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House of Commons

Thursday 23 October 2025

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to questions, I know that there has been some commentary on what Members may or may not discuss in the Chamber in relation to Prince Andrew, some of which is inaccurate. There is understandably great interest in this matter, from Members and from the public. For the benefit of the House, I would like to be clear that there are ways for the House properly to consider this matter. Any reflections on the conduct of members of the royal family can properly be discussed on substantive motions. I know that some Members have already tabled such a motion. I am unable to allocate time for a debate on such a motion, but others are able to do so if they wish. The long-standing practice of the House, as set out in "Erskine May", is that criticism of members of the royal family cannot be made as part of questions. I hope that clarification is helpful, as there has been a lot of online speculation.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Public Sector Reform

1. **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to develop the Government's approach to public sector reform. [905951]

2. **Mrs Elsie Blundell** (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [905952]

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): The Prime Minister has asked me to help drive the Government's delivery of the public's priorities: boosting living standards, fixing our NHS and securing our borders. I and the team are focused on changing how Government works, to build the foundations of a modern British state that delivers for the British people, using modern technology with more accountability and by breaking down silos and outdated hierarchy.

Lewis Atkinson: Could my right hon. Friend outline what role he thinks digital ID could play in supporting public sector reform?

Darren Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology for her dedicated work on the Prime Minister's recent announcement on digital identity. As of today, the Cabinet Office has responsibility for the policy, legislation and strategic oversight of the digital ID programme, with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology leading on technical design, build and delivery. Together, we will work to build the foundations of a modern British state that delivers better public services for people across the country, and digital ID will play a part in that work.

Mrs Blundell: The last Government left the public services on which our constituents rely on their knees, with many just about keeping their head above water, and the Probation Service is no different. Since being elected, I have come to understand the dire ramifications of what can go wrong when local probation services are not performing to the standard that local people should expect, especially when it comes to the suitable placement and proper monitoring of serious offenders post release. What engagement is taking place between the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Justice to ensure that when errors are made by local probation delivery units, there is proper accountability and corrective measures are taken to protect our constituents from those who could still cause them harm?

Darren Jones: I know that my hon. Friend has been a vocal campaigner for her constituents in relation to the injustice experienced through the Probation Service in and around her constituency. Public protection is, of course, a key priority for this Government, and serious further offences, although rare, are devastating for victims and their families. The Ministry of Justice and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service take learnings from serious further offence reviews, inspectorate of probation reports and internal audits to identify opportunities for improvement, and the Cabinet Office supports those Departments in these endeavours.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): In my constituency, organisations such as Just the Job, Yatton House, Northdale and Chopsticks provide valuable services for adults with complex disabilities and learning difficulties, so will the Minister join me in commending them? May I urge him to continue the work that I know his Department is doing on exploring where local voluntary and charitable organisations can play an effective and efficient role in delivering public services for local communities?

Darren Jones: May I join the right hon. Member in celebrating the success of the organisations in his constituency? He and the House will know that when the Government talk about delivery, we are really talking about those organisations that deliver real change for people's lives, not about processes in Whitehall. It is organisations in the voluntary sector, as well as Whitehall Departments, local authorities and private sector businesses, that help us deliver that change across the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his very positive answers. What steps have been taken to improve community healthcare services, to ease the pressures on our hospitals and encourage more care in local areas?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member will no doubt have heard from the Health Secretary in Health questions and subsequent statements about the NHS 10-year plan, which is moving the delivery of services from hospitals into the community. We know that too many patients end up in A&E, for example, making hospital delivery very difficult, because they cannot access support and care in the community. That is why the Department of Health and Social Care has been setting out its plans for supporting the delivery of care services in the local community, where local people are.

United Kingdom Security Vetting

3. **Michelle Scrogham** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the efficiency of the security clearance processes of United Kingdom Security Vetting. [905954]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that UKSV delivers a security clearance process that is efficient and fit for purpose. Security vetting clearances are being processed within agreed timescales, and UKSV performance is monitored monthly. It is working to ensure that demand for vetting is forecast better.

Michelle Scrogham: The Minister will know how proud we in Barrow are to be building our world-class nuclear submarines. Working in the shipyard requires security clearance, which is provided by UKSV. However, some of my constituents have lost job offers due to the significant delays in receiving clearance. That has a severe impact on those individuals as well as on our ability to deliver the submarines that defend the country. Can the Minister assure me that steps are being taken to speed up the process?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend will know better than anyone that Barrow makes a critical contribution to national security. I can assure her that UKSV continues to undertake a programme of work to improve the efficiency of the vetting process and that further work is ongoing to digitise and improve the automation of processes. If she has any further concerns, I would be happy to discuss them with her.

Voluntary Sector: Partnership Working

4. **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to strengthen partnership working with the voluntary sector. [905955]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons): The Government believe that strong partnerships with the voluntary sector are central to delivering for people across the country. Following publication in July of the civil society covenant—our ambitious plan to partner with civil society—we are now working with partners to launch a new £100 million programme that will reform services at a local level to help prevent the most vulnerable from falling into crisis. It will involve partnering with the voluntary sector to support people who might otherwise fall through the cracks between services, such as prison leavers or those suffering domestic abuse.

Danny Beales: I welcome the covenant and the Minister's response. Research from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations indicates that the charity and voluntary sector delivers £14 billion of public services annually. In my constituency, Hillingdon citizens advice bureau, Mencap and Mind provide vital advice and support, but in recent years their funding has been cut by the local authority. What steps is the Cabinet Office taking to reform public procurement and strengthen partnership working with the voluntary sector so that such organisations can play a greater role in future?

Josh Simons: I know that my hon. Friend has been a real leader in working with voluntary organisations in his constituency of Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and indeed across the country. As he knows, those organisations are often closest to the communities they serve. I am proud to say that, from April next year, all Government Departments must set a two-year target for direct spend with voluntary, community and social enterprises, and they must publish their results annually. That is a clear commitment to this Government's belief that the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector is vital to rebuilding and renewing our country.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I welcome the Minister's reassurance. The UK shared prosperity fund is about to come to an end, to be replaced by the local growth fund, and voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland have real concerns that they will be left in limbo between one ending and the other starting. I recognise what the Minister just said about the two-year funding pot, but what reassurances can he give those organisations in Northern Ireland that their funding will carry over? They support some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

Josh Simons: My understanding is that the new funding will start in the new financial year, but I will look into the specific issue the hon. Gentleman raised in relation to Northern Ireland, and I will write to him to reassure him on that.

Future Pandemic Preparedness

5. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What progress he has made with Cabinet colleagues on improving cross-Government co-ordination on preparedness for a future pandemic. [905958]

17. **Sadik Al-Hassan** (North Somerset) (Lab): What progress he has made with Cabinet colleagues to improve cross-Government co-ordination on preparedness for a future pandemic. [905974]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): As the response to module 1 of the covid-19 inquiry made clear, the Cabinet Office is playing a greater role in preparedness for cross-cutting catastrophic risks. Our preparedness for future pandemics has been stepped up through Exercise Pegasus, the largest ever national pandemic response exercise.

Katrina Murray: Last week I had the pleasure of meeting the general manager of one of the major supermarkets in my constituency. We talked about our memories of the early days of the covid pandemic, with

the rows and rows of empty shelves. All pandemic planning should build on the lessons learned from the last one, so what role is the retail and logistics sector playing in that?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right: businesses that move and sell vital goods are an essential part of any pandemic response. The resilience action plan, which was published in response to module 1 of the covid-19 inquiry, seeks to enable a whole-of-society approach to pandemic resilience. As part of that effort, we invited businesses to participate in the ongoing national pandemic exercise, Exercise Pegasus.

Sadik Al-Hassan: As a pharmacist who worked on the frontline throughout the pandemic, I would like to ask what discussions the Cabinet Office has had with local resilience forums to ensure that areas such as my North Somerset constituency have the local co-ordination structures needed to respond effectively to a future pandemic, particularly given the strain on our community health service?

Dan Jarvis: I thank my hon. Friend for his vital work on the frontline during the pandemic. The Government absolutely recognise that the most complex emergencies impact the whole system. That is why there has been extensive engagement with local partners ahead of Exercise Pegasus. The exercise will test national-to-local co-ordination arrangements, and lessons from the exercise will help strengthen pandemic preparedness at national and local levels.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): During the pandemic, Government agencies, bodies and Departments suddenly discovered ways to comply with GDPR to share significant amounts of data, which was critical to managing the pandemic response. Since then, the shroud of using GDPR as a reason not to share data has once again choked opportunities to solve the big problems facing our society. As part of his work on resilience planning, will the Minister ensure that data is shared with Departments on a day-to-day basis in future, to get around the use of GDPR as a reason not to share it?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member makes a sensible and constructive point, and I can give him the assurances he seeks. Since January, increasing our preparedness has included publishing an updated central crisis management doctrine—the Amber Book—as well as launching the biothreats radar to improve data sharing. We have also, as I have said, undertaken the largest ever national pandemic planning exercise.

Strengthening National Resilience

6. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [905959]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): In July the Government published the resilience action plan, which sets out our strategic vision for a stronger and more resilient United Kingdom. The Government also successfully carried out the second ever national drill of the emergency alert system last month. I am pleased to tell the House that the test reached 96% of cell masts across the country. That is a significant improvement on the first test in April 2023 and indicates that more people are receiving these critical alerts than ever before.

Alison Hume: In August, authorities declared a major incident after a wildfire broke out in Langdale forest and spread dangerously close to RAF Fylingdales, the ballistic missile early warning base. Given the increasing threat that wildfires pose to our security, can the Minister confirm whether he will consider automatically activating a national resilience response in future incidents where critical military infrastructure is under threat?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and I commend the emergency services and the local community who came together in her constituency to bravely tackle the Langdale moor fire. The risk of wildfires to critical sites is well known to local responders, who plan for such events and can call on central Government for support. The national resilience wildfire adviser assesses what additional wildfire national capabilities might be needed to increase resilience for future incidents.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Government's own advisers tell us that the climate and nature crisis poses a huge resilience threat to our country. Yet, in an answer to a question on wildfires, the Minister does not even reference that climate change makes them more frequent and severe. What are the Government doing to tackle this huge threat from climate change?

Dan Jarvis: The Government routinely conduct and update assessments on a whole range of threats. On gov.uk, the Government publish the outcome of those assessments in the national risk register and in their chronic risks analysis, including on climate change, biodiversity loss and the impact on our ecosystems.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the new Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to his post. I know that he is one of the most able performers in the Government, and he is now in one of the most important and under-appreciated roles in Government. For the good of the country, I wish him well. He is also the first Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister. We Conservatives congratulate him on how well Downing Street has been run since he took over—we have enjoyed it greatly. Phase 2 is proving to be a real belter.

On the alleged spying on Members of this House, Downing Street has revealed that the Prime Minister became aware on 13 September that the case was about to collapse. When was the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister first told that the trial was unlikely to proceed, and who told him?

Dan Jarvis: I am slightly struggling to make the connection with resilience, Mr Speaker, but I am very happy to respond—

Mr Speaker: Perhaps I can help, then. Security does include the resilience and the security of this House. I can go through it a bit more if need be, but I am sure that the Minister will use his imagination to answer.

Dan Jarvis: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Well, let me tell the hon. Gentleman. The decision not to prosecute was taken independently by the Crown Prosecution Service. The Government were extremely disappointed by that decision and published the deputy National Security Adviser's three witness statements. All three clearly articulate the very serious threats posed by China. No Minister or special adviser in this Government interfered with the case. I wonder whether Conservative Members could have said the same about their Government.

Alex Burghart: Okay, I will repeat the question for the Security Minister, because either he did not hear it or he chose not to answer it. My question was very specific. We know that the Prime Minister was told on 13 September that the trial was unlikely to proceed—Downing Street has told us that. My question is: when was the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster told, and who told him? He oversees the Cabinet Office's National Security Secretariat, and he chairs the National Security Council. When was he told?

Dan Jarvis *rose—*

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): He's right there! Why doesn't he answer?

Mr Speaker: Order. We have had one or two little bits of that, Mr Mayhew, and we do not need it. You should know better; you have been here long enough now. I expect a little bit more respect.

Dan Jarvis: For the purposes of transparency, the Prime Minister took the decision to publish the DNSA's witness statements. He has been crystal clear that no Minister and no special adviser in this Government interfered in any way with the case. I would be very grateful if the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) confirmed whether that was the case under the previous Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The recent cyber-attack on Jaguar Land Rover is reported to have cost the UK £1.9 billion, making it the most expensive in British history. It follows similar crippling incidents for companies such as M&S and the Co-op. Individual companies are taking their own security decisions, but in our increasingly interdependent world, the impact of those decisions can be felt at national and international levels. Will the Minister update the House on the progress being made in that area under the Government's resilience action plan, and when does he expect the introduction of the cyber-security and resilience Bill, which was mentioned in last year's King's Speech, so that we can assure the British public that such attacks are being treated as a pressing matter of national security?

