was Sir David Amess, and if I may, I will take a few moments to say this: Romford is Essex and Havering is Essex, but we have been denied the right to play any part in the discussions about Essex devolution. Essex is our county. It is our historic county. Romford and Havering are geographically tied to the people of Essex, yet we are forced against our wishes to be under the artificial construct called Greater London. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Government will relook at this and give the people of Romford and Havering a chance to have a different form of local government so that we can focus on what is best for our borough of Havering and rekindle the links to our historic county of Essex. I ask all Members to look at the wonderful historic county flags on display in Parliament Square. What a wonderful display it is of the fantastic historic counties of the United Kingdom, in which the Essex flag is the most prominent.

5.1 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this afternoon's debate. May I pay a heartfelt tribute to Sir David Amess? He was a wonderful man. I also pay tribute to Ian Gow MP for his vital work earlier in the history of this country.

I am very proud of our town, and want to speak about Reading and in particular my constituency of Reading Central. It is a new constituency, although it covers almost exactly the same territory that the Reading constituency covered in the 1950s, so there is some history there. It is very much focused in the town centre and the nearby parts of the town. We have had a year of contrasts, and I want to raise a few important points about my constituency and thank many local people for their work in our community.

It is vital that I start with the recent developments at Reading football club. I say an enormous thank you to Rob Couhig for buying the club and helping us out of the terrible trough that we were in. I also thank the Government for their work, including previous cross-party work, on the Football Governance Bill, an important piece of legislation that I believe will prevent any other English club from suffering the dreadful fate that Reading suffered for five years under an irresponsible owner who threatened its very future. I want to thank not only the new owner but the players and fans of Reading who have been through an unimaginable time. It is with great pride that we support our club and we look forward to a better season in the new football season later this year.

I appreciate the pressure on time this afternoon, so I will try to focus my remarks on a few other key issues in our community. One other vital issue for many of my residents, and for me, is the future of Reading jail. This wonderful historic building, which dates back to the 1850s, has been left empty for some years, and I have campaigned for some time, as many colleagues may know, for it to be turned into an arts and heritage hub in memory of Oscar Wilde, who was incarcerated there. It would be the most incredible facility for our town, bringing new opportunities in the arts and heritage to Reading. Indeed, it would also encourage tourism to the town, given that we are the western terminus of the Elizabeth line and very close to not only London but cities such as Oxford and Bristol.

I am pleased that the jail was bought by a sympathetic developer, and I look forward to a successful tender exercise for a new architect and further planning work being carried out.

I am also pleased that in the interim, the jail is being used for filming. If anyone watches crime thrillers, they may notice that some prison interior shots are filmed in Reading jail. That is an indication of just how wonderful the site could be. Back in 2014, there was an incredible exhibition at the jail run by the charity Artangel, in which individual cells were used for installation art, and Oscar Wilde's poetry was read in the prison chapel. It was an incredibly moving experience. One member of the arts world from London was talking on his phone in front of me as we walked down one of the cast-iron walkways, which looked like something straight out of "Porridge", and he said the wonderful words, "I'm in Reading. It's really rather good." I hope that more people can appreciate our town and understand how really rather good we are.

I would like to briefly celebrate our rivers and wonderful green spaces. There was some great news yesterday from the Environment Secretary about action to tackle pollution in rivers, a huge issue locally in both the Thames and the Kennet, a major tributary, and other watercourses such as Holy Brook, which have been polluted shockingly in recent years. We have also suffered from flooding. However, there is great news of important improvements to parks and riverside spaces led by Reading borough council and in partnership with many other community organisations.

I am aware that I have limited time, but I would like to briefly plug other local heritage, including the restoration of Cemetery arch, a historic landmark in Reading. I pay tribute to our dear friend Nick Cooksey, who sadly passed away, who had been leading the project brilliantly. I look forward to further work on the project. I thank our wonderful voluntary groups and our many small businesses that make us such a vibrant town and the major shopping centre for southern England. I am grateful for the new investment in the town at Station Hill where nearly £1 billion has been spent renovating the area and improving it dramatically, with a super new tower full of business accommodation and several new large blocks of flats in the area, which was once home to a car park.

I want to celebrate our public services, particularly our NHS, schools and police, who do such a wonderful job. I conclude by thanking you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak, and I once again pay tribute to Sir David. This is a wonderful tradition, and I am proud to have contributed.

5.6 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda). I can confirm that Reading is an excellent place to do shopping; it is a vibrant city with excellent restaurants and an important regional hospital. I am disappointed that the hospital will not be rebuilt until the 2040s, but we will, like all constituency MPs who circle the Royal Berkshire hospital, continue to advocate for it.

It has been a pleasure to represent over the past year my constituents of Henley and Thame. It has been pleasing to back some local campaigns, but also to learn some of the national significance that those campaigns have, and I would like to speak to two of them. In my hometown of Henley, I have been campaigning to get Marsh Lock horse bridge reopened since it closed over three years ago. There had been a record of inaction, and when I became the MP, I immediately wrote to Ministers, the Environment Agency, Thames Path national trail and many other organisations—basically, anyone who would listen. I am pleased that that work has made progress. In doing that work, I have discovered a lot more about the state of our infrastructure on our rivers—that is, locks, weirs and bridges. We all know the state of infrastructure when it comes to education, health and our roads, but lesser known is the poor state of our locks, weirs and bridges. They are essential infrastructure for river navigation and safety on the river, and if we did not have them, my hometown of Henley pretty much would not exist and would not have a river running through it—or at least there would not be any water in it. I would like to highlight that situation and call on Ministers to continue looking at how additional funding can be raised for the Environment Agency and its vital work there.

The second campaign I have been focusing on is the Thame to Haddenham greenway. Thame and the village of Haddenham are just three miles apart. Haddenham has the train station, and Thame is the major town with shops, schools and many facilities.

The two are not connected by an off-road greenway capable of taking active travel. I have been campaigning alongside residents to get that going. That is why I introduced an amendment on compulsory purchase orders to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

As we know, compulsory purchase orders are readily used for road projects, but they are difficult to use for active travel projects. That is why I called for Government guidance on that. Unfortunately, my amendment was not successful, but I am pleased that Active Travel England will bring forward guidance, including two case studies on how other councils have successfully used CPOs. I am grateful to the Government for pushing that forward. A cycleway between Goring and Wallingford would also benefit my community. Again, I hope that the Government will continue to invest in active travel.

I will touch briefly on another issue that I have been campaigning on: the lack of ADHD services in Oxfordshire. With no adult service commissioned for annual reviews by a specialist, once someone with ADHD who is well controlled on medication reaches the one-year limit, as required by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, GPs are removing prescriptions from them. That is an absolutely scandalous and very

dangerous situation for people with ADHD. I urge the Government to move quickly in their task of implementing the recommendations of the forthcoming taskforce publication, to ensure that we are properly treating and looking after people with ADHD.

In my remaining time, I will mention some of the excellent organisations that I have had the pleasure of meeting, including the Men's Shed in Peppard; the Sharing Life Trust in Thame, which does excellent work as a food bank; the River Thame Conservation Trust; the Riverside Counselling Service; and the Henley YMCA. Like many first-time MPs who spent their summer recruiting officers and doing a lot of admin, I am very much looking forward to this recess, as I am sure all Members are. But rest assured that I and my Lib Dem colleagues will be back in September to continue holding the Government and the official Opposition to account, and I look forward—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I call Jodie Gosling.

5.11 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I join colleagues in paying tribute to Sir David Amess, a true champion of his constituency. With that inspiration in mind, and with the summer recess ahead, I want to celebrate just a few of the incredible people and the progress made in Nuneaton.

Nuneaton has the proud legacy of hosting the first legal Lionesses game, so I will start with football. Just over a year ago, our football team, Nuneaton Town FC, had no home, no team and no committee, yet this year they have managed to top the league, achieving promotion with 121 goals. I thank the board, the fans, Ministers and the Football Foundation for their support. I look forward to bringing our club back home.

This past year has shown me the enormous heart and talent of my town. I commend those who supported the George Eliot hospital through the mayor's appeal. It raised £46,000, which was presented by Mayor Bill Hancox and Alderwoman Sheila Hancox earlier this year. The breast cancer unit will now hopefully move into a new diagnostics centre to continue supporting health in our communities. I thank the dedicated staff at George Eliot hospital, especially Annette Tracey, who retired after 51 years in the NHS, including 45 years in the breast cancer unit. Their work has reduced waiting lists and improved care not only across Nuneaton but across our country.

Mary Ann Evans hospice remains a pillar of our community. It is the proud legacy and final resting place of one of my predecessors, the honourable Bill Olnier. I join my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) in celebrating "Cheers to 60" with CEO Liz Hancock, who has selflessly turned over her 60th year to raising even more funds for those vital services.

I am proud that Nuneaton and Bedworth elected its first Nepalese-Gurkha mayor, Councillor Bhim Saru, who is a strong advocate for St Mary's ward and the Gurkha community as a whole.

Around Nuneaton, we are making good progress on improving job prospects. This year I have visited many businesses, schools and training institutes. Hercules Construction Academy trained more than 1,000 apprentices

last month. North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire college's supported internships are breaking down barriers for disabled people to access good work, and it was a privilege to revisit four of those interns who are now in good work and thriving, their confidence booming. It was an honour to hold the first SEND Parliament earlier this year and to see how the Government can support the expansion of these schemes.

This year, we held our first Nuneaton sports and activities festival, which was a great success, showcasing the role of sports in community cohesion and improving health and wellbeing. Clubs like Nuneaton rugby football club and Nuneaton Taekwon-Do are thriving, with Nuneaton's George Wright winning bronze at the 2024 European championships.

Like most post-industrial towns, Nuneaton has seen its challenges, but our town centre is now transforming. New college buildings, a food hall, retail units and a leisure hub are nearing completion. The business improvement district is thriving and jumping into action with new wardens and a packed schedule of summer events. We still have issues with crime and antisocial behaviour, which are being tackled by the brilliant officers at Nuneaton and Bedworth borough council, in conjunction with Councillor Nicky King and Warwickshire police. We are seeing the return of designated town centre officers and a summer crime blitz to make Nuneaton the proud place we all need to see.

It has been an honour to serve Nuneaton this year. In the key areas of jobs, health, education and crime, we are making real progress. I look forward to continuing this work and rebuilding our thriving, proud town. I thank my team and the House staff who support Members for all their work, which makes it possible to make the change we were put here to make. I wish them a restful, peaceful and safe break.

5.16 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate, which is one of my favourite debates of the year, because it gives all parliamentarians the opportunity to talk about the fantastic places and communities we represent.

We are blessed to have an excellent network of charities in Keighley and Ilkley tackling mental health issues. Andy's Man Club, Nebula Girls' Group, AWARE and Missing Peace Wellbeing and Support all do fantastic work. I was privileged to host them recently at a mental health forum in Ilkley alongside Dr Caroline Rayment, where we brought together a range of stakeholders to talk about the challenges facing younger people. I thank Dr Laura Spells, who came along to give hugely compelling and deeply worrying evidence about the damage that smartphones are doing to our young people. I look forward to continuing to work with Dr Caroline Rayment and those stakeholders to tackle the mental health challenges facing our young people.

In Keighley and Ilkley, we like to do things properly. That is why just last weekend it was excellent to attend two standout shows from both ends of the musical spectrum. Beat-Herder is one of the highlights of the UK festival calendar, and it was fantastic to go along and support the independent show created by six lads from Keighley. I want to say a huge thanks to Jamie Foxon and Nick Chambers for organising that event.

At the other end of the spectrum, the BBC definitely has competition, because Silsden Proms on the Farm was a roaring success for another year running. I pay tribute to Stuart Clarkson, William and Eileen Jowitt and their team of 10 volunteers who put that fantastic event together, raising money for Sue Ryder Manorlands hospice and the Silsden Methodist church. I know that many who attended that fantastic music event visited Olive & Green and Isherwoods butchers beforehand to ensure that their picnics were as good as they could be.

I also attended the Oxenhope straw race, which is in its 50th year. For those in the House who do not know about that event—crikey!—it is where everyone gets dressed up in fancy dress and runs down the Worth valley, having a pint or two in the pubs along the way. The event has raised more than £500,000 for local charities across Keighley and the wider Worth valley. I commend Robin Wright and his team for the excellent work that they have done in bringing it together.

Let me say a huge well done to our local Salvation Army, whose victory programme teaches young people for free how to make cheap and nutritious food. I was lucky to meet some of them just this weekend; I had a great chat with many of them about the challenges they face. I say a huge thank you to Imogen Stewart and her team for the work that they do alongside Rachel to provide those teaching sessions for many people across Keighley.

It is vital to give young people the skills to stay on the right path, and that is why I want to say a huge thank you to Switch Hitters boxing club. I particularly thank Jonny Greenwood for getting it going in Keighley. The club is doing excellent work. I attended it, but I did not get involved in the boxing sessions myself—I have confirmed that I will go back with my shorts on so that I can take part. I felt slightly intimidated by some of the lads from Keighley in their boxing gear, but I will go back and give them some support, because sports clubs do a huge job in providing confidence to young people from across Keighley.

Ilkley is lucky to be the official host of Yorkshire Day on 1 August. We were lucky enough to host it a couple of years ago in Keighley, and we will now host it in Ilkley, which will be a huge success for all residents across our area.

I wish all Members across the House a very happy recess. I hope that they will be out door knocking, speaking to as many constituents as possible and advocating as strongly as possible for the things that matter to them at a local level, as I will be.

5.21 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this summer Adjournment debate and to remember the star of the show in years gone by, Sir David Amess, whose plaque sits behind us. I also remember today my dear late friend, Jo Cox. Jo and I served together on the board of the Labour Women's Network, and I often think of her. I know that we are significantly poorer in this place for the absence of her experience and her voice of real moral authority.

I have to say something about the horrific situation in Gaza. Hon. Members may know that I was there in April last year, in my former role as an aid worker. Even as I have been sitting in this debate, I have had an

[Melanie Ward]

update on my phone saying that 15 people have died of starvation there in the last 24 hours. Since I heard that the Israeli military is now attacking Deir al-Balah, I have been thinking of a lovely former colleague there who has a disabled daughter. Where are they supposed to flee to? The former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert says that his country plans to set up a “concentration camp” in Rafah. The noble Baroness Kennedy said just last week that genocide is taking place. The world must stop these atrocities. Our Government have taken important action, but more is desperately needed, and quickly.

Let me turn to my constituency. Yesterday I had the great pleasure of attending the Burntisland highland games, the second-oldest highland games in the world. It was a pleasure to join the parade behind the Burntisland and District pipe band, to hear the chieftain declare the games open and to enjoy some of the fine highland dancing on display. I congratulate the games committee on a very fine event.

I will continue to work on improving accessibility at Burntisland train station—an issue that I have raised directly with both Network Rail and the Secretary of State for Transport. Frankly, Network Rail needs to get on with it, because the community has been asking for an accessible station for many years and has waited for long enough. We need action to make Kinghorn and Cowdenbeath railway stations accessible too.

In such a beautiful coastal constituency, the work of our lifeboats is hugely important. This year, Kinghorn’s Royal National Lifeboat Institution lifeboat celebrates its diamond jubilee, and I take this opportunity to wish the crew and the committee enormous congratulations and to thank them for the lifesaving service they provide to our community. They have already responded to 70 shouts this year alone. Sixty years of lifesaving service is an incredible achievement.

Turning to Cowdenbeath, I congratulate Cowdenbeath Rotary club on its centenary, and draw attention to the wonderful mining plaque that was unveiled in Brunton Square on Tuesday. That plaque commemorates Cowdenbeath’s proud mining history and the key role that the area played in powering our nation. Of course, it also commemorates the miners who tragically lost their lives in the pits.

Over in Kirkcaldy, I pay tribute to all those who played such a vital role in organising this year’s inaugural Lang Toun Fest. The work of all involved deserves recognition—they have given the town a cultural, musical, educational and artistic spring in its step in recent weeks, and I am already looking forward to next year’s Lang Toun Fest.

I hope to work with all the organisations in Kirkcaldy that I have mentioned as we provide input and ideas on regeneration to Fife council, which will decide how to spend the Chancellor’s multimillion-pound investment through the new growth mission fund on Kirkcaldy’s town centre and seafront. I am hugely proud that our Labour Government recognise the potential of our town and are investing in our place and our people after years of SNP and Tory neglect. I have created a survey on my website that has already been signed by over 350 local residents, and over recess I will be holding meetings, surgeries, roundtables and pop-up events to hear more from constituents, businesses and community

organisations about what they want to see. I will pass their views on to Fife council. At the same time, I promise that I continue to press the Treasury to secure as much funding as possible.

I congratulate Growing Kirkcaldy on being nominated for a Britain in Bloom award for the best town or city centre—the only Scottish town in that category. It makes our town more beautiful, and we will all be holding our breath on 15 August as the two-hour judging walkabout makes its way around the Lang Toun. I wish Growing Kirkcaldy the very best of luck, and I wish every Member here a peaceful recess and thank the House staff for all their support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before I hand over to the Chairman of Ways and Means, I would like to say that this will be my last session in the Chair for the foreseeable future. I thank colleagues for the courtesy with which I have been treated, and thank you in particular for the tributes that you have paid to my friend David Amess. David and I signed on the register on the same day when we came into the House. I am very grateful to you all.

5.27 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I join the House in thanking you for your work as Chair.

It is an honour to speak in this debate, held in memory of Sir David Amess. His legacy reminds us what it is to be an MP—to show up and champion the concerns of the people we represent. That is the spirit I have carried with me throughout my first year as the Member of Parliament for the brand new seat of Harpenden and Berkhamsted.

Over this year, access to health and social care has remained one of the most pressing challenges. I have heard from a constituent in Berkhamsted who faces an eight-month delay for their NHS appointment; from Katie from Aldbury, an expectant mother who could not get an NHS dentist appointment within 50 miles; and Clare from Harpenden, who cared for her mother with dementia while juggling newborn twins and has been pushed to the brink with little support. It was an honour to welcome the family of Ed Holderness, who sadly took his life at the age of 24—they are campaigning on the importance of mental health care. Locally, I congratulate organisations such as Hector’s House and Youth Talk on their work. We have seen movement on the NHS, which I welcome, but we urgently need proper reform, including prioritisation of mental health and social care work. As I have done throughout this year, I again urge the Government to start cross-party talks on social care sooner rather than later.

The environment demands equal attention. My constituency has four of the world’s rare chalk streams, which are beautiful places—the Ver, the Bulbourne, the Gade and the Lea—yet Markyate sewage treatment works has dumped sewage into the River Ver for almost 5,000 hours in the past 12 months, and around 3,000 of those hours were non-stop. It was an honour to secure my first Westminster Hall debate on tackling sewage in chalk streams. I have met Thames Water to push for action on upgrading Markyate’s sewage works, and I welcomed the Government’s proposals yesterday. I look forward to meeting the relevant Minister to see how

those changes can be used to prioritise the upgrading of those sewage works. I thank organisations such as the Ver Valley Society, the Friends of the River Bulbourne, Sustainable St Albans, EcoBerko and Sustainable Tring, which will not let me stop campaigning on these important issues.

Moving on to our high streets and families, small businesses are still struggling, and as someone who grew up helping my mum on the shop floor, this issue is close to home. Many businesses, such as Temptation in Berkhamsted, Threads of Harpenden and Almar in Tring, say that they are still struggling, and many are questioning how they can cope with the rise in employment costs, national insurance costs and rents, as well as other costs. They are struggling, and they are asking, “Will we stay open?” These businesses, as Members from all parts of the House have said, are the lifeblood of our local communities. I urge the Government to rethink some of those proposals and think about how we can support our high streets and small businesses.

Transport is a growing concern in my constituency. We have seen continued cuts to vital services, including to the X5, which connects constituents across Tring and Berkhamsted. While I am pleased that the frequency of Red Eagle services has increased to every 30 minutes—we have worked hard with local campaigners—many communities remain isolated. I will continue that work, but we need more support from Government. Unfortunately, local authorities are struggling to deliver under the current financial constraints. Hertfordshire county council recently outlined grave concerns about the fair funding review, which sees the council face a reduction of £45 million to £55 million in its grant. That is not just a budget squeeze, but a direct threat to those social services and transport services that are delivered to our communities.

On a positive note, I have been excited about the work we have done on science, innovation and technology, especially closer to home. A safer screens tour has allowed me to bring the voice of young people to that work nationally. It was a real proud MP moment when, after I had visited and spoken to two of my local schools—Ashlyns school and Berkhamsted school—they decided to get together and students themselves wanted to campaign on online safety. I urge the Government to listen to those calls for change.

Throughout the past year, my team and I have handled more than 10,000 pieces of casework. It is some of the most enriching work that we do. I have held more than 300 local meetings and raised questions and issues more than 500 times with the Government. Every one of those has been on behalf of residents of Harpenden and Berkhamsted. I thank colleagues across the House for their support, and I especially thank my team, who have helped deliver for local residents as I have found my feet in my first year as an MP.

I hope that my time as an MP reflects the principles I put forward in my maiden speech: to be guided by the values of community, tolerance and perseverance. Most importantly, I thank the community organisations that deliver for Harpenden, Berkhamsted, Tring and my beautiful villages, including the Harpenden Trust, the Swan Youth Project, Open Door, food banks, the Harpenden Money Advice Centre and many others. I wish everyone a fantastic recess as we go back to our constituencies to be refreshed for when we come back in September.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): There are about 16 colleagues bobbing. For me to try to get them all in, I will have to reduce the speaking limit again to four minutes. It may reduce again.

5.32 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to speak in this debate today. I pay tribute to Sir David Amess, who I never met but whose legacy and values live on.

I start by marking Norfolk Day, which is taking place this Sunday. It takes place on 27 July every year to celebrate everything that makes Norfolk special, from its beautiful landscape to its history and its community spirit. I take the opportunity to say thank you to the community groups and voluntary organisations in Norfolk and Norwich who do so much on this day and all year round. I have enjoyed visiting many of them over the past year and will continue to do so.

Norfolk is not just a county of beauty and tourist charm; it is the driest county in the country, even though it might not be the sunniest, although I might dispute that. We are not just a county of beauty and tourist charm; we are also a county full of innovation and creativity. Great things often arise quietly from Norfolk, be that the first UK Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, our leading naval hero Lord Nelson, or Julian of Norwich, who is thought to be the first woman to write a book in English that has survived. Many great things continue to come from Norfolk, including Alfie Hewett, and Lauren Hemp, who will be playing this evening against Italy for the Lionesses. I am sure Members will join me in sending them the best of luck as they progress in their campaign.

We have an opportunity to maximise the potential of the county further through devolution, and I am pleased that Norfolk is in the devolution priority programme. That, along with local government reorganisation, will enable us to attract more investment, secure more jobs and deliver better services for our residents. With limited time, I will turn to three constituency issues. I am very proud to represent Norwich North.

First, on health, many great things come from Norfolk and Norwich, as I have said, and that includes pioneering health research work. I recently hosted the University of East Anglia in Parliament to showcase its work on prostate cancer diagnosis. That could transform the lives of men around the world. Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital is also leading a world-first drug trial to tackle endometriosis. Women's health is a priority for me, so I am glad to see such pioneering work on my doorstep.

However, we face many health challenges, and the most noticeable is dentistry. We have made some good progress so far, with 21,000 urgent extra appointments allocated to Norfolk and Waveney, but we must go ahead quickly with reform of the dental contract. I have been reassured by what my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has said about that. I have also been campaigning, along with other Members, to secure a new dental school at the University of East Anglia. I believe that ours is the only region without one, and it is desperately needed, so I hope to hear good news about that soon. I welcome the Government's investment at the Norfolk

[Alice Macdonald]

and Norwich hospital and in local doctors' surgeries; after 14 years of neglect, it was badly needed. I also thank everyone who joined our campaign to save the NHS walk-in centre in Norwich, which was, unbelievably, once more under threat of closure. NHS bosses have listened, and have told my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and me that such plans will not be proposed again. I will keep up the pressure on, among others, the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust for better mental health services.

Secondly, I want to talk about housing. Too many people in my constituency are struggling to get on the housing ladder, stuck on waiting lists or facing soaring rents. I therefore welcome the £34 million that the Government have given our Labour-led city council to unlock Anglia Square, a site that has needed investment for decades and will now be able to deliver many affordable homes and jobs. This comes alongside the welcome Renters' Rights Bill, which will, among other things, end no-fault evictions. I hope that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will provide more ways in which to hold developers to their promise to provide community infrastructure. In two instances, play parks have not been delivered.

Thirdly, I want to say something about opportunity. In my constituency and many others, special educational needs present a huge challenge. I will keep pressing for the change that we need, including a new SEND school in Angel Road. I thank all the schools that have hosted me, and the children who have asked such excellent questions. We must ensure that every child has a good job after education. That is why I am so passionate about clean aviation and clean energy in our region.

I do not have time to say much more. Let me end by saying that I will keep fighting for the health, opportunities and homes that my constituents need, and by thanking my team and all my constituents for being so brilliant.

5.36 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I speak today in the tradition of using these debates to highlight issues facing constituents. Sir David Amess set a high bar in making the most of his opportunity to champion his constituents, and while we came from different political traditions, I respect the example that he set.

Let us start with road safety. Over the last year, I have raised serious concerns about rural roads throughout my constituency. I have highlighted dangerous junctions on the A27, and recently backed Arlington parish council's campaign to improve safety on the rural roads around Arlington and Upper Dicker. Elsewhere, communities have been left to take matters into their own hands. Those living along the C7, which runs through Kingston, Rodmell, Piddinghoe, Southease, Iford and Swanborough, have raised more than £20,000 just to fund a feasibility study as part of the "Safer C7" campaign. The fact that communities are having to crowdfund for something as fundamental as road safety speaks volumes. It is a damning indictment of national Government failure to deliver the infrastructure that our villages and rural communities need.

Let me now turn to the issue of housing and planning. Housing remains one of the greatest pressures facing my community. Too many families are stuck in temporary

accommodation while genuinely affordable homes remain out of reach. In areas such as mine, we urgently need high-quality housing in which people can actually afford to live. At the same time, we see poor planning decisions and underused sites wasting precious opportunities. I have raised the case of Talland Parade in Seaford directly with Ministers as a prime example of what happens when developers are allowed to bank brownfield sites in town centres to the detriment of communities. I am hopeful that promised new powers in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will give local authorities the powers to act, at last, on cases such as this. We do need new homes, but they must come with the infrastructure to support them, along with proper consultation with local residents and a focus on affordability.

I am glad that my local district council listened to local concerns, and chose not to include the Eton new town proposal in its draft local plan. That was absolutely the right decision. Speculative, large-scale developments of that kind, dropped into rural areas without proper infrastructure or consultation, do not serve our communities. Meanwhile, villages such as Ringmer are being bombarded with a constant stream of individual housing applications, with no investment in roads, schools or healthcare to match. That is not planning; it is placing pressure on communities that are already at breaking point.

Transport provision is key to making planning decisions. I welcomed last week's news of a direct rail service from Eastbourne to London Bridge, via Polegate, Berwick, Glynde, Lewes and Cooksbridge, which is a step in the right direction for rail connectivity across the south-east, but like many of my constituents in the area I was very unhappy to learn that it would not stop at Plumpton. My constituents deserve better than to be left behind in major transport decisions, and I will be objecting to the rail operator, GTR, and to the Department for Transport in the strongest terms.

Finally, constituents regularly raise with me the ongoing and unacceptable closure of the west beach in Newhaven—the only stretch of sandy beach in our area. Even nearby coastal towns, such as the aforementioned and wonderful Eastbourne, cannot match up to our sandy stretch in Newhaven. Shut off by Newhaven Port & Properties, which is partly controlled by the French authorities, this treasured local space has been out of bounds to residents for too long. I have engaged directly with those responsible to demand answers and to push for the beach to be reopened. This is not just about a stretch of sand; it is about fairness, local pride, and the right of communities to enjoy what should be a shared public asset. Generations of local families have memories of happy summers spent on that beach. They should not have to look back wistfully; they should be able to return to it. We will keep fighting to reopen the west beach—enough is enough.

None of these problems exists in isolation. The issues of road safety, GP access and housing all reveal a deeper failure of governance over many years. I will keep working with my local constituents, residents and campaign groups to get real change on the issues that matter, and to provide genuine representation for residents in Seaford, Newhaven, Lewes, Polegate and every village that I represent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): A portion of Southend West was represented by David Amess, and I call the new MP for the area.

5.40 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): It is not lost on me that I have huge shoes to fill in this place, as I stand here representing the constituency that was Sir David Amess's. I send my thoughts to his wife Lady Julia and all the family, and I hope that we can find a way to give them the answers that they need. This is my second year of contributing to the Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate, and the last year has gone so quickly, but the passage of time has not eroded the memory of Sir David Amess. Many Members on both sides of the House, and many people in my constituency, will never forget him. He is very much missed.

In my constituency, Tony Martin, who runs the Chalkwell lifeguards station, set up a temporary memorial to Sir David, with lots of pictures from his life and his time in Parliament. It was a fantastic temporary display, and I am delighted that over the last couple of months I have been able to work with Lady Julia and some of Sir David's team to put in place a permanent display on the wall of the lifeguards station. I thank everybody who has been involved in that project.

Of course, one of Sir David's legacies is that his death led to Southend becoming a city. Every city needs a cathedral, and I have been trying to get one, but it is proving difficult, because Chelmsford has one and there can only be one per diocese. However, I am working with the Bishop of Bradwell to see what we can do about giving special recognition to the historic St Mary's church, where Sir David had his Southend funeral. I hope that we can get this over the line and that I will get the support of the Church Commissioners in making it happen.

I want quickly to recognise the charity Trust Links, based in my constituency, which turned 25 years old a couple of weeks ago. Its chief executive officer Matt King and its founder Cheryl Higgins have done absolutely fantastic work in transforming a derelict plot of land in Westcliff into an outstanding project, which tackles loneliness and social isolation through a range of different activities. The staff there work on mental health as well—it is a true example of what the Government want to do in moving from hospital to the community.

We have been struck by two tragedies in Southend over the last couple of weeks. I want to recognise the death of seven-year-old Leonna Ruka, who was killed by a falling tree in Chalkwell park on 28 June. I send my sympathy to her family. On Sunday 13 July, we had the plane crash at Southend airport; again, I send my thoughts to the families of the four people who were killed. I sincerely thank the emergency services, Southend-on-Sea city council and its leader Councillor Daniel Cowan, the airport staff and the airport's CEO, Jude Winstanley, for everything they have done on both of these tragedies over the last couple of weeks. Most importantly, I thank the amazing Southend community, who have come out, laid flowers and paid tributes to the family. It has been absolutely heartbreaking to see what has happened over the last couple of weeks.

This is the end of my first year as an MP, and it has been an absolute privilege and honour to serve the people of Southend West and Leigh. We have achieved a lot, and there is plenty more to come. I am looking forward to it, and I wish all Members in this House a very happy and pleasant summer recess.

5.44 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): It is an honour to contribute to the Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate. I shall limit myself to a topic that is very important for my constituency of Ceredigion Preseli: the future of coastal rural economies. I shall make the case for a renewed emphasis and focus on the redevelopment and regeneration of those economies, not least because that would go a long way to addressing the Government's aspiration for growth across the United Kingdom, but also because it would help address a demographic trend that already poses severe challenges for the provision of public services in those areas, and that, if left unarrested, could become critical.

Ceredigion Preseli, like many other constituencies, has an ageing population. The trend is particularly pronounced in my constituency. According to the Office for National Statistics, if current trends continue, 30% of the population of Pembrokeshire and a third of the population of Ceredigion will be older than 65 by the year 2040, which is just 15 years away. I need not explain to hon. Members just how challenging it will be not only to maintain the vibrancy of our communities, but ensure effective provision of the wide range of public services that any civilised community and society expects.

In a renewed emphasis, focus and perhaps even strategy on rural and coastal economies, the Government would do well to recognise the importance of small businesses to these communities. In Ceredigion Preseli, some 81% of our over 5,500 businesses are classified as small businesses, and have fewer than 50 employees. This is quite typical for rural areas, where small businesses—especially in the agricultural, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors—drive the local economy.

It would be very welcome if the Government looked again at a policy that used to be in place. I was told yesterday by a former civil servant that back in the Tony Blair Government, one stage in the development of any policy in Whitehall was called rural-proofing—a consideration of the impact of the policy on rural contexts. If that had been reintroduced, I do not think we would have had the inheritance tax changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief, which are already causing great concern. According to a report by Confederation of British Industry Economics, it is estimated that 55% of family businesses and 49% of farm businesses are cancelling proposed investment projects in anticipation of those changes. Small businesses in rural and coastal areas need a little bit of hope and confidence from this Government. Rural-proofing as a stage in policy development, and a dedicated strategy for the redevelopment of rural areas, would go some way to restoring that faith.

In the short time I have left, I will touch briefly on the importance of our higher education sector. Universities and higher education institutions must play a critical role in any strategy for ensuring growth across every part of the United Kingdom. In my constituency, some 3,300 jobs are supported by its universities—that is 10% of all jobs—and it is a real concern that we hear so little about universities' current quandary.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I am trying my best to get everybody in, so the speaking limit is now three minutes.

5.48 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I wish to pay tribute to the late Sir David Amess. I did not have the privilege of meeting him, but his reputation clearly precedes him, as does that of the late Jo Cox. I am a member of the Speaker's Conference, and we are doing all we can to propose the changes needed, and get the culture shift required to deter and prevent the intimidation of candidates and elected officials at all levels, so that our precious democracy can thrive. That is particularly vital if we are to encourage young people to get involved in our political system.

The doom mongers are wrong about our young people. Far from being a problem, they are our greatest natural resource—one that is often under-utilised, and that we must unleash. I have tried to do this in my constituency, including by holding a “pitch your policy” event. Young people pitched in one minute the one new policy idea or law change that they would bring in. There were then two minutes of questions from the audience, followed by a vote. Some lacked confidence; others came to the event straight from a basketball session—a good illustration of the fact that we need to go to the places where young people are, and listen. I took the winning idea to the Chamber, where the Leader of the House responded to it, and I thank her for that.

We should bring the voices of young people into the corridors of power, because young people are genuinely interested in their communities, their lives, their country and definitely our world. They have excellent ideas to bring to the fore. They are going to inherit the future; we had better encourage them to engage with politics, so that they can be the architects of that future, rather than merely existing in a world designed by generations past, who have, to put it politely, singularly failed to create a world of opportunity for all our young people.

The voices of young people are not being heard enough; the focus is all too often elsewhere. For example, we heard much noise about the alleged attack on pensioners by the Government. If we zoomed out and looked down from outer space, we would see it is actually the younger generation who have been neglected by Governments of all stripes. Young people do not get a triple lock. They should. They are the generation for whom buying their own home is out of reach, and they have far less job security than previous generations.

Earlier in the week, in a social media video, I asked people to leave a comment saying what changes older generations would need to make for the younger generation to have more influence in politics and lead an empowered life. A. McCaslin said:

“We need the same opportunities that the generation before us had. They dismantled the ladder they used to build their lives and then told us to figure it out like they did.”

When people say to me, “I don't do politics,” my response is, “Well, politics does you. If you're not involved, you cede the ground to those who understand the power of politics.” I have been proud to be part of a Government who are rectifying that.

Finally, I want to say, in the limited time I have left, a thank you to all Members of this House and all staff. They have shown newbies like me only support and kindness. The right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) epitomises that—a good example from this generation to the next.

5.51 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I pay tribute to Sir David Amess.

I wish to speak about a number of transport issues relating to my constituency. Earlier this month, I had the pleasure of welcoming the Rail Minister to Ashford, where we attended the opening of a new career and skills hub for Southeastern. After the opening, I took the Minister on a tour of Ashford International station, and the part of the station left abandoned since Eurostar decided in 2020 that international rail services would no longer stop at either Ashford or Ebbsfleet. Those parts of the station stand ready for international passengers to use once again. It was great to have the noble Lord Hendy reiterate his and the Government's support for our campaign to have international rail services return to Kent.

In my year in the House, the other transport issue I have raised just as regularly as the return of international rail to Ashford is the deployment of Operation Brock on the M20. I am sorry that it was necessary to present a petition to the House on the subject last week, on behalf of my constituents. It is hugely disappointing that Kent county council and the Kent and Medway resilience forum have introduced Operation Brock once again, and that it will remain in force until at least 4 August.

The recent announcement that the Dart charge will increase from September has disappointed many of my constituents. If we take that together with the tolls now in place for the Blackwall and Silvertown tunnels, the result is that all those routes will now cost more. We should, of course, encourage people to take public transport wherever we can, and I recognise that the charges are in place to manage traffic numbers. However, many of my constituents will have no option but to pay the increased charge, as they have only one route to work available to them.

Potholes are a blight on the roads in my constituency, just as they are in the constituencies of most Members. It is wrong that, as a result of under-investment by the Conservatives, our constituents have been expected to deal with the repercussions of poor roads and the maintenance backlog that has built up. I welcome the fact that the Government are committing additional resources to fix this problem; they are providing £500 million in extra funding for highway maintenance across the country this year, and Kent county council will receive up to an additional £16 million. If those problems are to be fixed, there will of course need to be roadworks, but I plead on behalf of my constituents for much better co-ordination to ensure that any disruption is kept to a minimum.

I conclude by thanking you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as Mr Speaker, all my colleagues and the staff of this House.

5.55 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in my second Sir David Amess Adjournment debate, and to speak of my constituency of Carlisle and the incredible Roman dig there that is rewriting our understanding of Britain's ancient history.

Carlisle—or, as the Romans called it, Luguvalium—was no ordinary outpost. It was a strategic stronghold on the northern frontier of the Roman empire, and served

as a key military and logistical hub, guarding the western end of Hadrian's wall and controlling movement between Roman Britain and the unconquered lands of Caledonia. The city bore witness to the march of legions, the clash of cultures and the daily lives of soldiers, merchants and their families who lived on the edge of the empire. Now, thanks to this dig, nearly 2,000 years later, we are uncovering their stories, one layer at a time.