Dan Jarvis: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that matter, which is of real concern for the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and myself. Protecting national security, including by defending against cyber-attacks, is absolutely our first duty, and she is absolutely right to highlight concerns about the attack on Jaguar Land Rover. We take this incredibly seriously. Indeed, my first visit as a Cabinet Office Minister was to the National Cyber Security Centre. I can tell her that the Home Office is progressing a new package of legislative measures to protect UK businesses from ransomware attacks, which, as she knows, are the most harmful cyber-crime facing the UK.

Civil Service Recruitment

7. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of civil service recruitment. [905961]

Mr Speaker: Welcome, Minister.

The Minister without Portfolio (Anna Turley): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

This Government's aim is to recruit the brightest and best talent into the civil service—brilliant people from across the UK with the skills to deliver the priorities of the British people. We have already taken steps to improve recruitment, with the first ever cross-Government standardised recruitment processes and benchmarks, to strengthen accountability and bring faster, higher-quality and more inclusive recruitment. Fast, fair, inclusive: that is our recruitment vision.

Joe Robertson: The Government are restricting applications to the civil service fast stream summer internship programme in favour of those kids who they deem to be from working-class backgrounds. What does the Minister have to say to the children of hard-working nurses, police officers and teachers who will now not get the same opportunities because of decisions made by this Government?

Anna Turley: The fast stream programme, of which I am proud to be a graduate, is the No. 1 graduate employee scheme in the country. We are proud that we have had over 70,000 applicants for just 754 appointments. We know that we have done very well in increasing diversity, with applications from ethnic minority candidates, women and people with disabilities, but we are falling short in applications from those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. I make no apologies about taking proactive decisions to ensure that people who do not necessarily have the same social capital or relationship strength as those from other higher social backgrounds can take internships. The number of working-class people in the civil service is three times smaller than the broader UK workforce, and we are taking action on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Last year, the Government promised us that they were going to slash the size of the civil service, but instead the latest figures showed that the size of the civil service has increased by 7,000 compared with last year. It is not only other Departments that have failed to get a grip: the headcount of the Minister's own Department is up by 7%. Will the Minister guarantee that when the

next set of figures is published, it will show a reduction in the size of the civil service and the size of the Cabinet Office?

Anna Turley: Under the last Tory Government, Boris Johnson said that he would cut the number of people employed by the civil service by 91,000, but that figure went up. Jeremy Hunt said that he would cap numbers in the civil service, but they went up. The Conservatives lost control of the civil service, just as they lost control of our borders, our streets and our prisons, but we are taking action to bring those numbers down.

Mike Wood: I think that the Minister is missing the fact that she is in Government now and has been for well over a year, but the numbers are going up not down, as they promised. The Minister is correct when she says that the civil service must be able to recruit the brightest and the best, but surely she can see that that is not helped when the most senior civil servant, hand-picked by the Prime Minister barely months ago, faces a barrage of media briefings from within Government. Will the Minister and her Department commission an inquiry into the breach of the code of conduct for special advisers following the personal attacks on the Cabinet Secretary, and will she condemn the vicious media briefings that have clearly come from within No.10?

Anna Turley: We have full confidence in the Cabinet Secretary and we condemn all leaks and breaches. We undertake to look into how any leaks from Government take place.

Public Procurement: Employment

8. **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase employment opportunities through public procurement. [905963]

13. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase employment opportunities through public procurement. [905970]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I will answer on behalf of the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward), who, with your permission, Mr Speaker, is at an event with the Prime Minister in his constituency today. This Government's new social value model includes fair working skills criteria, so that authorities can reward suppliers providing good-quality jobs, supporting people into work and providing their employees with additional development opportunities. We are consulting on further reforms to public procurement and will update the House in due course.

Andy McDonald: With the Government's welcome commitment to improving terms, conditions and career progression in adult social care, as demonstrated through the planned fair pay agreement and the care workforce pathway, will the Minister confirm that the Government's response to the public procurement consultation will deliver a public interest test that accelerates insourcing and requires providers to recognise trades unions, as well as more sustainable careers and long-term employment opportunities?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As always, my hon. Friend makes a powerful case. The Government want public bodies to examine carefully how best to deliver public services. That is why we are consulting on proposals to introduce a public interest test, allowing for the evaluation of services being more effectively delivered in-house before they are contracted out, covering value for money, service quality and wider social and economic benefit. We will consider the range of responses, including those from trades unions.

Euan Stainbank: I declare an interest as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British buses. Alexander Dennis and Wrightbus create 13 jobs for every four directly hired in bus manufacturing, and for decades Alexander Dennis has been an invaluable piece of the Scottish economy. After the business almost left Scotland following the Scottish National party's disastrous Chinese bus-buying strategy, to its credit it spent nearly £4 million fixing the near fatal error. Will the Minister set out what the Cabinet Office is doing through public procurement so that my constituents' taxpayer money is maximising Falkirk, Scottish and British-based businesses?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Unlike the SNP Government, evidently, this Labour Government believe that where things are made and who makes them matters. That is why we are consulting on further procurement reforms to boost domestic supply chains and create more opportunities for businesses of all sizes, whether that be in Falkirk or across the United Kingdom.

Delivery of Government Priorities

10. **Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the delivery of Government priorities. [905965]

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): The Prime Minister has asked me to help to drive forward delivery of the public's priorities. In Scotland, we have delivered more money for public services than at any point since devolution began—an extra £9.1 billion over the next three years. I know that my hon. Friend and his constituents in Airdrie and Shotts will expect to see that money invested in Scotland's NHS, schools and frontline policing, instead of being frittered away by the SNP.

Kenneth Stevenson: In less than 18 months, this Government have delivered defence contracts that will support Scottish jobs for years to come; invested in the pride of place scheme, which will see Scottish town centres rejuvenated, including those in North Lanarkshire; and committed record funding to the Scottish Parliament to invest in Scottish public services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that stands in stark contrast to the priorities of the SNP in government in Holyrood, which has just wasted more taxpayers' money on producing yet another tired paper on independence, while one in six Scots wait on NHS waiting lists?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend rightly recognises the defence dividend that Labour has delivered for Scotland, including the recent £10 billion frigate deal with Norway. As my hon. Friend's constituents will know only too well, more people have waited over two years for NHS

treatment in Lanarkshire alone compared with the whole of England—that is a remarkable stat. Next year, voters in Airdrie and Shotts and across Scotland will look at that record and have the chance to vote out the tired SNP Government, who are failing to deliver on public services in Scotland, and choose a new direction with Anas Sarwar and Scottish Labour.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): The Cabinet Office co-chairs the flood resilience taskforce in order to deliver on its priority to bolster flood defences, but residents in Eastbourne at this very point in time on Wartling Road, Seaside and Whitley Road—and, earlier this week, on Macmillan Drive—have to wade through canals created by flooding brought about by adverse weather. The work being done to protect against flooding is not enough. Will the Minister meet with me and other stakeholders to figure out how we can best protect residents, businesses and schools such as Motcombe school from the flood risk?

Darren Jones: I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He knows that the Government take flood risk very seriously, and it is a key risk in our national risk register. That is why the Government have increased spending on flood defences significantly in the recent Budget and spending review, but I absolutely recognise that there is more to do. I will ensure that we look at the specific circumstances in his constituency and help him to understand when funding will come to support his constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I think the Government are right to identify economic growth as a key priority. I also agree with the Chancellor, who this week identified Brexit as one of the reasons that they are finding growth tough to find. Brexit red tape is a millstone around the neck of our economy; it has added 2 billion pieces of extra business paperwork, piled on costs and stifled innovation. Businesses in my constituency tell me they have stopped selling to our nearest neighbours in the world's largest trading bloc altogether. Does the Minister agree that if the Government are serious about growing our economy, they should unleash trade by joining a bespoke customs union with the European Union?

Darren Jones: May I welcome the hon. Lady to her new spokesperson role? We recognise the impact that Brexit has had on the UK economy, which is why we have entered into a new trade deal in our first year in government with the European Union. A very key part of that is the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement for food and drink trade, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) is working on with European counterparts at the moment. Once that is implemented, we look forward to seeing trade improve, growth increasing and prices coming down on the shelves in supermarkets across the United Kingdom.

Civil Service: Opportunities outside London

11. **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase opportunities to work in the civil service for people who live outside London. [905966]

The Minister without Portfolio (Anna Turley): Our great civil service serves all the people across the UK, so it should look like them, sound like them and come from the same towns, cities, regions and nations as the communities it serves. By 2030, half of the senior civil service will be located outside London, with half of the fast stream placements also in the regions and nations. This Government are absolutely committed to radical reform to ensure that people from all parts of the UK can have a full and rewarding career in His Majesty's civil service.

Mr Alaba: The Government's plan to relocate civil service jobs outside London will bring high-quality jobs across the United Kingdom and ensure that policy is delivered closer to the communities it serves. However, none of the areas identified for that relocation is in the east of England, and notably, none is in Essex. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that these opportunities exist in every region, including my constituency of Southend East and Rochford, and will the Minister meet me to discuss the opportunities that are available?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is a real champion for his constituency. We greatly value the contribution of the 23,000 civil service staff who are based in the east of England, and are determined that the people of Southend East and Rochford should have the same opportunities as those in Redcar, or anywhere else in the country. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

Strengthening National Security

12. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening national security. [905967]

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): Keeping our country and our citizens safe is the first duty of this Government, and the Cabinet Office plays a central role in that endeavour. My right hon. Friend the Security Minister and I regularly bring Ministers together from across Government to take decisions that strengthen our country's national security. Recently, my Department published the resilience action plan, and we are now implementing the national security strategy, which sharpens our efforts to improve national security.

Jessica Toale: Later today, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) and I will meet small and medium-sized enterprises in the defence sector and skills training providers to discuss how we in Dorset can benefit from the Government's defence industrial strategy. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell me how this Government's commitment to increasing defence spending to 2.5% by 2027 will create jobs and growth in my constituency of Bournemouth West?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and welcome the companies from her and her colleague's constituencies to Parliament today. As she knows, this Labour Government are committed to the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. Our strategic defence review and defence industrial strategy will also make defence an engine for economic growth, creating jobs and driving innovation in every

nation and region. I particularly thank institutions such as Bournemouth and Poole college and Bournemouth University for their important work, and for their focus on developing defence skills for the future and creating jobs for young people in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): There are reports that Jonathan Powell wrote a box note to the Prime Minister on the China spy trial. When No. 10 was asked about this, the official spokesman said that it was for the Cabinet Office to answer, and as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Gentleman is uniquely placed to tell us. Did Powell write a box note to the Prime Minister —yes or no?

Darren Jones: No.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

14. **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): What recent progress he has made on the infected blood compensation scheme. [905971]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Some 2,476 people have now received offers totalling over £1.8 billion. Alongside the work I am doing to prepare further secondary legislation and a public consultation, I am pleased to announce that applications are opening today for further interim payments of £210,000 to the estates of infected people who have sadly passed away. In addition, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has now asked every living infected person registered with a support scheme to come forward and start their claim, and has also opened a service for people to register their intent to claim.

Liz Jarvis: Many survivors of the infected blood scandal and bereaved families are still waiting far too long for compensation. They include my constituents, the family of Kevin Newman, who was infected with HIV and hepatitis C while a pupil at Treloar's college and tragically died in 2018. The family received their first payment last December, but have been waiting for another ever since, and now have to fill in yet another form with a time limit. Will the Minister ensure that these payments are speeded up?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Absolutely, and that has been my objective throughout. IBCA took a test and learn approach, and this House quite rightly held me to account at the start of that process when the numbers were lower. Those numbers are rising exponentially at the moment—that is why there are offers totalling over £1.8 billion—but the hon. Lady should be reassured that I am 100% not complacent, and will continue to drive progress.

Civil Service Jobs: Scotland

15. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on the relocation of civil service jobs to Scotland. [905972]

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): In May, we committed to strengthening our presence in Scotland and across the UK, ensuring that talent from across the country can have a full career in the civil service without having to move to London. My first visit as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and Minister for intergovernmental relations was to Scotland, and I was delighted to visit the Cabinet Office's second headquarters —based in my hon. Friend's constituency of Glasgow North—which will continue to offer more careers and opportunities in the civil service.

Martin Rhodes: Does the Minister agree that having different roles and different levels of positions within the civil service in Glasgow and in Scotland is important so that people can progress their careers while remaining in Glasgow or in Scotland?

Darren Jones: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We want senior roles in locations across the country and not just in London. That is why we have committed to ensuring that 50% of UK-based senior civil service jobs are located outside London by 2030. I should add that on my visit to the Cabinet Office headquarters in my hon. Friend's constituency, we met senior civil servants there, and we look forward to returning again in the months ahead.