The Roman dig at Carlisle cricket club has revealed not just one of the most significant Roman bathhouses ever discovered in Britain, but the largest building on Hadrian's wall, as well as evidence to suggest that the site may have hosted the Roman Emperor Severus in his final years. Since 2021, this volunteer-led community excavation has unearthed more than 4,000 artefacts, from coins and pottery to tiny, delicate gemstones and huge carved stone heads. These finds tell us not just about Roman engineering or military might, but about people—their habits, beliefs, luxuries and losses.

Carlisle's Roman past is not a distant memory; it is alive beneath our feet. It reminds us that history is about more than kings and battles—it is about communities, resilience and the enduring human spirit, which is exactly what we have heard about in all our communities this afternoon.

I invite Members to join me in thanking all the volunteers involved in the dig, led by the wonderful Frank Giecco from Wardell Armstrong, and all made possible thanks to funding from the Government, Cumberland council and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Together, they are not just uncovering Roman Carlisle, but reminding us that we are but fleeting custodians of our communities, and that we should always treat that responsibility with the same pride and respect that Sir David did.

5.58 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I join colleagues in remembering Sir David Amess.

I want to acknowledge the death of my father-in-law last month. He was a wise, kind and decent man, and will be missed by us all. I am grateful to all colleagues for the kindness shown to me and my wife, although I do remain very, very cross that I was forced to travel back to this place to vote on the day that my father-in-law died. Members who have been accused of criminal behaviour can vote by proxy, but people with dying relatives cannot. That is off the mark. It is unacceptable, and it must change.

It has been a privilege to serve the good people of Newcastle-under-Lyme over the past year. Being the voice of our community in Parliament is the honour of my life, and I am conscious of that responsibility every single day. In my maiden speech, I made tackling Walley's Quarry landfill site my No. 1 priority. We ran the cowboy operators out of town, secured the closure notice, and closed the place down. I am grateful to the Environment Agency for the work it has done in recent weeks to stabilise the situation. Our focus must now be on the safe and secure restoration of the site.

The special educational needs and disabilities crisis in Staffordshire has been firmly on my agenda since the election. I have stood with, and up for, the parents and carers who must navigate a broken system every day to get their children and young people the support they need and deserve.

Fixing our roads has also been a real priority. That is why I launched my great potholes survey, empowering local people to help me hold the county council to account. We have seen action on Lower Milehouse Lane in Cross Heath, Pepper Street in Silverdale and Dunkirk in the town centre, but we need much more. I hope that those on the county council, who seemingly watch lots of my speeches in the Chamber, will listen to my call to use the money that this Labour Government have given them to get on with the job.

The events in the middle east are unforgivable and inexplicable. The deaths of innocent women, men and children on our screens are beyond comprehension. I was raised to believe that actions have consequences, so I urge Ministers to do whatever they can to hold the Netanyahu regime to account, to ensure that this war ends and to recognise the state of Palestine. A two-state solution requires two states. It is as simple as that.

Last week, I had the opportunity to attend one of Keele university's graduation ceremonies. I send big congratulations to all the graduates and their families and pay tribute to Professor Trevor McMillan, who is standing down as vice-chancellor. I wish him, his wife Chris and their family well.

I shall keep urging Ministers over the next year to give real support to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. I have made this case before. The Government have got a lot right, so let us get this right, too. We need justice for members of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme as it is long, long overdue, and I urge my colleagues in Government to get this matter over the line.

We need more support for our ceramics industry in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire more broadly. I know from meeting my constituents in local businesses such as Silverdale Bathrooms that there is much more that we need to do. I will keep fighting for local jobs. FedEx, which plans to cut 400 jobs, must change its mind. We cannot lose jobs in our industrial heartlands to affluent communities in the south.

I said to our farmers on Saturday that I have their backs and remain their champion. Happy recess, Madam Deputy Speaker.

6 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Although some people will be hoping for a summer that is hot, hot, hot, many workers will not be doing so, because, although we rightly have legal protections against the cold in the workplace, there is still no legal maximum for heat. I am pleased that Ministers began a process with the Health and Safety Executive in the spring to look at workplace temperatures, and I look forward to a timetable being set for a public consultation. Maximum working temperatures, backed by law, are already standard practice in other countries such as Spain and Germany. But, to be clear, this is not just about stopping work when the sun shines, but about common-sense protections, such as ventilation, rest breaks, cooler uniforms and flexible hours. The climate is changing, and so too must our laws.

Let me turn to another summer matter. As we head into the summer recess, Members across the House will no doubt be thinking about their summer reading lists—I am sure that you might have a few titles lined up yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker. But how often do we

[Alex Mayer]

stop to think about where those books are printed? A quiet revolution is happening in the publishing industry. Millions and millions of books are being printed in Bedfordshire every single year, yet this has remained a really well-kept secret for some time. That is why I called on Amazon to include the words, “Printed in Dunstable” in every book produced at its Bedfordshire site.

To make my point, I wrote a children’s story myself, about a little book with an identity crisis—he does not know where he is from. He goes all around the country, from Bristol in the south to Aberdeen in Scotland. Like all good stories, it has a happy ending, because the local MP intervenes.

I challenged Amazon to make my story come true, and I am absolutely delighted to be able to tell the House today that, from this week, every book printed by Amazon in Dunstable will say just that—that it is printed in Dunstable. That is a brilliant way to put the town and its people on the map.

Madam Deputy Speaker, whatever you and other Members are reading in the next few weeks—whether it is a biography, a romance, or even a political thriller—I hope that you all have a great summer.

6.3 pm

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate in memory of Sir David Amess.

My home town of Blackpool is full of character and resilience. Its people are proud, its communities are close-knit and, despite facing more than a decade of neglect, we remain hopeful for the future. A person does not have to spend long in my constituency of Blackpool South to feel the warmth and strength of our coastal spirit. But as the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods made clear in its recent report, our communities have been asked to bear more than their fair share of the country’s hardship, and nowhere is that starker than in Blackpool South, where we have 34 mission-critical neighbourhoods, which is more than any other constituency in the country. That represents nearly every part of our town, where 97.8% of our population lives, including me and my family. I see the impact of this daily: the exhausted public services, the empty shop fronts, the health inequalities and the frustrations that many feel when they see new developments, new initiatives and new opportunities as being for someone else. I am proud that this Government are working on a new child poverty strategy, which will benefit many of the young people in my constituency, but it must be backed by real, targeted action at a neighbourhood level.

Crime is also concentrated. Over 40% of all antisocial behaviour incidents in Blackpool happen in just three areas. A 16-year-old girl told me recently that everyone she knows in the Claremont area carries a knife and is involved in drugs or gangs, and that it is nearly impossible not to get involved. She says:

“Gangs make you feel like you have some sort of power. That’s the way it is. That’s Blackpool.”

That is not the Blackpool that I know and love. It is the result of communities being left behind and let down for too long.

In areas where we have focused, however, we have seen progress. In the Brunswick ward, thanks to the multi-agency Youth ASB working group there has been a 45% drop in youth-related incidents. The same applies to health. Research from the Centre for Coastal Communities shows that young people in coastal towns such as Blackpool suffer worse health outcomes on almost any measure. This is avoidable. Thanks to local charities such as Counselling in the Community, young people are getting support every day. Organisations like the Blackpool Boys and Girls Club already do vital work with our young people. This summer local boxing champion Brian Rose will be launching Box Park—a free summer boxing initiative in partnership with MaverickStars to stop young people from engaging in ASB in the summer. It is a free event and an initiative I will be taking part in.

We all know where we need to focus and who needs the most help, and we know how to do it: by empowering these places, listening to communities and targeting support where it will have the greatest impact. Blackpool South needs the Government to invest in its future, because when Blackpool succeeds, Britain succeeds.

6.6 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this summer Adjournment debate—named, of course, in honour of Sir David Amess. Sir David understood the quiet power of Back-Bench MPs in this House shining a light on issues that are all too often left in the shadows.

In that same spirit, I rise to speak about Ehlers-Danlos syndrome—a group of rare inherited disorders that affect the body’s connective tissue. Though EDS is officially recognised as affecting around one in 5,000 people globally, the figure is widely believed to be much higher due to misdiagnosis and under-recognition. In the UK it is thought that around 460 people in every constituency are living with EDS, yet it remains one of the most misdiagnosed and neglected conditions in our healthcare system.

One of those 460 people in my constituency is Connor Edwards. I had the chance to meet Connor earlier this year, and his story has stayed with me ever since. A few years ago while mountain biking on Cannock Chase, he was bitten by a tick and developed Lyme disease, but Lyme was only part of the story. It turned out that Connor also had EDS—a condition that affects the collagen responsible for supporting skin, joints, blood vessels and internal organs.

For people like Connor, that can mean chronic dislocations, unbearable pain, neurological dysfunction and craniocervical instability, where the skull becomes unstable and begins to shift on the spine. As a result, Connor’s head no longer sits safely on his spine, and the instability is crushing vital areas like the brain stem and spinal cord. He lives with pain, frequent seizures and a level of disability that has robbed him of the life he once loved—fishing, mountain biking and simply going outside. He told me that he feels that his quality of life has been completely shattered. For a man, like me, in his early 30s to be in this position is heartbreaking. It should not be anybody’s reality in a country as wealthy as ours.

The NHS currently offers no treatment for CCI, and it lacks both expertise and imaging capabilities—for example, the upright MRIs needed to diagnose this

condition are not available on the NHS. Connor is now crowdfunding £50,000 to travel to a specialist clinic in Barcelona in the hope of receiving lifesaving surgery that will fuse his skull to his spine. Connor is not alone. According to Ehlers-Danlos Support UK, it takes patients up to 12 years to receive a diagnosis. Access to specialists is patchy at best, and those with the means often turn to private care. Those without the means suffer, deteriorate and navigate a system that does not see them.

Let us be clear: EDS is not rare. It is rarely diagnosed. What begins as a physical health condition can quickly become a mental health crisis. A debate was held on EDS back in May last year, but the Members who spoke so powerfully that day never had the opportunity to meet with the then Minister. That cannot be where this conversation ends. I will be applying to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate on EDS, and I urge colleagues across the House to join me in this effort. Let us make space for the Connors in every constituency.

This is not just about one young man in Cannock. It is about everyone who is waiting not only for treatment but for someone to believe them. Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, all hon. Members, and especially all parliamentary staff, a restful summer break?

6.9 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I spent my youth in the grassroots music scene playing in bands and putting on shows with my friends. The music was rough, the gear rarely worked, and if we got one lonely punter who was not a family member turn up we considered that a win.

The DIY music scene was where my journey into politics began, in a hardcore punk band writing songs about our disenfranchisement from the world around us; we were kids expressing ourselves with electric guitars and microphones. Indeed, I often think how many colleagues in the House cut their political teeth in the debating chamber of the Oxford Union and others cut theirs on the floor of the Trades Union Congress. I cut mine in a mosh pit, with a microphone in my hand and music in my heart, covered in other people's sweat and blowing out my vocal cords, screaming nonsense like, "The nurse will rise."

When I grew up, a band could release an album and go on tour in medium-sized venues. While they would not necessarily become rich, at least they were able to get by. Today, though, with the proliferation of streaming services and the erosion of the value of ticket and merchandise sales, live acts can barely break even on music streams, and venues are closing. Many acts operate in pay-to-play environments, losing money every time they play.

While pay-to-play is indicative of a failing industry, its existence has long been true in small venues for small bands. But I understand that this year Glastonbury was pay-to-play even for some of the biggest acts. Indeed, *The Independent* recently reported that one act had spent £80,000 of their own money on a Glastonbury set while smaller acts were offered just £250 to play one of the smaller stages, and not even given enough tickets to cover the whole band. This is a deeply unsustainable system that freezes out all but those with the private means to pay their own way. It is killing our creativity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, have you noticed how in recent years there has been a rise in the number of solo artists and a decline in the number of bands? In my view, the effect is born out of not only a change in music tastes, but simple economics. If a promoter is paying £100 to an act to play, a solo act takes home £100 while a five-piece act scrapes by with a measly £20 each. I had that experience personally—exactly, in fact, the one time that my band were paid anything for a gig—and it did not even cover our train tickets to the city we played in.

As colleagues look forward to the summer recess, I would like to make a request of everyone. Please go and see a band this summer, preferably in a small venue, and preferably a band you have never heard of. Please buy some of their merchandise and tell them they were good, even if they were not—especially if they were not. Without Ellie Dixon, there is no Chappell Roan. Without Not Right there is no Bikini Kill, and without Nurse Joy there is no Red Hot Chili Peppers. Please support the grassroots—it is everything.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The coolest speech by far.

6.12 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): How do I follow that? It is an honour to speak in the David Amess debate. I start by congratulating Falmouth town council and Source FM in my constituency for the opening of the resource project this weekend, which will bring community radio and a community café to everybody in Falmouth. Thank you and good luck to Pendennis Leisure and all those working for a pool for Falmouth. We are trying to get money from the Government grassroots fund and others, and we are looking for a public-private partnership.

Local to that are the docks in Falmouth. We are looking to restore the Falmouth freight rail line, which has been shut for 20 years, to take 77 lorries off the roads on each trip. In Falmouth, we have the docks, Pendennis Yachts and Falmouth Harbour, which all have fantastic expansion plans. We are looking to access the ports fund to make that happen and bring those new jobs to the town.

I am so pleased with what the Government have achieved on water. A scheme was announced this morning to work on the combined sewer overflow at Queen Mary gardens between our two main beaches in Falmouth—at last! I congratulate campaigners including Plastic Free Falmouth Surfers Against Sewage and Goonhavern primary school's eco club, who have worked so hard for this.

I want to say a little about a group in my constituency who have worked together and formed a support group because they all have endometriosis. David Amess was such a champion for people with endometriosis. We have been working to get training for healthcare workers in that area.

As a Co-operative party MP. I welcome community right to buy, which will be forthcoming in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. I have constituents wanting to rescue a methodist chapel and a pub in Ponsanooth, and the Ship Inn in Portloe. The funding source to go with that would be helpful. I look forward to that being announced.

[Jayne Kirkham]

To continue the co-operative theme, I have been strongly supporting the St Mawes community who have been trying to build affordable housing for their local community, which has been decimated by second homes. I thank Alan Macklin, who has also been involved in the Homes for Ukraine scheme in St Mawes. Falmouth and Penryn Welcome Refugee Families has been doing the same thing.

I thank Simon Fann and the food banks in Truro and in Falmouth and Penryn. I especially thank Simon for making Cornwall a living wage place, which is a fantastic initiative. I also thank the following organisations for helping their communities: the New Beginning Community Association in Malabar; the Friends of Coosebean, the Friends of Daubuz Moor and the Friends of Tregonigge Woodland, which have been bringing green spaces back to the heart of urban places; and the Truro Loops campaign, which has been restoring active travel routes around Truro. I am a new MP and many of those are very new projects. I hope to be able to stand here next year, the year after and the year after that and say, "We got some of these things done."

6.15 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. I start by paying tribute to Sir David Amess. I did not know him personally, but I am moved by the references to his life from across the House and particularly from the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).

This debate, in Sir David's name, presents me with a fantastic opportunity to do something that I so rarely have the chance to do: talk about Cornwall. First, I will speak of the immense opportunity that Cornwall has in its future, recognised by the Labour Government. It is hard to overstate the economic and strategic value of Cornwall's vast assets in renewable energy and critical minerals, which are both so clearly fundamental to our economic growth and net zero ambitions. In the UK, we import tin from as far afield as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, China and Australia, with all the damaging environmental impacts that come with such imports. Yet in Camborne and Redruth, we sit on the third highest-grade tin deposits in the world, and there is plenty of it. That is not just a statistic; it is a strategic national asset.

We have tin, lithium, geothermal and ground source heat, but we are also blessed with the opportunities of offshore wind in the Celtic sea, onshore wind, solar and tidal energy. From critical minerals extraction under the ground to wind energy off the coast, Cornwall is ready to play its part in the new economy. The task is vast, but the prize is priceless: energy security, which reduces our dependence on volatile international markets; climate action, which secures the materials we need for clean technologies; and jobs and regeneration in our Cornish, Celtic communities, which will bring back high-quality employment to communities desperate to grasp those opportunities. Reducing economic disparities between places comes hand in hand with bringing opportunity to people, not just raising skills but building communities where skills are rewarded.

The renewable energy and critical minerals opportunities are not the only factors that make our land so distinct. Our language, culture and heritage, as well as our economic potential, mark us out on this island. I want to ensure that our language, culture and distinctiveness are recognised, respected and reflected in decisions made at the heart of Government. That includes getting a devolution deal that works for Cornwall and that celebrates our national minority status. Our language, culture and industrial mining heritage are not just things we do; they are who we are, they are part of our landscape and identity, and they have helped define who we were, who we are and, I am certain, who we will be.

I have defined what I strongly believe Cornwall can be, but I want to briefly highlight the barriers that we face. In terms of health equality, we struggle with poor health outcomes and our remote coastal geography, and those health outcomes are connected to poor educational attainment. To that end, I encourage Members to join my Adjournment debate in September on Government support for remote coastal communities.

6.18 pm

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which comes at a good time to take stock of my first year serving my constituents in this place. I am extremely grateful to the old hands for their sage advice; however, there is one piece of advice I was given that I am happy to call out as the worst I have ever taken. "Don't rush into recruiting staff," they said. "Take some time to work out what you need." By last autumn, I was buried under so many emails that I thought I would never have time to sit in this Chamber ever again. I therefore appeal to colleagues never to give that advice to new MPs ever again. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Once my excellent staff were in place, they worked double hard to keep on top of the new inquiries and to clear the backlog, and I thank them. However, I should politely advise the man who regularly sends me an email that consists of little more than a *Daily Express* headline and a link, "I am sorry, but we are unlikely to respond to all your emails."

My constituency is an unusual one. It is one of the largest seats in the country, and it takes in the Solway coast, parts of the Lake District national park, two national landscapes, and villages on the outskirts of Carlisle, Penrith—one of the largest towns at about 15,000—and seven or eight smaller towns, all very Cumbrian, each very different and all pointing to different service centres. If I am honest, it is hard work making sure I visit all my towns and villages. My surgeries and visits take me all over the constituency, but at times it can feel like I am spreading myself very thin. I am sorry if some constituents feel like they do not see enough of me, but I assure them that I am at home in the constituency every week and I am grateful to those living there who reach out and invite me to their events. Meeting Cumbria Young Farmers and attending Maryport carnival have been two of the highlights of my year.

These are strange times politically. One would think that after securing such a huge majority at the last election, MPs like me would be feeling quite upbeat. I am not. Although I see a Government grasping the nettle on a range of issues that appeared to be beyond

the political palate of the last Government and a desire to secure economic growth and rebalance how limited public money is spent for the better, and although I know that change takes time, I also see a public who are struggling and angry. When the public get angry, they reach out for forces that feed on that anger and have always fed on that anger. Between the emails from those telling me I am complicit in the murder of Palestinian children or the enabler of Pakistani rape gangs, I receive emails pleading with me not to try and be more like Reform and not to try to outdo right-wing populist rhetoric. While I appreciate the frustrations of those who send me those emails, they rarely suggest an alternative approach. Well, here is mine. We accept that we live in a country that is broken. We acknowledge that there are people living in dire need of—[*Interruption.*] Am I out of time? No way! I recently met a Minister who was keen to stress to me that so soon after 14 years of Conservative Government, we must not forget that on these Benches we are still the disruptors. I believe that that is a good lesson for all my hon. Friends, especially those on the Front Bench.

6.21 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a privilege to contribute to the Sir David Amess debate. Sir David proudly championed Southend and its people, and it is in that spirit that I would like to speak about Sunderland today. To start, Mrs Ann Blakey, the retiring headteacher of St Benet's Roman Catholic school in my constituency, has for 20 years worked with love at the heart of that fantastic, warm community school. She is adored by pupils, staff and parents alike, and I pay tribute to her today and wish her a very happy retirement. I also want to take this opportunity to thank all teachers across Sunderland Central for the work they have done for our young people this year, and to wish them a well-deserved summer break.

I said in my maiden speech in October that Sunderland was a city on the up. Well, promise made, promise delivered. It feels like it was yesterday that we were at Wembley watching Tommy Watson score the late winner in the play-off final, which means we are now on the eve of being back in the premier league. Sunderland fans are spending the summer pondering all the big questions. With our embarrassment of riches, who will we start on the right wing? When will Chris Rigg score his first premier league goal? And how loudly will Eliezer Mayenda's views on Sam Fender echo around St James's Park? I know that the Minister will not be able to answer all of those key questions, but I hope she will join me in wishing Sunderland AFC well for the new season and in celebrating the passing of the Football Governance Act 2025 to protect the health of our national game, despite the shameful opposition of Reform and Conservative MPs.

Since I was elected, my priority has been investing in Sunderland. There is such a buzz around the city, with cranes in the sky, businesses announcing they are moving jobs to Riverside Sunderland, the new Keel crossing opening and the women's rugby world cup. Government decisions are bringing further investment, rebalancing council and NHS spending. I will continue to work publicly and privately to bring further investment into Sunderland—in our neighbourhoods, in our music and creative industries and in our public services.

One facility that has received investment, but that we have had incredible frustration with, is Sunderland station. Eighteen months after opening, the facilities still do not work, and it is simply not good enough. I eagerly await the work by Northern and Network Rail to deliver the improvements they have assured me will be made so that the station becomes rather less like an empty warehouse and more like the vibrant hub that our city deserves. With that, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the House staff and colleagues a very happy summer recess.

6.24 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate in memory of David Amess. Like Jo Cox, he was murdered in a previous Parliament, and I know many hon. Members miss his friendship deeply—may his memory be a blessing.

Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket is a beautiful constituency. Members will of course be aware that its namesake, St Edmund, was until the 14th century the patron saint of England. He ruled East Anglia between 855 and 869 AD until he was killed by Viking raiders. They shot arrows into him until he bristled like a hedgehog, then cut off his head and threw it into the forest. However, when they found his head, it miraculously reattached to his body. This was one of his miracles.

It is my hope that when we elect a mayor for East Anglia next May, the new mayor will choose Bury St Edmunds as the site of his new office. Since being elected, I have secured funding for the construction of the much-needed new West Suffolk hospital and saved the Marham Park flyer and the 73 and 73A bus routes, as well as securing £9 million of additional funding for local buses. We have sorted out £11 million for the potholes, and Station Hill in Bury St Edmunds is no longer called pothole alley. We got funding to fix the GP surgery in Ixworth, fixed the dangerous Fishwick corner in Thurston, and opened breakfast clubs in Howard academy and the Priory school.

Free breakfast clubs are particularly important. In Stowmarket, we have the brilliant Food Museum, which is running an exhibition right now called "School Dinners". I visited last week with my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson). We sampled flan, new potatoes and beans followed by delicious sponge and custard. Free school meals and breakfast clubs will be one of the most important things that this Government do to help working families.

Now we are about to break for our summer recess. All we new MPs have been learning on the job and, as I have just discovered, I have more to learn than many. I wish all my new friends—all 649 of them—a wonderful summer recess and hope that everyone gets a good rest.

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

6.27 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It has been a privilege to speak in this debate honouring the legacy of Sir David Amess—an MP who tirelessly advocated for his constituents. I could feel how all colleagues who have spoken are also deeply passionate about their communities, and it is a privilege to be part of the debate. Sir David Amess's Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000

[Zoe Franklin]

was ahead of its time in recognising that action on energy poverty and environmental policy are two sides of the same coin. Today, I want to speak in that same spirit about one of the defining challenges of our time: the climate and nature emergency.

Despite the suggestions from Reform MPs and some Conservatives that policies on the environment are a waste of governmental time and money, residents from across my Guildford constituency have spoken clearly, urgently and passionately about the crisis facing our environment. What is striking is not just how much people care, but how much they believe that the Government are falling short. Sixty-five per cent of Surrey residents do not think the Government are doing enough on climate and nature. Polling by Surrey county council's resident insight unit shows that climate change and environmental policy consistently rank in the top five public concerns, alongside healthcare and NHS privatisation.

The determination to see action begins young, as was clear when my constituents from Burpham primary school wrote to me recently about their concerns about deforestation and the heartbreaking loss of animals, birds and plants that comes with it. They understand that cutting down trees fuels global warming, destroys animal habitats and wipes out potential medical solutions that could one day save human lives. Tormead school eco club wrote to me about the challenge of sewage pollution in our waterways—one of our country's most shameful current environmental failures. Although I welcome the pledge to halve sewage pollution by 2030, action is happening far too slowly, but collectively we can do better.

Community actions groups such as Zero Carbon Guildford are doing the kind of work in my constituency that we should back at a national level. Zero Carbon, in work with the Water Rangers and the River Wey Trust, regularly tests our precious waterways to monitor sewage pollution. Nearly 500 residents are trained in citizen science, nine water-testing hubs are now active, and a new community water lab has been opened, in partnership with the University of Surrey in my constituency. That is proof that local people are not just waiting for change; they are making it. But they should not have to do it alone. They tell me that they want the Government to match their urgency. They want visible leadership on nature protection, tougher laws to stop sewage polluting our rivers, green spaces protected from poor planning decisions and support to make their homes warmer and cheaper to run.

On that point, the evidence already shows that insulating and retrofitting homes could slash energy demand by the equivalent of six nuclear power stations. It could cut household bills by a quarter, save the NHS £1.5 billion a year, and prevent nearly 10,000 deaths caused by cold and damp housing annually. This is not just an environmental policy; it is a health and cost of living policy, too. I say to colleagues across the House that if residents are that engaged and schoolchildren are that active, what excuse do we have not to act with a level of urgency matching theirs?

I will end by highlighting one of the most visible ways in which we can lead: by supporting sustainable transport. Residents are asking for better, greener transport options.

They want joined-up infrastructure that serves people, not just cars. That is why I am pushing for a new train station in Guildford, and I am calling for the Government's support to make that happen. Guildford's residents have been waiting for more than a decade for a decision on that. Given the major housing development taking place locally, the appetite among local businesses and residents for greener ways to travel, and the Government's commitment to rail travel, I say simply that now is the time. Let this summer recess not be a pause in our work but a call to action for when we return. Let us deliver the cleaner air, safer streets and low-carbon transport systems that communities are calling for. If we do not act, we are not just failing future generations; we are failing this one.

I hope that we have the restorative recess that we all need, particularly those of us who have spent our first year in this place. I say an enormous thank you to all the staff across the House, whether they work for us or help to make the House function. Without them, we would not be able to serve our residents in the way we do. I wish everyone a very good recess.

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

6.32 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is a great pleasure to close the Sir David Amess Adjournment debate on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition. Although I did not have the privilege of knowing Sir David personally, I have heard time and again from colleagues across the House about the warmth, generosity and conviction that defined him. He is remembered not only with great affection but with admiration for his tireless commitment to his constituents and the causes that he championed. His ability to weave so many of those causes into these end-of-term debates became something of a parliamentary tradition in itself—and stands as a lasting example of what it means to be a true local champion. That this debate now bears his name feels entirely fitting. It offers Members the same opportunity that he so clearly valued to test ideas, highlight local concerns and give voice to the communities we represent. I have no doubt that Sir David would have listened to today's contributions with great interest and enthusiasm.

While we rightly pay tribute to Sir David and reflect on his remarkable contribution to public life, we must also acknowledge the difficult but necessary questions surrounding the circumstances of his death, as many right hon. and hon. Members have said. Sir David's widow, Lady Julia, and their daughter, Katie, who are with us today in the Public Gallery, have shown great strength in their efforts to ensure that meaningful lessons are learned. Sir David's murderer had previously been referred to the Prevent programme. Yet despite that, he went on to commit an abhorrent act of violence.

In the years since, other cases, such as those in Reading and Southport, have raised similar concerns, as individuals known to Prevent were able to carry out attacks. Those are not isolated incidents; there is a pattern that warrants serious scrutiny, and the Opposition would like to see a full public inquiry into Prevent, bringing together those cases to understand what went wrong and how the system can be improved.

The Prevent programme is an essential part of our national security framework, but it must be effective to command public confidence. Where there are systemic failings, we have a responsibility to address them. As the Government will know, the Amess family do not feel that the recently released Lord Anderson report alone delivers the whole truth, accountability or justice that is needed. It is imperative that a full public inquiry is commissioned, to learn the necessary lessons from the systemic issues that clearly exist. I take this opportunity to ask the Government to commit to a full public inquiry into the failings of the Prevent programme.

I now move on to the fantastic contributions we have heard from Members across the House in this final debate before we break up for the summer recess. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) did a brilliant job of opening the debate. He mentioned Sir David Amess managing to raise 27 different topics within five minutes. In my hon. Friend's speech, we had the middle east, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, schooling, potholes and crime—near to 27, but no cigar this time.

The hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) talked about mining and industry, health and transport. Over the past year, I have seen that she is a fierce campaigner for her constituents, and I join her in thanking the school staff in her constituency.

The Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), spoke with conviction about his friend Sir David Amess. He called out the service failings in the Prevent programme and the poor treatment of Sir David's family. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response and hope to see the Government take action on this matter.

I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for his kind words about Sir David. He raised the dangerous effects of hepatitis C and the work needed to eradicate it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), my shadow defence team friend, did a fantastic job of opening this debate a year ago, which I enjoyed attending. He paid tribute to his best friend, Sir David. Having watched my right hon. Friend over the past year, I have learned a great deal. He is a tireless campaigner for his area, and it was brilliant to hear him talk about supermarkets and devolution.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) talked about Sure Start, green jobs and the importance of the northern industrial powerhouse. My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) talked about housing management companies. We all face that issue, especially in my constituency of Exmouth and Exeter East, and I look forward to working with him over the coming years to ensure there is proper accountability.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) made the really important point that Sir David Amess showed us that

“politics at its best is about service, not spectacle”—

I will use that one. The hon. Member talked about him and his team making 200 visits in their first year; it has obviously been a very busy year for them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) talked about the important work he is doing on the renovation of this building. I think we all know that our place of work needs restoration

—there are significant fire risks and security risks—and I look forward to that debate happening, so that we can have a national conversation.

I am keen to reference as many colleagues as possible, so I will speed up from a canter to a gallop. The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) shared a story about his late friend, Julian, and Sir David's true friendship and compassion to Julian. The hon. Member is a strong voice for his constituents. I do not think I have ever heard him talking about being a teacher, but I look forward to that.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) talked about one of his predecessors being tragically murdered. He said he has mentioned Eastbourne 200 times this year—the number 200 must be on everyone's minds at the moment—so I congratulate him on that. The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) championed local businesses in her area. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) talked about the issue of access to cash in his constituency. I am running a similar campaign in my constituency, and I am sure that many other Members who have seen bank closures in their constituencies will be looking for banking hubs.

The hon. Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) spoke about local health services. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) spoke powerfully about his dear friend, Sir David Amess, and called for a public inquiry into the Prevent programme. The hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) paid tribute to Reading football club and spoke about the redevelopment of a local disused jail. I look forward to visiting once it is up and running—hopefully not because I have been incarcerated.

The hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) spoke about upgrading river infrastructure. The hon. Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) talked about our fantastic Lionesses and local football in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), who I have learned a lot from over the last year, talked about children's mental health services in his constituency. That is another debate that I think we will have to have next year to talk about the links with the mental health crisis.

We have had fantastic contributions from the hon. Members for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), for Lewes (James MacCleary), for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), for Rugby (John Slinger), for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) and for Carlisle (Ms Minns). A really interesting point was raised, again inspired by Sir David Amess, about the fact that we are fleeting custodians of our constituencies. The service that Sir David Amess brought to this House over so many decades is a north star for us all to aim for. I express my condolences to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on the loss of his father-in-law. I hope that he and his family are doing as well as possible.

We also heard many interesting contributions from the hon. Members for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer), for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) and for Erewash (Adam Thompson)—I look forward to seeing videos hopefully emerging in the coming weeks and months of him rocking out in mosh pits. We heard from the hon. Members for Truro and Falmouth

[David Reed]

(Jayne Kirkham) and for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), my neighbours in Cornwall, which is the next county along from my constituency.

We heard from the hon. Members for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours), for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), who made a fantastic final contribution to the debate. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket is a respected surgeon, and it has been really interesting to watch him bring forward health matters and enrich the debate in this Chamber.

Before I close, I place on record my sincere thanks to all those who have supported us in this parliamentary year. I thank the House of Commons staff, including the Doorkeepers, the caterers, the Clerks and the event co-ordinators. Their professionalism and quiet dedication behind the scenes allow this place to function with such efficiency and dignity, and I hope that their work is never taken for granted. I am sure that all Members from across the House will join me in showing their appreciation for everything that they do not just today, but every day.

Let me offer special congratulations to two members of the Doorkeepers' team who work in Members' Lobby, Holly Jackson and Vanessa Chapman, who are soon to be married. I know the whole House will join me in wishing them every happiness as they begin their married life together.

I have one final remark: I pay tribute to Paul Kehoe, who is in his 45th year of service to this House. Just like David Amess, that is a true north star for what public service looks like.

That leaves me to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all colleagues from across the House a very restful and happy summer recess. I look forward to seeing everyone again in the autumn.

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

6.42 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am honoured to close this final debate of the term from the Government Dispatch Box. As a Government Whip, I do not often have the opportunity to speak in this Chamber, so it is a genuine privilege to be responding for the first time in this way. I am usually the one lurking just out of shot, muttering about speaking limits and timings, so standing here feels just a little risky. I promise I will not abuse that privilege—much, anyway. I am proud to be part of this Parliament, which contains the largest number of women ever elected. We still have a way to go; I am only the 479th female ever to be elected to this place, and it is striking to think that all those women who came before me would not even have filled this Parliament.

This debate has been reflective, respectful, and united by shared values. We have come together to remember what truly matters in public life, and in doing so, we honour the memory of Sir David Amess, a man whose life of service embodied the spirit of this place. He was a parliamentarian whose good humour and deep commitment to his constituents won him respect from all sides of the House.

We have heard some powerful speeches, and I would like to pay tribute to some of them. I commend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this debate, and in particular for the work that he has done to raise the issue of the plight of the hostages taken on 7 October 2023, and the horrific attacks on innocent civilians in Gaza. Those responsible must be held to account. He raised many other issues; I will not go through them, but I will ensure that the appropriate Ministers write to him to answer his questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) is a strong champion for her constituency. She rightly pointed out the importance of bus services to her constituents. Our buses Bill, which I know she is proud of, will allow leaders to take back control. The hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) seeks better transport connections, which is something that the Transport Secretary also has high on her agenda.

The Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), paid an emotional tribute to Sir David Amess, as did the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson). They mentioned the huge impact that events have had on Sir David's family, and I will make sure that all their comments and suggestions are taken up by the relevant Government Ministers. Our thoughts continue to be with Sir David's family and friends.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) spoke about World Hepatitis Day, which is on 28 July. I pay tribute to him for his campaign to raise awareness of that disease. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) championed jobs and opportunities in her constituency, especially the jobs of the future, and those in the offshore renewables sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) spoke about the real-life impact that a Labour Government are having on young people in his constituency, including through the roll-out of free breakfast clubs. He invited a Minister to visit his town centre, and I know that many would take him up on that offer, myself included. However, he is competing with the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), who invited us all to visit his wonderful constituency—he is a great advert for summer holidaying there.

The right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) raised the important matter of the restoration and renewal of this place. I will ensure that his comments reach the Leader of the House, but many of those issues are matters for the House, rather than the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) is a huge champion for his constituents, and I am sure that the phrase “Oxford-Cambridge-Harlow corridor” will catch on. I am impressed that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) has completed her 200th small business Saturday—I offer her congratulations on that mammoth commitment.

Access to banking services and hubs formed a central part of the speech made by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), and I know that is an interest shared by Members across the House. We are accelerating the roll-out of those banking hubs. My hon. Friend the Member for

Warrington South (Sarah Hall) spoke about the importance of inclusive education, and I share her passion. She recognises that having a Labour Government brings that change to young people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) rightly praised the Football Governance Bill, which would have prevented Reading football club from suffering its fate. We look forward to a better season for them—but not too good when they play against Cardiff. The hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) raised the issue of active travel and its importance to his constituents. I am pleased that the Government are prioritising that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) spoke passionately about her constituency, and was rightly proud that it was home to the first official Lionesses match. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) on her work locally and her campaigns, but also on her ability to speak from her depth of experience about the horrors unfolding in Gaza. Those horrors must stop.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) spoke with his usual eloquence, and I know his constituency well and understand the challenges his constituents face, as do this Government. I was fascinated to learn of the history of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) and, through the Roman dig, of its place as a strategic stronghold. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and his father-in-law, and I offer my hon. Friend condolences on behalf of the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) rightly mentioned tackling antisocial behaviour, which will continue to be a priority for this Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) told us about cutting his teeth in a hard rock/punk band and being in a mosh pit. I am sure that there are similarities we could draw with this place, but I will not even go there. My hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), and for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), rightly boasted of the riches of Cornwall, and my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) spoke of his pride in all his towns and villages, and the struggle to meet and talk to everyone there.

Equally passionate was my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson); I wish Sunderland AFC well for next season. Unless Cardiff seriously up their game, I do not see them in play-offs any time soon. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) said that free breakfast clubs are a game changer for his constituents, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) demonstrated that she is a huge champion for her constituency by ensuring that every book printed by Amazon in Dunstable says that it was printed there. That is commitment, and it is impressive.

I could go on. We have had fantastic contributions. The hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), and my hon. Friends the Members for Rugby (John Slinger), for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) and for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) all paid huge tribute to the work of their constituents and organisations in their constituencies.

I will be brief as I am conscious of time, but if you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, there is only one way for a Welsh Member of Parliament to close this debate, and that is by talking about Wales. For the first time in a generation, Wales has two Labour Governments, in Cardiff and Westminster, pulling in the same direction. I can tell Members that it is making a difference. Together we are rebuilding our economy, creating good jobs, driving down NHS waiting lists, and delivering the biggest investment in Welsh rail—£445 million to connect our communities and open up opportunities, including in my constituency of Cardiff North.