Civil Service Strikes

16. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): How many working days have been impacted by strikes in the civil service since July 2024. [905973]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I declare that I am a member of the Unite union and refer to my relevant entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests on support in general election campaigns. The Office for National Statistics estimates that 36,000 working days were lost because of labour disputes in the public administration and defence sector, which includes the majority of the civil service, between July 2024 and August 2025. That is down from the 95,000 days lost between May 2023 and June 2024.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for that answer, albeit partial, from the Minister, because he is quite right: he relies on the Office for National Statistics for the compilation of these figures. Now, even its staff have a strike mandate. They are refusing to attend work even for two days a week. What are the Government doing to enforce attendance levels at work? When does he think the ONS will find time to report on it?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Attendance levels are certainly important, but the hon. Gentleman has got some chutzpah, because under the previous Prime Minister—I note he is no longer in his place, although he was earlier in the questions—the UK lost more days due to strike action than France did, and the hon. Gentleman is here trying to lecture us about it. We will work in partnership with trade unions to avoid unnecessary disruption and not end up in the situation that the last Government did.

Topical Questions

T1. [905976] **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): This is my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister. In this role, I have been tasked with modernising the state to build a system that will better deliver the public's priorities and better communicate the changes we are making across the country. Sadly, too many political parties today wish to tear down our institutions and the public services we all rely on as the solution to the public's frustration with a legacy system that struggles to deliver change, but there is an alternative. This Government are committed to renewal and delivering on the promise of change. We will build a modern state and better public services that are there when people need them. We will lead the way to a Britain renewed.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will just answer the question from the official Opposition that I could not answer in substantive questions about when I was informed of the Crown Prosecution Service decision to not proceed with the case. I was informed of this decision after the Prime Minister. I should also inform the House that I look forward to answering more questions before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy on Wednesday next week.

Shaun Davies: Transforming Britain's public services will be a mammoth task, but while the white heat of artificial intelligence and digital technology offer a revolutionary opportunity to improve performance and value for money in healthcare, tax services and everything in between, will the Government seize this opportunity to modernise our public services, working with the brightest and best industries across Britain?

Darren Jones: The answer is absolutely yes. All our constituents know from their experiences at home, whether they are trying to do their banking, do their shopping or book a holiday, that they have the power to do it, when they want to do it, how they want to do it, on their phone, with services delivered in the way they want. That is in complete contrast to a number of our public services, and the public rightly expect, when they are paying tax money for public services, that we catch up with the private sector and deliver better public services that work in the way they want.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for giving us a degree more clarity. Perhaps he will give us a degree more clarity again. Was he told that the alleged case of spying against Members of Parliament was due to collapse before the information became public and, if so, who told him?

Darren Jones: I was not informed.

Alex Burghart: I believe the right hon. Gentleman, but I find that answer extraordinary, and I think he should find it extraordinary, too. As we have already said, the right hon. Gentleman chairs the National Security Council. He oversees the Cabinet Office's national security secretariat. The Prime Minister knew, the Home Secretary knew, the Cabinet Secretary knew, the chief of MI5 knew, the Attorney General's Office knew, but the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister did not. Has he asked why he was not told, and what answer was he given?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member seems to be confused by his list of institutions. The only relevant institution in this case is the Crown Prosecution Service. It is the CPS that independently decides whether to bring forward these cases, and it was the independent decision of the Crown Prosecution Service not to proceed. Might I just point out that the Opposition's arguments over the last few weeks have been quite bemusing? They started with an accusation that there was political interference in a Crown Prosecution Service case. That was proven not to be the case, so they changed their argument and are now asking, "Why did you not politically interfere, because that is the way we do things in this country?"

T2. [905977] **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): Storm Benjamin is mercifully not forecast to affect my Carlisle constituency today. However, when storms do land, storm-related power cuts can last hours, and quite often days, in north Cumbria and can include the loss of power to mobile phone masts. Fixed telecoms operators are under a licence obligation to ensure that they have power back at their key infrastructure points, but no such obligation applies to the mobile operators. What assessment has been made of the resilience of mobile networks in the event of a prolonged power cut?

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. We absolutely recognise the impact that the loss of communication services can have on constituencies like hers. The Cabinet Office is responsible for the co-ordination of resilience and crisis management across Government, and I have seen at first hand the diligence and professionalism of crisis teams in Cobra. I would be more than happy to discuss this matter with my hon. Friend further, and to represent her concerns to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

T5. [905980] **Dr Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): Last week, it was reported that No. 10 may have blocked the publication of a new Joint Intelligence Committee report on the severe threat to national security posed by the climate and nature crisis. With the Government's own advisers making it clear that we are in no way prepared for the effects of climate change that we are already seeing—such as wildfires, floods and storms, which we have heard about today—let alone the changes that are expected in the coming decades, can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster please tell the House whether it is true that the Government are trying to block the Joint Intelligence Committee chief's efforts to keep us all safe? When can we expect the report to see the light of day?

Mr Speaker: We are on topicals, folks.

Darren Jones: The Government take seriously the risk of climate change and the risk it poses to national security. That is why we are taking action to mitigate that risk and to reduce our carbon emissions. As the hon. Lady will know, we publish the outcomes of routine

assessments done by the Government in relation to the national risk register on gov.uk, and that will continue to be the case.

T3. [905978] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): Cryptocurrencies and digital assets are held by an increasing number of UK citizens—over 8 million people, according to recent figures—and the UK has the potential to be a world leader in this field, supporting our growth mission. Can the Minister detail what steps he has taken to ensure that we rapidly put in place a regulatory regime that gives confidence to the industry to develop and to companies to be based in the UK, while providing protection for consumers?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that he does in co-chairing the crypto and digital assets all-party parliamentary group. Financial services are integral to our mission for economic growth, and we are absolutely committed to creating the right conditions for a vibrant, competitive and innovative financial services sector. That is why the Government are proceeding with proposals to create a new financial services regulatory regime for cryptoassets.

T6. [905981] **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): In the absence of a plan, the Government appear to be centralising power and bureaucracy in the form of new quangos. More than 25 have been created since this Government came into office. What is the Minister doing to drive ministerial accountability and, crucially, to ensure that there are sunset clauses so that when quangos have met their objectives, they are wound up and come to an end?

Darren Jones: The Government agree with the principle of the hon. Member's question. As I said to the House earlier, we want to reduce the layers of bureaucracy and to be able to deliver more action and fewer words. That is why we are taking action to close arm's length bodies and other institutions. Most significantly, we have announced that we will close NHS England and bring decisions back into the Department for Health and Social Care for Ministers to make.

T4. [905979] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): I was pleased that the Minister give an update earlier on the work of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, but the process is still taking too long. May I press the Minister to undertake work specifically to expedite the timescales in which compensation is expected to be paid?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for infected blood victims, and he can rest assured that I will continue to drive progress as quickly as I possibly can. That is how we have got to the stage where over £1.8 billion-worth of offers have been made, and I will continue to drive that progress quickly.

T10. [905985] **Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): I have recently been contacted by International House Torquay, a language school, which has welcomed the opportunity for German foreign students to use ID cards to travel as a group. Can the Minister advise what further opportunities there will be for other European countries such as Switzerland, Italy and Spain to take advantage of a similar scheme?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We are going even further than that, because the Government are looking to negotiate a youth experience scheme with the European Union. It will of course be capped, but it will give significant opportunities not just for young Brits to travel, work and study abroad, but to welcome young Europeans here.

T7. [905982] **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): At my meet and greet session last week, my constituent Mick also raised that point about the importance of our young people having more opportunities to work and study abroad, including in Europe. I was so pleased by the Government's announcement of a youth mobility scheme with the EU, but could I ask the Minister for an update on those plans and how they will benefit my constituents in Aylesbury?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank my hon. Friend for again raising this issue. Any scheme would give young Brits, including her young constituents in Aylesbury, the opportunity to travel and experience other countries' cultures, as well as to work and study abroad. Of course, the exact parameters will be subject to discussion, and negotiations are under way, but we certainly hope to stand up these opportunities for young Brits as soon as possible.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the Paymaster General's remarks on the acceleration of the delivery of payments in relation to infected blood. It is very welcome for one of my constituents who has had it. I also welcome his response to the additional report by Sir Brian Langstaff in July. Given that, can he update the House on the lifetime of the public inquiry and any conversations he has had about ending the inquiry, which seems to be going on rather a long time given that the legislation was passed in May last year?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and I again pay tribute to him for his hugely important work in this area when he was the Paymaster General. On the public inquiry and the recent report, I hope to update the House in due course—subject, of course, to your permission, Mr Speaker—about action on the recommendations. On the public inquiry remaining open, that is of course a matter for the chair, Sir Brian Langstaff.

T8. [905983] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I have heard from small businesses locally, including a butcher's and a lighting supplier, about how Brexit has imposed extra barriers on small businesses such as theirs. Will the Minister outline how the UK-EU common understanding will improve conditions for small businesses, particularly those that import from and export to the EU?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for her constituents, and the common understanding will of course benefit the businesses she mentions. Our deals on emissions, energy trading, food and agricultural trade will all reduce costs for businesses.

Astonishingly, the Conservatives and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) want to reverse that and reimpose those costs on businesses.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Given that the Cabinet Office advises the Government on establishing public inquiries, will the Minister meet the families of the senior military and intelligence personnel who were killed when an RAF Chinook helicopter crashed on the Mull of Kintyre in 1994? The families have gathered compelling evidence suggesting that the Ministry of Defence was aware that the Mk 2 Chinook in which they were travelling was not airworthy. They are petitioning the Government to establish an independent, judge-led public inquiry. Will the Minister meet the families or at least advise a relevant Cabinet colleague so to do?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who raises a very serious case. If he were able to write to me directly about it, I will certainly look at what would be the most suitable ministerial meeting.

T9. [905984] **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I recently met Estonian MPs to hear about their experience of using digital ID over the last two decades, and particularly about how people's ability to see who has accessed their data is the cornerstone of the data privacy controls at the heart of their system. They talked about the efficiency gains across the public and private sector, such as when someone changes their name after marriage or buys a property. How does the Minister see modernisation of the state improving the delivery of public services in the UK?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons): In our public services, almost everywhere we look, outdated digital and data systems trap us in the past. We are laser focused on reforming the state. Central to that is a free, universal digital ID that will bring the state to all citizens and improve access to public services. A national digital identity system is a public good that is long overdue and this Government will deliver it.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has just come to the Dispatch Box and said that we have done a new trade deal with the European Union, which I think is news to both the Prime Minister and Brussels. The only thing this Government have done so far in terms of EU relations is to sell out our fishing industry for the next 12 years. With that in mind, will the Minister actually stand up for British interests in future negotiations with Brussels?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I stand up for British interests in every negotiation with Brussels. I will tell the hon. Gentleman what is not standing up for British interests. We negotiated, within 10 months of coming into government, the new common understanding that will be good for jobs, bear down on bills and give us the tools to secure our borders. The leader of the Conservative party opposed it before even reading it.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I have been thinking about the cost of software licensing in the public sector, because North West Anglia NHS foundation trust is trying to move to an electronic patient record and one of the biggest ongoing costs of that is third-party payments for software. Other trusts are in the same position, as are many schools paying for pupil management software. Will the procurement Minister commit to looking into whether we can instead deliver some of that in-house and save significant sums?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Cases of the kind my hon. Friend is talking about are the reason we have been consulting on a public interest test. On the specific case he raises, if he writes to me I will ensure that the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) provides him with a response.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent Phil is in the special category mechanism for the 916 people who were inexplicably excluded from the infected blood compensation scheme in February, even though the Government's expert group said in August last year that they should be compensated. On 5 June, the Paymaster General said he would consider the compensation arrangements. I may have missed it—forgive me if I have—but I also asked for a list of conditions that might be included within that. Does he have an update for me, please?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am certainly looking at the issue of the special category mechanism, as I undertook to do. If the hon. Lady writes to me I can look at the specific list, but I am also hoping, with Mr Speaker's permission, to update the House on this and other infected blood issues very shortly.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Residents in a housing development in my constituency are facing a number of issues after yet another developer has gone bust. Parts of the shared communal land have reverted back to the ownership of the Duchy of Cornwall, rather than to the residents themselves, who have to purchase the land back and cover the duchy's legal costs. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, quite rightly, has Cabinet oversight, but who does the Duchy of Cornwall answer to and what recourse do my constituents now have in this case?

Darren Jones: If the hon. Member writes to me with his constituency case, I will make sure that the Duchy of Cornwall looks at it in due course.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne is benefiting from some coastal defence scheme funding, the flood defence grant-in-aid, but it leaves heritage assets behind. Only residents and businesses currently qualify, which is leaving Eastbourne's historic bandstand at risk of severe flooding. Will the Minister meet me and colleagues across the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to review the loophole that leaves our bandstand behind?