When Labour governs at both ends of the M4, the priorities of the Welsh people are not just heard, but delivered. That is the power of partnership. I did say I would not get too partisan, but the contrast is clear; the Tories and Reform are fighting for the next clickbait headlines. I wonder what surprises we will hear over the summer recess. Perhaps it will be the publication of Reform's first fantasy novel, because that is the only place its funding calculations belong. Perhaps we will have a Tory leadership contest, because we have not had one of those yet this year.

Meanwhile, we are getting on with the job. We have delivered 4 million extra NHS appointments, recruited 3,000 extra police officers, established Great British Energy, recruited nearly 2,000 GPs, stepped in to save British Steel, secured a better deal for the workers of Port Talbot, brought forward a Bill on employment rights, opened free breakfast clubs and banned bonuses for water bosses. Wages have grown more in the first 10 months than in the last 10 years of the Tory Government. There is a lot done and a whole lot more still to do. That is the change we were elected on last year. As President Obama once said:

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time... We are the change that we seek.”

We know that in this place nothing would happen without the myriad people behind the scenes. I express my gratitude to the House staff, including the Doorkeepers, the cleaners, the Clerks, catering, security, broadcasting, *Hansard* and those in visitor experience, as well as our staff and constituency teams. Mine are sat up in the Gallery today, so I thank them, as well as my mother, who is with them. I also thank the civil servants. All these people come together to help make this place function.

I congratulate two of our wonderful Doorkeepers, Holly and Vanessa, on their upcoming wedding. On behalf of the whole House, I wish them a long and happy marriage. Of course, our thanks also go to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers. As we rise for the summer recess, I offer my best wishes to all, and I hope that everyone will enjoy the best possible summer break.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Bob Blackman to wind up the debate.

6.55 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We have had a wonderful debate, to which 38 Back Benchers have contributed, and we have also heard three excellent Front-Bench speeches. If I may say so, the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) may be looking

[Bob Blackman]

forward to the reshuffle that, it is rumoured, may take place over the summer; we may hear more of her in the Chamber, rather than outside it.

The House is, of course, rising for the summer recess. Some people think that we are all going off on a long holiday. Far from it: we will all be going back to our constituencies and doing work for our constituents, as is right and proper. We will be giving young people opportunities to serve with us, while we are given opportunities to see more of our constituents. However, I hope that everyone will have a well-earned rest and a proper break. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers—and, indeed, the entirety of the staff who support us—a very happy recess. I hope we can use the opportunity this summer to do more of the work that needs to be done in this Chamber and beyond to ensure that the House is fit and ready for the visitors who want to come and see the work that we do, but let us have a good recess, let us hope for a brighter future as a result, and let us look forward to coming back in the autumn, refreshed and ready for the political fight.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. As we know, the Doorkeepers know and see everything, and I need to correct the record, because an error was made earlier by the shadow Minister. Paul Kehoe has actually served here for 46 years, not 45.

Let me briefly put on record that I miss David Amess a lot. He would come into my office with a toasted teacake and a cup of tea and check that I was OK. It never occurred to me that I had to check that he was going to be OK in one of his surgeries.

I thank the Doorkeepers, the wonderful Clerks, everyone in the Speaker's Office, and my fabulous team—in particular, Pavlina Aburn, Alison Dobson and Abigail Curry—who will keep me busy this summer, working in my constituency, just like all other Members.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

PETITIONS

Future of Wingfield Manor

6.58 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): This petition relates to the future of Wingfield Manor, and is presented in conjunction with Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust. It has been signed by more than 3,000 residents of Derbyshire, and states:

The petition of residents of Amber Valley and the wider Derbyshire area,

Declares that the future of Wingfield Manor should be conserved and that it should be made accessible to visitors once more; notes that the ruin of Wingfield Manor is a scheduled monument on which the government of 1960 placed a guardianship order, recognising its historical significance; further notes that the Manor, built in the 15th Century, is said to have inspired the architecture of Hampton Court and served as a backdrop to the infamous Babington Plot when its most famous resident, Mary Queen of Scots, was imprisoned; further declares that the Manor has been under the care of English Heritage but it is privately owned and

soon to be put up for sale; and further declares that this presents a unique opportunity which is currently on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate steps to secure the future of Wingfield Manor and ensure it is, once again, accessible to visitors and available for future generations to enjoy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003102]

Leatside Pharmacy

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I rise on behalf of residents of Totnes to present a petition concerning the closure of Leatside pharmacy, formerly based at Leatside GP surgery, and I declare that I am a patient. Since the closure, many residents have faced longer waiting times and struggled to obtain prescriptions and advice, and the surgery has been sorely impacted by the loss. A separate petition on change.org has gathered over 3,000 signatures, representing the strength of local feeling. Both constituents and doctors have contacted me to express the urgent need for a pharmacy at the surgery to support its work and local health needs.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with NHS England to prioritise the reopening of a pharmacy at Leatside GP Surgery to ensure timely, accessible, and reliable pharmaceutical care for the residents of Totnes."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Totnes,

Declares that the closure of the Leatside Pharmacy, located at the Leatside GP Surgery in Totnes, has significantly impacted local access to essential NHS pharmacy services; further declares that many residents—especially older people and those with mobility challenges—now face increased travel distances and longer waiting times to access prescriptions and pharmacy advice; notes that ongoing issues with alternative local pharmacies have highlighted the urgent need to reopen the pharmacy at Leatside GP Surgery; and notes separate online and paper petitions on the same issue have generated over 3000 signatures demonstrating local support for this campaign.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with NHS England to prioritise the reopening of a pharmacy at Leatside GP Surgery to ensure timely, accessible, and reliable pharmaceutical care for the residents of Totnes.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003103]

UK Government Relations with Israel

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): I rise to present a petition concerning the UK Government's relations with Israel. It is joined by 354 signatures from a parallel petition collected by campaigners for Palestine in York, who have had a presence in our city for the last 30 years, but never at a time when the scale of violations and barbaric acts against civilians, including children, has been so catastrophic. The petition recognises the genocide against the Palestinians, which must end immediately.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately cut off all military and economic relations with Israel.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that there is a genocide taking place in Palestine.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately cut off all military and economic relations with Israel.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003105]

Changing Places Toilets

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

7.2 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on a subject that I care deeply about. Last Saturday, 19 July, was Changing Places Awareness Day. It is therefore an honour to have secured this debate and to be able to pay tribute to the campaign organisation Changing Places in its 20th year, and in a week when it has worked to remind the nation of the importance of its campaign. During this time, it has worked relentlessly to seek provision for the quarter of a million people in the UK who have for so long had no public access to accessible toilet facilities, and for their families and carers.

Changing Places toilets enable anyone, regardless of their disability, to go to the shops, attend hospital appointments, enjoy community life, socialise and travel. Many of us in this place and, indeed, across the UK take this basic necessity and right for granted every day.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): My friend Denise Deakin campaigned to get more Changing Places toilets 20 years ago, so it would be remiss of me not to mention her in this debate. Over the weekend, I spoke to Faye from Talke and Jane from Burslem, in my constituency, and they told me that the difference such toilets make is life-changing. One said, “For me and my family, it’s the difference between living your life or closing down your world.” Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to do all we can to enhance and get more of these facilities across the whole of the country?

Daniel Francis: Absolutely. As I will turn to, I know that at first hand as the parent of a child with cerebral palsy. The growth of Changing Places means that it is making an impact, but the fact is that we need more of these toilets across the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. I spoke to him beforehand to get an idea of what he was trying to achieve, and I want to congratulate him on his campaign—well done! Every one of us in our constituency wishes we had someone pushing as hard as he is with his campaign. I say that because in Northern Ireland we have only 1.4 Changing Places toilets per 100,000 people, which means we rank the second lowest in the UK after London. The hon. Gentleman is doing so much here, and we have a lot to learn. Some 7,000 people in Northern Ireland require additional room for assistance and support when using public restroom facilities. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, given that this issue impacts thousands across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we must ensure that enough Changing Places toilets are provided in all nations for all people with disabilities?

Daniel Francis: Absolutely, and I thank the hon. Member. As I will come on to say, we have seen such growth, particularly in central London, but that needs to be replicated across the United Kingdom.

[*Daniel Francis*]

Access to a Changing Places toilet allows anyone, regardless of their access needs or disability, to use a toilet with dignity, privacy and hygienically.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that accessible toilets keep people out longer, encourage spending, make towns more inclusive, and are critical for retail, tourism and local growth? When councils close them, disabled people and young families just stay at home. Does he agree that it is short-sighted of the Conservative council in North Warwickshire to fail to fulfil its promise to reopen accessible toilets in Atherstone town centre? We need more Changing Places toilets up and down this country so that everyone, regardless of their ability or who their children are, can make the most of their days out.

Daniel Francis: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. Again, I will come on to talk about a toilet that was closed in my own constituency and the impact that has. I will try to make some progress for a moment.

Changing Places toilets are specifically designed for people with profound and multiple disabilities and their carers, who need more space and equipment than a standard accessible toilet provides. The features include height-adjustable adult-sized changing benches, ceiling track hoists and space for multiple carers, ensuring a safe and dignified experience.

The Changing Places consortium was established 20 years ago, as I have said, and at the heart of its campaign, which was initiated by the late Loretto Lambe, the founder and chief executive of PAMIS—Promoting a More Inclusive Society—was the aim to ensure the growth of Changing Places across the country. I wish to pay tribute to the work of Changing Places staff and volunteers, led by Jenny Miller and Karen Hoe, and their vital support in ensuring this debate could be brought to the House.

Currently, the total number of active and registered Changing Places toilets is 2,609 spanning the UK and servicing leisure centres, city and town centres, shopping centres, venues, hospitals, transport hubs, stadiums and attractions. Last year, 414 new Changing Places were installed across the UK, the highest number of annual registrations ever.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I want to add a personal note of thanks to my hon. Friend for being such an outstanding advocate for families such as ours. We share a strong union on that point. Does he agree that it is not enough just to have a Changing Places facility, because it is also important for staff in those areas to have had training so that they know how to direct people to it? I reflected on that the other weekend when we went to a splash park, having seen that it has a Changing Places facility, which was amazing. However, when we asked the person opening the café, who allowed us to go in, how we could access the Changing Places facility, they just did not know, which made it inaccessible. Does he agree that it is so important that training is given to staff where there is a Changing Places facility, so that they can adequately direct people to it?

Daniel Francis: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. We work very closely together on these issues, as parents of disabled children. I will turn to such training in relation to some of my own horror stories in due course.

In May, PAMIS announced that it is updating its Changing Places practical guidance, a resource that helps support the design and management of Changing Places toilets. I think I missed out that there were 799 toilets 10 years ago, so there has been significant growth since that time.

I should also note the changes made by the previous Government when they amended the Building Regulations 2010, under which it is now compulsory for some new large buildings to have Changing Places toilets installed in them. In addition, a Changing Places toilets fund of £30.5 million was made available in 2023, which has provided 600 Changing Places across England.

I have seen the real impact that that growth has had in London and the home counties as a south-east London MP. I see that now in central London, as compared with 10 years ago, in train stations, at cultural venues, along the South Bank and, very recently, in Oxford Street. The Need2Change campaign, spearheaded by Bromley resident Katrina O'Leary who I worked with before I was elected to this place, has allowed an increase in toilets in parks, hospitals and coastal towns to ensure her family, my family and other families can have the days out that others take for granted.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. It is typically human-focused, compassionate and decent, which sums him up in every way. Will he join me in highlighting the current Changing Places toilets in Newcastle-under-Lyme at Keele services on the M6 southbound, Morrisons, the Jubilee 2 gym and sports centre, and our local library? That is four, but we need many more and government has an important role to play in making that happen.

Daniel Francis: I thank my hon. Friend. I absolutely agree. We have seen that growth, but we need to see more.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I am very sad to report that there are no Changing Places toilets in my constituency on the website—not a single one. I believe that, actually, Congleton leisure centre does have a Changing Places toilet, and I believe that Ruby's Fund also has a very extensive disabled-facilitated toilet, although not to Changing Places standard. Does he agree that, when I have a constituency of 90,000 people, with four towns and multiple villages, that is an appalling state of affairs and we need to do better?

Daniel Francis: I thank my hon. Friend. I am happy to work with her and her local authority to bring sites forward.

I will now talk about my own family's experience and, in particular, about education. I fully accept that not every disability is visible. Many people who may appear not to have a disability do require a Changing Places toilet, for instance if they have a colostomy bag and require extra space for toileting. For those who need a Changing Places toilet, the current system can be very frustrating. The main way of finding where one is located is through the excellent search location tool and

map—this was just referred to—on the Changing Places website. There is a separate app, but it is not run by Changing Places—it is run by a third party—and so is not as up to date. The information on the Changing Places website can only be up to date if the provider of the toilet advises of any changes in availability.

I could give a litany of experiences, as could my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), of where things have sadly not worked. One of our daughters has quadriplegic cerebral palsy. She is a wheelchair user. She is unable to tell you when she needs the toilet and is still in nappies at almost 12 years of age. Given her height and weight, a changing bed is essential to change her with dignity. Before we were aware of the Changing Places website, we sadly had the indignity of changing her in a variety of places, such as on a bench or behind a bush to try to give her some dignity. Our fallback today remains the floor of our wheelchair-accessible van, which I can assure you is a backbreaker. Since we have been aware of the Changing Places map facility, we plan our days out, trips and travel arrangements around it and where we believe there will be a toilet. It has been a life changer for our family and, as we have heard, for other families.

There are occasions where, because the information has not been updated or because of a lack of training on what Changing Places toilets are, we have had some experiences that have been not so great: finding that the only Changing Places toilet in the place you are visiting has been closed because it is vandalised; finding that the Changing Places toilet in a building is not available, as it is being used as a storage cupboard; having a council staff member refuse someone, who clearly cannot walk and is clearly in nappies, access to the Changing Places toilet on the grounds that they are a child and should therefore use a baby changing table, even when it is clear that their height, and particularly their weight, would break the table; finding, because it is winter, that the council has closed the toilet entirely or, when visiting a busy coastal city, that it closes at 4 pm—because clearly disabled people do not need to use the toilet after 4 pm!

I have seen some terrible training of staff in train stations and in public buildings, where they do not understand what a Changing Places toilet is. On numerous occasions, I have been told that because my daughter is a wheelchair user she should use the standard disabled toilet, with no understanding that she cannot stand and there is no hoist in a standard disabled toilet, and that if someone uses nappies, you might need a bed to change them. There was one occasion in a central London train station when a toilet attendant made everyone, regardless of which toilet they required, join one queue because their objective was reducing the queue length, rather than ensuring that the people who were able to use the only toilet available to them, did so. As we stood patiently at about number 50 in the queue, 49 people in front of us who did not need the Changing Places toilet were, in turn, directed to it. There are, however, some fantastic instances of staff ensuring that those trying to use these toilets as a baby changing room—which happens a lot—do not do so, and examples of fantastic signage explaining what a Changing Places toilet is intended for.

Along with the people who believe a Changing Places toilet is, in fact, a large baby changing facility, one other issue that can cause problems is the easy availability of RADAR keys, which are often purchased on the internet or in high street shops. I am afraid that some people do buy them as a way of skipping toilet queues.

In a number of places, including in Bexleyheath town centre in my constituency, the use of a RADAR key has led to people sleeping on the changing bed, and someone moving themselves and all their belongings into the toilet. My council took the decision to close the toilet because of the repeated damage caused by the person who kept moving into it, although I would argue that the council was clearly not maintaining it adequately, given that someone had been living in it for several weeks before my own wife discovered that they were living there.

Those issues persist, and we therefore need to have a conversation about training, about spreading best practice on signage and about different entry systems, which a number of Changing Places toilets now have. Those things would greatly reduce the stress for those who genuinely need a Changing Places toilet.

Jen Craft: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Daniel Francis: Very quickly—you have had your go already. *[Laughter.]*

Jen Craft: I very much appreciate my hon. Friend giving way again. Does he agree that when you go somewhere and you are unable to access adequate facilities to change your child, the message that is sent to you and your family is, “You are not welcome here. We do not want you.”? Conversely, when you go somewhere that has a Changing Places facility, you feel welcomed and part of the community.

Daniel Francis: That is absolutely the case. We will visit the same places for days out and we know our routine in central London, because we know where we will be welcomed and where we have had those bad experiences, which I have mentioned.

We do, of course, also need to consider this place. We have a Changing Places toilet in the Lower Waiting Hall, which is of the very old, original standard. It is therefore difficult to hoist somebody on to the bed, given how low the ceiling is. There is, however, no facility for visitors to Portcullis House, which is something we need to consider going forward.

In my constituency, there is one Changing Places toilet, located in the Broadway shopping centre, but we need more. Hall Place would be a fantastic place to have one, given that it is the premier cultural attraction and open space in my constituency.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): There are four Changing Places toilets in my constituency, which, given that it is one of England’s largest constituencies, still feels very inadequate. Does my hon. Friend agree that one sector where we would definitely benefit from more Changing Places toilets is in our visitor attractions? Does he support my call for English Heritage to increase the number of Changing Places facilities on its estate?

Daniel Francis: I absolutely agree. As my hon. Friend says, I am pretty sure that there are some in her constituency, but we do need to expand that. Having those facilities on the south bank has made such an impact culturally, I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): We have just two Changing Places toilets in my constituency, which is semi-rural and quite large. One is at Elvaston castle country park, so I ask my hon. Friend to put that

[Samantha Niblett]

on his list of places to come and visit. I opened my constituency office only once I had a disabled access toilet, but it just feels like such a halfway house. Does my hon. Friend agree that two Changing Places toilets for a constituency as large as South Derbyshire is far from adequate?

Daniel Francis: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who has one more than me in her constituency. We do need to expand the number that we have.

I recently met members of my local Bexley Mencap, who raised with me the need for a Changing Places toilet in one of my borough's swimming pools. We have three swimming pools in my local authority area, and it can be very difficult for members to change themselves.

However, campaigning can work. For many years, I have questioned the rationale of Eurotunnel LeShuttle having a Changing Places toilet in Folkestone but not having one for the very same customers in Calais. I accept that Changing Places toilets are very uncommon in France—in fact, I could count them on one hand. However, after many years of being told that one could not be provided in Calais, I have been advised in the past month that one will be supplied, although Eurotunnel is being vague about the installation date. Those customers will now finally be able to use a Changing Places toilet on both legs of their journey.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) wanted to be here to pay tribute to her constituent Zack Kerr, from Oswaldtwistle, who has been campaigning for additional Changing Places facilities since 2017. Zack has cerebral palsy and, because of his first-hand experience, has been instrumental in the building of 54 new toilets across motorway service stations in England.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) relayed to me that the changing places toilet in Bingley town centre has been a life-changer. It is really well maintained and is cleaned twice a day, which can be important for children with complex conditions who are susceptible to infections. With twice-daily cleaning it is also much less likely that somebody will move in there for several weeks.

I continue to aspire to see a national disability travel app that shows accessible train stations and interchanges, and flags up when lifts are out of order and where there is a Changing Places toilet. We must ensure that we do what we can to expand the provision of accessible toilets, particularly Changing Places toilets, to public buildings, parks and community facilities.

I am very grateful to hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon. I encourage them to engage with their local authorities and stakeholder groups, and impress on them the importance of Changing Places toilets so that all our constituents can have access to a clean, safe and accessible facility. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish you a very happy summer recess.

7.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for securing this debate

and for setting such a beautiful tone at the start of his speech. He speaks with enormous power as a parent of a child with cerebral palsy who requires full-time care, and also as someone who has a very long record—before his time in this place—of working with local parent groups and national organisations such as Scope and the Changing Places campaign. I know that there will be people watching this debate who relate strongly to the experience he talked about, and the experience that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) talked about. By bringing those people into this debate, he will have given them such a sense of peace. He did so with such power, and I pay tribute to him for that. His message, which I double underline, is that campaigning works, and I wish to show that, as a Government, we are bringing that spirit to bear as well, because this is such an important issue.

I am proud to have been a long-standing supporter of the Changing Places toilet campaign—long before my time in this Parliament. I have never officially been the toilets Minister, but I have spoken it into existence by telling anyone who will listen what I think. It is a simple truth that access to toilets—Changing Places in this case, and standard public facilities—is about dignity, independence, inclusion and ensuring that everyone, regardless of their needs, can fully participate in their community. No one, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, should ever get the message—explicitly or implicitly—that they are not welcome in their own community.

We know that for many people, especially those with complex needs or health conditions, the lack of appropriate toilet provision can be the deciding factor in whether they leave the House, visit the town centre or spend time with friends and family in their community. Without suitable facilities, what should be a normal day out can become a source of stress, exclusion and even risk, and we do not want that for anybody in our communities. That was the spirit not only of my hon. Friend's speech, but of all the contributions from our colleagues.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has done remarkable work through the £30.5 million Changing Places toilet programme. I have in the past recognised the work of the previous Prime Minister in this space, and I would like to do so again. These facilities provide the equipment, the space and the security needed by more than 250,000 people across the UK—people for whom standard accessible toilets are simply not suitable for their needs.

The fund has supported the installation of 483 new facilities across 220 local authority areas, and has been a jumping-off point for best practice guidance, mandatory technical design training to local authorities and operational training. I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said about where that has fallen short. We note that and we will make sure that we are communicating as best we can to make sure that, where these valued facilities have been installed, they are accessible, because the people who work in those spaces can help in the appropriate way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford was right that investment has been targeted to address gaps where provision is limited or non-existent, particularly in rural towns and coastal communities. It is important to recognise the vital role that transport plays in supporting independence and inclusion, so it

must overlap with this agenda. Again, I acknowledge the important work of the Department for Transport, which has made available more than £2.5 million of funding to install Changing Places toilets at motorway service areas and railway stations across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) recognises the well-loved Keele services, but I know that there are many others across the country. Changing Places facilities make it easier for disabled people and their families to travel however and wherever they want and to be confident that their needs will be met. We have heard a bit about how the facilities are made available, and I think that tool is really important.

The Government's inclusive transport strategy commits us to improving accessibility and ensuring equal access to the transport network for disabled people by 2030. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford has made a very important suggestion about how that could be improved with a single integrated app. I would be keen to meet him to talk further about that, and I assure him that the same goes for my colleagues in the Department for Transport.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Minister is talking about the importance of a single integrated app that would bring together accessible toilet facilities and transport. Does he agree that we need this across the whole of the UK so that my constituents in Fife and constituents in Scotland can travel across the UK? We are, after all, one country, and we need these facilities to be integrated and open to all our constituents. Will he join me in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) on his amazing campaigning on issues like this?

Alex Norris: On the second question, I absolutely will. My hon. Friend's contribution to this debate was outstanding, as is his wider work. On the first point, as we begin summer recess, a great number of colleagues will be crossing national borders within the UK—in my case to west Wales, but others will be going to Scotland. It is important that people know where facilities are and that we have integration. I am always keen to work with my counterparts in the devolved Governments, and I certainly would be keen to work with them on this issue.

My hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Sarah Russell), for Carlisle (Ms Minns) and for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), and all of us to some degree, have talked about a lack of provision in our communities, notwithstanding that there are now 2,600 Changing Places toilets. I hope to give a degree of succour, given the very important change that was made by the previous Government, which I want to recognise. The important change in building regulations in January 2021 meant that new large public buildings, from shopping centres and arts venues to motorway services and sports stadiums, have to have these toilets in them. I can give confidence to colleagues that as developments take place, they will naturally get these facilities.

That is really good news and a very important sign. It shows that although things such as building regulations might sound esoteric, if done thoughtfully and to reflect the lived experience of our communities, they can significantly improve quality of life for people across the country. That change will be coming.

Sarah Russell: That is fantastic, but could the Minister please think about how we can address this issue for those of us with predominantly rural communities that have smaller towns that are unlikely to have very large buildings?

Alex Norris: I will take up that point in the same spirit. The intent of the original programme was to try to fill in the gaps, but clearly from my hon. Friend's contribution there is more to do, so I will reflect on that and talk with colleagues.

These changes do not happen by accident, so I want to recognise the tireless campaigning of individuals, charities such as Muscular Dystrophy UK, and local authorities, which have been progressive in this space. I would like to personally thank a very good friend of mine in Nottingham, Martin Jackaman, who was at the very heart of this campaign at the beginning. It was he who introduced me to the importance of this issue was when I was a young portfolio holder on my council nearly 15 years ago. The action of such individuals has meant that progress has been made and that we can be confident of more progress to come.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is quite a large amount of ignorance among people who do not need to use these facilities, and that it is incumbent on all of us in this House, our councillor colleagues and others to raise awareness so that people do not just walk on by in towns, not realising the needs of others?

Alex Norris: It is so important that in our naturally busy lives we all do not cut corners, whether by parking in places or using toilets that are not designed for us. We must understand that, when we do so, what may seem a pretty harmless—I suspect it is thoughtless—act could have a profound impact on an individual who needs those spaces that affects not only their day but whether in future they will be willing to venture into that amenity. I do not think anybody would want to have that impact. We must all reflect on the impacts we have and, therefore, on how we might mitigate them in the future and stop these things from happening.

This has been an important debate. As we can see from the number of colleagues in the Chamber, we could have done with much longer—there is certainly much more I would like to have said on public toilets—but I know that we will have such opportunities in the future. The progress that has been made so far is a result of really heroic individuals, campaigners and charities, and has happened because people have shared what are often some of the worst experiences of their and their families' lives. We are better for their willingness to do so. I want them to hear me say from the Dispatch Box that, yes, we want them to keep campaigning and fighting—that is what we will all do—and that in us they have a Government who understand the issues they are talking about and want to be their partner in improving them.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 July 2025

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

Black Country Day

9.30 am

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Black Country Day.

What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz! As the Black Country MP for Walsall and Bloxwich, you know how important the subject of the debate is and will, I am sure, give it the respect that it deserves. I know that I speak for the whole Black Country, including your constituents and the constituents of MPs who cannot be present today, because we are one place—the Black Country is our region.

Sometimes people may say that we are part of the west midlands, but we have a pride and identity that are all our own. We are proud to wear the Black Country flag. There is some debate over the boundaries of the Black Country, but for the purposes of today I will treat it as our four boroughs of Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Walsall and Dudley, which means that 1.2 million people call our region their home.

Our region was the birthplace of the industrial revolution. If we look at the history books, that is clear: Thomas Newcomen's steam engine hauled coal at the Bloomfield colliery, and James Watt improved it at the Coneygree colliery in Tipton. Both places are in my constituency. Whatever the Birmingham and Manchester MPs say, the birthplace of the industrial revolution was in the Black Country.

Our name comes from the comments made by the American ambassador who came to the Black Country and described us as

“black by day and red by night”.

The black from the steel mills and heavy industry is long gone, but our heavy industry is not. We commemorate those days in our Black Country flag: the red for the red at night, the black for industry, the white for the glass furnaces and the chains for the heavy industry of our ends.

The 14th of July was chosen as the day to commemorate our region because it coincides with the first day that Thomas Newcomen used that steam engine, in 1712. It is fitting that, unlike other regions, which may choose a saint's day, the birthday of an eminent nobleman or the date of a battle as their regional day, we in the Black Country choose an industrial moment.

In the Black Country, we have had coal mining, steel fabrication, metal finishing, and nail, brick and chain making. Over the years, those industries have declined, but still the Black Country's future is bright. It is still one of the UK's most industrialised areas, thanks to iron foundries, and our haulage, automotive and metals industries. As we celebrate our heritage, we must remember the pivotal role that working people played in the creation of the modern Black Country.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on securing the debate, but on the magnificent job she is doing in selling the Black Country to Westminster Hall and the wider community. Does she agree that her celebrating Black Country Day and others celebrating other days demonstrates the diversity across the United Kingdom? In my patch last weekend, we had a sporting and cultural celebration, with the Open at Royal Portrush golf club and other events. Diversity across the United Kingdom ought to be celebrated in the very way that she is alluding to in this debate.

Antonia Bance: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. It is so important that each of our areas is celebrated for what they are—what they are now, what they have been and what they could be—and that we take note of the diversity of each of our areas.

This United Kingdom is made up of places, regions, identities, cities, towns and communities. Each deserves its opportunity—its day in the sun and its things that it is special and unique at. Each place deserves its own local pride. It is so important that we come together today to talk about the Black Country. The key things I want to talk about are about the way that our industrial heritage shapes our future. Some people might talk about their regional identity day and offer the best place to get a pint, the best regional delicacies or the most beautiful vistas.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend may know that I bought my very first house on the edge of the Black Country, within hearing distance of the Baggies' home ground. I want to celebrate the Black Country's very own orange chips. The orange chips are said to date back to world war two, but who knows? The best orange chips are always fluffy on the inside and crispy on the outside, but they have a very secret ingredient. Would my hon. Friend like to share what that secret ingredient might be? Would she agree that chips on their own are fattening enough, bab, without making them the orange-battered kind we can only get in the Black Country?

Antonia Bance: Having recently run a competition for the best orange chips in Tipton and Wednesbury, I have great experience of sampling the double-battered delicacy—oh yes, we are talking about chips that then return to the batter and are deep-fried a second time. It was very hard to choose a winner for the contest; perhaps the Black Country Chippy or The Island House chippy, but I have not sampled them all yet. I will keep going until I have sampled every orange chip in the constituency.

The Black Country was built by working people. We remember the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath and their struggle for decent working conditions and pay. We are proud to commemorate their struggle every year at the chainmakers' festival, which I was proud to speak at this year. We remember the workers of Tube Town—members of a union that was one of the forerunners of my union, Unite—who, in 1913, went on strike from their work metal forming and creating metal tubes, for decent wages. They were out for weeks on end. Somehow, they kept body and soul together. Somehow, those families prevailed and they won.

[*Antonia Bance*]

We remember those who, through no fault of their own, were caught up in the unsafe conditions of the industrial world in the Black Country of the early 20th century. I think particularly of the Tipton catastrophe, when 19 teenage girls working in an unlicensed munitions factory at Dudley Port, dismantling redundant world war one cartridges, were killed in an explosion. They were teenage girls in unsafe, unlicensed conditions. What happened to them changed the law and brought about some of our modern health and safety culture.

Although the Black Country is a proud and vibrant place, we do not always get our fair shakes. We do not always get what we are due. We are a proud place, we work hard and we want to do our best, but the legacy of deindustrialisation and 14 long years of austerity has meant that the people of the Black Country are less likely to be in work and more likely to be sick. Our children are more likely to live without enough money to live on. Forces bigger than any individual family or person hold us back.

I stand here today talking about Black Country Day and about our area to make the case for the two big changes that we need for the future of the Black Country. The first is a modern industrial strategy. I was proud to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade set out our modern industrial strategy a few weeks ago in the House. That industrial strategy named our West Midlands combined authority as one of the key locations for all eight of the industrial strategy priority sectors.

We were the only place in the country where all eight of those sectors were named as a priority, and our own Black Country was named as the priority for the clean energy industries. We are beginning to see that come true. In the last couple of months we have seen a £45 million investment from Eku Energy in a battery storage facility in my constituency at Ocker Hill on the site of a former power station. It is a lovely thought that modern, clean energy facilities can take over the space previously occupied by carbon-intensive polluting industries.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The hon. Lady makes an important point about the history, landscape and geography of the Black Country and the fact that our roots are in industry. She makes a very good point about how we can reuse our brownfield sites—for example, for the battery and energy storage system. Does she agree with me that we should focus 100% on reusing brownfield industrial sites before we start damaging our precious greenbelt with things such as battery energy storage systems?

Antonia Bance: As a proud Black Country MP, it is good to see the right hon. Member in her place today. I thank her for the intervention, but I am afraid I cannot agree. Much of my constituency is brownfield land. It is right that we look to use brownfield land first of all, both for industrial uses and for housing, but the key problem is that brownfield land is expensive to remediate and that our need for industrial sites and housing is urgent.

I support the Government's policy of a limited review of the greenbelt and using some of the greybelt to ensure that we can use low value land for housing. Some

colleagues around the room might not agree, but when there are 21,000 people on the housing waiting list, as there are in Sandwell, and when we regularly encounter families living in temporary accommodation infested with rats and insects, who show us with shame—they should have no shame; the shame is not theirs—the arms of their children covered in bites, then perhaps we can have a conversation about which pieces of land should be used for what and about the best use of scarce public investment in land suitable for building.

The other investment that I want to talk about relates to a wonderful, timely announcement being made today by colleagues at the Department for Transport. They have announced the third round of the advanced fuels fund; I am delighted to say that Sumo Engineering in my constituency will get £4.5 million for its CLEARSKIES initiative, a demonstration project that will help to produce sustainable aviation fuel.¹ I was so pleased to hear about that. Given that we will also have the battery storage facility in Ocker Hill, the Black Country could really become the hotbed and home of clean energy industries, which offer so much potential for the types of jobs that we need.

I should also say that I was glad that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary announced action on energy prices in the industrial strategy. We so urgently need to bring down the costs of industrial energy to ensure we carry on with advanced manufacturing and the types of clean energy infrastructure development that we know is the future for our ends.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the three trade deals that our Prime Minister secured earlier this year with India, the EU and America will benefit our region greatly and can really help to turbocharge manufacturing in the Black Country?

Antonia Bance: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend, one of my constituency neighbours, for his intervention. It was a difficult day when we all stood here in Westminster Hall debating the future of the automotive industry under the tariffs from the United States. I thank my colleagues at the Department for Business and Trade and the Treasury, as well as the Prime Minister, for getting that deal, which secured 34,000 jobs at Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands.

As I said, the Black Country needs the industrial strategy to bring good jobs back to our region, but the other thing it needs is our due. When I accepted the role of Member of Parliament for Tipton and Wednesbury, I spoke about the fact that we had for so long been an object of charity and about community self-defence. Our food banks and voluntary organisations had done everything they could, and now it was time to give us our due. I can see that beginning to happen in the local government finance review, which recognises the deprivation in Sandwell, the 12th most deprived local authority in the country, and will finally put back the money that is our due—the tax that we have paid—to reopen our Sure Starts and ensure that we have the local services we need.

I hope very much that when the trailblazer neighbourhoods are announced in the coming days, they will include the neighbourhoods in Princes End identified by the independent commission on neighbourhoods,

1.[*Official Report*, 1 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 4WC.](Correction)

and that when we see the child poverty strategy this autumn, it will put the resources into the children of Tipton and Wednesbury, where 50%—one in two; every second door; every second family; every second child—live in poverty. The number of siblings that you have should not determine whether you can have your tea tonight.

My speech has perhaps been more political than some other speeches about regional days. I have made a speech about the changes we want to see for the proud place that is the Black Country on this, Black Country Day. I thank everyone for turning up today and look forward to hearing about their experiences of and priorities for the Black Country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I expect to call the first wind-up speech at 10.28 am.

9.47 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) for securing this debate and giving us, as Black Country Members of Parliament, and you, Ms Vaz, the opportunity to highlight some of the lot that is the Black Country at its best. I do not think that 90 minutes is long enough to talk with the passion that we all would like to convey, or name-check all the wonderful organisations and individuals who make up the Black Country's history, present and no doubt future, but I know that we will all give it our best shot. Held every year on 14 July for over a decade now, Black Country Day is a time to honour and celebrate the incredible spirit of our region, from our tight-knit communities to our thriving businesses and tourism and remarkable industrial heritage. Today gives us the opportunity to share a little bit of it with all the people who have decided to tune into Westminster Hall on Parliament TV.

My constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills was not historically part of the Black Country. Its incorporation came in April 1974 as part of the major reorganisation of local government in England. Its name originally comes from the urban district council, that class of local authorities that was abolished by the 1974 reforms. Having previously come under Staffordshire, we were absorbed into Walsall borough council and hence joined the Black Country. Although we have a Staffordshire past, the Black Country is very much our present and our future, though I acknowledge that many in parts of my constituency still look, and rightly so, to Staffordshire and enjoy the historical and familial connections, which I for one will never forget.

The Black Country is renowned for its contribution to the industrial revolution. From the late 18th century onwards, the region developed into a major centre for coalmining, iron smelting and steel production. During the 19th century, the Black Country became noted for its iron and steel industries. Wrought iron production, chain making and the manufacture of locks and nails were central to the region's economy. Those industries became essential to Britain's railway, maritime and construction sectors.

As you know well, Ms Vaz, as a Walsall MP yourself, in parts of Walsall our major contribution as a borough was the leather industry. The origins of Walsall's leather industry lay in the middle ages, and it continued to grow

in the 17th and 18th centuries. I will use this opportunity to speak about the lorinery trade, which is what it is known as.

Many of the town's leather goods trade pioneers were bridle cutters; by settling in Walsall, they could call on the skills of local loriners for their bits and buckles. In the early 19th century, leatherworking became an important local trade, providing employment and manufacturing opportunities right across the borough, including in my constituency. After 1840, the development of the town's leatherworking industry gained pace. The coming of the South Staffordshire railway to Walsall in 1847 gave a boost to the trade, and by 1851 there were 75 firms making bridles, saddles and harnesses.

Horses were an essential part of Victorian life. There were around 3.3 million horses in late-Victorian Britain, which provided a huge market for Walsall's manufacturers. In the last decades of the 19th century, the Walsall leather trade entered a golden age of prosperity: exports boomed and Walsall firms sent their products all over the British empire—sadly, foreign wars were a particularly lucrative source of trade. At the turn of the 20th century, Walsall was home to nearly a third of Britain's saddlers and harness makers, and it remains best known today for making saddlery and harness, yet from 1900 those trades began a long decline as, one by one, the traditional roles of the horse were challenged and replaced by the engine. The great age of the horse had ended.

Walsall firms had to adapt to this changing world, or they would have disappeared. Some had been making light leather goods, such as travelling bags and hatboxes, since the 1870s, but from 1900 onwards they concentrated more on that type of work. Since the 1960s, the light leather goods trade has met with tough competition from overseas producers, and Walsall's surviving leather goods firms have concentrated on the luxury end of the market.

Goods for some of the world's most famous brand names are made in our borough. Indeed, one of Walsall's most famous clients was Her Majesty the late Queen Elizabeth. The late Queen was rarely seen without her Launer handbag. I must share this little story, although most people have probably seen the sketch: in the famous platinum jubilee sketch with Paddington Bear, the Queen pulled a marmalade sandwich out of one of her bags, which was proudly made in Walsall—the bag, not the sandwich. I believe the Launer handbag is still a favourite of many royals.

Walsall is not known only for its handbags. Canals and waterways were critical to the Black Country's industrial success, and they remain integral to our local communities today. We have regularly hosted the Inland Waterways festival of water in Pelsall in my constituency, and we have the Canalside festival each August in Brownhills. Our canals, rooted in our industrial heritage, play a key role today, providing wildlife corridors and opportunities for walking, cycling, and simply enjoying being outdoors.

Our canals are a good example of how the region has adapted to changes over the years. Canals were critical to the Black Country's industrial heritage, enabling the transportation of raw materials like coal and iron to local furnaces and workshops. The Wyrley and Essington canal, which dates back to an Act of Parliament—the Birmingham Canal Navigation Act 1792—runs through a large part of my constituency. Originally built to

[Wendy Morton]

transport coal from the mines near Wyrley and New Invention, it was later extended to Wolverhampton and Walsall, terminating at Ogley junction near Brownhills. The Wyrley and Essington canal is affectionately known locally as the “curly Wyrley”, which derives from the fact it is a contour canal, twisting and turning to avoid gradients, and thus the need for locks.

On the subject of transport, it would be remiss of me not to draw a link between the role canals played in our past and the role transport will play in our future. Transport connectivity is essential to our communities, unlocking opportunities and access to jobs and education. That is why it is vital that the Government honour the commitment of the previous Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, to deliver the train station in Aldridge, which I am always talking about, and will continue to do so. As we look to the future, improving transport links and, most important, delivering that train station, will unleash opportunities, enabling us to rediscover the vim and vigour of our industrial spirit, with access to good jobs, better connectivity and opportunity for the next generation as well as our own.

I will conclude by wishing everyone a happy Black Country Day, even though it was actually last week, but that is the way Westminster Hall debates work. I am so pleased that the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury was able to secure this day for the debate. It has been an absolute pleasure to participate and to have this really important opportunity as a Member of Parliament to celebrate the heritage of the area that I am deeply honoured to represent.

9.55 am

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Ms Vaz. 'Owamya, me babbies? It's bostin' to be here with my Black Country muckas to celebrate all the great things about our region, past and present.

Black Country Day was first celebrated in 2014, bringing together the boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall to acknowledge our shared, rich cultural heritage and history. It is now an annual event, where we can reminisce about the past and look towards a prosperous future. The Black Country flag was designed by a local schoolgirl, Gracie Sheppard—she is not so young any more—and it has become a recognisable symbol of the region, flying atop flagpoles on our civic buildings, spotted at football matches across the world and even on display at the campsites of Glastonbury.

Elihu Burritt's 1868 “Walks in the Black Country and its Green Border-land” opens with the words “black by day and red by night”

because the local furnaces gave out smoke and grime during the day and glowed red at night. At the centre of the Black Country flag is the glass cone, a well-known shape on the Stourbridge horizon, flanked on either side by black and red skies. A chain flows across the flag, representing the region's heavy industrial past: chain making was done by women in the back gardens of homes in Cradley, and larger chains and anchors were made at Hingley's in Netherton. The Black Country area was originally made up of Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire, but when the West Midlands county was established in 1974, some of our

identity was lost. I have been lobbying to have the Black Country flag included in the historic county flags display currently outside Parliament—maybe next year.

I am Black Country through and through, growing up in Halesowen and later moving to Stourbridge; my family have roots in Smethwick and Langley. Us Black Country folk are fiercely proud of our area and its history, and rightly so. During the industrial revolution, it was known as the workshop of the world. My constituency takes in not only the town of Stourbridge but also Brierley Hill, Netherton, Wollaston, Lye and Amblecote, Norton and Pedmore. Since the 1600s, Stourbridge has given its name to glass production, and the rich local resources of coal and fireclay made it the perfect location for that industry.

One of my priorities in Parliament is to promote and protect our varied history, heritage and crafts. I am already working towards keeping our own glass festival at home in Stourbridge. Wollaston produced the Stourbridge Lion, the first locomotive to run on a commercial line in the USA. Round Oak steelworks in Brierley Hill provided employment for thousands of local people and was a world centre of iron making during the industrial revolution. Netherton was the home of Hingley's, whose most famous product was the anchor for the RMS Titanic. Lye was famous for the manufacture of nails, anvils, crucibles and firebricks, and the Stourbridge name can still be found embossed on old bricks. Linking all these places are the many miles of waterways, once the highways for transporting goods, now the perfect place to walk ya wammel up the cut.

The Black Country is no longer the heavy industrial power it once was, but I believe that, with the right investment and the opportunities provided by this Government, it can thrive once more, with modern technology and green industries. It may be a bit black over Bill's mother's today, but I believe the future is bright. In fact, we have already seen groundbreaking innovation in Allister Malcolm Glass at Stourbridge Glass museum, which has transitioned fully to renewable energy and is working with another Black Country company to develop the country's first high-power electric furnace.

Stourbridge is also home to the shortest railway in Europe, the Stourbridge Shuttle, which runs between the town and Stourbridge junction, where our most famous resident, George the station cat, can be found. Stourbridge has long produced sporting, musical and artistic talent, from England football star Jude Bellingham to Ned's Atomic Dustbin, Pop Will Eat Itself and Robert Plant. Just last week, cyclist Ben Healy retained the yellow jersey, finishing in the top 10 in the Tour de France.

It would be remiss of me not to also mention the strong and diverse community and the friendly people across the Black Country. We also have our own community radio station, Black Country Radio, and brew our own beer at the famous Batham's Brewery in Brierley Hill—

“Blessing of your heart, you brew good Ale”.

I even met my husband in a Batham's pub. Hon. Members may not consider the Black Country as a destination this summer, but I am sure they will agree that there is plenty to see and do, and they would be welcomed with open arms. As we remember our fascinating past, there is much to look forward to in the future. I am not having a laugh—the Black Country really is bostin'.

10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, it is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I suppose this is one of those occasions when you would love to be down here participating in the debate, but are unable to do so due to your responsibility as Chair—maybe it is a chance to listen and hear about all the good things. I am very fortunate to be able to participate in a small way, and I am really pleased that the three ladies who secured the debate, the hon. Members for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) and Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) are here. I was also pleased to hear the intervention from the hon. Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor); I am not quite sure about orange chips, but there you are—that is by the by. I hope we can fly the flag. We have in the past had the flag of St Patrick flying for St Patrick's Day. I was told that that was impossible; I hope they have better luck than me, but we will see how we get on.

I thank the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury for leading the debate—she really sold it well, as did everyone. The day is crucial for remembering the heritage, culture and industrial history of the Black Country, including places like Walsall, Sandwell and Wolverhampton. There are many areas across the UK rich in industrial heritage.

I will take a slightly different tangent to help us to understand cultural and historical links that make this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland a better place—the culture from the Black Country and the culture from Strangford. I will tie the two together in a way that, hopefully, will honour what the hon. Lady is saying. I do it with appreciate and in support, so it is great to be here to celebrate the Black Country in its time of celebration.

The date of Black Country Day coincides with the anniversary of the invention of the world's first steam engine by Thomas Newcomen in 1712. The occasion was considered the start of the industrial revolution, which was seen in my constituency of Strangford and across Northern Ireland. It was a pinnacle moment for Britain. The industrial base of the Black Country, which the hon. Lady referred to, is the industrial base of Strangford, too. While we see some similarities, we also see differences, such as some of the culture and history. However, we are united by the fact that we all serve under one flag, the Union flag, and that is important for all of us.

Historically in Northern Ireland, we are known for our flax and linen industry, in which we have a rich culture. Back in the 1900s we had Crepe Weavers on the Comber Road, which was part of our industrial base and history. It was established in 1949 by the Mladek family, who were Czech refugees. I remember them quite well—the father in particular, who previously ran the site as a Miles Aircraft factory. The Crepe Weavers plant produced nylon and rayon fabrics until its closure in 2005. At its peak, the factory employed some 400 workers.

At the same time, the industrial base in the Black Country that the hon. Lady referred to is very similar to ours. There are numerous businesses and factories, rich in industrial culture, just like in the Black Country. In Newtownards, the major town in my constituency, we were fortunate to have the Lee Jeans factory and Baird clothing, which was also known as Bairdwear. These were

two major factories, one in Bangor and one in Ards. They exclusively supplied Marks and Spencer across this Great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—a connection that unites us—but in 1999 the contract ended, leading to hundreds of job losses and closures.

Strangford has changed incredibly—as has the Black country—but the illustration of its beauty by the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury and others has warmed my heart, because it has the same cultural activity that we have had in Strangford over the years. One pivotal issue is that there seems to be a decrease in the number of factories, and we are currently running a reliance on imports from other countries. Having an industrial base is important for the Black Country, as it is for Strangford and indeed for all of us.

What has happened in the Black Country has also happened in Strangford. The industrial base has declined, and where does it go from now? What is the vision for the future? That is what the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury has tried to outline. I look forward to hearing from the Minister as not only an interested person but the Minister with responsibility.

There has been a loss in local communities, which is sad to see given the history of the sector. We must all focus on upskilling those who have moved on from the jobs of the past to the jobs of the future. Life is changing, whether we like it or not. Job opportunities are changing. We once based our industrial prowess on the factory and that has changed as well, in the Black Country and in Strangford. I am interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on that. We must upskill those who have a genuine interest in this industry, to take back skills from overseas and employ our own people again. There is such potential for the Black Country, for Strangford and Northern Ireland, and for the whole of the United Kingdom. We must do more to preserve and protect that.

What is it that makes this United Kingdom so great? It is the culture, the history and the attractions. It is the fun stories. It is the orange chips—I like the orange part in particular, but then I am from Northern Ireland, and that is one of the things I will hold on to with great fervour. What makes us great are all the things that make us different, but also the same. This is what I feel in my heart: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is better because of all the differences and all the things that unite us. We should not dwell on the differences, because they are not really important. We should dwell on the things that make us stronger—that is what we should be aiming for.

To conclude, it is great to celebrate this event and to remember the cultural and historical significance of the occasion. The transition through the industrial revolution is something to be remembered. I have hope that we can bring these local industries back, although perhaps in a different way, for the future. The Minister has the vision for his role in that, and the Labour Government have a vision for where they want to go. We should stand behind our Minister and our Government as they bring about the future for everyone by ensuring that our people have the necessary skills. I look to the Minister, as I always do—I see him as a friend and someone who has a heart for his job—to ensure that we will not fall behind, and that we will make more efforts, as a collective, to reinstate what was once a highly populated sector in our jobs industry, and could be again.

10.8 am

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) for securing this debate. It is a pleasure to see fellow Black Country colleagues and others in the Chamber, on the last day before summer recess, to acknowledge an important celebration for our constituencies.

As a proud Wulfrunian, I have celebrated many Black Country Days and waved the Black Country flag over the years, but it feels particularly special and meaningful to do so today as the Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton West. Members across the House will agree that the heritage and culture of the Black Country are central to our communities. I welcome the opportunity to recognise Black Country Day within Parliament to honour our history, to celebrate our present and to look forward to a bright future.

Black Country Day is a fantastic occasion that brings people together from villages, towns and cities across the west midlands. In Wolverhampton, I am particularly proud of our rich heritage and the strong sense of community that shines through during these celebrations. Just over a week ago, I was pleased to attend a street party in my constituency, very close to where I live. I spent time with members of the Penn Residents Association, as well as meeting friends and constituents, and sharing the joy of celebrating the incredible place that we call home.

The Black Country is so called because of the region's heavy industrialisation during the 19th century. Smoke was emitted from the iron foundries, forges and mines, giving the area a dark, blackened appearance. It is a region that made stuff—where iron and coal shaped the world, and proud and resilient communities were created. Innovation has given the area its fame.

My city of Wolverhampton, with its history of steel production, automotive engineering and lock-making, is known for playing a major role in the industrial revolution. Indeed, my constituency office is in the iconic grade II listed Chubb buildings in Wolverhampton city centre. The Chubb company in Wolverhampton is famous for manufacturing high-quality locks and safes.

Black Country Day is not just about the history of the region; it is about who we are now. We have a warm, diverse culture, and we celebrate our communities, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, musicians, creative artists and sportspeople.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the wonderful and well-known Wolverhampton Wanderers football club, of which I am a proud season ticket holder. Cheering for my side at the Molineux stadium in my constituency has provided much enjoyment not just to my family and me but to the whole community. Wolves is yet another gem that the Black Country has to offer.

Rachel Taylor: I applaud my hon. Friend's love of the Wolves. Does he agree that one of the best football players from the Black Country was Jeff Astle, and that it would not be right for Black Country Day to go by without us commemorating Jeff's place in the world of football?

Warinder Juss: Yes, Jeff Astle was indeed a great player.

Jim Shannon: One of the greatest footballers that Wolverhampton has ever had was Derek Dougan. Where did he come from? Northern Ireland.

Warinder Juss: When I first came to Wolverhampton back in 1968, many years ago, one of the most memorable images that I saw plastered on gates and walls was of "the Doog"—Derek Dougan was well celebrated in Wolverhampton and he was affectionately known as "the Doog". I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning Derek Dougan—one of the legends of Wolverhampton Wanderers.

10.12 am

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) for organising this debate. It is a pleasure to see so many Black Country MPs together to discuss our great region with such passion. It is also nice to hear Members from outside our region talking about the Black Country.

We heard about the anchor for the Titanic, which was built between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles). Then, of course, it went to Belfast to be constructed. In the past few weeks, I have been talking to businesses in my constituency that continue to export to Harland and Wolff, and it is great to hear that British shipbuilding is coming back to Northern Ireland.

I speak today with pride in the Black Country, in my constituency of Halesowen and in the generations of working people who built this country with their bare hands. The Black Country once powered the world. Its furnaces lit the skies; its tools forged the British Empire. In Halesowen, we forged the anchor for the Titanic—shaped by skill, forged in fire, and a symbol of what the region could achieve when it was backed, believed in and properly invested in.

However, our greatest legacy is not iron or steel but our people. It is people such as the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath—working-class women from my constituency who, over a century ago, toiled for long hours in blistering heat for poverty pay. In 1910, they stood together, went on strike, and won. They secured one of Britain's first minimum wages, lifting not just themselves but a generation of working people out of poverty. They did not just make chains; they broke them. Their courage and clarity of purpose still echo through our region today.

Once again, our people are being held back not by a lack of determination but by a lack of investment and political will. Since the 1980s, successive Conservative Governments have allowed the foundations of our industrial economy to be chipped away, factory by factory and job by job. Apprenticeships have vanished, and young people have been told to aim lower. Today, youth unemployment in Dudley borough is 8.6%—nearly double the national average. That is not just a statistic; it is thousands of young lives stuck in limbo in our towns. We cannot talk about pride in our past if we are not prepared to fight for our future.

When I was in the Royal Marines, I saw how working in defence can be an excellent career. With defence spending now set to rise to 2.6% of GDP by 2030—more than £75 billion a year—young people in the Black Country have a real opportunity. The UK defence industry already supports more than 260,000 jobs and contributes £10 billion to our economy, but the benefits are not being felt equally across our country. That has to change. With targeted investment in defence manufacturing, we can bring jobs, apprenticeships and advanced engineering back to our region.

Antonia Bance: Was my hon. Friend, like me, pleased to see our West Midlands Mayor Richard Parker's new growth strategy, which was published yesterday? It explicitly identifies a number of the industrial strategy sectors, particularly the defence sector, as areas of potential growth in the Black Country.

Alex Ballinger: It is fantastic to see the Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, promoting growth across our region. I am also delighted to see that the defence sector, which will be vital for jobs not just in our region but across the West Midlands combined authority, is front and centre among all the sectors that are being supported.

With targeted investment in defence manufacturing, we can bring jobs, apprenticeships and advanced engineering back to the Black Country. We can retool our factories, rebuild our pride and give our young people the skills, wages and future they deserve. This is how we honour the chainmakers of Cradley Heath—not with warm words, but with action. They fought for better pay and a better life. If they could look at us now, they would want to know that their fight still means something and that their spirit lives on, not in museums but in jobs, hope and communities that are building again.

Does the Minister agree that our industrial strategy should reflect the history and expertise in the Black Country? Will he join me in working to build up investment in defence, automotive and advanced manufacturing, so that we can get back to doing what we do best—building for Britain?

10.17 am

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. It is also a pleasure that someone else who is not from the Black Country, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), has contributed to this debate. Liberal Democrats get slightly uneasy talking about the Black Country, as I believe we have not had a Liberal MP there for more than 100 years—and more's the pity, I am sure hon. Members would agree.

This year, communities across Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton—I correctly identified the boundaries—celebrated Black Country Day, which is a proud and growing tradition that celebrates not only the people and culture of the region, but its central place in Britain's past, present and future. The Black Country's origins lie in the dark coal seams and iron foundries that, from the 16th century, powered our nation's transformation into a global superpower.

The Black Country was the engine room of the industrial revolution, where innovation and hard work went hand in hand. It was in Tipton that Thomas Newcomen's steam engine was first put to practical use,

draining mines and laying the groundwork for what became modern industry. The Black Country helped to build the ironwork for the Crystal Palace and forged the anchor for the Titanic. Its factories, furnaces and foundries not only built Britain, but exported British craftsmanship and engineering across the world.

This influence goes beyond industry. The industrial impact on the land inspired J. R. R. Tolkien's vision of middle earth in "The Lord of the Rings". Following the war—not in "The Lord of the Rings", but the second world war—Black Country musicians took inspiration from the loud industrial processes to create heavy metal. Led Zeppelin, Slade and Black Sabbath all have members who hail from the region. These are typical of the world-leading cultural products that Britain and the Black Country have created. They have long helped to spread our unique culture and values, which we have exported across the world.

To ensure that the next generation of creative talent from the Black Country can succeed, we need to reverse the cuts to arts funding in schools. I am sure I will be forgiven for making a political comment in this debate, as others have: the previous Government downgraded the importance of creative subjects in education, and the Liberal Democrats would restore art subjects to the core of the curriculum, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to study music, drama and the visual arts. That means including arts in the English baccalaureate, providing funding for creative degrees and ensuring that high-quality apprenticeships are available in the creative industries.

The Black Country can also be proud of its strong footballing heritage. If I may be forgiven, I will mention one of the matches I attended at Wolverhampton Wanderers. I am a Southampton fan, and we do not often win games I attend—and I have attended many—but on that occasion we won 6-0, despite being significantly the worst side on the pitch that day. No one in the stands could quite understand how it happened. The Wolverhampton Wanderers supporters showed the classic Black Country spirit by chanting Mick McCarthy's name throughout the second half, even as their team went down 6-0. That certainly shows the region's spirit.

Two of the founding members of the Football League, West Bromwich Albion and Wolves, call the Black Country their home. It should be no surprise that the region has also produced footballing talent over the years. One of them, the Busby babe Duncan Edwards, grew up in Dudley and tragically died in the Munich air disaster. More recently, Jude Bellingham grew up in Stourbridge and played for its youth team—we all know about his meteoric rise since. I am told that the No. 9 derby between Halesowen and Stourbridge is one of the best attended non-league football matches in the country.

Alex Ballinger: One of the best matches in the country.

Max Wilkinson: And one of the best matches in the country, I am told. As a non-league groundhopper myself, I look forward to attending it at some point in the future. These are the kinds of clubs and fixtures that the Liberal Democrats have been fighting to protect through our support for, and amendments to, the Football Governance Bill. The need for that legislation to succeed can also be seen in the Black Country. We understand

[Max Wilkinson]

that Dudley football club has been without a home for some time, and Stourbridge football club needs major investment to keep its pitch open.

The principles of protecting the heritage of our national game, greater financial sustainability and greater fan involvement are crucial for ensuring that grassroots clubs can survive. That is why celebrations like Black Country Day matter, because they shine a light on the rich local cultures that define the region and the country, and the communities that deserve to be heard. We should celebrate Black Country Day, not just as a moment of looking back but as a promise to look forward and protect the ability of future generations to build on the region's legacy.

By my reckoning, as I said, it is more than a century since a Liberal MP was elected in the Black Country, which is a shame. I will finish by stating my admiration for my favourite politician from the Black Country. Adrian Bailey, the former Labour MP for West Bromwich West, is a Cheltenham Town fan and an alumnus of Cheltenham grammar school. He was present, but not involved, when a fellow spectator at the Cheltenham cricket festival had a fit of giggles and poured a whole pint over me, and then helped tidy up the mess. He is a thoroughly decent bloke from the Black Country.

10.22 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I am sure that, for the rest of us, you are our favourite Black Country Member of Parliament, in contrast to what we have just heard from the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson). I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) on securing today's debate.

One of the pleasures of working on local government, which I am sure the Minister and I share, is hearing the passion with which Members speak for their local areas. We all recognise that patriotism is not just about wrapping ourselves in the Union Jack or speaking about our country or national football team; it starts at the level of a community, town, city and region. It is in the strength of those towns, cities, regions and communities that the strength and cohesion of the country as a whole lies. For me, as a proud outer-London MP, whose constituents like to celebrate Middlesex Day—which we have debated and heard a great deal about—it is a pleasure to be here to speak as we talk about the Black Country.

It was clear listening to the exchange just before the debate got going that there is some degree of competition, shall we say, among Black Country MPs about exactly whose constituency supplied the parts for the anchor that secured the Titanic, or manufactured the bits for Newcomen's steam engine, and all the other things that have been spoken about so wonderfully by Members across the Chamber.

I was particularly struck by what my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said. It is a good illustration not only of the things that pop up on Wikipedia—things that we would learn about a region we were thinking of visiting for the first time as a tourist—but of some of the detail of what is happening in the local economy, which other Members referenced. The region's manufacturing heritage may have started 100 or 150 years ago, but the skills are still

maintained today. Sometimes, those skills contribute to other brands—British and international—and to the ongoing success of our national economy.

It is good to see a region of the UK that is proud of its industrial heritage and whose representatives speak eloquently about how that heritage has continued into the modern age to support jobs, brands and identity, while moving away from the issues of pollution and industrial poor health and safety, which we know—I speak as somebody who grew up in south Wales—dogged many areas associated with industrial heritage. We are proud of that heritage, but we also know that many people who lived through and worked in that industrial past were quite keen that future generations did not experience such conditions. It is important to see how all that feeds through to the modern world.

The significance of the Black Country has been recognised for many years by Governments of all parties, but I will highlight a couple of the things about which Conservative colleagues in the last Parliament were very exercised, such as the Repowering the Black Country project. A number of Members have spoken about the impact of energy costs on businesses. We know the UK now has the highest industrial energy costs of any developed economy, and we understand why that is happening. None the less, it has been a concern for Governments for some years, and supporting those energy-intensive industries that are particularly prevalent in the Black Country and across the wider midlands with their energy costs was a high priority.

The West Midlands combined authority was allocated £1 billion of additional transport funding. As an outer London Member of Parliament, my constituents are mostly commuters—very large numbers of people move around our capital city—so I know the importance of effective, high-quality public transport. Andy Street, the former Mayor of the West Midlands, invested in the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill route to deliver rapid bus transport and open the opportunities being created across the region to a greater geographical area.

Cat Eccles: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that it is Richard Parker and this Government who have fully funded the West Midlands Metro to Brierley Hill, and that, sadly, Andy Street left a big black hole in that budget and did not enable the link to be fully realised?

David Simmonds: Several Members mentioned the late Queen; as she was fond of saying, "Recollections may vary." When Andy Street left office, he was particularly proud of the contribution made by his work, especially as somebody who was absolutely rooted in that local area. He was also proud that he had not levied a precept on residents, and I know the Minister may have something to say about the impact of local government funding on households across the west midlands.

Of course, the Black Country & Marches institute of technology is also often mentioned. There is a sense that, to sustain the region's industrial heritage for the future, there is a need to invest in apprenticeships, education and opportunities so that the new jobs being created can go to local people who have the skills those jobs require. We know the world is changing, and people need to be able to adapt to meet those challenges. Of course, the Department took the decision in 2021 to open its first non-London headquarters in Wolverhampton.

I have gone through a list of initiatives, investments and positive points, but we all recognise that our country faces significant challenges. As this is a local government debate, we must consider the financial position of local authorities in the Black Country, whose work is important to supporting local heritage. For example, we have heard from City of Wolverhampton Council's budget consultation that it has faced unprecedented financial challenges since this Government took office. Indeed, it has never previously experienced such serious financial concerns under any party in office.

Antonia Bance: Does the hon. Member recognise that a number of our Black Country local authorities have, over the past 15 years, lost hundreds of millions of pounds of local government funding, which has led to the diminution of local government services, the closure of libraries and Sure Starts, the creation of potholes across our road network and, frankly, the degradation of our public realm? That is not an occurrence of the last year, but of the last 15. One might hope that action will be taken in the review of local government finance to set that right.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The motion is about Black Country day.

David Simmonds: The hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) did say in her introduction that she wanted to be a bit political.

It is important that we acknowledge—the Minister may wish to comment on this—that Sandwell council talked about a £19 million budget gap and the scrapping of weekly bin collections, which will have an impact on that subset of residents in the Black Country. That comes against a backdrop in which our economy is challenged and unemployment is rising. Jaguar Land Rover—mentioned by a number of hon. Members—has announced a further 500 redundancies because of the challenges that it faces.

We need to ensure that the momentum represented in some of the projects that I referred to, which has led to an improvement in the economic outlook and in the opportunities for people across the Black Country—the kind of economic opportunities that have been seized in the past and given rise to the proud industrial heritage that so many hon. Members have eloquently described—is not lost against the backdrop of a national picture of rising unemployment, increasing poverty and the loss of jobs in some of these key industries. That loss is gaining momentum. I am sure that the Minister will not just say a little about how he is proud of the heritage, but will want to tell us specifically what the Government are doing to address those issues.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Thank you, and thank you for your kind comments.

10.31 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. It is so apt that you are in the Chair for this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) on securing it. Her contribution was a love letter to her community and it gave us all great

pleasure. It shaped this debate—a debate about what has been, but also about what might be. There is an awful lot to be excited about in what may be in the future, so I am pleased to have an opportunity to highlight the profound cultural, historic and economic significance of the Black Country. This is a community that was the beating heart of the industrial revolution, renowned for coal mining, for chains made in Cradley Heath, for glass produced in Wordsley, for the iron and steel foundries of Tipton and Wednesbury, and for the leather made in the community of the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—as she herself said. What pride it must give her constituents to see that global, indelible and historic link to the late Queen. What a wonderful calling card that is for them.

Wendy Morton: Both.

Alex Norris: Both for them and for other Walsall constituencies. I definitely would not want to be seen to favour one end of Walsall over the other—certainly not with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz.

I think also of the pride it must give my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) and his constituents to see that Chubb branding everywhere they go in the world—what that says about their community and the contribution it has made.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury said in opening the debate, we could think of those industries in terms of their factories, their furnaces, their foundries and their tanneries, but actually it is people—the people of the Black Country—that were all those things: that showed all that creativity, that powered the nation, and that laid the groundwork for modern manufacturing and engineering. We also cannot decouple from our proud history as a movement, their struggle for recognition that the work they did was the magic there, and that they ought to have a share in its benefits, be treated properly, go to work—and come home again. I know that is of great importance to my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury, as it was in her previous work. We see that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) says, in that iconic chainmakers' festival and what that says specifically about the strike in 1910, and in general the struggle of the labour movement throughout that period to get a fair shake.

That speaks also to the cultural impact of the Black Country, which is a treasure trove of unique food—I am not sure I am going to pull on that thread any further than colleagues have—and unique traditions. In sports, we have heard about Jeff Astle. It is impossible not to mention him, and the work of the Jeff Astle Foundation. I will, of course, say that Jeff Astle was a son of Nottinghamshire, not so far up the road from my own community. I think of my trip to the Hawthorns in 2001 to see Manchester City lose 4-nil to West Bromwich Albion—we have had success since, but not with me present.

In politics, I am really glad that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) mentioned Adrian Bailey. As a fellow Labour and Co-operative MP, he showed great kindness to me as a young parliamentarian. We have been well represented today by excellent Black Country politicians, and of course dialects—I cannot wait to see what the *Official Report* does with elements

[Alex Norris]

of the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles), which, I have to say, I could not follow.

However, colleagues who are sat to the side of and behind me, who are in their first Parliament, have to some degree failed in the very important task of telling those of us who are not from the Black Country, and who perhaps do not have their familiarity with their region, where the best pint is. That is custom and practice although, as with many other customs and practices in this place, I am sure they will learn over the years.

The Black Country is also the birthplace of music legends like Led Zeppelin and home to the award-winning Black Country Museum, which keeps the area's industrial and cultural heritage alive. But as in my community—and in Newtownards, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said—the deindustrialisation of the '70s and '80s led to the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, and an economic legacy from which the area has still not fully recovered. Unemployment remains stubbornly high, as my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen said, productivity is below the national average, and healthy life expectancy is significantly lower than in more affluent parts of the country. The challenge for the region and for the Government is clear, and that is why we are so determined to partner with the region to change that by driving growth and unlocking investment.

The former strengths that we have talked about can be the heart of future prosperity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury said in opening, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge also said, the future is bright. I could not agree more. The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the importance of skilled work. I totally agree, because the share of manufacturing jobs in the Black Country is already significantly higher than the UK average, and the area has modern strengths, as a hub for advanced engineering, with global supply chains, a growing tech sector, and defence, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen.

This debate is well timed, coming eight days after the anniversary that the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills mentioned. Indeed, it is perfectly timed for the exciting announcement that my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury mentioned about sumo and the clear skies programme—another example of how the Black Country is going to shape the global economy in the future, through the brilliant innovation of its people.

The link to this from central Government starts with the industrial strategy. That is the defining and guiding document for this nation's economic future. We were very excited to publish it last month, and we are very excited about our ambitious plans for eight high-growth sectors, present across the Black Country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) mentioned. It is right to say that the Black Country will be at the heart of that industrial strategy.

The west midlands more broadly will be getting a range of targeted support, including £150 million through the creative places growth fund to support creative businesses, £30 million for research investment through the local innovation partnership fund, and a pilot

partnership to drive the development of a strong and resilient electric vehicle supply chain. What a great connection the region has through that industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury also mentioned the advanced manufacturing sector plan. That is an important part of the effort focused on innovation, upskilling the workforce and attracting investment to create strong supply chains and high-quality jobs.

As I often say in these debates, the industrial strategy talks about our nation's place in the world. It talks about the industries in which we shall lead and the jobs that we shall create. It is big numbers; it is big-picture—it is the whole nation. But everything happens somewhere; everything is local somewhere. Even the biggest global success story, whether Chubb or anything else, is local to somewhere. That is the exciting bit that we do in our Department, and that I do as Minister for local growth. My commitment today is for a real cross-Government effort and a connection, through ourselves, to local growth.

That is an approach that I pitched in November to the Wolverhampton youth forum. I have to say, if those young people are the future of the region, and if the creativity with which those young people were tackling local problems or the scrutiny to which they subjected my ideas is anything to go by, I believe that the Black Country has a very good future indeed. Our approach, as I said to them, is about investment, devolution, reform and partnership with regional local leaders.

I recognise much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury said, from my own community and region, about the lack of support traditionally from central Government. What we offer in lieu of that now is not charity. It is not, "You are x pounds below the national average, so here are those pounds back to you." It is about starting a new partnership and a theory of change that says, "We believe that the ideas, innovation and creativity exist in the Black Country and its leaders already; they exist in the west midlands and its leaders already." It is the job of the Government to back that with power and resources to make sure that they are able to drive that forwards. As part of the spending review, we announced a number of things that I think will make good on that.

Before I discuss the spending review, I want to address local government finances; because for all the exciting things that we are doing, there is nothing more important than repairing local government finances. I cannot accept the shadow Minister's characterisation of how we came to be in this situation. I think when he meets the people who have created it, he will be really furious. I give him a clue: they are not far away from him when he sits with his party colleagues.

We have a chance to make this right. We made significant commitments in the autumn Budget and the spending review, and there is now the fair funding review. I encourage hon. Members to take part in that. We are building on that, as we did at the spending review, with a new local growth fund and mayoral recyclable growth fund for specific mayoral regions in the north and the midlands, which identifies areas with productivity gaps and gives them the resources to close them; a £240 million growth mission fund to support directly job creation and economic regeneration of local communities; and our really exciting commitment to

local growth plans, which will guide economic vision and foster productivity across mayoral strategic authorities. Yesterday, perfectly timed for this debate, the Mayor of the West Midlands became very the first to publish their growth plan as a strategic authority and set out their 10-year vision. Our commitment is to work with them to make that a reality.

Everything that happens, happens somewhere locally. I want the people of the Black Country to feel devolution not just in powers that go to a regional mayor across the west midlands, but in their towns and villages. When they say that they want to take back control of their future, we should give them the chance to do that. I am really proud to be leading efforts in our Department on the plan for neighbourhoods. We are in our first wave of that, with £1.5 billion of funding to 75 communities across the UK to help tackle deprivation and turbocharge growth. For the Black Country, that includes Dudley, Bilston, Darlaston, Smethwick—and Bedworth, although that is slightly outside the boundaries. Importantly, local people will be in the driving seat for how that funding is spent, with independently-chaired neighbourhood boards made up of residents, businesses and local leaders helping to decide what projects get funding. That will drive three goals: thriving places, stronger communities and taking back control over a 10-year period.

There is more to come, as was set out at the spending review. I note the timely submission that my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury made on behalf of her community. I can say only this: the criteria will be objective and fully transparent, because I know I will suddenly have a lot of friends and a lot of enemies on that day. Other lists may exist, but I would take them for indicative, rather than definitive, purposes, and ours will be coming shortly.

Before I finish, I want to address two important issues that came up in the debate. The first is housing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury said, there are 21,000 people on the waiting list. Those people, and all communities in the Black Country, must have housing. That is why we have pulled together our comprehensive investment strategy to help us deliver the target of 1.5 million homes in this Parliament. I am pleased that the Mayor himself has committed to the biggest social housing programme the west midlands has seen. As part of the investment, the combined

authority is building the Friar Park urban village, which is one of the largest brownfield developments going. Those are really good signs of what is going on.

The shadow Minister mentioned transport, and I completely agreed with his point. As it is the end of the parliamentary year, I thank the shadow Minister for his characteristically excellent contributions. He is such a good shadow Minister that, as it seems it is reshuffle day on the Opposition Benches, I hope he will be shadowing a different Department from mine. I know that he will take that in the spirit in which it is intended, because it is not his company that I do not wish for. I echo his point about transport, which is why we were proud that in June, the Chancellor announced £2.4 billion being made available to the West Midlands combined authority for transport across the region, including in and around the Black Country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge said, it is great to see spades already in the ground on the £295 million West Midlands Metro extension to Brierley Hill, meaning faster and more reliable transport connections between Birmingham and the Black Country.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury for securing the debate, and all hon. Members for their excellent contributions. Black Country day is about pride in our past and in the real things that make us who we are as a nation, but it is also about confidence in our future. From what we have heard today and see in the Black Country, I think we have an awful lot to be confident about. I look forward to working in that partnership with colleagues from across the House and their constituents.

10.45 am

Antonia Bance: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate and put our brilliant region in the spotlight today. I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), for their contributions, and I thank all hon. Members who have spoken. We have done our region proud.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Black Country Day.

10.46 am

Sitting suspended.

Gene Editing

11 am

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of gene editing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I secured this debate as gene editing provides immense opportunities to the United Kingdom in boosting growth in our agricultural sector, in supporting our world-leading life science industry and in better protecting our environment for future generations. Being able to diverge from the European Union on the regulation of gene editing is a genuine Brexit opportunity, but there is much concern that the Labour Government's EU reset will pause or even reverse the progress made in the UK in setting out a new path to regulate that exciting technology and, in doing so, will sacrifice a key opportunity to help our farming community.

Almost all our domestic animals and plants are the result of thousands of years of selective breeding. Gene editing is best thought of as a modern enhancement of that technique. It is often referred to as precision breeding. It allows scientists to make changes to a plant or animal's DNA, cutting the DNA strand and then adding, deleting or altering sequences to give beneficial traits, which make for things like disease and drought-resistant crops, or indeed more nutritious crops.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. This is an incredibly important issue to the farming community that I represent and those across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He is presenting some incredibly interesting facts. Does he agree, however, that we must be careful in any consideration of the future of gene editing to maintain a boundary between gene therapy and gene enhancement? We must ensure that we are not generating superhuman traits, as opposed to seeking to cure genetic traits, which is something we can all agree on. The key issue, as he says, is the issue of drought and disease-resistant crops, which are critical to the farming community.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is a champion of the farming community. He and I, in my previous role, often discussed farming issues, and we both hugely support the importance of food production as a key part of our food security. He is right to draw attention to the fact—I will come to this—that gene editing and gene modification are often confused, when they are very distinct. The crucial point to share with the House is that the changes in gene editing are limited to those that occur naturally or through conventional selective breeding. That is the distinction I will come on to with gene modification. By using gene editing, we can get to a desired trait more quickly. Science therefore accelerates something that could happen naturally, as opposed to being an artificial intervention.

Let me give an example of how gene editing can provide a win-win in practice in our farming community. I represent North East Cambridgeshire, which is the centre of UK sugar beet production. That crop has been severely impacted by virus yellows disease. At the moment, the only way to tackle it is by using a seed

treatment, Cruiser SB, which is toxic to pollinators such as bees. Given the downsides for nature, the treatment needs to be granted emergency authorisation on a year-by-year basis. The last time that the authorisation was not made available was in 2020, and 25% of the national sugar beet crop was lost. Without authorisation of something that is accepted as damaging to nature, the crop fell by a quarter, which is a severe consequence.