Darren Jones: I recognise the problem. The decision was to use the budget available to protect people's homes and that has left other buildings at comparable

risk. The relevant DEFRA Minister is working with DCMS on this issue. I will ensure that a conversation can take place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the infected blood compensation scheme in Northern Ireland, as of 21 February, 149 people had started the process, with 38 offers made totalling some £48 million. What assessment has been made of the time taken from when an application is made to when a payment actually arrives through the door?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Infected Blood Compensation Authority is operationally independent, but I am accountable to this House. It is important that I have regular conversations and provide challenge on the kind of timescales the hon. Gentleman is talking about. The infected blood scandal predates modern-day devolution and he can rest assured that all four corners of the United Kingdom are at the forefront of my mind in respect of the speed of delivery.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The Minister was earlier asked about the ever-growing size of the civil service and the Cabinet Office under this Government and whether we would see those numbers coming down, not going up, next year. Instead of answering the question about the future, they talked about the past. Let me ask the question again, but from a different angle: when are this Government going to take ownership of the fact that they are in government now, and these are their problems that they need to resolve?

Darren Jones: I am very happy to take ownership of the fact that we are in government, and very happy to confirm that the Conservatives are in opposition.

Alleged Spying Case: Role of Attorney General's Office

10.30 am

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Solicitor General if she will make a statement about the role of the Attorney General's Office in the decision to drop the China spy prosecution.

The Solicitor General (Ellie Reeves): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this urgent question, following the deeply disappointing collapse of the prosecution case concerning two individuals charged under the Official Secrets Act 1911.

It is a bedrock constitutional principle that prosecutions in this country are free from political influence. This means that it is prosecutors, not politicians, who decide which cases to prosecute; it is prosecutors, not politicians, who decide what evidence will be used at criminal trials; and it is prosecutors, not politicians, who decide when cases should be dropped.

Although individual decisions are made independently and protected from political influence, the Crown Prosecution Service as an organisation is superintended by the Attorney General by virtue of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985. The details of what that means in practice are set out in the framework agreement between the Law Officers and the Director of Public Prosecutions, signed by the then Attorney General under the previous Government. The framework makes it plain that the role of the CPS is to take independent decisions on individual cases referred to it by the police and other criminal investigation authorities based on the evidence available and the public interest in pursuing a prosecution, which accords with the code for Crown prosecutors.

There are a limited number of offences, including those under the Official Secrets Act, for which Parliament has made statutory provision requiring the Attorney General's consent to prosecute in individual cases. In doing so, the Law Officer acts in a quasi-judicial capacity independently of Government and applies the same two-stage test as the code. Consent was given by my predecessor on 3 April 2024. Following that date, no Law Officer intervened in the case at any stage; it would have been wholly inappropriate for them to do so.

Once consent is given, the Law Officer plays no ongoing role. If the prosecutor contemplates dropping the case because of evidential reasons, they are required to inform the Attorney General of the decision as soon as it has been taken. That is what happened in this case. The DPP and senior Treasury counsel have already confirmed that the decision to offer no evidence in this case was made without any political influence, and the Cabinet Secretary, Director of Public Prosecutions, Attorney General and Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister will all give written and oral evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy this and next week.

The ongoing disinformation around the collapse of this case is now distracting from the most important issue that we should all be focused on, which is how the Government can work across parties and with the UK law enforcement community to ensure that Chinese espionage and interference is not successful in the UK.

Robert Jenrick: Let me cut to the chase. It is standard practice for the CPS to inform the Attorney General if a case of political significance that had required Attorney General consent in the first place is likely to be dropped. We are told that the Attorney General was informed that this case was at risk but had not formally been ended in August. Is this correct? Can the Solicitor General provide the exact date of that meeting?

It would have been the Attorney General's duty to ask why the case was at risk. That does not mean seeking to change the independent judgment of the CPS on whether to proceed, but it could and should have meant asking and ensuring that more evidence be provided to the CPS at its request. It was abundantly clear that the CPS was asking for further evidence on the question of whether China posed a current threat to national security, so the Attorney General and the Government had a decision to make: whether to provide the evidence or not, even if they thought that it was excessive to do so.

The Attorney General must have understood what was required. We are told that he is an eminent lawyer, so what did he do the moment he knew? Who did he inform within Government, and when? Did he inform the Prime Minister or his office? Did he take any steps to ensure that the evidence was provided?

We know that on 1 September the director general of the AG's Office attended a meeting at which the case was discussed. At that point, the case could still have been salvaged. At that meeting, did the Attorney General's Office push for further evidence to be provided? Following that meeting, *The Sunday Times* has reported that the Attorney General's Office was asked to speak to the CPS. Can the SG confirm whether anyone from the AGO spoke directly or indirectly to the CPS?

The AG knew that the case was going to collapse in August. He knew what was required to save it, but—unless the Solicitor General can provide a compelling account today—we must all conclude that the AG, on behalf of the Government, chose not to provide it. He may not have killed the case, but he allowed it to die. There are examples in the recent past of AGs having the candour to come to the House and explain that the Government and the prosecuting authorities have chosen to drop cases that raise the highest national security questions for diplomatic reasons. Will the SG today have the candour to do exactly the same with this case?

The Solicitor General: Today we have heard from the shadow Justice Secretary yet more of the baseless smears that have characterised the Conservative party's approach to a matter of such importance to this House and the whole nation. He knows that the Attorney General will give evidence next week—as soon as Tuesday—to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

Like me, the shadow Justice Secretary trained and practised in law, so he should know the importance of consistency when putting a case together. Yet his words today have brought only more confusion to the Conservatives' chaotic approach. First, they accused the Government of political interference in this case without evidence. When that was disproven, they argued that we did not interfere but should have interfered in an independent prosecution—so which is it? Their approach has served only to distract from their own failings, and frankly does a disservice to the history and heritage of their party.

I respectfully remind the House that part of the reason we find ourselves in this situation is because the Conservatives spent their years in government fighting among themselves and not fixing glaring holes in our national security laws. The charges in this case were brought under the Official Secrets Act—

Robert Jenrick: You are supposed to be a Law Officer—answer the questions.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Jenrick, when you get a UQ, you get your time, and I want you to be heard in silence, quite rightly, because this is an important issue that affects this House—but I do not need barracking from the Opposition Benches. I want you to help me. If you wish to catch my eye in the future, this is not the best way to do so.

The Solicitor General: The charges in this case were brought under the Official Secrets Act 1911—outdated legislation, drawn up even before the dawn of world war one. As I said, the Attorney General, the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, the deputy National Security Adviser, the Cabinet Secretary and the Director of Public Prosecutions will all appear before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy next week, and the Government have committed to fully engaging with Committees across both Houses as this issue is rightly scrutinised.

Along with proper parliamentary scrutiny, another core tenet of our democracy is a prosecution service free of political interference. That is something that we on this side of the House will always defend.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Given that the Conservatives, during their 14 years of chaotic power, sought to develop an even closer relationship with China, can I urge the Government to continue Labour's approach, which is to look at opportunities to work together while not compromising our values and national interest at any time?

The Solicitor General: I agree with my hon. Friend's position. I remind the House that the test in this case applied to how China was viewed under the previous Government, not this one.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Throughout these revelations, Ministers and the Prime Minister's spokesperson have repeatedly claimed that the Government had no sight of the witness statements and no input. The PM himself said that at Prime Minister's questions last week. But the Government Legal Service's own guidance requires the Attorney General to be consulted on the most sensitive legal cases involving the Government. In a case as high profile as this, where the very integrity of Parliament and our national security was at stake, did the Attorney General—the Government's top legal adviser—really not review the witness statements before they were submitted on behalf of the Government? If not, please could the Solicitor General tell us why not? Given the very serious national security implications, will the SG commit to a statutory independent inquiry into why the case collapsed, and will she please update the House as to when the Government will share the full China audit with the Intelligence and Security Committee?

The Solicitor General: As I set out in my answer to the urgent question, the previous Law Officers gave consent to prosecute in April 2024. After that happens, it is right that there is no further involvement of Law Officers in cases. In accordance with the framework, that is how things work. It is right that politicians do not interfere with prosecutions in criminal cases, and that is what happened in this case once consent to prosecute was granted.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): May I just start by saying that nobody in this House is disputing the independence of the prosecution or indeed the judicial officers? Nobody has had any dispute on that point at all. The question is a different one. It is whether an official who is giving evidence not on his behalf, but on behalf of the Government, should have had any communication with his own Government after the prosecutor said that the evidence was not sufficient.

One argument is that if the Government are not supplying enough evidence, surely they should supply a little bit more. But the argument that the Government are using is that the official gave evidence on the basis of the previous Government's view between 2021 and 2023. Well, that is a little odd, because the Labour party manifesto was not written until 2024, and yet he quotes it in his evidence. There is an incoherence here: either he is giving evidence on the basis of the previous Government's view between 2021 and 2023, in which case the Labour party manifesto is irrelevant, or he is reflecting the view of the Government post 2024, in which case the quotation of the Labour party manifesto is relevant. Which is it?

The Solicitor General: In terms of the witness statements, to start with the first and by far most substantive witness statement was the one made under the previous Government. In relation to more recent statements, the Conservatives' starting argument was that the Government in some way interfered with the evidence, and now they seem to be criticising the fact that we did not interfere with the evidence. It is right that the deputy National Security Adviser gave that evidence free from any political interference, as has been confirmed numerous times in this House already.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) is quite right. Throughout the whole saga, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) made clear, there have been conflicting stories about who did what, and why it could or could not be done, all in the same breath. But we know the rules require that the Attorney General is consulted on matters that are politically sensitive. It does not cut across his independence; it simply means that he or she has to be informed at the time. We understand from the Director of Public Prosecutions that the Attorney General must have been told that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute. If so, the Attorney General's role in this matter—independently—is to say to the authorities in the Government, "You are not providing sufficient evidence. This prosecution will collapse unless you do." Did the Attorney General say

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

to the Government, "You are not providing enough evidence to secure a prosecution. It is over to you to do as you have been asked by the DPP"?

The Solicitor General: The Attorney General will be giving his evidence to the Committee next week. I think it is right to say that the case was dropped by the CPS not on public interest grounds but on evidential grounds. When a case is dropped on evidential grounds, the framework sets out that the Law Officers be informed when that has happened, and not that there is consultation beforehand. This is a case that did not continue on evidential grounds.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Given the important national security implications of this whole sorry case, what assessment has the Attorney General's Office made of the impact that the decision may have on confidence in our ability to prosecute alleged foreign interference?

The Solicitor General: This case was prosecuted under legislation that was in force when the alleged offences were committed in 2021 to 2023. The law has now changed—it took the Conservative party many years to tighten up national security legislation; it passed with support from Labour Members—and under the legislation as it stands now, it is easier to bring prosecutions of this nature because the enemy test no longer has to be satisfied.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Attorney General has a duty to superintend prosecution agencies. The Government have previously defined superintendence as, inter alia,

"a right for the Attorney General to be consulted and informed about difficult, sensitive and high-profile cases",

of which this is clearly one. Given that the Attorney General is responsible by statute for the superintendence of the Crown Prosecution Service and overall superintendency of the DPP, and additionally has the requirement for consent to prosecute certain categories of criminal offences such as those relating to official secrets, what action did the Attorney General take once he had been informed of the potential collapse of the China spying trial?

The Solicitor General: As I have set out, consent to prosecute in this case had to be granted by Law Officers, and that was done under the previous Government. Once consent is granted, it is for the CPS to prosecute a case, rightly without political interference. This case was discontinued by the CPS on evidential grounds, as opposed to public interest grounds. I am sure that the hon. Member is aware of the two-part test for prosecutors. When a case is discontinued on evidential grounds, it is not for the CPS to consult with Law Officers in advance of that. I say again that the Attorney General will first give written evidence this week and then oral evidence on Tuesday.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): None of it makes sense—not the collapsed trial, Chagos or the embassy—but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) says, it all makes sense if the Government have prioritised a strategic relationship with communist China, does it not?

The Solicitor General: I politely remind the right hon. Gentleman that this case was to be tried under the Government's position in relation to China between 2021 and 2023, when his party was in Government.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Solicitor General has repeatedly said that prosecutors and not politicians should decide whether to prosecute. Of course that is the case, but that is a straw man argument. The issue here is not political interference in the decision to prosecute, but political interference in the evidence that was given to the CPS, affecting its ability to prosecute. We have been told that the Attorney General was informed. Why was he informed, if not to allow him to take action to perfect the evidence? Why did he not?

The Solicitor General: The Prime Minister and the DPP have both confirmed that there was no political interference in the evidence given by the deputy National Security Adviser, and rightly so. The Conservative party cannot have it both ways: first, the argument was that we interfered with the evidence and now it seems to be that we did not. Which is it?

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): *The Sunday Times* reported that, following a key meeting on 1 September, the Attorney General's Office was asked to speak to the CPS. Did anyone from the Attorney General's Office speak directly or indirectly to the CPS after that meeting?

The Solicitor General: There was a meeting on 1 September in relation to this matter, which, as I understand it, took place on the basis that the prosecution would go ahead. It was to discuss bilateral relations with China in the context of the ongoing legal case.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Director of Public Prosecutions has said that the case was dropped because efforts over many months to get evidence that China represented a threat to national security were not forthcoming from this Government. When was the Attorney General informed that the case was at risk and what did he do?