That led to an economic loss of about £67 million, in an industry involving 10,000 jobs. After some years of approval the current Government have decided that authorisation will again not be available in 2025, which has left the sector with a lot of uncertainty. But instead of requiring us to choose between nature and crop yields, gene editing provides a better solution. Under the previous Conservative Government, a £660,000 grant was made jointly to British Sugar, the agricultural biotechnology company Tropic, and the world-leading plant science institute, the John Innes Centre, to fund gene editing research into sugar beet resistance to virus yellows disease.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point about the potential for gene editing or precision breeding. Does he agree that one of the clearest examples of its promise is the humble potato? During a recent visit that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee made to the John Innes Centre, which he mentioned, we met Tropic and saw at first hand how researchers are using precision breeding to develop a blight-resistant potato, a breakthrough that could dramatically reduce the need for fungicide use. It could cut costs for farmers and improve yield resilience in the face of climate change. Does he agree that public engagement and clear, science-led regulation will be key to ensuring that those advancements deliver for both farmers and consumers?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree. I will come on to public sentiment towards gene editing, which is extremely favourable, but it is helpful to have cross-party support because this is a win-win, as I have said. It boosts yields, helps farmers and reduces the cost of pesticide. It is also a huge benefit to nature. The hon. Member is right to praise the John Innes Institute, which is world leading. That is another reason why we should seize the opportunity that science offers.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. No one should underestimate the importance of gene editing and its advancement. Does he agree that there is a problem in the devolved regions? Because of the EU law that is applicable to Northern Ireland, we will be behind the curve and could see England advance with gene editing while the rest of the devolved nations lag behind, because of Europe.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady raises an important point. By embracing innovation in the technology, we can lead and, by leading, show the benefits to farming and nature that the EU may wish to follow. The EU regulation is cumbersome. It brings gene editing within the fold of gene modification. The pace of change is slow and its scope more limited. It is better to move ahead and show the benefits, rather than wait for the

back-marker to see if they eventually come to the table and make the changes, many years after elsewhere in the world has moved on. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the pace of regulatory change and the sluggish nature of the EU.

The opportunity of this technology is not far away. I mentioned a moment ago the grants that we had awarded for research into virus yellows disease. Researchers hope to have plants by the end of this decade that, if successful, will do away with the need for the harmful treatments and the dilemma that Ministers face as to whether to grant emergency authorisation. That would protect British sugar beet farmers from potentially catastrophic losses, while also increasing crop productivity and resilience, and at the same time increase sustainability and bring direct benefits to nature. I have long believed that there is an opportunity to see farming and nature not as opposites, but as complementary, and we can boost farming in ways that also are beneficial to nature.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) talked about the public response, and he is right to do so. I am pleased to note that the public at large support gene editing because of its environmental and economic benefits. A recent study found support among the public at 70% across the population as a whole. Interestingly, that rose to 80% among generation Z, so there is widespread support among the public. But if we are to realise the benefits and capitalise on that public support, we need to get the regulation right.

That brings me, as the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) mentioned a moment ago, to European regulation. Back in 2018, the European Court of Justice ruled that gene-edited crops are subject to the same 2001 legislation as gene-modified organisms. Yet, as we touched on, the two techniques are very different and should not be confused. Gene editing speeds up changes that could occur naturally or through conventional selective breeding; it is unlike gene modification, which is where DNA from different species has been introduced to another, creating new types of plants and animals that could not have come about through natural methods. As a result, gene editing is a much lower and different risk, and should be treated in regulation differently from gene modification, but that is not the position of the European Union.

Even the European Commission has realised that its regulatory approach is not fit for purpose, but progress is remarkably slow in changing it. While it is working on its own legislation, it will come years later and be more limited in scope than what we have done in the United Kingdom. After Brexit, the UK was able to diverge, which is why the previous Conservative Government brought forward the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023, which removed precision-bred plants and animals from the existing genetically modified organism regulatory system. The Act created a new framework for their oversight and provided the Secretary of State with powers of secondary legislation.

I commend the Government and the Minister on pressing ahead with the required secondary legislation to bring this new system in for plants, which is due to come into force in November. So why the need for this debate? This debate is needed because I fear that the current optimism is a high point in this journey and that we are about to see the UK surrender the advantage that will help our farmers and our nature, and that has

been gained with the primary and secondary legislation in place. To prevent that, I am seeking assurances from the Minister in three key areas: implementation, further expansion, and funding.

First, on implementation, the Prime Minister's EU reset at the UK-EU summit included plans for sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. To achieve that, the EU has suggested that dynamic alignment will be required of the UK, meaning that all relevant EU rules will apply to UK goods. As a result, some experts have suggested that there would need to be a pause on the UK's progress in taking forward more effective regulation of gene editing, and that we would need to then wait while the EU spends potentially years putting in place its own more limited reforms.

Waiting would hold back centres such as the John Innes Centre, UK science and development, and give up our hard-won commercial competitive advantage in terms of the sector and the jobs it employs. I mentioned how important gene editing crops will be to areas such as my constituency, and to leading businesses such as British Sugar, which works with over 3,500 growers and is concerned about alignment on this matter. It would urge the Government not to sacrifice the UK bioscience sector's progress on gene editing in the UK-EU trade negotiations and to recognise that delaying the use of the technology in the UK would put us at risk of falling behind other countries using it. I wholeheartedly agree with that analysis and assessment. Will the Minister confirm that the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Regulations 2025 will come into force in November this year, and that there will be no delay?

Secondly, on further expansion, I note that only regulations on gene editing plants have been brought forward. It was always the intention that plants would be first, and that regulations relating to animals would come second. This will provide another opportunity compared with the European Union. Discussions at an EU level suggest that animals will be excluded from its regulations, whenever they eventually emerge. It is vital that we capitalise on that opportunity, too. Will the Minister confirm that it is still the Government's intention to bring forward the required secondary legislation under the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Regulations 2023 to remove precision-bred animals for the existing genetically modified organism regulatory system?

Finally, on funding, I know the challenge that Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers will be facing when it comes to negotiations with the Treasury, having been within both DEFRA and the Treasury, and given that farming is seemingly not a priority for the Labour Government, with £100 million of cuts to farming and countryside programmes announced in the spending review. Given that spending backdrop, one might have thought the Minister would want to maximise opportunities to boost farming and nature, which do not come at a cost to the Treasury.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The right hon. Member raises a very important point: the Government may be cutting funding for farming, but they are very much pursuing climate change goals. Farming is facing periods of extreme weather—we have just had some of the driest and wettest months on record. One of the great successes of gene editing was dwarf wheat, which

[Edward Morello]

was drought resistant and allowed places such as Mexico and India to become net exporters of food. Would pursuing gene editing for British farmers not offer them protection against climate change and therefore protection against cuts to the farming budget?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that builds on the earlier intervention on public support. One of the sweet spots of this area of policy is that it is beneficial to farming—because it cuts costs on things like pesticides and increases yield—but it is also hugely beneficial to nature, in terms of climate change. It is also beneficial for the public purse, because gene editing is a way of using science, in essence, to drive productivity and nature-beneficial schemes, rather than simply spending public money.

For context, I am sure the Minister will have seen the farming figures this morning. The Government borrowed £20.7 billion in June alone—the highest figure since records began, with the exception of June 2020, during peak covid. That is not an isolated figure. If we look at the previous month, the Government borrowed £17.7 billion in May. That was also the highest on record for May—again, with the exception of May 2020. So the Government are borrowing record sums, and the Department's budget is under pressure—all the more reason not to sacrifice genuine scientific opportunities, particularly those that, as we have explored, have widespread public support.

Will the Minister recognise that gene editing jointly serves the goals of food production and protecting nature, and ensure that we do not give away our competitive advantage? Specifically, will he confirm that the £12.5 million from the recent farming futures research and development fund for the precision breeding competition—aimed at mid-stage precision breeding projects—will be paid in full? Will he also confirm that funding will be made available directly to farmers to take part in field trials, so that the science actually progresses?

In conclusion, gene editing is a genuine Brexit opportunity. It can boost economic growth, support food production, help protect our environment, and give us a competitive advantage over other countries. To sacrifice that as part of some UK-EU reset negotiations would be a serious mistake. It would be another example in a long list of decisions where the Department has been overridden by the Treasury.

There is still time. The legislation is in place; the regulations are there. Can the Minister confirm today that gene editing will continue to be a priority, and that the UK Government will secure the advantages that it offers?

11.19 am

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. Let me congratulate the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay)—my near neighbour and colleague—on securing today's debate on such an important policy area. He is clearly deeply knowledgeable on issues relating to EU negotiation and, as we have heard this morning, on matters relating to precision breeding. I will be watching later today to see whether he is seamlessly edited back on to his party's Front Bench; I wish him well with that.

I found myself being taken back to what was for me one of the most rewarding times in Parliament—sitting on the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill Committee. We had many of the discussions that the right hon. Gentleman has taken us through this morning. That Bill was a very good piece of cross-party work; there has been considerable cross-party consensus on this topic, although there are areas of disagreement.

This Government were elected just a year ago on a manifesto absolutely promising to kickstart economic growth. We want to work with industry to remove barriers to growth and to seize new opportunities. Key to achieving that is seizing the opportunities presented through harnessing innovative technologies. As the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, I genuinely want to realise the benefits of new technologies to help us address many of the challenges, set out today, that face our agricultural system: to meet our environmental goals, to support productive and profitable British farmers, and to meet the Department's key priority of achieving food security. Food security, as we all acknowledge, is national security—but, in a world of many different challenges, it is becoming harder to achieve. Precision breeding can play an important role.

The right hon. Gentleman set out many of the opportunities associated with breakthrough precision breeding technologies and how they can help to transform and modernise our food system, making it fit for the future. I remember standing in fields near Bury St Edmunds with people from British Sugar and others, looking at varying degrees of decaying sugar beet plants attacked by virus yellows. We absolutely need to find ways of meeting that challenge. I was very struck by the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) about potatoes. Farmers face real challenges. We need to equip them to meet those challenges.

The Government have taken action in England by introducing a new science-based and enabling regulatory framework for precision breeding. With that cross-party support, we passed the secondary legislation needed to implement the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 for plants in England. It is absolutely vital that we support that work. It has also been recognised as a key part of engineering biology, a critical subsector within the Government's recently unveiled industrial strategy. That is no surprise, because in our country we are renowned for scientific excellence.

I represent Cambridge. We are home to a world-leading fundamental plant science research base, with regional clusters of excellence across the UK. I pay particular tribute to the work that goes on in and around Norwich, particularly the John Innes Centre. I am very proud of the work that goes on in this area, including in and around Cambridge in my part of the world and including the work of the National Institute of Agricultural Botany.

The Government recognise the importance of unlocking the opportunities presented by precision breeding. I assure the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire that our commitment to financial investment is secure. In July 2024, we announced the latest round of crop genetic improvement network programmes—GINs—supported by up to £15 million in funding over five years to boost breeding research for key UK crops. The latest programme includes funding for research into precision breeding.

Earlier this year, under the farming innovation programme, the Department announced a £12.5 million competition focused specifically on precision breeding, which the right hon. Gentleman specifically asked me about. As part of the industrial strategy, at least £200 million was allocated to the programme up to 2030, which precision breeding will continue to be in scope for.

The right hon. Gentleman raised further concerns that I ought to address—in particular, the impact of the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement that we are working on with our European neighbours. He asked how precision breeding will fit into that. The new agreement will establish a common sanitary and phytosanitary zone between the UK and the EU, making agrifood trade with our biggest market cheaper and easier by cutting costs and red tape for businesses who export to and import from the European Union. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that, on the day that was secured, many food businesses were very pleased, because of the problems they have had over the last few years.

On the precision breeding point, the EU has accepted that there will be a number of areas where we need to retain our own rules. With the principles and framework of a deal agreed, we will now need to negotiate the detail of an agreement. The Government have been absolutely clear about the importance of supporting new and innovative technologies, so we remain committed to moving forward with the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 and we have engaged with industry to help inform our approach to further discussions with the EU. We will continue to do so.

Although the final legislation has not yet been agreed among EU legislators, the European Commission, as the right hon. Gentleman explained, published a proposal for the regulation of plants by, to use the EU terminology, “new genomic techniques”. We are monitoring the EU’s position closely and will continue to do so as progress is made in trilogue discussions. Those proposals are similar to those that we brought forward in the 2023 Act, but I fully acknowledge that the EU is behind us. That has been the argument for some years—indeed, going back all the way to that 2018 court case. We therefore understand that it will be some time before new legislation is implemented in the EU.

However, that is a problem because this is a growing global sector and Europe is falling behind, so investment is going elsewhere—only 5% of venture capital investment in the sector currently comes to Europe. With the new regulations, we have the potential to be at the forefront across Europe and to be a major global competitor in this rapidly growing industry. We need to invest in this sector now, in order to realise the opportunities of precision breeding for tackling issues around climate change and food security. We do not have time to delay.

Let me say a little about the devolved Governments. We recognise the valid concerns that people have raised about the issues of divergence within the UK—there was an intervention to that effect today—including the concern that farmers and businesses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will miss out on the opportunities presented by the implementation of the 2023 Act for plants in England. That is why we continue to engage regularly with the devolved Administrations to discuss potential impacts. That engagement builds on regular monthly meetings with counterparts at official level and will support future ministerial engagement at the interministerial group.

Input from the devolved Governments has been invaluable in shaping our approach and objectives to the agreement, ensuring that it will deliver tangible benefits for the whole of the UK. DEFRA has engaged closely with devolved Government officials and Ministers in the run-up to the UK-EU leaders summit, and will continue to do so as we prepare for detailed negotiations with the EU. The timing and format of negotiations will be subject to the outcome of further discussions, but we are committed to engaging closely throughout the negotiation phase to ensure access to timely and expert input from the devolved Governments.

The right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire asked about the situation of animals in the 2023 Act, and many people are keen to know more about the Government’s plans and timelines. We are continuing the research that supports policy development of the animal welfare declaration. In keeping with the previous Government’s approach, which the right hon. Gentleman will remember from that time, while the research is continuing no decision has yet been made about bringing forward legislation to implement the 2023 Act in relation to animals.

In conclusion, I again thank the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire for securing this debate. It is so important that we send out a powerful message to investors across the world that this is the place to come and invest. Harnessing innovation in precision breeding can help us to achieve several priorities, including bolstering food security and championing British farming, helping to mitigate and adapt to climate pressures, and driving the Government’s missions on growth and health. The growth potential of this industry is evident; we have the opportunity to be at the forefront of it. I am absolutely determined that that will be the case, and the Government strongly recognise the importance of precision breeding. Let me reiterate our commitment to that technology and to securing its success in our country.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Humanitarian Situation in Sudan

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Sudan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate, although I do so with a heavy heart because we meet at a moment of almost unimaginable suffering for the Sudanese people. The war in Sudan has created the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today, and the situation continues to deteriorate at a frightening pace. Investigators from the United Nations have found that war crimes have been committed by both the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces. Both sides continue to target civilians.

The SAF have used barrel bombs to target civilians and, in Kordofan, the RSF have eradicated entire villages. Hospitals and medical sites—places that should symbolise safety and healing—are becoming battlegrounds. This is a war on civilians. It shows no respect for international humanitarian law. This debate is about recognising that the scale of suffering in Sudan demands the full attention of the international community, and the targeted assistance that must follow.

Two years since the crisis began, nearly 13 million people—one in every three Sudanese—have been displaced from their homes.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The United Nations reports that Sudan now faces the world's largest displacement crisis, with 14.3 million people—a third of the population—displaced in 2024. Does she agree that displacement at such a large scale poses not just a humanitarian crisis, but a direct threat to innocent civilians and the long-term prospects for peace? Our Government must do more to support diplomatic efforts to bring an end to those horrors.

Harpreet Uppal: I agree. The Government have taken some urgent action, which I will come to, but I agree with my hon. Friend's call.

Half of Sudan's population, about 25 million people, now need humanitarian assistance and protection. They face acute and extreme shortages of food, water, medicine and fuel. Famine is widespread and strikes first at the most vulnerable. Crucially, it is driven by the deliberate deprivation of livelihoods and the obstruction of aid. A cholera outbreak is also spreading across the country, compounding hardship that is already acute.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In addition to the cholera, there is also malaria, which kills thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of children every year. There is also mycetoma—a new, neglected disease that literally takes the skin, muscle and bone off people. A dedicated research centre in Khartoum was looted and destroyed, so the very people who need help and treatment are unable to get it. I wished to add that to the debate.

Harpreet Uppal: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points. That is an awful situation that the people of Sudan should not have to go through.

The impact on children is particularly brutal. In some famine-affected areas, as many as 29% of children show signs of acute malnutrition. At that level, children risk lifelong complications even if they survive the hunger that they face today.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The hon. Member is right to highlight the 25 million Sudanese people living in food insecurity. As she knows, Sudan is protected from the cuts to overseas development aid, but a further 600,000 Sudanese people live displaced in places such as Chad; those other countries in the region are not protected from the cuts to ODA. Is the Government's decision to cut ODA seriously impacting our ability to help the Sudanese people?

Harpreet Uppal: I will come on to that issue later, but I am sure the Minister has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Previously, I have also raised in the House and with Ministers the terrible reality that rape and sexual violence are being used as weapons of war. Women and girls bear the brunt of the crisis: over 6.7 million of them are at risk of gender-based violence. Between December 2023 and December 2024, the UN found a 29% increase in the number of people seeking sexual and gender-based violence services. Reports of intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and the specific targeting of ethnic minority groups, are both widespread and on the rise.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I fully agree that this is a war being waged on the bodies of women and girls, but women are also women fighting back. I have met many brave women from women's rights organisations, including my friend Emi Mahmoud, a UNHCR ambassador. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we are investing in our aid, we must ensure that a large percentage of it goes to women's rights organisations that can lead the charge and find the solutions?

Harpreet Uppal: I agree with my hon. Friend and I will say more on those points later, but I thank her for everything that she is doing on this issue.

UNICEF's report in March also highlighted a crisis of child rape and sexual violence. The #Women4Sudan campaign has tirelessly documented case studies of sexual violence in Sudan. The stories include that of a 14-year-old girl who suffered internal injuries after being brutally gang-raped; she was then let down by medical practitioners, who shamed the family. The young girl later died at home. In many cases, such stories never reach the outside world. The ongoing telecommunications blackout has made it extraordinarily difficult for survivors, families and organisations to communicate with journalists, humanitarian agencies and international bodies.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, because this conflict is simply not getting the attention that it deserves. She has done more than most to raise awareness of it.

Just last week, my hon. Friend and I hosted a roundtable with Médecins Sans Frontières and the British Medical Association, among others, where we heard the kind of horrific details that she has been talking about. Regarding the sexual violence, we know that there are men assaulting women and girls on the road as they flee the conflict, seemingly with total impunity. Does she agree that the amount of parliamentary and political attention that the conflict receives, especially given what is happening to women and girls, is in no way proportionate to the scale of the humanitarian crisis that it is causing?

Harpreet Uppal: I agree, and I thank my hon. Friend, both for joining me at that roundtable and for the work that she is doing.

The blackout also hinders access to mobile money, which is used to buy essential goods. That enforced silence not only conceals the scale of the atrocities but actively impedes life-saving support and documentation of abuse. There are many courageous organisations and individuals working with survivors to protect them and to bear witness, but they cannot shoulder the burden alone. The sheer scale of the emergency requires a full humanitarian response.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. It is often the innocent who get caught up in conflicts around the globe. We have heard today about some of the most harrowing offences, especially against women and girls, but also against minority communities and minority faith communities—especially the minority Christian community. We talk about diplomatic levers and how we should all apply political pressure. However, does she agree that we could also do something different—have an international military peace force, which could be deployed to help those residents and citizens?

Harpreet Uppal: I thank the hon. Member for his important point, which I am sure the Minister has heard.

Behind every number, there is a human being: a parent trying to find water for a child; a grandmother who has not eaten for days; a teenager who dreams of going to school but instead hears shellfire. As the rainy season approaches and worsening weather conditions make it increasingly difficult for aid to reach those most in need, the parties to the conflict continue to fight fiercely, heightening insecurity and disrupting critical trade and aid routes.

Hoy da, a member of the Sudanese diaspora community in my constituency of Huddersfield, has spoken of the “colossal devastation and destruction of all aspects of normality of life in Sudan throughout the last two years”.

Hoy da also says that efforts by authorities to establish normality, and a return for those who have been internally or externally displaced, face severe challenges.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend not only for securing this debate, but for her leadership on these important issues and for ensuring that in this House we do not forget what is happening in many other parts of the world. She has spoken about the horrors that we see on our TV screens, which speaks to the experience of constituents she has met and those I have met in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Will she join me

in urging the Minister to ensure that we do as much engagement with the Sudanese diaspora in this country as possible? The effects of the horrors that we see on our television screens are being felt big-time in communities up and down the United Kingdom.

Harpreet Uppal: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which I will come to next.

Hoy da and the Sudanese diaspora community continue to play a pivotal role in assisting families, relatives and friends through financial remittances, but Hoy da told me that

“their needs are much bigger than the capacities of individuals”

and that international communities must come together to

“accelerate efforts and initiatives for de-escalation that may lead to a permanent end to the fighting.”

I thank Hoy da and all members of the Sudanese diaspora community. I know how much of an impact supporting loved ones stuck in danger will be having both emotionally and financially.

I am also aware that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has, under previous Administrations, committed to a diaspora engagement strategy, but that strategy has not been produced, which represents a missed opportunity. Without access to decision makers, diaspora and civil society groups cannot utilise their knowledge of the crisis to help shape policies. During the MSF roundtable that my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) mentioned, we heard the stories of medical workers in El Fasher. They were performing a caesarean section when soldiers from the RSF burst in, killing the patient and her unborn child. That is the reality of a healthcare system that is being systematically attacked.

Recent publications by organisations working in Sudan document testimonials from people displaced from El Fasher and Zamzam in North Darfur, from which thousands fled to Chad after an RSF attack on the Zamzam camp. During that mass displacement, one mother told an aid worker that several of her children died of thirst on the road. Another spoke of pregnant women dying as they walked. One woman was raped during the attack. All left loved ones behind in El Fasher, a place they described simply as “hell”.

Those testimonies reflect just a fraction of the suffering taking place across the region, so let me turn to Darfur specifically. Its population of around half a million people is in dire humanitarian need. Following the April attacks on Zamzam internally displaced persons camp, half a million IDPs have been moved to Tawila, a small town in North Darfur. They face a catastrophic shortage of food, water, shelter, household items and healthcare. The wind and rains, which are due to start within weeks, will destroy shelters and contribute to the spread of disease.

The mass killings, rape, ethnic violence, starvation and humanitarian crisis that we are witnessing can no longer be tolerated by the international community, but frontline organisations are being pushed to breaking point. Agencies have told us that cuts to official development assistance have made it harder to maintain services; without urgent intervention, a major funding cliff edge

[*Harpreet Uppal*]

is approaching in September. That is when multiple key humanitarian programmes are due to expire, with no confirmed renewal.

If the funding gap is not urgently addressed, the consequences for those relying on aid in places such as Darfur and Tawila will be devastating. The UK Government have made Sudan a stated foreign policy priority. I welcome the steps already taken, but the operational reality on the ground remains dire.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this really important debate; it is often said that Sudan is the forgotten conflict. Does she agree that we must urge the United Nations to enforce its resolution 2736, which mandates lifting the siege, particularly in the city of El Fasher, and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid?

Harpreet Uppal: I was about to come on to that point, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for making it.

I know from conversations with organisations working in Sudan, and from previous discussions with Ministers, that the FCDO is trying to create a credible process for access and protection, and to exert influence in international forums, including in our role as the pen holder on Sudan at the UN Security Council. The UK introduced a Security Council resolution that called for protection of civilians and full, unimpeded aid access. The Foreign Secretary noted that he was appalled that Russia vetoed the resolution.

I know that the Foreign Secretary has a personal commitment to the crisis, having visited the Sudanese and Chad border earlier this year. Indeed, the Sudan conference hosted by the Foreign Secretary in April was another positive step, as was the commitment for an additional £120 million in aid from the UK, and the raising of €800 million from nations attending the conference.

However, despite the best efforts of UK Ministers and officials, the conference did not deliver on its primary aim of finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Uma Kumaran: Does my hon. Friend agree that we must step up the international diplomatic effort? As the UN penholder, the United Kingdom both can and must lead the international community to help to bring an end to this awful conflict.

Harpreet Uppal: I agree, and I will come on to that.

We must build on the political capital generated by that conference and rejuvenate collective action. We need diplomatic strategies that achieve four things: the first is unimpeded humanitarian access across Sudan; the second is guaranteed and sustained access for UN agencies nationwide; the third is safe and open cross-border and cross-line routes for humanitarian workers and aid deliveries in Darfur; and the fourth is the strategic use of all points of leverage to encourage efforts to de-escalate the conflict. Those measures are urgently needed so that we can respond at scale and mitigate the suffering of countless Sudanese women, children and men against the backdrop of relentless violence.

I understand from conversations with organisations working in this space that, although the UN believes its current measures are easing the burden on civilians, the people on the ground tell a different story. Urgent action is needed to make the operational environment easier for humanitarian actors to navigate, so I shall be grateful if the Minister confirms what discussions she is having with the UN's senior leadership to establish a meaningful strategy for expanding activities across Sudan. That strategy must go beyond the long-term goal of a ceasefire; it must also set out concrete support for non-governmental organisations, so that they can relieve suffering today.

The Government must also continue to scrutinise the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and its plans for Sudan. Rigorous oversight is essential if we are to ensure that the promises made in New York translate to aid delivered in North Darfur, Khartoum and beyond. As the penholder, the Government must lead and support a large-scale humanitarian response, and use every diplomatic, legal and multilateral channel available to prevent further mass atrocities and to protect civilians. We must work with international partners, including those whose actions are fuelling the conflict, to ensure that we act in concert to bring this war to an end, and we must keep Sudan at the top of our foreign policy agenda and sustain the momentum generated by the April conference.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have shown how their diplomacy can deliver positive outcomes for the most vulnerable people in the world. We must now leverage those diplomatic relationships, including and specifically our relationship with the US, to work alongside state departments to help to achieve lasting peace in the region.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time. In addition to minority communities such as Sudanese Christians, women and girls are bearing the brunt of the crisis in Sudan, with widespread reports of indiscriminate and large-scale sexual violence. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is very important that the specific impact of gender-based violence is placed at the heart of any future peace process, particularly in addressing the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war?

Harpreet Uppal: I absolutely agree. There is no doubt that rape and sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war, and we must consider that when deciding on our actions and priorities.

Solutions do exist. What is missing is the international political will to implement them with urgency. Members of this House, our international partners, the Sudanese diaspora community and the organisations labouring on the frontline are right to ask why the gap between promise and delivery remains.

I close with a reminder. Behind every statistic lies a face, a voice and a story. Behind every data point, there is an individual who dares to hope that the international community will help to alleviate their pain and suffering. Let us honour that hope by matching words with decisive action.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I need to calculate how long everyone will get to speak. Is everyone standing who wishes to speak? Okay. In that case, I call Jim Shannon.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I appreciate the opportunity to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for setting the scene so very well. She made an excellent speech that encapsulated all the ideas; I thank her very much for that. As always, it is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. We are very fortunate to have a Minister who is very responsive and who understands the issues of human rights and persecution. I very much look forward to her contribution.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I find the situation in Sudan to be of the utmost concern. I have spoken about this issue many times—indeed, there was an urgent question in the main Chamber just last week, to which the Minister replied. The hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) and others have referred to the Christians who are suffering unbelievable human rights abuses, persecution and unspeakable violence; the situation is incomprehensible. As a Christian, I pray for my brothers and sisters, as I have done every morning of my life; this morning before I left the hotel, I prayed for Sudan.

We must do more to support those being persecuted. It is great to be here to represent them and to get that point across. One of the things that disturbs me greatly, as it does us all—it is incomprehensible—is the sexual violence. I can never understand why that is done, but I think I can understand the horror that the women and girls are made to endure by those with guns and strength. I hope the Minister will tell us what can be done to help those women and girls who are subjected to the greatest of violence.

The recent events in Sudan are horrendous, most notably the bombing of three churches in El Fasher by the Rapid Support Forces last month. That resulted in the death of five people, including Father Luka Jomo, the parish priest of the Roman Catholic church, and left many more injured. The RSF also seized two major camps for internally displaced persons, Abu Shouk and Zamzam, which house more than 700,000 people and have now been militarised. I hope the Minister can tell us what is happening in those two camps seized by the military, where 700,000 people are subject to whatever the RSF want to do to them.

The RSF's repeated attacks on places of worship and systematic pressure on Christians to convert to Islam during the ongoing conflict with the Sudanese Armed Forces are deeply troubling. Both parties have committed violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including attacks on vulnerable civilians seeking refuge in churches.

While fighting between the SAF and RSF has intensified in Darfur and Omdurman, targeted attacks on churches have continued since the civil conflict began in April 2023. Both armed factions were accused of desecrating religious spaces during military operations. They show an absolute disregard for church buildings and the right of people to worship their God if they so wish; they attack the sacraments in some churches, particularly Roman Catholic ones. There is the destruction of houses, of the community,

of economic opportunity and jobs. All those things are happening. Many of us think that Sudan is the place that the world has forgotten. It disturbs us greatly.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. In August last year, the third official famine declaration of the 21st century was made in the Zamzam displacement camp in north Darfur. This year, it is projected that 65% of the Sudanese population will require humanitarian support. Does the hon. Member agree that the scale of human suffering in Sudan is unconscionable, and that ensuring access to aid should be a priority for the UK Government and international partners, to avert further death and suffering for the millions in Sudan?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do, and I commend the hon. Gentleman on raising that issue. As I and others will reiterate, he is absolutely right that the priority is to reduce the level of suffering. As he rightly says, this is unconscionable, but our Minister and Government, in partnership with other countries, have an opportunity to do more.

Furthermore, Christian communities displaced by Sudan's civil war have faced restrictions on worshipping in refugee areas. As both a Christian and the chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, that greatly disturbs me. In Wadi Halfa, a town in the Northern state, displaced Christians were blocked last year from holding a Christmas service in a public park, where they had taken shelter, as they had been internally displaced and moved away from the violence.

Pastor Mugadam Shraf Aldin Hassan of the United Church of Smyrna said at the time that officials told the congregation they needed written permission to conduct Christian activities in a Muslim area, despite prior verbal approval from national security officers. There had been an agreement, but radicals with extreme ideas decided that they would not let it happen. Again, perhaps the Minister can give us some idea of what can be done to help our brothers and sisters in the Christian communities out there who are subjected to this each and every day.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): There is no justification or excuse to prevent any human being from practising their faith, or no faith, wherever they live, in peace and without interruption or force. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that is a fundamental human right and should be protected wherever it can be?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. My APPG believes in the freedom of belief for those with Christian faith, another faith and no faith. We protect them all, we stand up for them all and we speak for them all. I want to live in a world where everyone has the autonomy to practise their individual belief, if they wish to do so.

Sudan ranks as the fifth worst country for Christian persecution on the Open Doors "World Watch List 2025", which notes that over 100 churches, Christian buildings and homes have been forcibly occupied during the ongoing civil conflict. The situation is dire, and more has to be done to stop this. In his intervention, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) expressed the desperation that we all feel, and the hon. Member for Huddersfield set the scene so incredibly well.

[Jim Shannon]

I will conclude as I am conscious that others wish to speak. I urge the Minister and the UK Government to use their influence to call for an immediate ceasefire, and to press, with others, for increased national efforts to protect civilians and places of worship in Sudan. A sustainable peace in Sudan depends on the cessation of violence. The violence must stop; if it does not, this will never end for the good people of Sudan, and for the protection of freedom religious freedom in all its communities.

2.58 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this debate. The crisis in Sudan is something that we should all be seeing on our TV screens and social media feeds, and we should be debating it here in Parliament every day, yet tragically it barely features, so my hon. Friend's success in securing this debate is all the more commendable. As we have heard so powerfully, in just over two years 28,000 people have been killed, 12 million people, half of them children, have been forced to flee their homes, and there are 15 million children in need of humanitarian assistance. The human impact of this conflict is truly shocking.

We know that the situation is particularly dire in North Darfur. Al Fashir has been described as a "city under siege". At Zamzam refugee camp, starving people have been attacked, and aid agencies tell me that an estimated 450,000 to 500,000 have fled from the camp to Tawila, where they now live out in the open in extreme heat, with barely any food or water, and with diseases such as cholera taking hold. With the fighting now escalating in the Kordofan region, it looks set to be the next area of acute humanitarian crisis. As we have heard from other Members, that is not an accident; it is the result of a strategy by warring parties, at best, to allow civilians to be collateral damage in a vicious fight and, at worst, to deliberately and directly target them.

Let me turn to what needs to be done. As I think about what needs to happen in Sudan, in many ways it feels like a test of how we act in response to humanitarian crises more broadly in these new times. Our humanitarian aid budget is reduced, but our deep expertise and leverage in humanitarian action remain. The first thing to say is that funding is important, as it is in any humanitarian crisis. The £120 million that the UK committed to Sudan at the London conference in April—part of the £810 million aid package—will support 650,000 people with basic lifesaving aid this year, which we should be proud of.

What we do with the funding matters. We are increasingly good at focusing on interventions that are proven to work, such as the use of ready-to-use therapeutic food to treat severe and acute malnutrition. Who we fund also matters. Sudan is an example of why we have to get funding to the local responders in any humanitarian crisis, but in this case particularly to the emergency response rooms where there are extraordinary networks of volunteers embedded in communities, running community kitchens, feeding hundreds of families, operating mobile clinics, restoring basic infrastructure, and doing the work that international and humanitarian aid agencies are unable to do in the context.

Beyond funding, there are three further ways in which our actions can have an important impact in the crisis in Sudan and beyond. The first is by pushing for expanded humanitarian access. Large parts of Sudan are completely out of reach of the UN and international aid agencies, which is completely unacceptable given the scale of the humanitarian needs, so we must keep up the pressure on the warring parties and their external backers in Russia, the UAE and elsewhere to allow aid to flow in.

Sudan also shows why we may need new tools, whether it is in Yemen, Myanmar or, of course, Gaza. The denial of access to humanitarian aid has become a routine part of warring parties' playbooks. We urgently need to find ways to create more expectation and more pressure. I think, for example, of the recommendation of my former employer, the International Rescue Committee, which has suggested that we should set up a new international mechanism to monitor and protect humanitarian aid access. That is just one idea.

The second point is about how we use our diplomatic assets and tools to push for a ceasefire and a peaceful resolution to the conflict. As one of the emergency response room spokespeople recently said:

"We cannot continue to respond to the crisis while the guns keep firing. The people of Sudan need a ceasefire—now—to save lives and to rebuild our communities."

We have the opportunity of being the penholder on Sudan in the UN Security Council. We are rightly working with the African Union, the EU-convened group and others to make progress. We are looking outside of the established groups. I suspect it will be increasingly necessary to find informal coalitions of interested countries to work together for peace. It is complex and sensitive diplomacy, but it could not be more urgent.

The third point is about how we drive more accountability in these contexts for breaches of international humanitarian law. Last month five aid workers were killed in an appalling attack on a UN convoy near El Fasher. I am glad that we called for accountability at the time, but we see a sustained pattern of attacks on aid workers in Sudan and elsewhere. In the case of Sudan, the International Criminal Court's Office of the Prosecutor has now found reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity may well have been and continue to be committed in Darfur. We have to be clear that that is absolutely unacceptable.

I see the crisis in Sudan as a test of our compassion, but also of our capability in responding to humanitarian crises in the world today.

Alice Macdonald: My hon. Friend will know that we said "never again" in Rwanda, in Srebrenica and after the Holocaust, but we are clearly not living up to that promise. Does she agree that we need a comprehensive atrocity prevention and response strategy? That has been lacking in the UK Government for a number of years now.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is what is at stake here—I am sure the Minister will say more. I think that we are looking at that atrocity prevention strategy and we need to update it.

I will conclude by saying that for me Sudan is a test of whether we can successfully push to get aid into the most awful humanitarian crises in the world. It is a test of whether our diplomacy can play a stabilising role

and help to be a force for peaceful solutions. It is also a test, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) said, of whether those who violate international humanitarian law will be held accountable for their actions. That matters for the victims of the conflict in Sudan, but it also determines what warring parties think they can or cannot get away with in future conflicts. I know the Minister is aware of a lot of this and feels the pressure. I look forward to hearing her thoughts.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We are going to set the clock for speech duration. Everyone has to remain within 4 minutes and 30 seconds so that everyone can get in.

3.5 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this debate.

This war is both violent and catastrophic, entrenched in bitterness and brutality. It is backed by external actors feeding the atrocities enacted upon civilians, especially women and girls. We have heard graphically today of the levels of physical, sexual and psychological violence. We also see the tragedy of famine and disease, with floods expected to cause even further harm. While the world looks away and the political platforms are silent, today, as Back Benchers, we are calling Government to account over this humanitarian crisis.

The Sudanese need this Government and those around the world to step up. We need a strategy and relief to be met with opportunity and hope. The escalating suffering and brutality of war in Sudan since April 2023 exceeds that of all conflicts. As people move out, external actors are moving in, fuelling their interests and those of the warring parties, as are those with economic interests, particularly in gold. Darfur, as ever, is the focus of this conflict. We have heard today about the impact on El Fasher and the Zamzam camp for those already experiencing such tragedy. The scale of aid that is needed requires not only the UK Government, but those around the world, to step up. I plead again with the Government to move rapidly to restore the 0.7% ODA target, because our world is suffering and needs that replacement.

As we look at the strategic approach, we recognise that the three strands of defence, diplomacy and development need to be held in far better balance in order to achieve outcomes for people in Sudan and across our world. Therefore, as we look forward, we have to get the strategy and the financing right and, ultimately, diplomacy in the right place. It is essential that the African Union is empowered and strengthened through its regional efforts, but it is time for the Government to refresh a resolution at the UN, be mission-focused and ensure that the right measures are put in place for the next Security Council.