The Solicitor General: In order for this case to succeed, it was based on the relationship with China at the time of the offences and how China was viewed then. I have already referred to the meeting on 1 September, which was on the presumption that the case would continue. The Attorney General will set out his evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy next week.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I previously asked the Security Minister about the lack of inclusion of China on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. What input or advice has the Attorney General or the Solicitor General given to the Government on that? Given the ongoing situation, will she now reconsider and push for the Government to do that?

The Solicitor General: Under the law as it now stands, it would be easier to bring prosecutions in cases such as these. We are deeply disappointed that this prosecution did not go ahead, but I will get back to him on the specific points that he raises.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Solicitor General has expressed several times her and, presumably, the Government's disappointment at the fact that this did not go to trial. That disappointment would suggest that she and the Government wish for an alternative outcome. The simple point that I and my constituents cannot get our heads around—they have contacted me about this because they are outraged and concerned—is that if the Government wish for an alternative outcome, why did they not exhaust every single possibility to bolster the case of the CPS? Regardless of interference, and there is no question of political interference, why did they not exhaust every single opportunity to put the CPS in the strongest possible position to ensure a successful prosecution?

The Solicitor General: The Government are disappointed that this prosecution did not go ahead. If the previous Conservative Government had tightened our laws in relation to national security before 2022, we may not have found ourselves in this position. It is absolutely right that there was no political interference with the witness evidence. It is an important part of our constitution that criminal prosecutions are done without political interference.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): When was the Attorney General informed that the case was going to collapse?

The Solicitor General: The Attorney General will be setting out his evidence to the Joint Committee next Tuesday.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): To be perfectly honest, I do not know what the point is in me asking this question, because we have had two weeks of statements and urgent questions, and Ministers keep attacking straw men and answering questions that are not actually being asked. It is pathetic.

On Monday, the Security Minister came to the House and was asked several times when the Home Secretary knew that the case was going to collapse and what representations she made to ensure that the case was as strong as possible. He did not answer that several times. When did the Home Secretary know? What representations did she make and to whom did she make them? Surely among them was the National Security Adviser, the Prime Minister and the Attorney General.

The Solicitor General: I do not speak on behalf of the Home Secretary, but I am sure that she will be happy to address the hon. Member's points.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Solicitor General to her new role and wish her every success and happiness in it—hopefully it will not be as hard the next time round. As the Chinese spy prosecution case rolls on and on, concerns on the ground are growing about the state of national security and our intelligence community. Does she accept the lack of confidence that has arisen from the handling of this case? What can be done to assure British citizens that their interests and security are the top priority for this Government, not trade links with China?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Member for those kind words. This case was brought under the Official Secrets Act. There is now new legislation in place, which means it is no longer necessary to prove the enemy part of the test in order to bring a successful prosecution. That will make it easier to bring prosecutions of this nature in future. It is regretful that the previous Government did not bring in this legislation sooner. Had they done so, I expect we would not have found ourselves in the situation we are in today.

Robert Jenrick: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask your advice? Unusually, the Attorney General does not sit in the House of Commons. When I submitted written parliamentary questions to the Attorney General, they were answered by the Solicitor General, but the Solicitor General refused to provide answers for the Attorney General, only answering for herself. Today, understandably, the Attorney General could not come to the House because he is not a Member of the House, but the Solicitor General repeatedly refused to give answers on behalf of the Attorney General. She referred to the Attorney General's written answers and to a Select Committee hearing which is ordinarily held in private. How does the House of Commons hold the Attorney General to account?

Mr Speaker: There is a collective responsibility for the Government to answer within this House—the right hon. Member is absolutely right to ask the question—but I am not responsible for the answers that the Solicitor General provides. This goes back to the frustration under the previous Administration, when the Foreign Secretary sat in the Lords. My view is that it is much harder, but there is a collective responsibility that questions will be answered in this House. I am not going to keep the debate going now.

Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund

10.59 am

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the fishing and coastal growth fund.

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): We are working closely with our fishing and seafood sectors to ensure that they are vibrant, profitable and sustainable, and that we have a healthy and productive marine environment. That is why, on 19 May, the Government announced the fishing and coastal growth fund, a £360 million investment that will support the next generation of fishers and breathe new life into our coastal communities. Through the fund, we have recognised the vital contribution that fishing and coastal communities make to our economy, local communities and national heritage.

Designing the fund with stakeholders is paramount to its success, and we want to work with industry and communities to get their views on how to maximise value and target investment for maximum local impact. That engagement is just beginning. We will consider investment in new tech and equipment to modernise the fleets; in training and skills to back the next generation; and in promoting and supporting the seafood sector, so that it can export across the world.

Since the fund was announced, a wide range of stakeholders have called on the Government to learn from previous fisheries funding schemes and to devolve the funding, instead of the funding being at UK-level. That is why, on 20 October, the Government, in a reaffirmation of our commitment to devolution, confirmed that the fishing and coastal growth fund would be devolved, and that devolved Governments would have full discretion over how to allocate funding. That approach enables each devolved Government to design and deliver support in response to the specific needs of their fishing and coastal communities. That will ensure that investment is targeted towards regional needs and national views, and that it best supports coastal towns and villages. It ensures that decisions are taken closer to the communities that the devolved Governments serve, so the sector can thrive for generations to come.

Although the Government respect the devolution settlement, I would like to encourage collaboration across all Governments to maximise the fund's impact, as each Government will have their own insights into how the funding can be used, and will learn lessons over the fund's lifetime.

Seamus Logan: I thank the Minister for her response. I would be failing in my duty to my constituents, and indeed to people across Scotland, if I did not reflect the anger, dismay and sense of betrayal that has greeted this set of fund allocations. On 5 March, ahead of the much-vaunted EU reset deal with the UK, the Prime Minister told me the following from the Dispatch Box:

"I recognise the huge and historic importance of the fishing industry in his constituency, and others, and I am determined to make the sector more secure, sustainable and economically successful."—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 280.]

But we were once again used as a bargaining chip when EU access to Scottish waters was extended for another 12 years—way beyond what the EU negotiating team had hoped for.

Boris Johnson used those in the fishing industry as poster boys for his reckless Brexit campaign and then betrayed them afterwards, and now this Government have done exactly the same by reserving more than £300 million for English coastal communities over the next 12 years, while handing us pocket money. Despite Scotland representing 60% of our fishing capacity, despite it landing almost 50% of these islands' catch, and despite more than 75% of all species caught having been landed by Scottish vessels, we have been offered a mere 7.78% of the fund.

My urgent question has been co-signed by colleagues from across the House who represent coastal communities across Scotland, including those in Orkney and Shetland, the Outer Hebrides, and Wales. My Welsh colleagues are equally dismayed at the crumbs they have been offered. I recognise that the Minister and her team may need time to get to grips with their brief, but her predecessor said he intended to engage fully with devolved Governments, and the Scottish Government have been ignored again. I urge the Minister to look at this decision. There is time before next March to take a fresh look at these allocations, and to recognise the crucial role that the fishing industry plays in our beautiful coastal communities, around our massive coastline, and in our island communities across Scotland. If the Minister is in any doubt about the strength of anger on this matter and about why it is so crucial, I repeat the offer I made to her yesterday to come to my constituency and see for herself.

Dame Angela Eagle: I have been looking at the history of seafood support funds. The last one was a UK seafood fund, which was reserved by the then Government nationally, to be used in a strategic way. There were many vocal complaints that the fund should have been devolved. We have now devolved a fund in the way in which funds are always devolved: using the Barnett formula, which gives a 20%-a-head uplift to devolved Governments for all other spending.

I also note that the devolution settlements in the comprehensive spending review 2025 gave the Scottish Government another £8.5 billion that they can choose to spend in any way. It is always open to them to support the sector, which is an important industrial sector for them, with some of the money devolved to them in the CSR devolution settlement.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Minister for coming to the Dispatch Box, and the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for raising this important issue. There is a question of fairness in the geographical distribution of the fund, and the Minister should consider that; I hope the funding will be reviewed in due course. There is another aspect to fairness, too: there should be fairness across the sector. I want the funding to be aimed at new entrants to fishing communities that face big challenges to do with depopulation, crewing and keeping themselves going. For example, the funding can be used to allocate and buy quota, so that local authorities can distribute it to new entrants, as happens to a limited degree in Orkney and in the Western Isles. I also want the funding to be aimed at new opportunities. This

summer, an 800 lb tuna was landed in my constituency from the North Atlantic, and it is to be sold at a famous market in Tokyo.

Those are the kind of schemes, places, and fishing and coastal communities that the fund should be aimed at; we should not just funnel the money to the already wealthy quota barons who dominate the industry and the airwaves.

Dame Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend has made some interesting observations about creativity, which may well be applied to the fund. We are trying to co-design the way the fund will work—it is there for the next 12 years—so that we can be creative and think about how we support the younger generation of people who wish to go into the industry. Some of the suggestions that he has made are intriguing, and I will certainly follow them up with him and others.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): This fund is a weak apology from a Labour Government who, this year, have sold out the UK fishing industry. It is a mere sticking plaster—a rushed one, at best—that ignores the proportion of fish caught in different parts of these isles, involves the devolved Administrations poorly, and ignores evidence-based delivery and logic. This fund is Labour trying to buy off the UK fishing fleet, due to its disastrous 12-year deal with the EU; the deal is three times longer than the deal Labour sought. It prevents Britain from setting annual fishing quotas, as other independent coastal states do. Fishing organisations have called the deal a "horror show" for fishermen. Will the money be front-loaded and spent where it will have the greatest benefit for industry and coastal communities? What input will fishing organisations and representatives have in ensuring that the fund is spent in the right place?

Fishing is not just about the fish caught; it is also about the people and marine wildlife involved. Can the Government explain how the fund will support fishers' mental health and efforts to protect marine wildlife, such as by ending bycatch? There is not enough detail for the industry to plan. How will the fund be delivered, how is it being targeted to support the fishing industry, and how are the Labour Government supporting the next generation of fishermen and women with the fund?

This fund is an example of the Labour Government trying to buy off the industry with a sticking plaster, rather than ensuring that the best deal for the British fishing industry is the one that they negotiate with the EU.

Dame Angela Eagle: The fund is about long-term transformation and partnership. We want to modernise the fishing sector, support coastal regeneration and build resilience in the industry across the UK. For that reason, we will co-design the fund with local communities and the industry. I am not able to answer the hon. Gentleman's questions in detail at this precise moment, because we seek to co-operate with those who will be beneficiaries. When I am in a position to make further announcements, I certainly will.

Michelle Scrogham (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): As a coastal MP, I was delighted that my constituency was selected for £20 million of pride in place funding. How will those funds benefit coastal communities around the country?

Dame Angela Eagle: Pride in place funding is a new initiative from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Colleagues will know that it is based very much on a bottom-up approach to improving place. My understanding is that allocations will be given and directed by local boards with community membership. That is an important way of doing regeneration. It is not doing things to people from on high; it means trying to involve and listen to those who live in those places, who know what is best. I hope that we will be able to apply that principle to the use of these funds over time.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The Liberal Democrats of course welcome any further investment in our fishing communities, but coastal towns must have a proper say in how the money will be spent. The allocation of the funding must reflect the significance of the fishing industries across our isles. The proud fishermen in my North Cornwall constituency have been wrapped up in so much red tape, and face extra costs because of the Tories' botched Brexit deal. They now want proper management of fish stocks, and a new byelaw to limit larger vessels inside the six-mile line. What steps are the Government taking to reverse that damage and provide our fishermen with greater access to their largest and closest market? How will the Government use this fund to give greater powers and resources to coastal communities, to allow them to invest properly in their local areas? Finally, can the Minister assure us that the fund will improve water quality, to protect our fishing industry in the future?

Dame Angela Eagle: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, clearly improving water quality is another policy area. The coastal growth fund is not about improving water quality; it is about building resilience, helping to modernise the fishing industry through high tech, access to training and entry to the industry. We must not mix up Government support for different issues, and try to shove everything into one policy.

The hon. Gentleman also asks about the reset for export purposes. If we can do it properly, the reset with the EU will enable the export of fish and catch with much less red tape than we have ended up with, post Brexit. There are big gains to be made from that. Likewise, if we can get the free trade agreement to work properly, it will increase the prospect of fishing industry exports to other parts of the world.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Scottish salmon is renowned around the world for its quality and taste. How are the Government supporting the promotion of the Scottish salmon industry around the world?

Dame Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. I believe that the free trade deal with India took away all tariffs on Scottish salmon, so hopefully there will be a lot more of it heading that way soon.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the Minister to her new position. I have to say, though, if ever there were an illustration of the

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

scale of the challenge facing Ministers in turning around the Department, this is it. Let us not forget that this fund was created because the Prime Minister rolled over for a further 12 years the catastrophically bad deal that Boris Johnson gave us for five years. If the Minister is sincere when she says that the aim of the Government is to maximise local investment, then using the Barnett formula to distribute the funding is ocean-going madness. By volume and value, Shetland alone accounts for 9% of the fish landed in this country, but Scotland as a whole will get only 8% of the funding. When will the funding formula be reviewed, and when will we hear exactly where the money will be spent and what it will be available for?

Dame Angela Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman will have to ask the Scottish Government about what they are going to do with their devolved part of the fund. He might also wish to ask them whether there is any extra money available from the devolved comprehensive spending review process, because they got an extra £8.5 billion to spend this year.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Government's investment in a sustainable fishing and shellfish industry, which will create jobs and drive growth in coastal communities such as mine. Will the Minister provide a timeline for when stakeholders, such as the Whitby & District Fishing Industry Training School and the Whitby lobster hatchery, will be formally engaged in the process of developing and delivering this important fund?

Dame Angela Eagle: As I have said, we are at an early stage in the process of seeing how we can do this. We are committed to trying to co-design the fund, so I am happy to talk to my hon. Friend about how she wishes that co-operation to be taken forward in the fantastic area of Scarborough—it is near Bridlington, where I was born, which also has a little to do with crabs.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In Lincolnshire we know all about fishing, because Grimsby used to be the world's greatest fishing port. It beggars belief that we, a coastal nation, import twice as much fish as we export. Fishermen feel completely betrayed after years of vassalage to the European Union and this latest deal. We are where we are—we have this fund now—so I want to end on a positive note by asking my favourite Minister: will she ensure that she uses the fund to recreate fishing in areas such as Grimsby, which now has a miniscule amount of fishing, to help them to modernise, get more staff and rebuild our industry?

Dame Angela Eagle: The Father of the House knows that flattery will get him everywhere—obviously, I hold him in equally high esteem. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), I am more than happy to work out how we can use this fund to do precisely as he suggests.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this fund. The Cornish fishing fleet, which has suffered, has put together a joined-up proposal for our part of the fund, so I would be grateful if the Minister could look at that. The proposal talks about front-loading the investment, multi-year project funding, science and research, and data collection about the number of fish that we catch and the way we catch them, and it particularly focuses on careers, skills and infrastructure. There was an announcement this week about an environmental lead regulator going into the development at Falmouth port, which will make a massive difference and speed up port infrastructure redevelopment. I urge the Minister, and the Government as a whole, to look at doing more of that, to look at local seafood production and to encourage people to eat local.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is rather odd that in this country we have to export more of what we catch because we eat what is caught elsewhere. Expanding the UK population's view of what they can eat from the catch might make it easier to revive our fishing industry. I will be seeing a group of Cornish Members next week to talk about some of their detailed suggestions about the fund, and I am interested in all creative ideas.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): This fund was set up to act as a sweetener to our fishing communities after they were completely sold out in the Government's EU-Brexit reset. In that negotiation, 12 years of access to our seas were given away. Scotland lands three-quarters of the tonnage of fish in the UK and 60% of the value of UK fishing comes into Scotland. However, of this £360 million fund, Scottish fishermen will get only £28 million—7.7% of the fund. Does it really make sense to the Minister that Scotland gets 8% of the fund, when Scottish fishermen bring in so much of the value of fishing? If it does not make sense, what is she going to do about it?

Dame Angela Eagle: As I have mentioned, a predecessor fund—the UK seafood fund—was complained about massively because it was ringfenced and held at UK level. There were demands for it to be devolved, so we have devolved it and used the Barnett formula, and that is the way the allocations work. The Scottish Government can always spend some of their extra uplift—the largest uplift of a Scottish devolution settlement since devolution began—on supporting the fishing industry, should they so wish.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Brixham has the highest-value catch in England, yet it is in Torbay, which is the most deprived local authority in the south-west of England. How will local levels of deprivation colour the allocation of funding for England?

Dame Angela Eagle: Part of the fund and its use is certainly about trying to create a more vibrant and modern fishing industry that is resilient, and part of that must be social resilience. I look forward to any of the views of the hon. Gentleman's constituents on how the fund could best be used, but we must remember that it is fishing-related, not general; it is there to modernise and make more resilient the UK's fishing industry.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): When the fishing and coastal growth fund was announced, the Government said that they had also secured a new sanitary and phytosanitary agreement to slash red tape

for UK seafood exporters and businesses. Can the Minister tell the fishing fleet in King's Lynn, Brancaster and around the Norfolk coast when that deal will actually be implemented?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are awaiting the EU mandate, which the Commission tells us will be available by the end of November. We are very anxious to then get on to doing the SPS deal as quickly as possible, so that we can tear away all the red tape caused by Brexit. That has caused so much damage and made it so hard for the UK fishing industry to trade with our closest neighbour.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Some 90% of our fishing fleet in Wales are small, under-10 metre boats. The Seafish "Economics of the UK Fishing Fleet" report for the last year found that while Scotland and England saw strong fishing income growth, profits in Wales fell by nearly 10%, despite more active days at sea. Does the Minister agree that funding based on what the sector and the fishing communities need in Wales would be far more fair and effective than the outdated Barnett formula?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is important that we try to support all our fishing industry around the UK. The idea of devolving the fund was to allow the devolved Administrations to do that in their particular areas, because they have more information and views on how best to support. Some £18 million of extra support in the fund goes directly to Wales, which can be used and decided upon by the Senedd to support its local industry.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The East Neuk fishing fleet in my constituency may not be delivering what Shetland does in terms of tonnage, but it is critical, and it faces challenges around spatial mass and recruitment. I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) in relation to how the fund will be distributed. May I query the Minister in relation to the 12-year span of the plan? Obviously it is linked to the EU agreement, but what guarantees can the Minister actually give us that the fund will last for those 12 years? Otherwise, what is proposed becomes meagre.

Dame Angela Eagle: No Parliament can bind its successor, but it is not usual for funds announced in this way to be suddenly ended at the beginning of the next Parliament. We certainly want to ensure that we put in place plans that are so useful and effective that no subsequent Government would even think of cutting the fund. It would be half.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her answers to all our inquiries. I absolutely welcome the fund and thank her for the goals that match the funding. However, with the Northern Ireland funding allocation for fishermen being based on the Barnett consequentials, I do not feel that the £10 million designated for Northern Ireland is enough for the goals of investment in technology and equipment for a new generation of fishermen as well as the necessary harbour updates. A real concern I have is that these moneys may not be ringfenced to ensure that they are not frittered away on the goals and aspirations of devolved Ministers, rather than going directly to the fleets. What guidelines are in place to safeguard the use of this fund and to ensure that every penny rebuilds our fishing fleets, such as those in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel?

Dame Angela Eagle: Clearly, the way that devolution works is that the Government in Westminster, once we have distributed funds via the Barnett formula, cannot ringfence them in any of the devolved Administrations. That would be a ridiculous misinterpretation of what devolution means, and I am sure that those devolved Administrations would be the first to complain if we tried. The hon. Member—I thank him for his welcome to me—needs to talk to the Northern Ireland Assembly about what it is going to do. We want the fund to be used for the purposes for which it was created, but by definition the devolution settlement takes the ringfence off, so he must have his arguments with the Assembly.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for securing this urgent question. The aggregated coastline of my constituency is greater than that of France, so the fishing industry plays a crucial part in its economic wellbeing. Having barely survived the disaster of Brexit, this latest decision by the UK Government is another kick in the teeth to those fishing communities. We are all agreed that this formula is fundamentally unfair, so did the Secretary of State for Scotland come to the Minister's Department at any point and specifically urge her to reverse this decision—yes or no?

Dame Angela Eagle: Following Brexit—since leaving the EU under the trade and co-operation agreement—the UK received an uplift in its fishing quota. Some 65% of that uplift went to Scotland. That was worth £107 million on 2024 figures, so I think Scotland got a reasonable deal. Remember that the uplift in the quota, which creates real income, is locked in going forward.

Mr Speaker: This was a very important and well attended urgent question, and I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to answer it. One of the arguments made to me for not granting it was that "there will be a Westminster Hall debate next Wednesday, though on an unrelated subject: banning plastic wipes"—I know that argument was not from the Minister, who I again thank. I think we can see that the urgent question was very important.

Business of the House

11.27 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 27 October will include:

Monday 27 October—Remaining stages of the Victims and Courts Bill.

Tuesday 28 October—Opposition day on a motion in the name of the official Opposition—subject to be announced.

Wednesday 29 October—Remaining stages of the Sentencing Bill.

Thursday 30 October—General debate on property service charges, followed by a general debate on the ageing community and end-of-life care. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 31 October—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 3 November includes:

Monday 3 November—Second Reading of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

Jesse Norman: In addition to the tributes that were paid earlier this week, I believe I will be speaking for all Members in mourning the death on Monday of our former colleague Oliver Colvile. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] Oliver entered the House with me in that glorious parliamentary generation of 2010. He was nationally famous for taking a wicket in India on live television for the Lords and Commons cricket team, and for his memorable call in 2015 for hedgehogs to become a national emblem of the UK. As he pointed out in this Chamber,

"hedgehogs are prickly in character, have a voracious appetite and a passion for gardens, and have a noisy sex life."—[*Official Report*, 10 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 351.]

He said that he left it to the Deputy Speaker to decide which of those traits he himself possessed.

The Leader of the House has rightly put some distance between himself and his predecessor in electing not to engage in political knockabout, and I am four-square behind him on that. In that spirit, I will content myself by simply noting some of the news this week. The UK has just recorded net borrowing of more than £20 billion in September, the highest of any month since 2021. The Crown Prosecution Service has been forced to abandon the most consequential trial of Chinese spies for many years. Four people have resigned from the grooming gangs inquiry panel and the leading candidate to be chair has withdrawn. Newspapers have been briefed by No. 10 that the new Cabinet Secretary will be removed in the new year, after barely 15 months in his post. A person deported under the Government's one in, one out programme has immediately returned by dinghy, reportedly citing his terror at being in France.

The Leader of the House may or may not wish to comment on those issues, but there are two specific items affecting many Members of this House that I bring to his attention. The first is the imminent closure of the fruit and vegetables aid scheme. As he will be aware, the UK fresh produce sector is worth more than £3 billion and is a significant part of the UK farm economy. There has been a plan in place for some time to grow that sector rapidly over the next three years through public and private investment in equipment, technology and infrastructure, but the current scheme closes at the end of this year without any movement to date on this crucial issue from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Will the Leader of the House therefore ask the Secretary of State to pick up this issue as soon as possible, push ahead with the plan and make a statement to the House, so as to avoid risk to the horticulture sector, local food production, jobs and national food security?

The second issue relates to the Government's new local government fair funding review. As the House will know, this is a fraught area of concern for Members across the House, and I declare a particular interest, since it appears likely that Herefordshire council—my own county—will face a funding gap next year of around £27 million, or 11% of its net budget. That is a gigantic sum, which comes on top of the withdrawal of the rural services delivery grant, which supported so many local services. It is entirely unclear what the rationale for such a cut could be, especially for what is a relatively poor and sparsely populated part of the country. I also note, and bring to the attention of colleagues across the House, that the new formula will create serious problems for many local authorities up and down this country, including London boroughs.

The need for reform is clear, but the Government are still consulting barely six months before the new formula is due to be rolled out. Haste is the last thing anyone needs in an area of this complexity and delicacy. May I impress on the Leader of the House the need for care and deliberation from the Government in how this consultation is carried out and then implemented? Will he in turn express this concern to ministerial colleagues and give proper time for these issues to be debated at the length they deserve in this Chamber?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am pleased to see the shadow Leader of the House back in his place this week. I just inform him, if he did not already know, that last week we discovered in his absence that he has a highly capable deputy in the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who may or may not be joining us in deliberations later.

I join the shadow Leader of the House in paying tribute to Oliver Colvile, who the House will remember fondly as the MP for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport from 2010 to 2017. Our thoughts are with his family. Apart from his other achievements, not least in seeking to save hedgehogs, my understanding is that he never broke his party's Whip and therefore would have been a Chief Whip's dream, I can assure the House.

We also remember this week that it is 59 years since the Aberfan disaster, when 144 people lost their lives, including 116 children. We must never forget. Today also marks the launch of the Royal British Legion poppy appeal. We remember those who served and gave their lives in the service of our country, including those who were Members of this House.

I also pay tribute on a personal level and give my thanks to Kate Wilson, who is leaving the Cabinet Office this week. Her career has spanned three decades, and she supported successive Governments' work in Parliament on behalf of the office of the Leader of the House of Commons and the Government Chief Whip's office, and I hope the whole House will join me in wishing Kate the best in her future endeavours.

I also join with you, Mr Speaker, in wishing England all the very best in their rugby league match on Saturday against Australia. We wish England well.

I turn to the shadow Leader of the House's points. First of all, it is true that we need to get the balance right in these questions between serious matters and, from time to time, knockabout. I have spoken to him privately about this, and I am committed to ending some of the knockabout—but given the list that he presented, he is tempting me. As some of the issues might come up in questions later, the only thing I will say is on my starting point last week on questions about the economy: any Conservative Member who asks a question on the economy should begin with an apology.