We know that time is not on our side and we have heard about the scale today. We need to focus on three strands. The first is the humanitarian response of food, healthcare and support for all those who are displaced, whether internally or externally, across the region and beyond.

The second strand is the protection of civilians. We need to develop strategies for sustained support, access for humanitarian and medical aid, aid at scale, better communications, the documentation of evidence of war crimes and adherence to international law. We need to ensure the creation of safe areas that are patrolled and protected. We also need to ensure that there is a trauma-based approach, and most of all that it is delivered on the ground through the experts who have developed the connections and reasons for it. We also need to move to disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and, ultimately, rebuilding.

The third strand is a political process. We know how crucial it is at such times to establish good dialogue and systems that enable conversations about not only accountability but moving forward to take place. We need to take a human rights approach while upholding international law. Governance must be rebuilt through civil society. We need to ensure that civil society is leading the dialogue and invest in that heavily, so that this will never be a forgotten war, but one where peace prevails.

3.9 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this important and timely debate.

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan is among the most acute and neglected emergencies in the world today. Since the outbreak of violence in April 2023, Sudan has become the site of the largest displacement crisis in the world. As of July 2025, more than 12 million people have been forcibly displaced due to the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. We are witnessing not just a conflict but hell on earth.

In 2024, Sudan's humanitarian indicators collapsed even further. Famine looms large, cholera outbreaks have intensified, and more than 80% of hospitals have been destroyed or rendered unusable. In El Fasher and North Kordofan, civilians are trapped under relentless shelling. MSF withdrew after repeated attacks on health facilities, illustrating systematic violations of international humanitarian law. In its 2025 report, MSF warned:

“Mass atrocities are underway in Sudan's North Darfur region”.

People are not only caught in indiscriminate heavy fighting but actively targeted by the RSF and its allies, notably on the basis of their ethnicity. The RSF has carried out massacres, torched villages and attacked refugee camps in Darfur, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee, including many who were originally displaced during the Darfur war in the 2000s. Sexual violence against women and girls from particular ethnic groups has been documented. Those atrocities, highlighted by the deputy prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, are war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Despite the UK's £120 million pledge at the London conference on Sudan, the UN's humanitarian response plan remains less than 50% funded. Aid is stranded in Port Sudan. Relief convoys are looted. People are starving, not because food is unavailable but because it cannot reach them.

The crisis demands a bold and principled response. Therefore, I call on the Government to address six points. First, they should release the remainder of the

[*Kate Osamor*]

committed £120 million, to ensure that support reaches those in Sudan and neighbouring countries that host displaced people. Secondly, they should reconsider their wide cuts to the UK aid budget and safeguard long-term funding, especially for the post-conflict rebuilding phase.

Thirdly, the Government should use diplomatic levers to pressure countries, particularly the UAE, which has been credibly accused of arming the RSF with advanced Chinese weaponry, in violation of the UN arms embargo. Amnesty International has documented GB50A guided bombs and AH4 howitzer systems, previously exported only to the UAE, being used by the RSF forces in Khartoum and Darfur.

Fourthly, the Government should push for a fully monitored ceasefire and secure unhindered humanitarian access. Fifthly, they should expand resettlement schemes for Sudanese nationals, to ensure swift and compassionate protection. Sixthly, the Government should back accountability mechanisms, including the UN fact-finding mission and the International Criminal Court, to ensure that justice is served.

I honour the work of the Sudanese diaspora in the UK. Their advocacy, resilience and courage must be reflected in our foreign policy response. Sudan may feel distant to some, but the consequences of our silence are all too near—lost lives, fractured communities and a betrayal of our humanitarian commitments. Impunity is a threat to international security. If international law is to mean anything, there must be consequences. Let us be clear in this House today: the Sudanese people are not forgotten. We stand with them.

3.14 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal), who is my constituency neighbour, for securing this really important debate.

Unfortunately, we live in a world of competing crises and wars, one overshadowing the next. Depending on how horrifying we perceive the situation to be, how close it feels, or how much the cameras are rolling, unfortunately some conflicts get forgotten or neglected. Some horrors are met with silence, not outrage. Sudan, in the grand scheme of reactions, is one of them. This is a really important debate to highlight the atrocities that are happening there today, and have been happening there for several years.

Since April '23, Sudan has spiralled into a living nightmare for those living there or watching their country from afar. As we have heard, over 14 million people have been displaced, with cities reduced to rubble, markets bombed, women and girls raped, and entire communities starved. In August '24, famine was officially declared in Zamzam, with a displacement camp in Darfur now home to over 400,000 people. As we have heard, over 25 million people across Sudan are food insecure, which equates to half of the country starving. Just like in most conflicts, more than half of those affected are children.

Most recently, just this month on 10 July, reports confirmed that at least 60 civilians, including 35 children, were killed in attacks near Bara. On 14 July, over 200 people were killed in RSF raids. El Fasher saw RSF

shelling on 12 July, which killed five people, including children, and on 16 July shelling killed five more civilians, again including children. As we have heard, MSF warns of ongoing ethnically targeted mass violence, looting, sexual assaults, abductions, destruction of health infrastructure and starvation. This is unacceptable and we must do everything that we can to stop these atrocities.

Let us be clear: many of these atrocities, including using famine and starvation as a weapon of war, are not a natural disaster. It is not a drought or a crop failure; this is famine as a weapon of war, and the supply of weapons by our allies to the forces that are killing civilians on the ground. Warring factions, the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces, are deliberately blocking aid and attacking humanitarian workers, turning hunger into a method of control. The United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and the US and UK Governments have all confirmed that the atrocities are war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide. Still, the world barely watches.

This is not just about Sudan. We are seeing a terrifying pattern in Sudan, Palestine and beyond, where famine and genocide are becoming the tools of modern warfare. “Never again” cannot become a slogan; it must be a promise that we honour for as long as we walk this Earth. These crimes can be stopped. The perpetrators are not acting in a vacuum; they continue to act like this as they know the world turns a blind eye when the world keeps weapons flowing into the country and humanitarian aid is treated as optional, not urgent and necessary. Sudan’s partners must exert real pressure on the conflict to stop the targeting of civilians and to bring the perpetrators of international humanitarian and human rights law violations to justice.

Today, I ask the UK Government to do everything that they can to stop the atrocities, save lives, get food to starving babies, and support the women and girls who have been subject to sexual violence. We must demand immediate, unimpeded access to humanitarian aid. The people of Sudan are not nameless victims of a faraway war; they are mothers, students, teachers, children—human beings deserving of dignity, safety and hope. Let us not allow Sudan to become a forgotten catastrophe. Let us not accept famine and genocide as the cost of inaction from the international community. If the weapons of war of famine, sexual violence and genocide are allowed to continue, they will be normalised, they will be repeated—and as always, our silence will mean our complicity.

3.19 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this really important debate. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal), who was absolutely right to state that the war in Sudan is a war on civilians—that is what it is. She set out many of the truly grim statistics. I will try to put them in some perspective before building on the many calls to action that we have already heard.

My hon. Friend talked about the extent of displacement. I want Members to imagine that every single person living in this city of London had been forced to move, and then half again—every man, woman and child, whether frail or strong, ill or healthy, had been forced to move. That is the extent of the displacement that we have seen taking place in Sudan.

My hon. Friend talked about the extent of hunger—24 million people facing acute hunger. That is the same number of people as live in London, the south-east and the west midlands combined. It is only just less than the number of people who live in Australia. Can we imagine an Australia in which either people are already malnourished or they can stay nourished at the moment only by selling off livestock or other essential means of survival? That is the number of people we are talking about.

My hon. Friend talked about the 638,000 people who face catastrophic hunger—people who are living in famine. That is more than the population of Glasgow, Bristol or Cardiff. Can we imagine entering one of those cities and finding that one in three people is already acutely malnourished and there is an extreme shortage of calories per person per day? That is the extent of this catastrophe.

The numbers of those impacted by violence are staggering, and so is the depravity of the violence. Many Members have spoken incredibly powerfully about this. I have seen footage, particularly from Humanitarian Action for Sudan. I am very grateful for the work of that organisation, and to Zeinab Badawi and others who are so engaged. I have seen footage that I can never unsee. It is absolutely appalling. We have seen so many Rubicons being crossed. Sexual violence has already been referred to by colleagues. We have also seen camps for displaced people being purposely attacked, individuals being kidnapped and homes being burned.

So what to do? We have to maintain the political profile of Sudan. There is such a strong moral case; we all know that. There is also a strong security case, regionally and globally. We also know that, of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children coming to our country, the highest number are from Sudan. We must maintain pressure for a ceasefire. We must work with the African Union. We must work with the EU-convened consultative group on Sudan. We must put pressure on those who deny famine, deny atrocities and refuse to engage with those processes. We must do more as the penholder on Sudan at the UN Security Council. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is committed to that, as are the broader ministerial team. We must ensure that perpetrators are held to account. Above all, we must act with urgency. We have already heard that Sudan is now moving to the rainy season. That, coupled with the appalling behaviour of all warring parties in restricting access to aid, will make the situation even worse.

I will end with a personal story—so many Members have told such stories about this situation. I met some of those who had fled from violence in Sudan when I was in South Sudan. At the camp of Bentiu, I met people who had fled. They were the only members of their family to have survived. Their siblings had died while trying to walk through floodwater. They had died because of exposure. They had died because of diarrhoea. They had died because they did not have enough food to eat. They had died because they had been killed by warring parties. They had been abducted by warring parties. That is happening time and again, and it is happening while the international community is failing to act.

3.23 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal)

for securing time for this debate, and for her continued commitment to raising the humanitarian situation in Sudan through debates, questions in the House and briefing meetings for Members such as me and others in the room with people from the Sudanese diaspora community and those who have experienced at first hand the tragedy that is unfolding in Sudan.

As we have heard, with the conflict in Sudan now entering its third year, the country is facing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises on record. The impact is wide-reaching. It includes mass displacement, shocking attacks on healthcare facilities and aid workers, a raging cholera outbreak and mass atrocities against civilians, including sexual violence and widespread gender-based violence. However, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nutrition for development, I will concentrate my remarks on the unprecedented severity of levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in Sudan.

At the start of this month, together with the Minister for international development from the other place and the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), I opened a photographic exhibition in Parliament on why nutrition is foundational to development aims in the UK. One of the images on display, taken by Peter Caton for Action Against Hunger, was of Nyibol; 27-years-old, six months pregnant and with a young daughter, she is one of up to 12 million people in Sudan forced from their homes.

Nyibol was forced from her livelihood as a peanut farmer, and had to endure an exhausting journey over four long days in search of safety because her village was attacked and her house burnt down. She was fortunate to be reunited with her husband and eldest daughter after being separated while running for survival, and to receive malnutrition screening on arrival at the border checkpoint, but many are not. This mass displacement, together with ongoing conflict, high food prices, a collapsing economy, disruption to supply chains, challenges in agricultural production, the breakdown of essential services, and severely limited access to healthcare, nutrition and humanitarian services is fuelling Sudan's continuing slide into famine.

The most recent integrated food security phase classification report for Sudan, published in December, found widespread starvation and a significant surge in acute malnutrition, with half the population facing high levels of acute food insecurity. That includes more than 8 million people in the emergency phase, and at least 638,000 people in the catastrophe phase. The IPC's latest alert, published 10 days ago, confirms that the situation will deteriorate over the coming months.

Despite the fairly favourable harvest season in parts of Sudan, major production gaps and supply barriers persist, exacerbating food insecurity. Constrained access to treatment services, worsening road access, and the increased threat of floods as the country enters its rainy season, raises serious concerns, especially for children, during the July to September lean season between harvests, which we are now entering. Levels of malnutrition are such that people are increasingly succumbing to treatable illnesses that would not normally be a threat to life, such as diarrhoea. This is a particular concern with cholera, which is already present and likely to spread in the rainy season.

[*Steve Race*]

We all know the importance of good nutrition to development. Without access to nutrition, the potential of each person, community, and country is held back. Entire economies are undermined, and poverty and suffering persist.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, the issue of malnutrition for the Sudanese is not contained to Sudan. Many millions of displaced people are in neighbouring countries, and those countries are unfortunately also suffering from conflict, whether that is Uganda, South Sudan, Eritrea or Rwandan militias in the DRC. Do we not need to also take action to ensure that the Sudanese are getting adequate nutrition when they are displaced into neighbouring countries that are also seeing conflict?

Steve Race: I completely agree, and of course Chad is home to many of the displaced Sudanese too.

Poverty and suffering persist and provide fertile recruiting grounds for extremism. It is encouraging to see the UK continue to take a leadership role as the penholder on Sudan at the UN Security Council, and through convening the London Sudan conference, committing £120 million of UK aid to support over 650,000 people in Sudan this year.

However, with ongoing famine in Zamzam, in camps in El Fasher, and in the western Nuba mountains, which the Famine Review Committee warns is extremely likely to spread to additional areas, can the Minister update us on additional UK efforts to ensure the sustained delivery of food, nutrition, water, and health assistance to prevent further loss of life—particularly nutrition-specific interventions including ready-to-use therapeutic food? Recovery rates of children with severe acute malnutrition who receive a full course of RUTF are over 90%.

Can the Minister also update us on progress towards ensuring unhindered access for humanitarian and commercial actors across borders and conflict lines, including through the Adre border crossing and El-Obeid corridors, and to communities under siege in El Fasher and surrounding areas? Those access routes need to be expanded and stabilised now before the height of the rainy season. Finally, how are we ensuring that lifesaving aid, including RUTF to treat severe acute malnutrition, will reach those children who desperately need it, and that aid workers are protected?

3.29 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this important debate and on putting Sudan in the spotlight, where it needs to be. This war is the greatest humanitarian catastrophe since the advent of the modern age, with 25 million people in acute hunger, famine abounding and a war on civilians and women and girls. It has displaced 13 million people. It directly affects us in Britain, too: about 10% of those arriving on small boats are Sudanese. I would like to focus on three questions: is our response to Sudan's humanitarian need enough, are our diplomatic efforts enough, and is our work to support the establishment of a democratic civilian Government enough?

Across a world of proliferating conflicts, we are observing a growing disregard for international humanitarian law, with warring parties increasingly seeing access to humanitarian aid as a weapon to be wielded. The UK has attributed famine conditions in parts of Sudan to systematic aid obstruction by both the RSF and the SAF. We must continue to push for aid to get in and for warring parties to respect international humanitarian law, but we must also recognise that under these conditions, local groups are often best placed—and better equipped than international NGOs—to meet civilian needs.

Sudan's emergency response rooms have become the international symbol of such groups. They are community kitchens, shelters and medical centres; they provide clean water; they treat and protect victims of sexual violence. Currently, they are reaching more than 4 million people. In response to my recent written question on the ERRs, the Government directed me to the £120 million spend announced by the Foreign Secretary at the London conference and said that a

"portion of this uplift"

would go

"to local responders...through the Sudan Humanitarian Fund".

But so far this year, the Sudan Humanitarian Fund is just 23% funded. The total shortfall is over \$3 billion, and a cliff edge looms because of cuts to USAID and other international donors. Our current contribution, although welcome, does not touch the sides of what is required.

I understand that the Government are still assessing how best to support ERRs and local actors, but I ask the Minister: since USAID has done the hard work of due diligence and bureaucracy, can we not step up now and do more? This Government have slashed Britain's international development budget to its lowest level this century. Again, I urge the Government to reverse that. Ministers claim that Sudan will remain a priority, but it is unclear whether they will have the resources necessary to make a real impact.

The Government's cuts now require us to rethink and reform. Localisation has risks, but we must acknowledge that when it comes to Sudan, the old ways may not work. The emergency response rooms may be an example of how to do it. Can the Minister please provide an update on how much of the £120 million pledged at the London conference has been allocated, and through which channels? Does that include support for displaced Sudanese in the region, particularly in Chad and South Sudan?

I turn to the subject of diplomacy. Before the International Development Committee, the Foreign Secretary told me that since the London conference he has had separate conversations on Sudan with the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He did not elaborate, however, so perhaps the Minister can. Have these conversations produced any tangible progress? If not, should the Prime Minister become involved to drive action at a higher level?

The war in Sudan is being worsened by outside state actors offering diplomatic, financial and sometimes military support to the warring parties. I am pleased that Britain has consistently expressed opposition to such behaviour, but words are not enough. It has been consistently reported and alleged, most prominently by *The New York Times*, that the UAE has been funnelling weapons to the RSF. The UN's panel of experts on Sudan told the Security Council that those allegations are credible.

The UAE is a significant buyer of British military exports, so its purported actions raise serious concerns in relation to the strategic export licensing criteria. Not only are they a material consideration in relation to the risk of diversion, but they violate the spirit of other criteria. The FCDO is vital to decisions made by the export control joint unit, so I ask the Minister what assessment she has made of the reports that the UAE is supplying weapons to the RSF. That is a question that I have asked of her and the Foreign Secretary, and I have since received an inadequate response from the Minister for Africa. I will be grateful if the Minister can say what view the Government take of the compatibility of such actions with the strategic export licensing criteria.

It is not only arms that are fuelling this war; it is also gold. In response to a written question in June, the Government told me that since the war began,

“the UK has frozen the assets of nine commercial entities linked to the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces.”

With the exception of the November sanctions on two RSF commanders, all those measures were imposed under the last Government. It has been more than a year since this Government took office—a year in which famine conditions were confirmed, and in which almost nothing has been done to address Sudan’s war through further sanctions. Why? It is good that three Russian entities linked to Sudan’s illicit gold trade have been sanctioned, but Russia is not the only implicated nation. It is not even the most significant. By far the most important player in the global trade of Sudanese conflict gold is the UAE, so why have no steps been taken to impose consequences on the UAE for its role in that trade?

To make a dent on the global trade in Sudanese blood gold, Britain would have to use sanctions strategically with a view to dismantling entire systems, as opposed to merely punishing one or two offenders. We will have to work closely with willing partners, particularly the EU, Canada, the Nordic states and the United States. Can the Minister assure me that these conversations are ongoing?

Simultaneously, we must drive high-level initiatives to bring key commanders and external actors to the table. There are reports of a new peace framework taking shape in Washington—one built not on inclusion and democracy but, it seems, on power sharing, resource control and the legitimisation of the SAF and the RSF. A deal must not be made by outside states over the head of the Sudanese people, so I am glad to see the Foreign Secretary’s commitment to a Sudanese-led transition to civilian government and to extending the UN fact-finding mission to Sudan, investigating human rights abuses and crimes. However, the Government can and should be doing more to support Sudanese civil society and democratic groups, both in Sudan and in exile.

I am aware that the Government, through Global Partners Governance, help to fund the anti-war, pro-democracy coalition. How is the Government ensuring that these groups in exile remain representative and accountable to the Sudanese people? Can the Minister outline the recent work of the UK special envoy to Sudan? How is the special envoy engaging with pro-democracy organisations and diaspora groups, particularly those in exile throughout the region? We must work with as many like-minded partners as possible and with willing allies such as Canada, the Nordic states and others. Can

the Minister share how Britain is building diplomatic support for an inclusive peace process, centred on the civilian democratic voices in Sudan for a sustainable peace?

3.37 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Dr Huq. It is appropriate that, as someone who has always stood up for humanitarian causes, self-determination and the rights of peoples around the world, you are chairing this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall this afternoon, on the last day of term. She has been a principled voice on the issue in Parliament for a very long time; I commend her for it.

I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan—not least Glen Promnitz of its secretariat, who is here today—for keeping parliamentarians briefed and informed on the ongoing situation in the region, especially when so much of the world appears, regrettably, to have fallen silent. They have done an excellent job; I commend them for all their work.

I would like to refer to some, although not all, of the comments that have been made this afternoon. I have just said that the world is regrettably silent, but this House has not been silent this afternoon. I have heard some very passionate speeches and comments from all parts of the House. Considering how much is happening in the world today and how many issues we do talk about, we have not spoken as much as we should about Sudan. The nature of the conflict and the dreadful repercussions on the people of Sudan is absolutely horrendous, and we are right to debate it.

The hon. Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) spoke about the health risks in the region. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and other colleagues spoke about the importance of the diaspora in the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) spoke about the use of gender-based violence as a weapon of war; he was right to do so. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as chairman of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, spoke passionately about the issue and gave examples of where we need to highlight it.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) talked about the denial of humanitarian aid as a weapon, a point that was taken up by the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed); I thank both Members for highlighting it. It seems that it is now common practice in conflicts that the withholding of humanitarian aid is being used as a weapon, which is dreadful and appalling. I was particularly struck by the speech of the hon. Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor), who spoke about war crimes and crimes against humanity, and about how justice is needed in such cases. She paid tribute to the diaspora here in the UK. She said that the Sudanese people are not forgotten and that we must stand with them. I agree. She summed up the mood of the House this afternoon.

The right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who did a fine job in her time as Minister, spoke today with knowledge and experience of the topic. It is a shame that she is not still in her place as a Minister, but we thank her for continuing to take an interest in this very important subject.

[Andrew Rosindell]

Like other Members today, I wish to express my deep and growing concern for the people of Sudan, a nation in the grip of one of the most harrowing and shamefully overlooked humanitarian crises of our time. The conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has torn this ancient country apart. According to the United Nations, more than 25 million people—over half of Sudan's population—are now in need of humanitarian assistance. The World Food Programme warns that 18 million people face acute food insecurity, with 5 million in serious danger and over 750,000 children suffering from severe malnutrition. Hospitals and aid convoys have come under attack, entire communities have been displaced, and reports continue to emerge of ethnic cleansing, gender-based violence and mass killings, particularly in Darfur.

In April, as has been mentioned, the United Kingdom co-hosted an international humanitarian conference on Sudan. It announced that £120 million would be spent in humanitarian funding, supplementing the tens of millions provided by the last Government. However, nearly three months later, we must ask—and I hope the Minister will respond—what that money has been used for. Where has the money gone? Has the funding reached frontline organisations and local civil society actors working to deliver urgent assistance? Is it getting over the border at the scale required? Is there deconfliction to ensure that it is distributed to the innocent civilians who require that funding?

As the penholder on Sudan at the United Nations, the United Kingdom holds a unique and vital responsibility, but I must ask whether the UK is currently doing enough. Are we using our position at the Security Council to its fullest extent? What will the UK do through the United Nations Security Council in the time ahead to push for action on humanitarian corridors and for independent investigations into war crimes, and to hold the perpetrators to account?

More broadly, will the Minister tell us what new measures the Government are taking to compel the warring parties into a much-needed ceasefire? How is the UK supporting Sudanese civilian and political forces to engage in constructive dialogue processes such as the Cairo conference? What is the Minister's assessment of the current effectiveness of such processes and of the Jeddah process? What action does she propose to take on external factors influencing the war?

The House would also welcome clarity on whether the Government are exploring replicating the approach of our American allies to sanctions. The United States recently imposed further targeted sanctions. The previous Government recognised that those measures send a clear message that those who commit appalling acts will be held accountable, which is why we implemented a number of sanctions on those supporting the activities of the Rapid Support Forces and of the Sudanese Armed Forces.

I welcome the appointment of the UK special envoy for Sudan, but that cannot be the sum of our response. It cannot be a substitute for a full and proper strategy, which I hope the Minister will outline later in her remarks. We, on this side of the House, call on His Majesty's Government, first, to provide a full and transparent update on the disbursement and impact of

the £120 million pledged in April; secondly, to clarify how the UK is supporting frontline humanitarian agencies and set out its diplomatic engagement with regional actors; thirdly, to push for stronger co-ordinated action at the UN and with our allies, including support for a ceasefire and accountability for atrocities committed; and finally, to clearly set out their position on where they could do more on the possibility of sanctions.

Finally, although this Westminster Hall debate is crucial for raising awareness and pressing for much-needed action, the gravity of the situation in Sudan demands the highest level of Government focus. I therefore urge the Foreign Secretary to come to the House at the earliest opportunity—probably not until September now—to make a comprehensive statement outlining the Government's full and proper plan of action to address this ongoing catastrophe. We need to see a clear, unified strategy that matches the scale and urgency of this crisis.

Britain has long played a role in Sudan, with deep historical ties that stretch back centuries. From the days of General Gordon in Khartoum, and our administration of Sudan during the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, Britain has been intrinsically involved in the shaping of Sudan's modern identity. A successful Sudan, then, is not distant from our national story; it is, in part, a reflection of ourselves. None of this happened in a vacuum; our knowledge of the region, long-standing diplomatic channels and moral voice on the world stage place the United Kingdom in a position to lead. We must honour that tradition in Sudan. The world may not be watching, but Britain must not look away.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Leaving time for Harpreet Uppal to conclude, I call the Minister.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dr Huq; I acknowledge your interest in matters relating to human rights, humanitarian aid and Africa.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this debate; I am sure that many of her diaspora in Huddersfield are listening carefully to the arguments she has made. Indeed, we have a number of active MPs who mentioned the diaspora today, including my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). Our constituents care deeply about the welfare of Sudanese civilians. That is why it is so important that we have these debates and discussions.

I will try to answer Members' points, but I specifically wanted to come to the question of our constituents to say that the Foreign Secretary has made a commitment—as part of our strategic diaspora engagement on Sudan—that the UK engages with civil society and diaspora at ministerial and official level. In December, the Minister for Africa, Lord Collins, attended a roundtable alongside representatives of the Sudanese diaspora and civil society, hosted by Dr Zeinab Badawi, president of SOAS University of London.

In the run-up to the London Sudan conference in April, we had an extensive engagement with civil society and NGOs, including at ministerial level, which provided

valuable insights into Sudanese views on how to end this dreadful crisis. We complement that work with significant engagement with civilian groups inside and outside Sudan, and have supported civilian activists briefing the UN Security Council. As for any diaspora strategy, we are seeing it today in person through all the hon. Members from across the UK who have come to give voice to the concerns of their own constituents. We know that Sudan is enduring the most severe humanitarian crisis on record. As I outlined on 16 July in response to the urgent question, the situation is nothing short of catastrophic and the consequences of this brutal conflict are being felt. In terms of the numbers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said they were equivalent to half the population of Australia. To put it another way, more Sudanese are affected by this crisis than the number of people in Afghanistan, Gaza, Mali and Bangladesh combined.

With the rainy season approaching, the threat of famine and cholera will only grow, putting even more lives at risk. That is why I was so pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) mention the neglected tropical disease mycetoma, and the rather more common disease malaria, which will flourish in those conditions. It is clear that the humanitarian situation is being exacerbated by how the war is being fought, with both sides showing complete disregard for human life. Reports of appalling atrocities are widespread, civilians are targeted on the basis of ethnicity, sexual violence is rampant, and aid is being weaponised as both sides continue to seek a military solution.

As with many other conflicts—and as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) so eloquently pointed out—it is women and children who are bearing the brunt. A shocking 25% of the population or 12 million people are estimated to be at risk of sexual and gender-based violence in Sudan—as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). Only last week in Sudan's Kordofan region, more than 450 civilians were killed in brutal attacks, including pregnant women and at least 35 children. Over 3,000 people are reported to have fled recent fighting. The Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC—which was mentioned by several hon. Members this afternoon—stated that it has,

“reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been and are continuing to be committed in Darfur”.

That is why it is so important that we deal with the issue of displacement—which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding).

In May, during her visit to the Sudan-Chad border, Minister Chapman announced that the UK would provide £36 million in funding for the financial year 2025-26 for Sudanese refugees in eastern Chad. The collapsing economy and acute food insecurity will hopefully be addressed by some of those funds. The Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC recently stated that it has reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes are being committed. We call on all parties to the conflict to comply with their obligations under international law. I include any external partners—as was raised by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton—regardless of which country they come from and their role, and ask that they put down their

weapons and work together to find a peace process. That is why the Foreign Secretary led at the London Sudan conference this Easter.

As the humanitarian situation worsens, the very people trying to deliver aid to those most in need across Sudan have been continuously obstructed from conducting lifesaving work. More than 120 humanitarian workers have been killed since the beginning of the conflict. Just last month, the UNICEF-WFP convoy waiting to deliver lifesaving aid to those fleeing violence in El Fasher was attacked and five aid workers lost their lives, as was highlighted in the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan. Let me be clear: all parties must allow aid to reach those who need it most, and humanitarian workers must never be a target. I was very impressed by the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) and other colleagues from the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs in listening first hand to the accounts by doctors who have delivered medical aid in Sudan and the horrors of what they saw there.

The UK can, however, be proud of the fact that we are playing our part in addressing the worst consequences of this wholly unjustified war. Sudan has been a top priority for the UK Government since taking office, and indeed a personal priority for the Foreign Secretary, who in January became the first UK Foreign Secretary to visit Chad, when he saw first hand the devastating effect of war on refugee communities.

Our goals are clear: to secure more humanitarian aid, to ensure that it reaches those in need, to protect civilians and to stop the fighting and work with the Sudanese people to deliver long-term peace. The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), speaking from the Conservative Front Bench, asked how exactly the funding would be spent. I can reassure him that the £120 million for this year will be spent on lifesaving aid, given the nutritional deficit there. The Mercy Corps-led cash consortium for Sudan, which is a multilateral group, will also receive UK funding to provide direct cash assistance to mutual aid groups on the ground, because we are aware that, with the banking situation in crisis, some multilateral organisations simply cannot provide the usual sorts of aid.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine West: I apologise, but I only have three minutes.

We also want Sudan to be free of FGM—a priority that I know the hon. Member for Romford would be in agreement with—supporting the work of protection and prevention and providing care services in response to increasing rates of gender-based violence across Sudan. Of course, the funding also supports the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, which delivers lifesaving support to communities across Sudan and is now funding the emergency response rooms that provide essential services to communities affected by the conflict in Sudan.

The hon. Member also asked what we are doing politically. Mr Richard Crowder, our UK rep, travels extensively across the region, including to engage with Sudan's neighbours, which have traditionally had closer ties to both the warring parties. He has engaged extensively

[Catherine West]

with efforts by Egypt and the African Union to foster a platform for civilians to come together and debate the country's future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury said, the UK can be proud of our leadership on the humanitarian crisis. The support that we have provided builds on last year's £235 million of aid, which reached over 1 million people with food and cash, as well as clean water provision. During her visit to the region in May, Baroness Chapman announced an additional £36 million specifically for those displaced by the refugee crisis. Following the Sudan conference, we are using all diplomatic tools at our disposal to ensure that aid can reach those facing famine across Sudan. As the penholder on Sudan at the UN Security Council, we continue to raise the alarm about reports of appalling violations of international humanitarian law, and to call on the warring parties to facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief.

I know very well that my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield will wish to say a few words, so I will conclude by impressing upon Members the importance of our values. Indeed, the Government strongly condemn the lack of freedom of religion or belief in the current context. We strongly condemn the reported killing of the priest Father Luka Jomo in El Fasher, North Darfur, as well as the reported bombing of churches, which killed and injured multiple people. I can reassure the hon. Member for Strangford that we will continue to champion the right to freedom of religion or belief by promoting tolerance and mutual respect through our engagement in multilateral fora, our bilateral work and our programme funding. David Smith, the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, made a statement at the United Nations Human Rights Council in which he highlighted the UK Government's concerns—I know he speaks for all of Parliament—about the coercion of non-Muslims in Sudan to change their beliefs through denial of work, food aid and education. In the absence of a ceasefire, the humanitarian situation will only worsen.

3.59 pm

Harpreet Uppal: I thank all colleagues for their contributions to this debate and the Minister for her commitment and actions. At the heart of this are the people of Sudan, who need sustained, co-ordinated and courageous leadership from the international community. Let this House be part of delivering that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Sudan.

Housing Provision in Stafford

4 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing provision in Stafford.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate.

To give some understanding of the local picture, Stafford borough is currently without an adopted local plan. A new draft plan was due to be approved just as the general election was called last year, but with that and the new housing targets, the process paused. While it is good that the work has restarted, getting a new plan in place for our area will take years, even in the best-case scenario. That matters because, in the meantime, communities such as Eccleshall are left exposed to speculative development without the protections that a local plan provides.

I attended a public meeting in Eccleshall two weeks ago, and the atmosphere was thoughtful, not hostile, and the message was clear. People understand that we are in a housing crisis, and they know we need more homes not just for this generation but for the next generation. People also want to stay close to their family. They want to contribute to their community and grow old where they have always lived, but they are also dealing with the consequences of past development in which infrastructure has not kept pace.

Those pressures are visible in Eccleshall's drains, roads and local environment. Eccleshall's sewage treatment works flooded 67 times in 2023 and has flooded 26 times so far in 2025. The aim is to have no more than 10 spillages a year by 2045—that is in 20 years' time. It flooded again last Sunday, spilling sewage and waste water, which affected residents. That is the reality for people living there now, before a single additional home has been built.

I make my position absolutely clear: I know that we need more homes. Across Staffordshire and across the country, far too many people—including young families, pensioners and key workers—are being priced out of the areas in which they grew up, and that is true even in Eccleshall. That is the legacy of the previous Government, who made things worse.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Does she agree that housing must be provided for families, for single people and for elderly people? Newtownards in my constituency is providing a mix for everyone. Is that something she is trying to achieve for her constituents, in conjunction with the Minister?

Leigh Ingham: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. My dad does not work any more, but he was a bricklayer. He always said to me that if he had owned his own business, he would have built bungalows because there is always a need for them—this country can never build enough bungalows. We need a mix of housing, but he always said, "If you want to sell houses, build bungalows." That is my dad's life tip, if anyone is interested.

That goes to the point that we have not built the right homes in the right places. Pensioners cannot find smaller homes to downsize into; families are not able to settle for the long term; and people are being pushed away

from their support networks and lifelong communities. We need to build, but we have to do it responsibly and with infrastructure. In Eccleshall right now, that balance has not been found.

Residents are understandably alarmed, as there are 10 speculative development proposals on the table for potentially over 1,500 homes. Accounting for families, that is likely to be more than a 50% population increase for a town of 6,500 people. That would stretch the resources of any community, but it would be overwhelming for a very small market town. To be very clear, not a single application has yet been approved, but the sheer number of proposals coming in simultaneously is creating real anxiety and uncertainty, because people do not know what might be approved.

More broadly, we have already seen how this can go in another part of my constituency, in Loggerheads. There, development went ahead without an up-to-date local plan. Developers insisted that infrastructure was adequate, but in reality there were no buses, few community services and precious little investment in support to new residents. The building continues.

In Eccleshall, planning officers are doing everything they can, but without a local plan, they are working with one hand tied behind their backs. The default position of presumption in favour of sustainable development leaves them vulnerable. The Minister and his Department are committed to fixing this broken system, and I recognise wholeheartedly that the challenges are not new—they were building up for years under the previous Conservative Government—but Eccleshall provides a case study of why councils need more tools and more flexibility to get things right.

Today, I want to offer four practical suggestions that would make a real difference to Eccleshall and other communities like it. First, we need faster and more flexible processes for approving local plans. Right now, it can take up to three years, in ideal conditions, and during that time councils and communities are left in limbo. If we want to plan properly, we need the system to keep pace.

Secondly, infrastructure must come first, not years later. The flooding in Eccleshall is a red flag. The system has not caught up with past development, let alone proposed future growth. With respect to that, I ask the Minister: what specific support is available to towns such as Eccleshall to help building to happen sustainably, without overloading existing stretched services?

Thirdly, we need to let councils assess housing proposals in the round, not one by one. When multiple speculative bids are in play, applications cannot be treated as if they exist in isolation. Local authorities must have the power to consider the cumulative impact and align decisions with community priorities.

Fourthly, we need strong protections for our best agricultural land. In Eccleshall, the sites under threat are all grade 2 and 3a, some of the best and most versatile farmland in the country. If we lose it, we do not get it back. We cannot build over the land that feeds us and call that sustainable.

In conclusion, no one—residents or developers—wants to see 10 disconnected developments forced on a community with no plan and no infrastructure. I want to be clear: the people I represent are not opposed to growth. They want to be part of shaping it, and to build homes in a

way that is planned, not piecemeal, with infrastructure first, communities and the environment protected, and fairness at its heart. I ask the Minister to meet me—after recess; I will not make him do it today—specifically to speak about Eccleshall. We have a meeting coming up to talk about wider housing provision in Stafford borough, but I hope he will not mind me asking for a separate conversation about this specific and unique case. I believe that we can build the homes we need in a way that is fair, sustainable and community-led, and that this Government want to do that. I hope this debate will be a constructive step towards making sure that happens.

4.8 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing this debate. As you know, she always speaks with force and passion on behalf of her constituents, and has done so again today on this important matter.

I appreciate fully the concerns that my hon. Friend expresses on behalf of residents in Eccleshall. I assure her that the Government want to see more plan-led development, and development generally, to provide all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities. Without doubt, much more remains to be done, but I trust she recognises that the Government have already taken decisive steps to deliver on those objectives.

My hon. Friend will appreciate that I am unable to comment on her local development plan or on individual planning applications within her constituency, due to the role of Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers in the planning system. I will seek to respond to the points she has made in general terms.

Let me start by addressing the concerns that my hon. Friend expressed about local development plans. She is absolutely right to highlight the importance of areas having up-to-date local plans, and the detrimental impact on individuals and communities where that is not the case. Local plans are the best ways for communities to shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development their areas need. We want more people involved in the development of local plans. The plan-led approach is, and must remain, the cornerstone of our planning system, but a locally led planning system only operates effectively if coverage is extensive.

As my hon. Friend will no doubt be aware, we inherited a system where less than a third of local plans were up to date. We are taking decisive steps to progress towards our ambition of universal local plan coverage, both in providing local planning authorities that are striving to do the right thing with financial support and intervening where necessary to drive local plans to adoption as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the length of time that it takes to progress and adopt a local plan—on average, seven years. Slow progress in the preparation of local plans means that those areas are at greater risk of speculative development and that those local plans are out of date more quickly upon adoption, which creates uncertainty for communities

[Matthew Pennycook]

and holds back development where it is needed. That is one of the many reasons why we intend to introduce a new, faster and clearer process for preparing plans. That new system will set a clear expectation that local plans, as well as mineral and waste plans, are routinely prepared and adopted in 30 months. Other aspects of our reforms will support that aim, such as the introduction of gateways, shorter, simpler and more standardised content focused on the core principles of plan making, and a series of digital transformation initiatives.