On the substantive matter that the right hon. Gentleman raises—the food and vegetable aid scheme—he is a strong advocate for the industry and particularly for his beautiful county of Herefordshire, where I understand it has been a great year for apples, but not always for other veg and fruit. I will draw his remarks to the attention of the DEFRA Minister, who I am sure will be happy to meet him if he seeks a meeting, and who will also keep the House updated on that matter.

On local government funding, I will respond by saying that the current system of local authority funding has left some places behind—there is no doubt about that. It is not a fair system. The previous Government understood this very well in their fair funding review, but, as with many issues, they just did not deliver on it. We will make good on our commitment to introduce improvements to align funding with need, and that will be the first time that has happened since 2013. We will also publish our response to the fair funding review 2.0 later this autumn, which will be followed by the publication of the provisional multi-year settlement. In the usual way, there will be plenty of time to debate that.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Last week, the Office for National Statistics published its latest report on drugs-related deaths in England and Wales. Sadly, for the 12th consecutive year, drugs-related deaths have increased, with a harrowing 5,565 people losing their lives to drugs in the last year. A key finding of the report is that almost half the deaths were related to opiates, and the number of deaths involving synthetic opioids called nitazenes has increased fourfold. Given the scale of the loss of life that we are seeing and the stark regional disparities in the figures, will the Leader of the House please arrange for a debate in Government time on measures to urgently address this crisis?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises very important matters. As a former drugs Minister, I know that there is a feeling across the House that we need to continue to bear down on the devastation that drugs can bring to our local communities. There is interest across the House, and I urge my hon. Friend to ask for a debate, perhaps in Backbench Business time, so that colleagues can share their concerns.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): First, I associate myself with the comments made about Oliver Colvile's passing and the Aberfan disaster.

I wonder if we can have a debate about rhetoric colliding with reality. Earlier this week, we had the Chancellor, after years of telling us that we can make Brexit work, finally concede that things are not going so well on that front. In the same week, our resident patriots—people who are so passionate about Britain that they seek to import American politics to our shores—discovered that their latest pet project has hit the buffers as well. Reform's department of government efficiency—or DOGE, as I hear teenage boys call it—has succeeded only in cutting the number of Reform councillors in Kent from 57 to 50. The latest spate of losses has come after Reform's Kent county council leader conceded that there is not much waste to cut in local government and that it will probably have to put up council tax, just like everybody else.

As much as I enjoy watching populist promises go pop, there is a serious point to be made about local government being on its knees. As real-terms budgets have been cut year after year, demand has continued to rise. More elderly people require social care, there are more children with special needs, and more families are turning up at the council's front door after becoming homeless. For many local authorities, the vast majority of their budget is now spent on services for these vulnerable people, leaving little left for the services that residents expect to see across their communities.

The Government's fair funding formula was supposed to fix all this, but in some places, including my London borough of Sutton, it seems like it is set to make things worse. That is in no small part down to the fact that it utterly fails to take account of the real cost of housing, particularly in London and the south-east. Can the Government give us assurances that they intend to fix the problems with their current proposal, that they are going to listen to the feedback from London Councils and the Local Government Association, and that they will come back with a funding formula that works for local authorities?

Sir Alan Campbell: I must say that a request from the Lib Dems to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality shows how far they have come. On Brexit, the cost of that decision is becoming clearer, but I would point the hon. Member to the fact that the Government are seeking to achieve a better deal with the European Union, as we heard in response to the urgent question, not least for fishing communities such as my own.

On local authority spending, as I said to the shadow Leader of the House, the current system is broken. The Government are committed to fixing it, which the previous Government did not do. We do intend to make good on that commitment, and the hon. Member will have to wait and see what the outcome is. However, he is right that this is a concern not just for Members on his side of the Chamber, but for those on the Labour side, and the Government will bring forward our proposals in

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good time. Our intention is to make things better, and we will come back and explain in full how that is going to happen.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I am incredibly proud that five of my constituents—Kelly Buxton, Maddie Buxton, Demi-Leigh Walsh, Ollie Taylor and, the youngest, nine-year-old Blake Webster, all from Evolution Martial Arts in Glossop—will be representing England at the kickboxing world championships in Niagara. Will the Leader of the House not only join me in wishing them every success, but provide Government time for a debate on ensuring access to sporting opportunities for all young people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in wishing the very best of luck to all those involved in Evolution Martial Arts. I think that would make a good topic for a debate, perhaps in Westminster Hall, should he seek to apply for one. It would enable the Minister concerned to talk about the Government's recent announcement of £400 million for future grassroots facilities, which in no small part will ensure that facilities are there to provide the opportunities from which his constituents are seeking to benefit.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I add my tribute to the late Oliver Colvile. I first came across him in the final selection in Brent North, where he was up against Sajid Javid and Grant Shapps. He had to wait until 2010 to finally be elected. In the famous cricket match in India when the Lords and Commons took on an Indian select eleven, I remember two moments. One was when he bowled—completely bowled—an Indian state-sponsored cricketer. However, the more important one was when he bent down to pick up the ball when fielding on the boundary in front of the camera, and his trousers split to reveal his Union Jack underpants.

I thank the Leader of the House for the convivial meeting we had on Monday about trying to ensure that time for Backbench Business debates in the Chamber can be maximised. I gently ask that we get a notification if we are to get any time in the Chamber on 4 or 5 November or in the week after, which will facilitate debate.

I come to the business in Westminster Hall. On Tuesday 28 October, there will be a debate on obesity and fatty liver disease. On Thursday 30 October, there will be a statement from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on its report on land value capture, which is of great importance across the country, followed by debates on histological testing of excised moles and on the Education Committee's report on children's social care. On Tuesday 4 November, there will be a debate on the impact of UK official development assistance cuts on international development. On Tuesday 11 November, there will be a debate on support for dyslexic pupils at school. On Thursday 13 November, the first debate will be on modern-day slavery in Pakistan, and we will be offering another debate later.

There are rules governing the use of fireworks. On Diwali, Chinese new year and new year's eve, people are entitled to have displays up until 1 am, and on Guy Fawkes day till midnight. At all other times, it is 11 pm. I am not sure what other colleagues think, but the reality is that there are very unsociable people who release fireworks in the early hours of the morning, starting in September and seemingly going on until the end of January. Not only do they do that, but we have very expensive and very loud fireworks that frighten animals and disturb children's sleep. People who need their sleep before they go to work are also severely inconvenienced. May we have a statement from a Minister on what action will be taken to prevent that from happening and to ensure that enforcement action is taken not only on hours, but to restrict the very powerful fireworks that cause such distress?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his work as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. We will endeavour to give as much notice as possible of upcoming Backbench Business days, but I take particular note of 5 November and I will get back to him as soon as possible.

The Government's intention is to minimise the negative impact of fireworks. People do enjoy fireworks, but at the same time communities can be plagued by their misuse. We certainly support their considerate use, but we need to reduce the risk and disturbance to individuals and, in particular, to animals. We have launched a firework safety campaign for this fireworks series, and current regulations control their sale, availability and use, including the maximum noise for consumer fireworks, but the Government will keep that under review. Our Crime and Policing Bill, which is currently in the Lords, will give the police greater powers to get persistent antisocial offenders off our streets, whatever the time of year.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Just to help the House, we are aiming for a 12.30 finish. A good example of speed will be given by Dr Marie Tidball.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Last month, I held a community event in Wharncliffe Side on building an NHS fit for the future. My constituents were pleased to hear about our Government's plans to bring healthcare closer to our communities. They want to see diagnostic and treatment centres, like those in the Glass Works in Barnsley, established at the heart of Stocksbridge, our steel town. Will the Leader of the House advise me on what I can do to secure a community health hub in Stocksbridge in my constituency to enable preventive care to take place locally?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend has been a fierce campaigner on healthcare issues and I pay tribute to her for that. As she points out, we are committed to a neighbourhood health service, ensuring that more care is delivered in local communities and open six days a week. I do not know the answer to her question about how she gets a hub, but I will make sure that the appropriate Minister hears it and we will get back to her.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Lancashire county council has started a consultation on the future of adult social care. Critically, it includes a consultation on the

future of 10 critical care homes across Lancashire. It says it has not made its mind up about the consultation, yet there is already a timeline for when those care homes would be closed down should the decision be made. They include: Milbanke in Kirkham, Thornton House just up the road, and Grove House in Adlington in the Chorley constituency. Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to ask the relevant Minister to organise a cross-party meeting between myself, the Labour MPs affected and you, Mr Speaker, so we can hold this Reform-led county council to account for the decisions it is making?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue on behalf of his constituents, and it goes much further afield than his constituency. We all know the concern about the possible closure of care homes. I will therefore speak to the relevant Minister in the hope that we can get the meeting he requests.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Wednesfield in Bloom for once again achieving gold in the Britain in Bloom awards? From Ashmore Park to the village, our high street, St Thomas's church, Guru Nanak gurdwara, the Hub at Ashmore Park, nurseries, schools, shops and businesses, will he thank the phenomenal volunteers and everyone involved for their blooming marvellous effort and success?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Wednesfield in Bloom and everyone involved in its success. It is a great example of the immense contribution that community groups and volunteers make to our local communities. As I usually say at this point, Mr Speaker, volunteers and community groups are the golden thread that runs through our communities and holds them together, and I wish them well.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): A number of constituents have come to see me about adaptations made to their home under the ECO4 scheme, where an installer has received a grant from the Government—from the taxpayer—to hopefully improve the energy efficiency of their home, but what the homeowner has actually experienced is significant disruption and energy bills that have gone up. The payment to the installer from the taxpayer is based on estimates of the household's energy use before and after—there are no facts involved. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero on whether these schemes represent value for money for the taxpayer and the homeowner, and whether they can be made more efficient in the future?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady raises an important question in two parts. First, are these homes getting the improvement that we want them to have under our ambitious plans? Secondly, is the taxpayer getting good value for money? I will draw this matter to the attention of Ministers and ensure that she gets a full response.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): As it is business questions, Mr Speaker, I figured I would come to work in my high-visibility jacket. Over the summer recess, my team organised a series of roundtables in Waltham Forest and Redbridge with families of children with special educational needs and disabilities. A key theme highlighted to me was the need for a more inclusive and collaborative approach—wherever we can, we need to avoid forcing families into adversarial and often chaotic processes for education, health and care plans. Does the Leader of the House agree that with the right resources and environment, all schools should be able to meet all but the most complex of needs without isolating children from their peers? Given that so many families have waited years to receive help, can we have a debate on this subject?

Sir Alan Campbell: I agree that every child should have access to the best education possible, wherever he or she attends school. It is very clear that the SEND system is broken: it does not work for parents or children, and it does not really work for staff, either. We have invested an extra £1 billion in SEND and, as my hon. Friend knows, we are committed to reforming the system. We are getting on with that, because it is really important that the next generation of children do not suffer the traumas that the current and previous generations have suffered. We keep the House updated on these matters, but I am sure that if my hon. Friend wishes to speak to a Minister, they would be happy to confirm those things, too.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Applications for battery storage sites are springing up all over the country, including in my constituency, and my constituents are certainly very concerned about them. This month the UK Health Security Agency wrote to my local district council raising concerns about one such application, discussing fire risks, toxic gases, the potential for particulate matter causing cancers, and damage that could occur to the aquifer, water supplies and the environment, among many other concerns. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the risk of these sites, as I do not think they have been considered in sufficient detail?

Sir Alan Campbell: Planning practice guidance encourages developers and local planning authorities to engage with local fire and rescue services, so that part of the process clearly needs to be followed. Should the hon. Lady wish to raise this matter in a debate, I am sure that others will join her in raising their concerns and she will get a response from a Minister.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): The Government have delivered increased funding to local councils for schools, buses, roads and social care. However, the Reform administration in Kent is in chaos, focusing on internal disputes rather than delivering for my constituents. At the weekend, a video emerged of the leader of the council shouting and swearing at other Reform councillors who disagreed with her. As Kent county council is responsible for billions of pounds of taxpayers' money, can we have a debate on local government accountability and how we can ensure that the people of Kent receive the high-quality local services they deserve?

Sir Alan Campbell: There is a theme emerging this morning on the difference between the offer that Reform makes in order to get into local government and what actually happens in reality. As the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions yesterday,

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"what people get if they vote Reform is total chaos and broken promises."—[*Official Report*, 22 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 962.]

Elected representatives have a duty to local taxpayers to spend their money wisely. My hon. Friend may wish to seek an Adjournment debate to further expose the role of Reform in Kent county council.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In a 2019 "Newsnight" interview, Prince Andrew stated that he broke off ties with the notorious international paedophile Jeffrey Epstein after going to visit him for four days in New York. We have since learned through email chains that he in fact got in contact with Jeffrey Epstein subsequently to that, and stated that he was looking forward to "playing some more". Following those revelations and further allegations that are in the public domain, I have laid a motion before this House that calls on the Government to listen to parliamentarians, the public and victims, and take legislative action to remove the dukedom from Prince Andrew.