The new system will help us to deliver and maintain universal coverage across England, supporting the Government's wider commitments to deliver the development the country needs. It is our intention that a package of plan-making reforms, enabled through provisions in the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act 2023, will commence later this year. I understand that Stafford borough council has chosen to introduce its next local plan under the new local plan-making system that we intend to put in place, and my Department will continue to engage with it to that end.

Where plans are not up to date and local planning authorities are not delivering in line with the needs of their communities, it is right that development can come forward outside of the plan; the homes our country needs cannot be put on hold. However, we have been clear that that is not a passport to poor-quality housing. That is why we added new safeguards to the presumption in the revised national planning policy framework that we published in December last year. The absence of an up-to-date local plan does not remove the need for local planning authorities to consider the use of conditions or planning obligations to make otherwise unacceptable development acceptable. That can include the provision of necessary site-specific infrastructure at appropriate trigger points in the development, and local planning authorities have enforcement powers to ensure compliance with any such provisions.

My hon. Friend asked me, very reasonably, what can be done about multiple applications and whether they can be considered in the round. I again stress the point that local development plans are the most appropriate way to consider applications in the round, in terms of allocating appropriate sites to come forward, and local plans do have an element of sequencing to them in what development they expect to come forward during the whole life of the plan, but for specific applications, it might be worth stressing that other proposed developments can be a material consideration in the determination of an individual planning application, although that is always decided on a case-by-case basis.

As my hon. Friend made clear, communities across the country, including in Eccleshall, want to see infrastructure provision delivered as early in the development process as possible, rather than being an afterthought that comes right at the end. The national planning policy framework sets out that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of supporting infrastructure in a sustainable manner. The revised NPPF, which was published last year, will also support the increased provision and modernisation of various types of public infrastructure.

Local development plans should address needs and opportunities in relation to infrastructure, and identify what infrastructure is required and how it can be funded and brought forward. When preparing a local plan, planning practice guidance recommends that local planning authorities use available evidence of infrastructure requirements to prepare an infrastructure funding statement. Such statements can be used to demonstrate the delivery of infrastructure throughout the plan period. There is already detailed guidance and an infrastructure funding statement template on the planning advisory service website. However, the chief planner wrote to all local planning authorities recently to remind them of their statutory duty to prepare and publish an infrastructure funding statement where they receive developer contributions via section 106 and/or the community infrastructure levy.

The Government also provide financial support for essential infrastructure in areas of greatest housing demand through land and infrastructure funding programmes such as the housing infrastructure fund. As my hon. Friend will know, the Government are also committed to strengthening the existing system of developer contributions to ensure that new developments provide necessary affordable homes and infrastructure. We will set out further details about our proposals in that area in due course.

It is worth mentioning the provisions in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which will provide for mandatory spatial development strategies in sub-regions across the country. That is a good example of how groups of local planning authorities can plan at higher than the local planning level for the effective delivery of new homes and infrastructure across a wider area, making smarter decisions in a framework that sees infrastructure and investment come forward.

Finally, my hon. Friend raised the issue of agricultural land. The Government place great importance upon our agricultural land and food production. The NPPF is clear that planning policies and decisions should recognise the benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land—namely, land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the agricultural land classification system. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of higher quality. That said, the Government recognise that the system used to grade agricultural land is currently not fit for purpose. The maps are outdated, not at a scale suitable for the assessment of individual fields or sites, and are not suited to the changing suitability of land. The Government are exploring what improvements are needed to the ALC system to support effective land use decisions.

To conclude, I commend my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I thank her for the clarity with which she expressed the concerns felt by her constituents and Eccleshall and beyond. I emphasise once again my agreement with her about the importance of plan-led development to provide the necessary infrastructure, amenities and services. I am more than happy to meet with her to have a separate conversation on Eccleshall specifically, as she requested, but in general terms, I look forward to continuing to engage with her to ensure that the changes that the Government have already made,

along with those to come, are to the lasting benefit of her constituents and those of other hon. Members across the country.

Dr Huq, I wish you, my hon. Friend and other hon. Members an enjoyable and productive summer recess.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Reciprocated all round, I think.

Question put and agreed to.

4.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Internal Market

4.30 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered barriers to trade in the UK internal market.

I am pleased to have been granted this debate. I do not have much luck securing debates in Westminster Hall, but I thought that perhaps nobody else would apply for a debate at the end of the last day before recess. I think I guessed right, so we have a debate on this very important issue.

This debate is about the disruption to the UK internal market. My remarks are not based on the political stance that my party has taken against the Brexit arrangements agreed by the last Government and continued by the present Government; they are based on a report by the Federation of Small Businesses, an independent body interested only in the concerns of its members, that does not look exclusively at Northern Ireland. Indeed, the report is based mostly on responses from businesses in England, Scotland and Wales—only 14% of responses came from businesses in Northern Ireland. The impact on the internal market is a UK-wide concern.

The report found that the Windsor framework is not protecting the market. There are considerable barriers, whether customs paperwork, European Union rules and laws applying in Northern Ireland, physical checks, delays in the delivery of goods, the labelling of goods not for EU use, or business-to-business parcels now being subject to customs procedures. As a result, many businesses have abandoned Northern Ireland. Indeed, the report highlights that 34% of small businesses that previously traded with Northern Ireland have now stopped, saying that the regulation has made it far too expensive to trade with Northern Ireland.

Some of the regulations are ludicrous. One business wrote that some of the requirements are little short of farcical. They have to state that their goods have not been imported from Iraq, even though they were made in Great Britain. Others have been told to fill in forms to make it clear that canes imported for use in road construction are not being used to torture anybody. Businesses find themselves facing that kind of nonsense, and as a result they are abandoning Northern Ireland.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Is not the real problem, as identified by the FSB and articulated by the right hon. Gentleman, that there is an unholy alliance of Eurocrats and bureaucrats, of separatists and globalist corporates, who are acting in a way that is injurious to the interests of small and medium-sized businesses that trade across our United Kingdom?

Sammy Wilson: The right hon. Member is absolutely correct. I will talk about some of that bureaucracy later in my speech.

Fifty-eight per cent of businesses have faced significant or moderate difficulties, including rising transport costs, significant disruption to supplies, stock shortfalls, shortages, loss of sales and increased bureaucracy and costs, as well as the drain on their finances because of the payment of taxes and duties that take a long time to be repaid.

[Sammy Wilson]

Of the companies surveyed, 61% said that they had experienced negative consequences as a result of the Windsor framework. Significantly, despite what the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would try to tell the House, only 2% said there were any positive benefits. More worryingly, 56% either said that they are “not confident” or only “slightly confident” about what will happen with their trading relations with Northern Ireland, and 29% said that they are likely to have to stop supplying to Northern Ireland in the future. That is on top of those companies that have already stopped.

In fact, one company said that it was now more difficult to trade with Northern Ireland—that is, bring goods from GB into Northern Ireland—than it is to trade with Australia and the USA, which is why it would stop trading with Northern Ireland.

What has been the Government’s response to all this, as it is well known? I am pleased that the FSB has now independently verified what we have all known anecdotally, as constituency representatives. I suspect that the Minister will say, “Oh, but we are doing our best. We have put in support mechanisms. We have the trader support service, we have HMRC guidance.” I hate to tell the Minister that the survey shows that 78% of businesses say the support is either “poor” or “very poor”—in other words, useless. The report says,

“a similarly high proportion found access to the support difficult. Businesses frequently cited confusing or inconsistent guidance. As one NI manufacturer put it, navigating new customs paperwork via the Trader Support Service often feels like a ‘guessing game’.” It is a joke of a system. The defence is, “We have put in support mechanisms.” Well, they are not working.

The second argument—and we have heard the Secretary of State make it repeatedly—is, “Oh, but you have other benefits. You have access to the dual market. You have the benefits of being able to sell into the EU, which companies in GB cannot do as freely, and to sell into the GB market.” We know now that the GB market is not accessible, and that supplies are not coming through.

As far as the dual market system is concerned, when businesses were surveyed, 88% said that the opportunities were not explained—they did not know what the opportunities were—and 64% said that they did not even understand what the opportunities were. They said that it seemed like the Government were making no effort to promote the great benefit that was meant to be the result of the Windsor framework. I suspect that the reason why the benefit has not been promoted is because, as many of the companies said, it is more in theory than in reality. There is no real benefit.

Of course, the latest argument is, “Well, the new sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU will smooth it all out.” Every time I hear that argument, if I am at home, I look down into Larne harbour from my study window and see that, despite the promises that the SPS agreement will do away with a lot of these checks, there is a border post being built—I can see it clearly from my study window. £140 million is being spent on it, and only last night, the local council was asked to sign a memorandum of association to ensure that it supplies staff for that border post until March 2029.

Even if the SPS agreement were to do that, it covers only a very small part of the trade. All of the customs requirements, duty payments, checks, delays and parcel

post will still be affected. EU regulations, affecting many businesses because the EU has different standards, will still apply.

The one thing I hope I do not get from the Minister today is the same complacency, disdain and “I couldn’t care less” attitude that Northern Ireland experiences from our Secretary of State, whose attitude has been little short of disgraceful. Pontius Pilate-like, he has washed his hands of it all. If anything, he acts more like an EU emissary to Northern Ireland than a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I can see that you are getting a bit uneasy, Dr Huq, but I notified the Secretary of State that I am angry at the way in which he has treated Northern Ireland, and he knew I was going to make these remarks this afternoon. In fact, I think I spelled them out to him.

Let us look at some of the Secretary of State’s comments. When my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) recently raised a statistic from the FSB survey in the House, his attitude was, “Well, if some of the businesses can trade with Northern Ireland, why can’t the rest of them? It is up to them to decide where they want to trade and where they don’t.” When someone who is meant to be standing up and fighting for Northern Ireland takes that kind of attitude, I despair about whether this issue is being taken seriously.

In a recent letter to me, the Secretary of State indicated that, as far as he is concerned, the main thing is to ensure that we “faithfully” pursue the Windsor framework because the EU is getting angry that some of the regulations may not be fully implemented. Here we have damaging regulations for Northern Ireland, and the Secretary of State’s response is, “Well, I have to stand up for the EU. Northern Ireland businesses? Let them paddle their own canoe.”

I know that others wish to speak, and I am pleased that so many have stayed on the last day. I do not want them to miss out, so this is the last thing. What do we need? I could go through many of the options that we have proposed and that the Government have dismissed, but I ask the Minister for one simple thing. All the paperwork, all the regulations, all the delays and all the checks are founded on one thing: that goods entering Northern Ireland from GB are regarded as at risk of going into the Irish Republic, contaminating its economy in some way and breaking EU rules.

Custard, the stuff we heat and pour over apple tarts or put into trifles, was deemed to be a dairy product, but it was not required to be labelled until phase 3 of the labelling requirements. However, the EU decided that perhaps custard should have been regarded as a product at risk, so it changed the labelling requirements. One of the big supermarkets had custard in its supply chain, and the EU bureaucrats decided that this custard must be hunted down—“We cannot have it coming into Northern Ireland and finding its way into the Irish Republic.” Lorries with mixed loads were stopped and searched. The offending custard was hunted down, discovered and exposed. That delayed the lorries, which did not reach the depot in time, so their goods could not be broken down and distributed to the various shops. It affected the supply chain and the supply of shops in Northern Ireland.

Here is the irony: the supermarket did not have any shops in the Irish Republic. The offending custard was okay one day, but not the next, because it did not have a

label that it did not require the previous day. There was no evidence that anybody was dying from eating this custard in Northern Ireland or anywhere else, but the supply chains for a major supermarket in Northern Ireland were disrupted.

I am sure many Members could tell story after story about how the regulations are having an effect. What is it all down to? It is down to goods presenting a “risk”. What risk? We do not know. A simple change could be made so that goods are deemed at risk only once they leave Northern Ireland and go into the Irish Republic or elsewhere. The Road Haulage Association and Federation of Small Businesses have asked for that. It is not beyond the wit of man to ensure that happens. After all, all the companies that are selling these goods have VAT returns. HMRC trusts those companies at the end of the year to declare how much VAT they owe. If the goods have gone out of Northern Ireland, they do not have to pay VAT. Why can that VAT return not be used to follow the goods to where they eventually go? There is much disruption to trade, though not to all of it.

I am sure Members will talk about the inequity and constitutional implications of EU law applying to Northern Ireland, but one simple change can be made. Rather than kowtow to the EU, or be afraid that the reset with the EU might be disturbed if we ask for something simple, I ask the Minister to consider that one simple change, which many businesses have said would restore their ability to trade freely within our own market, selling goods that are not at risk. It would be of immense help to the small businesses that are the backbone of our economy.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We will now divide up the time left. If Members keep their speeches to within four minutes, everyone will get in. I call Jim Allister.

4.47 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) on securing this debate, which cuts to the very heart of what it should mean to be part of the United Kingdom.

If we construct, at a foreign institution's behest, an internal international border within our own country and require customs checks and declarations, and the payment of tariffs on the movement of goods, it should be no surprise that we will hugely upset our country's internal market. That is exactly what has happened. I would go further and say that that is exactly what was intended, as it was notoriously said in Brussels that the price of Brexit would be Northern Ireland. What we have evolving before our very eyes is the dismembering of the United Kingdom, as an object lesson to any other member state of what happens if they dare to leave the EU.

We have created a situation where, because Northern Ireland is in the EU single market and under its customs code, GB is in law decreed to be, within EU terms, a foreign country whose goods must be checked when they move to within the EU, which is how Northern Ireland is regarded as far as the single market is concerned. It should be no surprise that there will be disruption to the market as a consequence. It was the intention of the EU to build an all-Ireland economy as a stepping stone. That was the design, and the protocol is working in that sense: it is delivering what it was intended to deliver.

When we hear from the FSB report that 34% of businesses that previously traded with Northern Ireland have stopped trading, that inevitably means that trade with the Irish Republic—it was the purpose of the protocol to build an all-Ireland economy—is increasing. We have statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to show that, over recent years, purchases from the Irish Republic have increased by 50% in comparison with those from GB, taking account of inflation. We therefore have the protocol in action illustrated for us, and its intention to build an all-Ireland economy.

All that is set against a background where the Minister present today is under a statutory obligation, under section 46 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, to secure and maintain Northern Ireland's internal place in the UK market. It is supposed to ensure that goods can travel freely, but it does not and never will, because that is impossible to achieve.

More than that, with all the spin that attended the Windsor framework, we were told that we were protected under article 16. If there was any diversion of trade, we were told that the Government would step in and take actions permitted under article 16. Well, there has been diversion of trade—lamentable, demonstrable and huge diversion of trade—and what have the Government done? Nothing. They have simply run away, taken a blind-eye approach and refused to act under article 16.

Indeed, only a few weeks ago in a Delegated Legislation Committee, I had a Minister tell me that article 16 specifies that there has to be

“a massive distortion to trade.”—[*Official Report, First Delegated Legislation Committee, 23 June 2025; c. 9.*]

No, it does not; it refers to any diversion of trade. There has been a diversion, but there has been no action, which makes the Government wholly complicit in the dismantling of this Union and the divorcing of Northern Ireland economically from the rest of the United Kingdom. Unless and until that is addressed, this issue will not be settled.

The Government talk much about their great reset—well, they had an opportunity, and they did not take it. If they are going to align SPS rules, why did they not say to Europe, “We're taking back sovereignty and control of SPS in Northern Ireland.”? That is not what the reset does; it retains EU sovereignty of SPS in Northern Ireland, and then makes a separate deal for GB. We are on the road to dismantling this Union, courtesy of this protocol—and that is why, as a Unionist, I will always hold out against it.

4.52 pm

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Dr Huq. This matter is crucial because it deeply affects British livelihoods, communities and the unity that we hold dear in the United Kingdom. To those who prematurely claimed or exaggerated that the Irish sea border was removed, I say, “You're overlooking the harsh realities faced by many businesses in Northern Ireland.”

The numerous cases speak for themselves, and I will share several today. Only last week, four loads of food supplies were sent back in a 48-hour period from a port in Northern Ireland because of these regulations, affecting chilled and frozen foods. Recently, a lorry driver who owns a lorry-driving business mentioned that one sixth

[Alex Easton]

of his business is being negatively affected by the Windsor framework. The Secretary of State claimed that food supply and veterinary issues were resolved—that is clearly not the case. Why are food lorries being turned back from Northern Ireland ports?

I go shopping in a local supermarket in my constituency. In the last 10 days, I have been into that supermarket about half a dozen times. I have not even been able to get corned beef or doggy treats for my dog—my dog loves his doggy treats, and we have not been able to get them. Those are just basic items that face problems getting into Northern Ireland. That is why I stand firmly against any trade barriers between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It was unacceptable then and remains unacceptable now.

This debate transcends commerce; it is about the integrity and unity of the United Kingdom. First and foremost, these barriers disrupt a legacy of seamless trade, which we have enjoyed for decades. They place additional costs and burdens on businesses in Northern Ireland. We take pride in our small, family-run businesses, which form the backbone of our economy. I implore the Minister to empathise with these businesses as they face challenges in sourcing or sending products across the Irish sea and become entangled in complex regulations that hinder rather than help. He should see it from the perspective of these businesses and ask, “Is this truly fair to fellow citizens in Northern Ireland?”

We are not just discussing inconveniences; these barriers are a chokehold on progress, strangling the local businesses that drive our economic growth. Moreover, these trade barriers threaten consumer welfare. Market constraints lead to limited choices, empty shelves and rising prices. British families in Northern Ireland face restricted access to diverse goods and are suffering unnecessarily. That is not the future that we envisioned for UK citizens. We cannot accept a future market that is marked by economic hardship due to artificial barriers within our United Kingdom.

These trade barriers challenge the essence of what it means to be united. They drive a wedge between regions that throughout our rich history have stood shoulder to shoulder. The resulting divide contradicts the very principle upon which the UK was built. It must not fracture our shared identity and values. While the intentions behind the protocol may have been good, the reality necessitates a reassessment of its impacts. I am reminded of the saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Solutions exist and we must pursue them. The bottom line for any resolution must be the integrity of the UK and its internal market. Let us not be passive in the face of these trade barriers; instead, we must be diligent in restoring seamless trade throughout the United Kingdom.

Finally, Minister, given that these trade barriers are part of some 300 EU laws with zero democratic accountability in Northern Ireland, what is the timescale for their removal? We were told that we would get the best of both worlds; that is just not the case. When will this get sorted out?

4.57 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) for securing this debate.

I am sure that we will hear in the Minister's response what the Government have done to alleviate some of these issues, but it is the practicalities that Members from Northern Ireland are actually asking about. I am sure that we will hear about Lord Paul Murphy's report. He was commissioned to conduct an independent review of the Windsor framework. I am now aware that his report was handed to the Government on 9 July, so we have to ask, “When will we see it? When will businesses see it? When will trade and industry actually see what Lord Murphy has said?” I am sure that the answer we will get is that under domestic law the Minister has up to six months to publish the report and its recommendations. Why not publish it now? Why not let businesses and politicians see the challenges that lie ahead?

Two bodies were created at the time: the independent monitoring panel and Intertrade UK. Those organisations were launched with much noise and furore, and good people—genuine people—were appointed to them, but we have seen no product. We have seen nothing come from them with regard to the challenges, and the opportunities that people keep talking about but that nobody is prepared to put in writing.

With regard to the challenge that we currently face, the introduction of “Not for EU” labelling on 1 July, which has been touched upon, applies even to goods that will never leave the UK's internal market, and adds yet another layer of complexity and cost. Businesses have been told that these labels will eventually be phased out, but the requirement to have them now still stands. For a large retailer, that may be a frustration, but for a small supplier or producer it could be the final straw.

That was evident in the FSB's independent report. As the right hon. Member for East Antrim pointed out, this is an independent report commissioned by the FSB from GB suppliers providing goods to Northern Ireland. Those suppliers said that trade disruption is widespread, with 58% of those trading between GB and NI reporting “moderate” to “significant” challenges. Over a third of respondents—34%—have already ceased trading rather than deal with these new compliance issues.

Even major retailers are pushing back. We will hear about all those businesses and companies that make it work, but in June Stuart Machin, the chief executive of Marks & Spencer, called the implementation of these labels

“bureaucratic madness, confusing for customers, and completely unnecessary given the UK has some of the highest food standards in the world.”

If the chief executive officer of one of the UK's most established food retailers finds the system hugely bureaucratic, says it is

“adding yet another layer of unnecessary costs and red tape”,

how can we expect small firms, often with just a handful of staff, to cope?

I am sure that the Minister will talk about the coming SPS deal, which has been mentioned, but the real challenge that the Government have to answer is: why are they continuing to introduce further bureaucracy and further checks? If this promised deal—this new relationship with the EU—is so positive, so genuine, and if we are so much in partnership, why do we have to introduce this? Why can we not put in place the extended grace periods we have often seen in the past for those businesses and organisations?

The FSB's work on the framework was undertaken before there were further restrictions—before the restrictions on business-to-business parcels came into force on 1 May, and before the phase 3 labelling requirements on SPS products came into force on 1 July and from 1 September. Small businesses are asking us to establish something that actually helps. A back office, knowledgeable and with expertise, should be made available through an accessible, business-friendly route, rather than this bureaucracy. Dr Huq, I respect your time limits and will allow another hon. Member to speak.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. We will move on to the first Front Bench, Liberal Democrat spokesperson Clive Jones, at 5.8 pm, so the time limit is now three and a half minutes.

5.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) for his continued dedication to highlighting the absurdity of the Windsor framework and the need for an end to this disastrous mechanism. All hon. Members who speak in this debate have outlined and will outline the barriers that affect business across the whole of Northern Ireland. We are aware of the problems that we are raising, but I urge the Government to fully consider their impact. The Minister is a good man; he listens, and always tries to respond, so we look forward to his response on behalf of Government.

The Government will say that this is only a small additional bit of paperwork to do, and that businesses should be able to comply with the two-lane system and the administration, but the fact is that, while they could comply, it is more hassle, so at the system's worst they are simply not complying.

I will give two examples that affect households throughout Northern Ireland. Morris & Son Ltd specialise in near-date sales and clearance lines that are cheaper and enable shops to pass on deals. Morris Ltd has said that the product margins on such products are too small to justify the time it takes to administer the additional protocols, when it can sell with no hassle on the GB mainland.

I do not say this to shame Morris Ltd, because that is not what this is about; the shame is on the current and the previous Governments for not rectifying the issue, but the losers are those on low incomes, who used to be able to get a good deal on short-dated stock. The constituents of every hon. Member in this House can take advantage of that, barring my constituents in Strangford and people in other constituencies of Northern Ireland. At a time when food inflation stands at 4.5%, and is predicted to be 5.1% by the end of this year, why should my constituents, and people across Northern Ireland, not be able to take advantage of those offers?

The hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) referred to dog treats: cheaper companies will not pay the vet fees to go through the shipments line by line. I heard Roger Pollen, from the Federation of Small Businesses, doing an interview at the end of June, in which he highlighted that 1,000 Marks & Sparks products have to be re-labelled, and 400 M&S items have been

moved into the red lane—all that when Government had promised us that things would get easier, instead of getting worse. When M&S is struggling with the complexity, why would small retailers such as Morris & Son Ltd waste time and money? The fact is they will not, they are not, and my constituents are the losers. We were promised the rewards of a dual market, yet there has been no drive to entice business to come in and make the most of that supposed draw. The reason is that no one can actually quantify what the benefits are, and how we can assess them.

The Minister is a good man. We all know that. He always tries to be helpful. We have posed a lot of questions, and hopefully he can give us some answers. I urge him to go to the Cabinet to arrange a meeting with the EU to end this nonsense once and for all. Small businesses are crying out, and it is now affecting big business, which is where it gets even more difficult, but what is worst of all is that my constituents and all the other Northern Ireland constituents are paying more for their products than people on the mainland, and wondering why they are paying the price for Europe to maintain its death grip. End that death grip, Minister. Make the changes and end it soon, before small businesses are choked to death.

5.5 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The protocol and Windsor framework continue on a daily basis to fail the people of Northern Ireland. The failure is not anecdotal; it is measurable, documented and deeply felt. I say this with sincerity: it is a bureaucratic burden, a constitutional compromise, and for many of our people and businesses, an economic noose.

The Secretary of State and the Government cannot continue to keep their heads in the sand, thinking that the problems that we highlight are all exaggerated and unimportant. Businesses, farmers, hauliers and animal health professionals are affected. Every sector is engaging more and more in highlighting the daily struggles associated with the framework and calling for help from the Government they pay their taxes to.

The reality remains that Northern Ireland is subject to EU laws in more than 300 areas—laws that we have no democratic say over, no way of changing, and that are creating burdensome and costly checks that no other part of the UK endures. The Windsor framework was sold as a solution. It was never a solution. It was a glossed-up version of the protocol with a new name, but it was the same poison. It raised hope among businesses in Northern Ireland, but has delivered dismay, frustration and additional costly trading barriers.

I have always been critical of the Government's approach to Northern Ireland when it comes to Brexit, be it under the previous or the current Government. I never believed the spin and promises, because at every turn promises have been broken and there has been no desire to resolve even the most simple problems created by the Windsor framework.

I commend the FSB for its courage in producing an exceptional report. Many so-called industry leaders are all too often caught up in the spin and do not actually reflect their membership's concerns. Yet the FSB's latest report lays bare the truth: 58% of businesses face moderate to significant challenges, and more than one third have

[Carla Lockhart]

stopped trading with GB altogether, rather than deal with the mountain of paperwork. This is not frictionless trade. It is not the “best of both worlds”. It is best only for the EU.

Let me spell that out with real examples. A forestry business in my constituency urgently needed machine parts. They were delayed coming from Scotland via next-day delivery, leaving workers idle and costly machines unused. A children’s boutique was hit with a £205 duty and VAT invoice for delivery of goods from GB. We have also seen used agricultural machinery, visually clean and only road driven—immaculate—being turned away at our ports unless scrubbed to EU standards and accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate. One dealer has had to comply with four separate pieces of paperwork just to move a single tractor. Meanwhile, GB and Republic of Ireland dealers face none of that. An engineering firm supporting major Northern Ireland manufacturers said that its key selling point was rapid response. It is now impossible to say that, because of the delays and trade barriers.

In addition, we now have the blow to animal health. From January 2026, the Government are prepared to implement EU law in full on veterinary medicines, shutting out GB-based suppliers unless they jump through impossible hoops. Pet shops, farmers and even charities are now in the firing line.

This is death by a thousand cuts, and the Government are not even pretending to stop the bleeding. GB firms now say that it is easier to export to Japan than to Northern Ireland. The reality is that we have farmers who cannot move livestock; horticulturists who cannot bring in trees and seed potatoes; and families who no longer get parcels from GB retailers, because more than 90 major suppliers no longer deliver to Northern Ireland. There is every reason to act, the two main ones being that there are now economic implications, as per the FSB report, and there is clear diversion of trade. It is time for the Government to step up and act on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland and the businesses that are impacted.

5.9 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) for securing this debate.

The majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. The Conservatives’ botched withdrawal agreement has caused nothing but problems for the Northern Irish economy and has hit small businesses particularly badly. The Conservatives said that they had an “oven-ready” deal for leaving the EU, yet they left Northern Ireland in the deep freeze. The idea of dual market access under the Windsor framework was sold as a unique advantage for the people of Northern Ireland—businesses would be able to access both the EU single market and the UK internal market—but widespread dissatisfaction with the Windsor framework is becoming increasingly clear. Northern Ireland should be able to exploit dual access, but businesses are not being helped by the Northern Irish Executive, nor by the UK Government.

Jim Allister: Will the hon. Member give way?

Clive Jones: I only have a few minutes, so I will not. Recent findings from the Federation of Small Businesses have highlighted severe challenges: despite Tory promises of “no more red tape”, many small businesses are finding trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland laborious and costly. The Chartered Institute of Export and International Trade found that, between 2021 and 2023, since the Brexit deal, 2 billion additional pieces of paperwork had to be completed by exporters. That is nearly enough paperwork to wrap around the Earth 14.7 times.

The FSB report also makes it clear that businesses are not aware of the benefits of the dual market access. It is the Government’s job to add some clarity here. According to the FSB, only 14% of Northern Ireland-based businesses responding to its survey said that they understand and are benefiting from dual market access. The rest either lack sufficient understanding to benefit from it or have not been able to leverage it. Some 51% of respondents believe this opportunity is not being adequately explained or promoted by Government authorities. We have to ask why.

Does the Minister not agree that further clarity, communication and support from the Government would benefit businesses across the whole of the UK, and trade with Northern Ireland? We are right to ask why the Northern Irish Government is not doing more to help local businesses, especially small and medium-sized businesses. It is clear that Labour must take a more pragmatic approach with the EU and foster a closer relationship for the benefit of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

A closer relationship with the EU will also help solve the UK’s skills shortages, especially in Northern Ireland. According to a report by Ulster University’s economic policy centre, Northern Ireland needs more than 5,000 additional workers to grow its economy. Does the Minister not agree that a closer relationship with the EU and introducing a youth mobility scheme would be the perfect way to help solve that issue?

Not only would a closer relationship with the EU benefit Northern Irish jobs and its economy, but a new trade deal would boost the entire UK economy and provide revenue for our public services. A customs union with the EU would add up to £25 billion to the Government coffers. Labour say it wants growth, yet the Government shy away from a new deal with the EU that would cut the costly red tape that is holding so many small businesses back.

I am running out of time, so I will move to the end of my speech. Growth is possible for the UK, and, whether that is through a new deal with the EU or a fairer deal for our SMEs and industries, Northern Ireland deserves economic prosperity after years of economic neglect. The Good Friday agreement brought peace, but it did not bring prosperity, and the Conservatives’ Brexit deal has clearly not brought prosperity either.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister in His Majesty’s loyal Opposition, Andrew Griffith.

5.13 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Thank you, Dr Huq. It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship. I congratulate the right hon. Member

for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) on securing this last debate before the summer recess on this important topic. The UK's internal market, forged over centuries through the Acts of Union, is the bedrock of economic prosperity. We are indeed stronger together, and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 has provided what should be a robust foundation for economic cohesion and non-discrimination.

I accept that challenges remain, and we have heard about them today. I thought the example—the illustration—of custard, visual metaphor though that was, was important. I regret the imperfections of the Windsor framework, and this Government with their reset have the potential to use their equities to significantly improve some of those arrangements in the UK internal market, should they so wish. The right hon. Member for East Antrim drew attention to the work done by the excellent Federation of Small Businesses, highlighting the very real problems and concerns.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend, with typical generosity, says that we are all trying to get this right. I established that that is largely true, with the possible exception of the EU itself. There are those in the European Union, stung by the wise decision of the British people to leave that awful body, who have never really accepted that decision and have made life as difficult as possible—both for this country and for the businesses described by right hon. and hon. Members in this debate.

Andrew Griffith: As ever, drawing on his extensive experience in this place, my right hon. Friend makes exactly the right point. We do not have time to revisit all the imperfections of the Brexit deal imposed upon us by a recalcitrant European Union, which turned out to be a very false friend.

We should hear from the Minister, and I want to afford him as much time as possible. But my party will of course support anything that removes frictions and reunites the territorial integrity of the whole United Kingdom. We want every small business to benefit from that frictionless relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. Our Union depends on that single indivisible approach and the sort of practical solutions that we heard about, such as trusted trader schemes and utilising HMRC's already extensive data collection and reporting framework to improve the operation of our internal market. That should be something that every Member of this House seeks to do. The Government have given up things like British fishing for 12 years; I hope that we continue to see in return some real progress on this issue.

I thank all hon. Members, and congratulate the right hon. Member for East Antrim on highlighting the issue. With your permission, Dr Huq, I will give the rest of the available time to the Minister.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We are going to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the Member in charge to conclude.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Arundel and South

Downs (Andrew Griffith), for giving me ample time to respond to the many issues that have been raised. He may be keen to take a phone call as a result of the shadow Cabinet reshuffle; maybe there is a promotion or relegation in the offing. I know that he has been keenly checking his messages all afternoon.

Andrew Griffith: You're stuck with me.

Justin Madders: He is staying in place.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) on securing this debate. He referred to not having a great deal of luck in applying for debates; perhaps he is right that he has not faced as much competition because this is the last day before recess. But he is also right that this is an important issue. Given the number of Members here today, there are clearly things that people wished to raise. I want to address as many of the points as I can in the time that I have. If I do not get around to all of them, I will ensure that the relevant Minister responds.

I start by stating the current position. In January, we announced that we were reviewing the UK internal market, a move that would be quicker and broader than was required in statute. We published a public consultation on the operation of the UK Internal Market Act 2020, and at the outset of the consultation the Government made it clear that they would not repeal any part of the Act, as it contains important provisions relating to the Windsor framework and the unfettered access of qualifying Northern Ireland goods to Great Britain. It is important that we have that in the back of our minds when debating these issues.

Upholding Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market was a key manifesto commitment, and we are determined to fulfil it. At the time, the Government stated that they were not minded to weaken the protections offered by the market access principles in the Act. Those protections facilitate the free movement of goods, provision of services and recognition of professional qualifications, resulting in real benefits for businesses and people across the whole of the UK.

We recognise, however, the concerns—and hear them again today—about how the UK internal market has been operating in practice, particularly for businesses. The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lothian East (Mr Alexander), made a written ministerial statement to the House last week with the Government's response to the review and the public consultation. The review made clear that businesses across all sectors strongly support the UK Internal Market Act's market access principles to avoid unnecessary barriers to trade.

Jim Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Madders: If the hon. and learned Gentleman does not mind, I have an awful lot of responses to get into, so I will not eat into that time with interventions.

The Department has been very much guided by businesses in developing the response to the review and the consultation, and in designing the changes and improvements we will make. We also believe that growth and prosperity are supported by devolution—a belief no doubt shared by hon. Members here. The outcome of the UK Internal Market Act review has been carefully

[Justin Madders]

crafted to ensure that unnecessary barriers to trade do not arise within the UK, while maximising the scope to realise the benefits of devolved decision making.

We want to work with the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure that businesses and the Office for the Internal Market are more involved in discussions about the management of the UK internal market. We are confident that the changes we announced in our response to the review represent a more balanced and proportionate approach to managing the UK internal market than that pursued by the previous Government.

Our approach seeks to avoid the imposition of unnecessary new costs on businesses, while respecting devolved competence. Those reforms are part of our broader plan for change, which has shaped both the UK's trade strategy and industrial strategy to make the UK the best place to do business, while respecting devolved powers and delivering prosperity across the nations. We are keen to work with devolved Government Ministers to implement those improvements as soon as possible and put in place the necessary changes to the UK internal market in an effective way for the benefit of all our citizens.

Hon. Members have spoken passionately, as we would expect, about the Windsor framework. I hope it goes without saying that this Government are wholly committed to the Windsor framework. It forms part of the withdrawal agreement between the UK and the European Union, and it supports the peace and prosperity brought about by the Good Friday agreement—one of the proudest achievements of the previous Labour Government. It also plays a vital role in ensuring the smooth flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is why we supported the Windsor framework in opposition, and we continue to support it in government.

I recognise that the framework does not operate perfectly for everyone. Concerns raised by hon. Members today show that there is more to do in this area, but more than 10,000 traders have now signed up to the UK internal market scheme, and more than 1,100 operators are registered for the Northern Ireland retail movement scheme and Northern Ireland plant health label. Indeed, Northern Ireland is now one of the UK's fastest-growing regions.

We also recognise the importance of ensuring that the right advice and guidance is available to businesses when they need it. We will continue to work on those issues. I heard what was said about the Federation of Small Businesses survey. We will speak to the federation and work with it moving forward—there were some pretty damning critiques from hon. Members today about what that survey found.

Our own surveys have found that customer satisfaction with the trader support service is running at 90%, so there is a significant disconnect between what our surveys are finding and what the survey from the Federation of Small Businesses has discovered. HMRC trade statistics published on 17 July showed that 11,400 businesses were associated with Great Britain and Northern Ireland customs processes in 2024. That was actually up 200 on the number for the previous year. I therefore suggest that the picture is not quite as apocalyptic as has been

suggested by Members today, but we want to understand some more detail about why that survey showed such dissatisfaction with the current arrangements.

In taking forward commitments made in the “Safeguarding the Union” Command Paper last year, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has established the new body Intertrade UK. That body is independently looking at promoting trade across the whole of the UK, and at how we can guide and encourage businesses to trade more, invest more and grow more.

It is also important that we take the opportunity to look ahead at the broader benefits that businesses across the UK will yield from the common understanding that we are taking forward with the EU. This new partnership in agrifood, emissions trading, electricity and other issues, will remove barriers for businesses trading with our nearest neighbours. We hope it will also help smooth the flow of trade to the advantage of Northern Ireland, reflecting our commitment to the UK internal market.

On our commitments, I take issue with the comments made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim about the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who I believe is an honourable man. He is committed to Northern Ireland, and I do not accept at all the characterisation that he is disdainful or could not care less about Northern Ireland. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim also raised the issue of the duty reimbursement scheme. I understand there have been issues with that. We are seeing increased use of the scheme. HMRC processes claims quicker now than it previously did, with an average processing time of 14 days, but clearly there is more to do in that regard.

The right hon. Gentleman also raised the example of custard—clearly not a trifling matter, Dr Huq, if you will pardon the pun. The Northern Ireland retail movement scheme simplifies the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, based on UK food safety standards. In return, it was agreed that the “Not for EU” labels would be applied to some retail goods eligible to be moved by the scheme, but through the SPS agreement with the EU we will ensure that there is a consistent regulatory framework for SPS, and therefore expect “Not for EU” labels and checks to diminish significantly.

DEFRA is working closely with traders to ensure they are clear about where goods need to be labelled to be eligible for the scheme and has published detailed guidance to support that. Where possible, enforcement is proportionate, with only non-compliant goods removed, the rest of the consignment continuing on to its destination. The majority of NIRMS shipments pass into the Northern Ireland area without any issue or delay, but if there are specific examples of where things have gone wrong we would certainly be grateful to hear more detail and whether we can do anything more. However, we are making progress.

In terms of other issues raised, the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) asked about Lord Murphy's report. I can pass on to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland the eagerness of Members to see that; I am sure he will be hearing those messages already. There is a commitment to publish the report in the UK Parliament and in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am sure the Secretary of State will be keen to deliver that as soon as is practical.

I need to give the right hon. Member for East Antrim a moment to respond. I apologise for not having covered every issue that has been raised. To conclude, the Government are committed to protecting the UK's internal market and delivering for all UK citizens and businesses. We need to work together to understand where the issues are so that there are no unnecessary barriers to the flows of goods and services. Like all members of this Government, I am committed to working with hon. Members from across the House to ensure that that is the case.

5.28 pm

Sammy Wilson: I appreciate that the Minister has stepped in at short notice and is probably reading from the Government brief, but I am really disappointed. He talked about the review of the internal market and how the legislation was designed to uphold Northern Ireland's position and ensure the free movement of goods.

I do not know whether the Minister has listened to what Members have said here today, but the free movement of goods is not happening. The internal market is being

disrupted. He talks about ensuring that no more unnecessary barriers arise, but we have the labelling coming through now and the EU export control system coming through in September. We also have all the new EU legislation, which will impact on businesses and create different standards in Northern Ireland.

The Minister then put the cream in the cake by saying that the Government are committed to the Windsor framework, but the Windsor framework has been the cause of the issues raised in this report. All I can say is that this Government are going down the road of making sure they do not upset the EU—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. We now adjourn until September.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10 (14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 22 July 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Product Regulation and Metrology Act

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The Product Regulation and Metrology Act (the Act) received Royal Assent on 21 July 2025. The Act will preserve the UK's status as a global leader in product regulation, supporting businesses and protecting consumers.

The powers set out in section 1(1)(a) of the Act allow the Secretary of State to make regulations that seek to reduce or mitigate the risks presented by products. Section 1(4) of the Act sets out that, for the purposes of the Act, a product presents a risk if, when used for the purpose for which it is intended or under conditions which can reasonably be foreseen, it could:

- endanger the health or safety of persons;
- endanger the health or safety of domestic animals;
- endanger property (including the operability of other products);
- or
- cause, or be susceptible to, electromagnetic disturbance.

Section 1(5) of the Act requires the Secretary of State to make a statement setting out the process relating to the identification and assessment of risks in products.

Today I have published an overview of the product risk identification and assessment process that I would expect to be followed. This can be found in the updated product safety code of conduct, which sets out the legislative and non-legislative safeguards around the UK's product safety framework, including the use of the powers in the Act. The annex entitled "Risk identification, assessment, and response" explains the process of identifying and assessing risks, as well as consideration of regulatory and non-regulatory responses. The code of conduct will be kept under review and updated as appropriate to reflect any future changes or updates to the safeguards. The updated code of conduct is available on gov.uk and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS881]

CABINET OFFICE

National Security and Investment Act: Reforms

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Security and prosperity go hand in hand—we need a strong economy to support our security, and the investment driving our economic growth needs to be secure.

With that in mind, I am today announcing my intention to make a series of reforms to the National Security and Investment (NSI) Act 2021. These reforms are intended to keep the system up to date and transparent, and to reduce business burdens without exposing the country to greater risk.

First, I intend to remove the requirement for business to have to notify certain internal reorganisations and the appointment of liquidators, special administrators, and official receivers. These have proven to be very unlikely to present risk, and so removing these notification requirements will reduce burdens on businesses and free up Government time to focus more closely on higher-risk transactions. I will seek to bring secondary legislation to Parliament in due course.

Secondly, I am today launching a 12-week consultation on proposed updates to the notifiable acquisition regulations ("the NARs"), which set out the areas of the economy subject to mandatory notification under the NSI Act. The launch of this consultation draws from the conclusions of the statutory report I published on 19 December 2024. In response to the feedback, I will then consider what updates to take forward.

The consultation seeks views on the following proposals:

Reorganising how the NARs categorise activities in particular sectors to improve clarity. This includes creating new areas for semiconductors and critical minerals and removing them from the existing advanced materials area. The activities covered by the computing hardware area will be added to the semiconductors area.

Updating the areas for advanced materials, artificial intelligence, communications, critical suppliers to Government, data infrastructure, energy, suppliers to the emergency services, and synthetic biology.

Creating a new area to cover acquisitions in the water sector.

I expect these changes to the scope of the regulations would have a minimal overall impact on notification volumes, detailed further in the consultation document. Implementing these changes will also require secondary legislation, which I will bring to Parliament in due course.

Thirdly, I am today publishing the 2024-25 annual report alongside this package of reforms, fulfilling the requirements under section 61 of the NSI Act. A copy of the report will also be published on gov.uk.

The report shows that the Government took a decision on whether to call-in or clear all notified acquisitions within the statutory 30 working days. Of the 1,079 notifications reviewed, 95.5% were notified that no further action would be taken, and 4.5% were called in. In this reporting period, 17 final orders were issued and five called-in acquisitions were withdrawn before a decision was made.

Finally, I plan to publish more guidance in due course based on stakeholder feedback and will continue to look for ways to increase transparency in the NSI system.

[HCWS878]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Creator Remuneration from Music Streaming: Label-led Principles

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The UK's music industry is a globally significant sector, recognised for its cultural and economic contribution. The UK is currently the third largest music market in the world and the second largest exporter of recorded music. This success is underpinned by the work

of music creators, songwriters, composers, musicians, producers and performers, whose talent and dedication are fundamental to the strength and diversity of the sector.

In response to the 2021 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report on the economics of music streaming, the Government committed to addressing the concerns raised by creators and industry stakeholders about fairness, transparency and remuneration in the streaming economy.

Since then, the Government have led a comprehensive work programme that includes:

- A market study conducted by the Competition and Markets Authority;

- Research by the Intellectual Property Office into copyright reform; and

- Workstreams focused on improving metadata and transparency.

These efforts have led to significant progress, including industry-led agreements aimed at fostering a fairer and more sustainable music ecosystem.

The final issue addressed was the remuneration of creators from music streaming. Since 2024, the Government have supported industry-led efforts to tackle concerns around low streaming royalties through the DCMS-led creator remuneration working group. This group served as a forum for constructive dialogue among key industry stakeholders. It involved representatives from the music creator community, record labels, music publishers, streaming platforms and collective management organisations, who met regularly to advance collaborative solutions and drive meaningful change.

Label-led Principles

Following a series of constructive discussions, UK record companies have now agreed to a set of voluntary measures that aim to improve remuneration outcomes for UK music creators. This includes bespoke commitments to deliver them made by the UK divisions of the world's largest three labels, Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group, which are estimated to deliver tens of millions of pounds in new investment to support creators by 2030. These measures seek to support fair remuneration for our incredible creators, as well as enhancing the growth of our world-leading sector.

The principles announced today will complement the industry code of good practice on transparency and the industry agreement on metadata published in 2024, and mark a major milestone in the Government's work with the music industry in response to the DCMS Committee's 2021 report on the economics of music streaming. These principles have been developed by the British Phonographic Industry and the Association of Independent Music, and are recommended to their member organisations across the sector.

The principles include:

Support for legacy artists:

- Disregarding unrecouped advances in defined circumstances;

- Providing resources to promote catalogue music through streaming; and

- Improving clarity on the process for contract renegotiation.

Support for songwriters:

- The payment of per diems at label-organised sessions, with major labels Warner UK and Universal UK committing to a payment of £75 per day, in addition to expenses.

Sony UK will fund a bespoke new songwriter support programme, in partnership with the Ivors Academy, to provide financial support and assistance to songwriters. These payments will not be charged as a recoupable cost to their advance.

Support for Session Musicians:

- Increases to minimum session fees;

- A review of income from broadcast and public performance; and

- A commitment to convene a further meeting to address outstanding concerns.

I recognise that there are ongoing concerns, particularly in relation to session musicians. We therefore intend to convene further discussions with industry stakeholders to examine these matters in more detail.

The Government expect full delivery of these measures and will work with members of the creator remuneration working group, including the Council of Music Makers, to develop a robust monitoring process. This process will assess the extent to which the principles result in improved remuneration outcomes for creators. The Government will then consider whether further intervention is required to achieve its objective of a fair and sustainable music streaming ecosystem.

I am grateful to the BPI, the major labels and AIM for engaging constructively with this work. I want to applaud the dedication and engagement of the Council of Music Makers, including Featured Artists Coalition, the Ivors Academy, Music Managers Forum, the Music Producers Guild and the Musicians' Union for their tireless commitment to the strength and success of their members.

Finally, I thank the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and its predecessor Committees for their role in bringing attention to this important issue. The Government remain committed to supporting a thriving UK music industry that fairly rewards its creators and continues to succeed at home and internationally.

[HCWS887]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

New Nuclear: Sizewell C Investment

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): The Government clean energy superpower mission is about replacing the UK's dependence on fossil fuel markets with clean homegrown power that we control, to bring down bills for good and protect household finances.

As we drive for a clean power system, new nuclear can provide a backbone of reliable low-carbon electricity, working alongside expanded renewables to achieve a lower-cost, low-carbon and more secure electricity system for the long term.

That is why at the spending review, the Government announced plans to usher in a new golden age of nuclear power, with new funding for full-scale nuclear, small modular reactors, and fusion.

Central to this vision is Sizewell C. The spending review provided a £14.2 billion funding allocation to support project construction to the end of the spending period, building on the investments made since 2022, which have made the Government the majority shareholder in Sizewell C during the project's development.

I am pleased to confirm today that—following the conclusion of the capital raise process and required Government approval—the Government have confirmed its final investment decision, the first for a new nuclear power station in the UK since Hinkley Point C's construction was approved in 2016.

The Government have reached a commercial deal with a group of experienced equity investors: EDF, La Caisse, Centrica and Amber Infrastructure Ltd. The Government will take an initial 44.9% equity stake in the project and will be the biggest single equity shareholder. La Caisse will take a 20% stake, Centrica 15%, EDF 12.5%, and Amber Infrastructure Ltd initially 7.6%.

Alongside this investment, the National Wealth Fund—the Government principal investor and policy bank—is making its first investment in nuclear energy. It will provide the majority of the project's debt finance. The remainder is set to be provided by a number of commercial banks lending to Sizewell C, under a proposed £5 billion guarantee from the French export credit agency Bpifrance Assurance Export.

Sizewell C Ltd plan to achieve a final capital cost for the project construction of around £38 billion (2024 prices). This cost estimate has been rigorously assessed by incoming investors as part of the financing process, and follows negotiations with the project's supply chain as well as detailed scrutiny by the company of Hinkley Point C, the design of which Sizewell C will replicate. Delivering Sizewell C at this cost estimate would represent a saving of c. 20% on the estimated cost of Hinkley Point C.

During construction, consumer payments through our new funding model, the nuclear regulated asset base, will be limited to an average of around £1 a month on a typical household bill. This is a good deal for consumers, as demonstrated by the value for money assessment that will be published today. Once operational Sizewell C could create savings of £2 billion a year across the future low-carbon electricity system with consumers then benefiting from cheaper, clean power for decades to come.

Sizewell C will deliver this cheaper clean electricity to power the equivalent of around 6 million of today's homes for at least 60 years. Sizewell C will also deliver major economic benefits, supporting 10,000 jobs at peak construction—and thousands more in the wider supply chain—and as it is built will create 1,500 apprenticeships. Seventy per cent. of the value of construction is set to be awarded to British businesses. Sizewell C Ltd anticipates it will have 3,500 UK companies in its supply chain, from across the entire country.

As well as its nationwide benefits, Sizewell C stands to make a lasting positive contribution to the local and regional economy, with £4.4 billion invested in the east of England during construction, 2,600 local construction jobs created in Suffolk at peak construction, and over one third of the apprentices to come from the local area.

Further details of the terms of the deal, including the project's economic licence with modifications to use the RAB model, details of the project's funded decommissioning programme, and a value for money assessment, will be published as a suite of documents on gov.uk.

To highlight key aspects of the project and the deal for the attention of the House, the commercial structure outlined above consolidates the Government position as the main provider of finance to Sizewell C, alongside the investment of our private partners.

Working in partnership with other shareholders, the Government will oversee the project's progress and work closely with all those involved to ensure successful delivery. The private equity and debt lenders also provide a wealth of experience in delivering other large-scale infrastructure projects and encouraging positive commercial behaviours on the part of the company.

As noted, the project's capital structure will be backed by the RAB funding model; this is a tried and tested approach to funding large-scale infrastructure, and the first time this approach will be used for a UK nuclear project.

The framework includes robust incentives and penalties for shareholders to ensure the project stays on track and mitigates the risk of significant overruns. These incentives include reducing investor returns if the project overruns cost thresholds set out in the economic licence. Lenders will also have levers to incentivise good governance and cost control by the shareholders, such as the ability to "lock up" shareholder dividends in certain scenarios. The company's supply chain is also strongly incentivised to deliver to this cost estimate.

The RAB structure will be regulated by the UK's independent energy regulator, Ofgem. Revenues will be collected from electricity suppliers by the Low Carbon Contracts Company, previously designated as the counterparty for revenue collection contracts for the purposes of the nuclear RAB model.

The outcome of the capital raise follows a competitive process involving a wide range of potential investors, and we are grateful to all parties who participated. The high level of interest demonstrates confidence in both the Government vision for nuclear power and in UK nuclear projects as an investable asset class, as well as confidence in the Government as a credible partner for delivering key infrastructure.

The deal confirmed today ends an era of delay to give Sizewell C the go-ahead. It will help secure Britain's homegrown nuclear supply far beyond 2030, and marks a major step in the Government mission to take back control of the country's energy supply, reduce dependence on global fossil fuel markets and protect household finances.

[HCWS880]

Prax Lindsey Oil Refinery

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): On Monday 30 June, I made a written ministerial statement and gave an oral statement regarding the deeply disappointing news that Prax Lindsey oil refinery had entered insolvency. Today, I am updating the House on the urgent work undertaken by the official receiver to manage the situation on the Prax Lindsey site and determine next steps.

Since the refinery entered insolvency, we have worked urgently to ensure the safety of the refinery site and the security of fuel supplies, and to protect workers. This has also allowed time for bidders to express an interest in the site.

The official receiver has rigorously assessed all the bids received and concluded that sale of the business as a whole is not a credible option. Having visited some of the workers on site on 17 July, I know this will be hugely disappointing news for them, their families and the local community.

A package has been offered to all those directly employed at the refinery which guarantees jobs and pay over the coming months. The Government will also immediately fund a comprehensive training guarantee for these refinery workers, to ensure they have the skills they need, and that they are supported to find jobs—for example, in the growing clean energy workforce.

Furthermore, we understand that the official receiver continues to explore various proposals for assets. I therefore remain hopeful that a solution will be found that creates future employment opportunities at the Immingham site.

The refinery will continue to process crude for the rest of the month, and the official receiver will continue selling refined products for a number of weeks, giving buyers time to adjust their supply chains.

The former owners left the company in a poor state and gave the Government very little time to act. That is why the Energy Secretary immediately demanded that the Insolvency Service launches an investigation into their conduct and the circumstances surrounding insolvency, which is now under way, and I have repeatedly called on the owners do the right thing and provide financial support to the workforce.

[HCWS882]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

River Basin Management Plans: Next Steps

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The water industry is failing. Our rivers, lakes and seas are polluted with record levels of sewage. Water pipes have been left to crumble into disrepair. We share customers' fury at rising bills. The lack of water infrastructure is blocking economic growth and a broken regulatory system has failed customers and failed the environment.

This Government are committed to delivering the bold and necessary reforms needed to fix our water sector. Our priority is to restore our rivers, lakes and seas to good ecological health, and to put in place a planning framework that works for the environment, the public, and future generations. This Government was elected to clean up water pollution and ensure unacceptable water bill hikes can never happen again. The report of the Independent Water Commission published yesterday proposes how to do this, and the Government will set out our response in the next parliamentary Session.

In May, I confirmed that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will work together with the Environment Agency on how to deliver improved river basin management planning consistently with the Court of Appeal's conclusions in *Pickering Fishery Association v. Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*, and committed to setting out more information in due course.

I can now set out the next phase of work to take steps consistent with the Court of Appeal judgment and provide a strong foundation for long-term reform. I am pleased to announce that DEFRA and the Environment Agency are working closely towards updating programmes of measures consistent with the judgment. The Environment Agency has already begun work to review and improve a water body level programme of measures across the country to support nationwide action to improve water quality.

To support this work, DEFRA and the Environment Agency also intend to develop a targeted, "ground up" approach to reviewing and identifying new programmes of measures in a small number of catchments. The EA plans to work with local stakeholders with knowledge of the local issues affecting their catchments and test new approaches in identifying the actions needed to improve water quality.

This represents a first step in developing an approach towards improving planning for the water environment, and will help identify where further action or reform may be required.

These steps reflect the Government's commitment to taking forward action to improve water quality, while work proceeds on broader regulatory reforms to implement the recommendations of the Independent Water Commission.

[HCWS886]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

ODA Target 2024

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): My noble Friend the Minister of State for International Development, Latin America and Caribbean, the right hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington, has today made the following statement:

The FCDO's annual report and accounts 2024-25, published today, reports that in 2024, on a provisional basis, the United Kingdom did not meet its target to spend the equivalent of 0.7% of gross national income on official development assistance.

The International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015 envisages situations in which a departure from meeting the target of spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA may be necessary, including due to economic circumstances, fiscal circumstances and circumstances arising outside the UK. The fiscal circumstances did not allow for ODA spending to be returned to 0.7% of GNI in 2024.

This Government are committed to restoring ODA spending at the level of 0.7% of GNI as soon as fiscal circumstances allow. The principles for a return will be met when, on a sustainable basis, the Government are not borrowing for day-to-day spending and underlying debt is falling. We will monitor future forecasts closely against these tests. The latest forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility indicates that the tests will not be met in this Parliament. The Government are working hard to create the conditions to enable the ODA fiscal tests to be met by prioritising growth—stronger growth will help in time to get underlying debt down.

As required by section 2 of the 2015 Act, an unnumbered Act paper has been laid before Parliament and is in the same terms as this statement.

[HCWS888]

Overseas Territories: Illicit Finance Dialogue and Beneficial Ownership Registers

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): In my statement of 3 July, I provided an update on progress made by our overseas territories on delivering on commitments at the Joint Ministerial Council in November 2024 on corporate transparency and beneficial ownership registers.

On 15 July, I convened a virtual illicit finance ministerial dialogue with elected leaders of the overseas territories, Ministers and senior officials and was pleased to be joined by Baroness Hodge, the Prime Minister's anti-corruption champion.

We discussed the importance of working together to tackle the threats of illicit finance and the important role that beneficial ownership registers play as part of our toolkit.

In line with my previous statement of 3 July, we reviewed progress made in each overseas territory, and I have asked Baroness Hodge, in her capacity as the Prime Minister's anti-corruption champion, to support me and other Ministers in working with the overseas territories to help deliver progress. As an immediate next step, Baroness Hodge will visit the British Virgin Islands to assess progress in implementing their commitments on beneficial ownership registers. She will report back to me after the summer. I will carefully consider what further steps to take in the light of this report.

Our next formal review of progress will be at the next Joint Ministerial Council scheduled in November. I and my officials will remain in close contact with the overseas territories prior to that to support completion of the commitments made previously.

I also updated overseas territory leaders and other delegates about the opportunity to work together in support of the Foreign Secretary's illicit finance campaign and ahead of the countering illicit finance summit that is being planned in 2026.

I welcome the work of the overseas territories to implement international standards, including the Cayman Islands, which have been appointed by the Financial Action Task Force as guest members under the new regional bodies' guest initiative.

Finally, we discussed the important role of the overseas territories in implementing and enforcing UK sanctions. I commended the efforts of the overseas territories to implement UK sanctions effectively and acknowledged the excellent progress that the overseas territories are making on building their sanctions capabilities.

I encouraged the overseas territories to strengthen their enforcement frameworks, in line with the outcomes of the UK's own sanctions enforcement review, including by exploring introduction of civil monetary penalties for sanctions breaches in overseas territory jurisdictions and increasing information sharing on sanctions wherever possible. I underlined the ongoing Government commitment to support the overseas territories in this vital work.

[HCWS877]

Global Irregular Migration and Trafficking in Persons Sanctions Regulations 2025

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): Today I am updating the House on the introduction of "The Global Irregular Migration and Trafficking in Persons Sanction Regulations 2025" which will be laid before Parliament in due course and will be debated after the summer recess. These regulations are subject to the made affirmative procedure for secondary legislation.

This new sanctions regime is the first of its kind anywhere in the world and aims to tackle people smuggling and human trafficking and those that enable, facilitate, promote and profit from these vile trades. It is made under powers provided to the Government by the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 and delivers on the commitment made in my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's speech in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Locarno room of 9 January to bring forward legalisation to tackle this evil trade as quickly as possible.

This regime will stop criminal gangs exploiting some of the most vulnerable, to prevent them profiting from risking the lives of innocent human beings, and to stop them getting rich and committing more crime on Britain's streets.

The regulations provide extensive new powers enabling the Government to designate persons who are involved in people smuggling, trafficking in persons and the instrumentalisation of migration for the purpose of destabilisation. Those sanctioned under the regime face being banned from entering the UK, prevented from being a UK company director, and having any assets held in the UK frozen. These powers will complement our wider efforts to break the business model of those profiting from the misery of others in this way.

This regime delivers on the Government's commitment to use every tool available to crack down on the abominable people smugglers risking people's lives, including in the English channel. It gives the Government new powers to take direct action against them and their enablers in the way we can already against terrorists, cybercriminals and corrupt kleptocrats.

Sanctions experts from across Government have worked in close collaboration with the Home Office and law enforcement authorities to deliver an effective and targeted sanctions regime that will help stem the finance flows of people smugglers at source and deter them from taking part in this inhuman trade.

As the world's first sanctions regime dedicated to targeting irregular migration and organised immigration crime, it will target individuals and entities wherever they are—from countries of origin to those who smuggle migrants across borders or enable and facilitate these dangerous journeys. It will allow the Government to sanction targets along the entire smuggling and trafficking chain, including companies involved in small boat supply chains and organised immigration criminals and their enablers.

While we are proud to be leading the way on this issue, people smuggling and human trafficking are not problems the UK faces alone, but shared global challenges.

We will continue to play a leading role with our international partners to combat these joint challenges, including to strengthen our sanctions co-ordination.

This is part of the Government's resolute mission to secure our borders and crack down on irregular migration. This Government have made irregular migration a priority from the outset, and we are continuing to break new ground on innovative approaches to address the challenge, including the recently agreed groundbreaking pilot with France to detain and return migrants who arrive via small boat. The Germans have also committed to amend their criminal legislation this year to explicitly cover facilitating irregular migration to the UK. This will save lives by disrupting the dangerous small boat supply chains of criminal networks.

The sanctions regime forms part of these wider efforts to secure our borders and disrupt and deter dangerous irregular migration, complementing new powers for law enforcement, including those introduced in the Border, Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. In the last year, this Government have more than doubled asylum decision making—a 116% increase since the election. We have also made over 35,000 returns since the election—a 13% increase compared with the same period 12 months ago. We have increased illegal working raids and arrests by 50% in the last year, with 7,130 arrests and over 10,000 raids—the first time in a 12-month period where more than 10,000 raids have taken place.

By helping to smash the people smuggling gangs and tackle irregular migration flows upstream, this regime will play an important role in delivering the Government's plan for change on behalf of the British people.

[HCWS879]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

ME/CFS Final Delivery Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I am pleased to announce to the House that today the Government have published their final delivery plan for myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome.

This Government have a clear commitment to ensure that people with long-term conditions like ME/CFS can live as independently as possible and see their overall quality of life enhanced. This plan will help us take an important step towards achieving this.

ME/CFS can be an incredibly disabling condition to live with, for as many as 390,000 people living in the UK. Its fluctuating symptoms can make it difficult for those affected to take part in everyday activities, enjoy a family or social life, access services they need and engage in work or education. Those with severe or very severe ME/CFS face particular challenges, finding even the most basic daily tasks or activities impossible.

The aim of the final delivery plan for ME/CFS is to improve the experiences of those affected, with a focus on boosting research, improving attitudes and education, and enhancing care and support. The plan sets out a series of actions, which will help address the key challenges and drive forward improvements to outcomes and quality of life for people living with ME/CFS in England.

People living with ME/CFS often face stigma and misunderstanding, stemming from a lack of awareness and education about the condition. This lack of awareness and understanding can significantly impact the quality and availability of services and support for those affected.

Research too will be particularly important in helping to improve understanding of the condition, informing improved diagnosis, the development of new effective treatments and better support for patients.

In this respect, the plan sets out a long-term vision for a co-ordinated, well-funded, and inclusive research environment that reflects the complexity and severity of ME/CFS. As part of this, we will launch a new funding opportunity with a National Institute for Health and Care Research application development award focused on evaluating repurposed pharmaceutical inventions for post-acute infection syndromes and associated conditions, including ME/CFS.

On education and awareness, the plan commits to increasing knowledge of ME/CFS among public sector professionals, as well as the wider public, by ensuring that information and learning resources are up to date, publicised and signposted.

Through a range of measures, the plan also commits to: improving the quality and accessibility of health services and adult social care; appropriate and timely support for children and young people in education; and helping people with ME/CFS to find and maintain employment.

While many actions in the plan are specific to ME/CFS, others relate to wider initiatives that will benefit people with long-term conditions, including those with ME/CFS. The recently published 10-year health plan set out the three big shifts our NHS needs to be fit for the future: from hospital to community; from analogue to digital; and from sickness to prevention. Services will be moved closer to, and into, people's homes, providing faster diagnosis and faster access to treatment for patients with long-term conditions like ME/CFS. By 2028-29, neighbourhood health teams will be organised around the needs of their patients. Joined-up working across hospitals and into community settings will be created, with multidisciplinary teams, which can provide wrap around support services.

I would like to thank the many people with ME/CFS, carers, health and care professionals, researchers and research funders, charities and patient groups, and other interested organisations and individuals who contributed to the public consultation on the interim delivery plan. Their insights into the realities of living with the condition will help ensure that the agreed actions will meet real needs and help address the health and care inequalities people living with ME/CFS can experience.

I would also like to thank members of the ME/CFS task and finish group, who so generously gave their time to contribute to the development of the plan, and for their continued support in agreeing further actions where these will be required. We have listened very carefully to group members and recognise that further work will be needed, and we will continue to build on the foundations of these actions well beyond the publication of this plan.

While the final delivery plan covers England, the devolved Governments have considered the policy implications arising from the consultation on the interim delivery plan and discussions within the task and finish group for their own nations.

A copy of the final delivery plan will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS884]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration Report: Age Assessment Checks

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): In the immigration White Paper, published on 12 May, we undertook to improve the robustness of the age assessment process, including exploring scientific and technological methods to ensure that adults entering the asylum or immigration system are not wrongly identified as children, or vice versa. I wish to update the House on that work today.

Accurately assessing the age of individuals is an incredibly complex and difficult task, and the Home Office has spent a number of years analysing which scientific and technological methods would best assist the current process, including looking at the role that artificial intelligence technology can play. Since coming into office, this Government have commissioned further tests and analysis to determine the most promising methods to pursue further.

Based on this work, we have concluded that the most cost-effective option to pursue is likely to be facial age estimation, whereby AI technology trained on millions of images where an individual's age is verifiable is able to produce an age estimate with a known degree of accuracy for an individual whose age is unknown or disputed.

In a situation where those involved in the age assessment process are unsure whether an individual is aged over or under 18, or do not accept the age an individual is claiming to be, facial age estimation offers a potentially rapid and simple means to test their judgments against the estimates produced by the technology. The quality of this technology has improved rapidly, and is continuing to evolve and improve as it becomes more widely adopted by online retailers, social media websites and other companies to conduct online age verification tests.

Early assessments suggest that facial age estimation could produce workable results much quicker than other potential methods of scientific or technological age assessment, such as bone X-rays or MRI scans, but at a fraction of the cost, and with no requirement for a physical medical procedure or accompanying medical supervision.

I have therefore commissioned further work to test and trial this technology, with testing due to begin later this year, and I have commenced a procurement process, which has involved market engagement, with an invite to tender to be launched in early August, so that—subject to the results of further testing and assurance—facial age estimation could be fully integrated into the current age assessment system over the course of 2026.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Age Estimation Science Advisory Committee for the work it has carried out since 2021 to support the development and analysis of options in this area. The Home Office will continue to consult closely with experts in the field as we pursue the facial age estimation method, and will also maintain an open mind as other techniques emerge or evolve that could provide an alternative in the future.

I am also today publishing the report of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration into the Home Office's use of age assessments, along with the Home Office's response to the recommendations the inspector has made. This inspection was carried out prior to the Home Office reaching its conclusions on scientific and technological methods to support the age assessment process, as set out above, and does not therefore take into account either those conclusions, or the decisions I have announced today.

[HCWS885]

Combating Ransomware

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today the Government have published their response to the public consultation on our proposed measures to combat ransomware. Ransomware is the most significant cyber-crime threat of our time. I would like to thank all who responded to the consultation, the Government value the feedback.

We have seen the devastating impact that ransomware has on our businesses and society, demonstrated through the recent spate of attacks on our retail sector and healthcare providers.

During the consultation, officials held several stakeholder engagement sessions and consulted across a range of industries. There were 273 responses from critical national infrastructure, industry, academia and individuals with an interest in cyber-security who wanted to have their say on the changes we proposed.

The three measures we consulted on are:

- a targeted ban on ransomware payments for the public sector and critical national infrastructure—making the essential services the country relies on the most unattractive targets for ransomware criminals;

- a ransomware payment prevention regime—to increase transparency of criminal demands, and provide an opportunity to give victims not covered by the ban guidance before they decide how to respond;

- and a mandatory reporting regime for all ransomware incidents—bringing ransomware out of the shadows and affording law enforcement greater intelligence on criminal activity.

We received clear support from the public to continue to develop our measures, to harden our economy from these attacks and protect our critical and essential services. They will provide our operational partners with vital intelligence to expose, detect and disrupt these criminal networks. To defend the economy and our business, we need to break the ransomware business model.

We will continue listening to and engaging with organisations from all sectors and civil society, to help develop these proposals further and to ensure they are as robust, streamlined, and effective as possible.

A copy of the Government response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and made available on gov.uk.

[HCWS883]

Petitions

Tuesday 22 July 2025

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The humanitarian situation in Bangladesh

The petition of residents of the constituency of Woking

Declares that there are mounting reports of extreme violence, persecution, destruction, and repression taking place in Bangladesh; further declares that ordinary people are being terrorised, with rising violent crime, religious extremism, politically motivated attacks, public harassment of women, and persecution of religious and ethnic minorities; and notes that these abuses are occurring under the unelected interim government of Bangladesh, with grave concern that the situation may deteriorate further without international scrutiny.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to recognise the human rights abuses taking place under the interim government in Bangladesh; to work with international partners to press the United Nations to carry out an investigation assessing the risks of potential repression, the country falling further into turmoil, and the wider implications for regional security; and to take steps to hold responsible to account, ensuring protection, accountability, and justice for the people affected.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mr Will Forster.*]

[P003106]

OBSERVATIONS

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Petrol prices in Dunfermline

The petition of residents of the constituency of Dunfermline and Dollar,

Declares that residents in Dunfermline are being unfairly charged higher fuel prices compared to nearby areas; states that fuel is an essential commodity required by the majority of people within Dunfermline for their daily lives and essential for the local and regional economy; understands unfair petrol pricing puts a significant strain on family incomes, particularly for younger people, those on low incomes and small businesses; and notes that over 600 people have signed an online petition relating to this issue.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to instruct the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate higher petrol prices in Dunfermline compared to the immediate area and take immediate action to address this that will ensure petrol prices are fair and competitive in Scotland's historic capital and newest city.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Graeme Downie, Official Report, 6 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 653.*]

[P003066]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):

The Government acknowledge the concerns raised by the petitioners in Dunfermline. When petrol and diesel prices are high, the impacts are felt by everyone. That is why this Government are committed to delivering for drivers and ensuring they get value for money at the pump.

The Competition and Markets Authority has played a crucial role in reviewing and addressing the rise in fuel prices in the UK. The CMA's road fuel market study, published in July 2023, found that competition in the road fuels retail market had weakened at a national and local level, ultimately failing consumers. To address this, the CMA recommended that the Government should introduce a road fuels monitoring function and a statutory open data scheme for road fuel prices.

The Government are committed to implementing these recommendations to help drive down pump prices. The CMA received statutory information gathering powers through the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 so it can continue to monitor and scrutinise fuel prices. In addition, the Government announced that we would introduce an open data scheme called "fuel finder", which will increase price transparency, so drivers can compare prices to find the best deal. We expect this could result in fuel cost savings of 1p to 6p per litre at the pump. Subject to parliamentary passage, we aim to launch "fuel finder" by the end of 2025.

Our goal is to ensure that petrol prices in areas like Dunfermline are aligned with those in the immediate area, providing fair and competitive pricing for all drivers.

Radford Semele Solar Farm

The petition of residents of the constituency of Warwick and Leamington,

Declares that that the proposed construction and associated planning application of a 49.99 MW solar farm and battery storage facility by Staffordshire Solar 1 Ltd, on Land to the west of Fosse Way and to the south-east of Radford Semele (W/24/1404), should not be approved; notes that the measures laid out by GB Energy, to ensure that slavery and human trafficking is not taking place in its business or supply chains, should be the same conditions applied to this application to prevent the use, supply and involvement of forced labour in UK infrastructure projects; acknowledges that the scheme is only 0.01 MW below the acceptable tolerance stipulated by the Government's 50 MW threshold, which would qualify the project as a nationally significant infrastructure project requiring greater scrutiny; further declares that the proposed site is located close to a substantial village and would impact on the recreational amenity of the residents; further declares that the proposed site comprises grades 2 and 3a "best" and "most versatile" agricultural land, which should be protected from such industrial developments in accordance with planning regulations; and notes that Government data suggests that three additional solar farms are either operational or being developed within 2 miles of the site.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review and refuse the application for a solar farm near Leamington, to consider an alternative location within the nearby area or an onshore wind farm within a few miles, and to

ensure that the local community is properly included in the proposal and planning of such energy schemes going forwards.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Matt Western, *Official Report*, 19 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 856.]

[P003071]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):

On 20 May 2025, the planning committee of Warwick district council refused an application for planning permission relating to this proposal. It would not be appropriate for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to comment on this decision or the merits of the proposed development. Likewise, it is not for the UK Government to intervene in decisions about the precise location of specific projects—these are left to private developers.

The Government are committed to achieving clean power by 2030. This is an ambitious mission, which will require the accelerated roll-out of various renewable energy sources, including solar. The clean power action plan, published last year, sets out that 45 to 47 GW of solar will be required in 2030, up from around 18 GW today.

All solar projects are subject to a rigorous planning process, in which the views and interests of local communities are considered. This includes any impact on visual amenity, land use, food production, or the natural environment. Planning guidance also sets out how decision makers should consider cumulative impacts where several projects are proposed in close proximity.

Planning guidance makes it clear that, wherever possible, developers should utilise brownfield, industrial, contaminated, or previously developed land. Where the development of agricultural land is shown to be necessary, lower-quality land should be preferred to higher-quality land.

Community engagement is an essential part of the planning process. The national planning policy framework, which governs planning decisions taken by local authorities,

encourages developers to engage with local communities before submitting an application. Members of the public can also submit their views to planning authorities; significant concerns will be considered as part of the local decision-making process.

On 31 December 2025, the threshold above which projects are classified as nationally significant infrastructure projects will be raised from 50 MW to 100 MW. This will better reflect the economics of the modern solar sector, and prevent artificial clustering around the 50 MW threshold. It will also return control over a greater number of projects to local planning authorities.

The Government agree with the petitioners that no company in the UK should have forced labour in its supply chains. We are working collaboratively on this important issue to see where we can go further. We are considering how we can strengthen section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (which places a requirement on businesses with a turnover of £36 million or more to publish an annual modern slavery statement), including possible penalties for non-compliance. We are also working with a wide group of stakeholders to update the section 54 statutory guidance. The Procurement Act 2023 enables public sector contracting authorities to reject bids and terminate contracts with suppliers that are known to use forced labour themselves or anywhere in their supply chain.

Moreover, over the past two years, the solar taskforce has focused on identifying and taking forward the actions needed to develop resilient, sustainable and innovative supply chains that are free from forced labour. Details are set out in the solar road map, which was published on 30 June. The road map includes the Government's commitment to support and engage with key industry standards, such as the solar stewardship initiative, and, if necessary, identify where further action is needed, so we can prevent Government and wider UK contracts from being awarded to those who cannot meet ethical and industry-specific standards.

Written Correction

Tuesday 22 July 2025

Other Correction

DR BECCY COOPER

Maternity Services

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Maternity Services on 25 February 2025.

Dr Beccy Cooper: ...The Women and Equalities Committee highlights that gynaecological care waiting lists have grown faster than lists in any other specialty in recent years. **As a public health professional, it saddens me to say this, but the NHS Confederation reports that**

the UK stands out as the country with the largest female health gap in the G20 and the 12th largest globally, with women spending three more years in ill health and disability compared with men. Those systemic failings underpin the poor outcomes and health inequalities that we see in maternity care.

[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 303WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper):

Dr Beccy Cooper: ...The Women and Equalities Committee highlights that gynaecological care waiting lists have grown faster than lists in any other specialty in recent years. **As a public health professional, it saddens me to say that women spend more years in ill health and disability compared with men.** Those systemic failings underpin the poor outcomes and health inequalities that we see in maternity care.

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Tuesday 29 July 2025**

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