[That this House calls on the Government to take legislative steps to remove the dukedom granted to Prince Andrew.]

When will the Government introduce that legislation?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, any discussion of this issue needs to begin with the simple, important fact that at the heart of this should be remembering the victims of Jeffrey Epstein, so we do that. The question of titles is primarily a question for His Majesty. I know that there has been speculation about legislation, but the palace has been clear that it recognises that there are other matters that this House needs to be getting on with, and we are guided in this by the palace. That does not mean that the House cannot find ways to debate these matters, whether it be the matter of titles or of the finances, which I know are also under question. The right hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to find a way to make that happen.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): It is time to end the taboo around the menopause. Today's Government announcement that menopause will be included in the 40-plus health check is a huge step in the right direction. It will mean that women across my constituency of North Warwickshire and Bedworth will get the medical support that they need. However, we must go further so that every woman gets the support that she needs in her workplace. Will the Leader of the House support a debate in Government time on how to work across Government to ensure that managers, departments and businesses give all women the support that they need in the workplace in order to thrive?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is time to end the taboo, and I pay tribute to her for her campaigning on this important issue. We are improving menopause support through the Employment Rights Bill, which will require employers to produce an action plan showing what they are doing to support menopausal staff. There was a Westminster Hall debate last week to mark World Menopause Day, and I am sure that there will be further opportunities for Members to discuss these matters.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): In 2023, my private Member's Bill received Royal Assent, becoming the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023. In order to bring it into force, some statutory instruments had to be introduced. Police forces up and down the land, as well as police and crime commissioners, hailed it as a major step forward in preventing agricultural equipment theft and, indeed, power tool theft, as was envisaged in the original debate on the Bill. Yet last week, I had a letter from the Policing Minister telling me that the contents of the Act would be hollowed out, with the requirement for immobilisers on quad bikes removed and only forensic marking required for GPS units. That is a bad let-down for rural communities up and down the land, so can we have at minimum a statement, or better still a debate in Government time, to explore what this Government's real approach is to rural crime? Without the full provisions of the Act, it is a free ride for the criminals.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Can we speed up, because a lot of people want to get in, and it is only fair that everybody gets a chance?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government believe that rural crime is a huge problem and are determined to act, which is why we set up the rural crime strategy and announced new funding for the national rural crime unit. We published the Government's response to the call for evidence, which outlines the scope of the secondary legislation needed to implement the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act, on 17 October, and we aim to introduce the secondary legislation in Parliament this year. There will be opportunities for the hon. Gentleman to raise his very valid concerns.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Every year thousands gather for safe organised firework displays. However, this time of year also brings dread for many due to antisocial and inconsiderate firework use, as we have heard. It causes misery and distress for animals, and many vulnerable and elderly people. I welcome the earlier comments from the Leader of the House on this issue, but can we have a debate on the regulation of fireworks outside of formal displays to minimise their impact on people and animals, and to ensure that they are sold and used responsibly?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is an excellent advocate for her constituency, and I thank her for raising this issue. As we have already heard, it is of concern not just to our constituents but to Members across the House. Councils and the police have powers to protect the public from misuse and harm, but it is up to this House to make the case as to whether those powers represent the full extent needed. I would ask my hon. Friend to apply for a debate so that those issues can be explored—perhaps in Backbench Business time.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Last week, Billington Structures, one of the UK's leading structural steelwork contractors, announced proposals to close its Yate site, with 81 jobs at risk. Businesses of all shapes and sizes are struggling due to the increase in national insurance contributions and rising energy costs. Will

the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on what needs to be included in the upcoming autumn Budget to avert further job losses?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Leader of the House responds, we only have 30 minutes to go, so questions must be short and answers even shorter.

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady would not expect me to speculate about what is in the Budget, but there will be adequate time during the debate on it to address the concerns she raises.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): While it is obviously necessary to improve the lives and dignity of older people, does the Leader of the House agree that in order to build a fairer Britain there needs to be some rebalancing of attention and resources towards the younger generation? Will he therefore consider a debate in Government time on what I call a youth triple lock? Members, having consulted young people, could then discuss what such a measure might include—for example, free bus travel, uplifting maintenance loans by inflation or a voucher scheme for constructive activities.

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a number of important issues. We are determined to get the balance right and to get a better future for our young people. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate or Backbench Business debate to raise those concerns.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The Birmingham bin strike has now cost taxpayers £14 million. Residents have had no recycling collection since last Christmas, and the city has lost £4 million in income due to no garden waste collection. The strike is doing irrevocable damage to the reputation of the west midlands, including my constituency. Can the Leader of the House ask the new Minister for Local Government to update the House on this situation and on how the Government are going fix it?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I can.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Young adults in my constituency are still waiting more than five months for a driving test. It is just not fair. They cannot get to work; they cannot have apprenticeships. Will the Leader of the House join me in pushing the Department for Transport to do something about this very quickly?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I will. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, which has been highlighted by a number of Members. I have also raised it with the Department for Transport. The Government are accelerating a consultation into the abuse of the driving test booking system and the reasons that we do not have enough places. I will ensure that the Transport Secretary has heard his concerns directly.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Banking hubs give residents and businesses much-needed access to cash and banking services, and can drive up town centre footfall to support local businesses. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the importance of banking hubs, and does he agree that the beautiful, historic and incredible town of Yarm would be the perfect location for such a hub?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are committed to providing more banking hubs, and indeed some have opened. The hon. Member could ask for a Backbench Business debate, because I am sure his concerns are shared by others, but let me gently say that the beautiful and historic town of Whitley Bay gets its banking hub on Friday.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Dementia is the leading cause of death in this country, and my constituents tell me of not only the mental decline but the physical conditions, poor mobility, infections and increased pain levels that sufferers experience. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is crucial to improve co-ordination between social care, community care and hospital services? Will he please consider asking the Department of Health and Social Care to treat dementia as a physical health condition so that sufferers and their families can receive the appropriate support they need?

Sir Alan Campbell: I agree with my hon. Friend. We will deliver the first ever modern service framework for dementia to deliver improvements in quality of care. We are committed to tackling the issue he mentioned and I will ensure that the Health Secretary has heard his concerns.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): In 2020, my constituent Dorien Williams submitted a complaint to the Legal Ombudsman service about the professional conduct of his former legal representatives. It took the ombudsman four years to find in his favour. The delay took Mr Williams over the six-year limitation period, denying him the opportunity for legal recourse. Does the Leader of the House agree that the ombudsman's defence that other customers experienced similar delays is totally unacceptable? Will he allow a debate in the House to provide accountability?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is not good enough to explain away such delays by simply saying that they happen and that people should stand in a queue. I think we all sometimes get frustrated at the work that ombudsmen do, though they do important work. I will draw the point to the attention of the appropriate Minister to get a response for the hon. Lady.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): From his first stage performance in the Alloa town hall with the brilliant Forefront stage school to starring as Orpheus in "Hadestown" at the Lyric theatre in London, what a journey Tillicoultry actor Dylan Wood has been on from the wee county to the west end. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Dylan on his fantastic theatre run? Does he agree that Dylan is an inspiration to young people across Alloa and Grangemouth to pursue a career in the creative arts?

Sir Alan Campbell: Absolutely. I also congratulate Dylan; it is really important that people get the opportunity to shine and show their talents, and I wish him well.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Many of my constituents in Berwickshire would prefer to use NHS services in Northumberland, which are much closer to them—indeed, Northumbria healthcare NHS foundation trust has said it would welcome those patients—but the SNP Government do everything to stop them, meaning that elderly and sick patients have to travel many miles to access treatment. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate to allow this matter to be considered further? Does he agree that people should be able to access NHS services regardless of which side of the border they are on?

Sir Alan Campbell: As someone with a constituency in the area covered by the fantastic Northumbria NHS trust, I am not surprised that the hon. Member's constituents would rather be served by it than by the authority where they live. We have delivered Scotland's largest settlement since devolution. At its heart, this is about getting the health service right north of the border, with that money spent properly.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for holding the Black History Month debate in Government time. The recent Government consultation on closing the ethnicity pay gap is important. The GMB's report shows that there is a pay gap in Parliament. Will he help me to push forward action plans so that we can close it?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, we will ensure a full right to equal pay for ethnic minorities in law, and we will introduce mandatory ethnicity pay reporting for larger employers to help close the pay gap and to support my hon. Friend's campaign.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last week I held a drop-in with the Great Start in Life Foundation, which supports health visitors and school nursing services across much of the north of England, helping children and families to get the best start in life. Will the Leader of the House congratulate that organisation on its work and find time for a debate on supporting and strengthening nought-to-19 public health services, which play such a vital role in improving outcomes for children and young people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will, of course, congratulate the foundation on its work. The Government are seeking precisely to ensure that everybody gets the best start in life and that the investment is there, because it pays off later.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I recently met one of my constituents, Toni Hibbert, who expressed concerns about the process through which parents of disabled children can become Court of Protection deputies when their child turns 18. The application process not only can take many months but requires parents to pay large sums throughout, adding extra financial burden when they may already be stretched. Toni has started a parliamentary petition, which has received almost 9,000 signatures, in the hope of making the process much simpler for parents who are often already stretched. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on changes that could address this critical issue?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important issue on behalf of Toni. The Government recognise the difficulty that parents and guardians face. It is important that safeguards are in place from the outset to protect vulnerable people. He will have the opportunity to raise this matter with the Minister directly at the next Justice questions, or he may wish to apply for an Adjournment debate.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): With the Government planning to bulldoze all over the green belt—other parties do not fare much better; the Liberal Democrats, in their manifesto, said they wanted to build even more houses—and given that the Conservatives have pledged to protect the green belt, will the Leader of the House explain to my constituents why the Bromsgrove and the villages housing target has increased by a staggering 85% while Birmingham's has reduced by over 30%? If he cannot, will he grant a debate on this important topic?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman may seek either a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate to draw attention to the matter of his constituency. I would gently point out that people need somewhere to live, and that arguments against such proposals are often from people who are already have houses in which to live and who do not seem particularly bothered about solving this particular problem—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member chunters from a sedentary position. The public services that people need around housing will only be paid for if we get growth in the economy, and housing is an important part of delivering that.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): The clocks turn back this Sunday and many children will soon go to school in the dark. The Child Brain Injury Trust has a campaign called GloWeek, which promotes high visibility so that young people can be seen in the dark and avoid accidents that can alter their lives forever. Tomorrow I will join pupils at Chopwell primary school as they learn all about it. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can encourage safety across our community?

Sir Alan Campbell: As usual, my hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I thank her for doing so. As the nights draw in, it is important that we promote campaigns such as GloWeek. Work is under way to deliver an updated strategic framework for road safety. I will make sure that Ministers are made aware of the Child Brain Injury Trust campaign.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It was announced yesterday that family courts will no longer presume that contact with both parents is preferred when domestic violence has occurred. Many in Wokingham, including Kaleidoscopic UK, are concerned that abusive partners will still manipulate courts by claiming that they are the victim. Family courts only get limited mandatory training; that is why residents want an expert to advise the judiciary, case by case, in order to stop abusive practice. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on how we can best implement that advisory role into the judiciary to support victims of domestic violence?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are absolutely committed to supporting victims of domestic violence. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's concerns are shared across the House, so I encourage him to seek a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate or to put the point directly to Ministers in Justice questions, so that they can respond.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Older constituents living in the high flats at Callendar Park and Kemper Avenue in my constituency have for years raised the issue of unacceptable antisocial, and sometimes criminal, behaviour. Those flats are the last place that any drug dealer should be rehoused. Can we have a debate in Government time on housing and the operation of the Equality Act 2010 so we can better defend housing historically reserved for older people from the social consequences of Scotland's drug crisis?

Sir Alan Campbell: It must be a worrying time for residents of high flats. Local authorities and social landlords have a range of existing levers to tackle anti-social behaviour, including eviction. The Government expect them to use those levers responsibly and proportionately —but, importantly, where appropriate, we expect them to be used. This would make a powerful topic for a Westminster Hall debate and I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for one.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Next month, the UK will be co-hosting the Global Fund replenishment summit with South Africa, but it has been reported that the UK will slash its own funding by 20%. It is estimated that such a cut will cause 82,000 more deaths in Africa and cost over £5 billion to its GDP. Will the Government have a debate on the Global Fund replenishment, so that the House can scrutinise these decisions before they are made?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady will know why the Government have made some decisions on the question of overseas aid, given the situation that we inherited. However, I understand her concerns, which will be echoed in constituencies across the country.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Today marks the start of the Carlisle beer and cider festival, a fantastic celebration of local independent brewers, including those just over the border in Scotland, who now benefit from the guest beer agreement, making it easier for them to get their product into local pubs. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the organisers of the festival and will he arrange for a Business Minister to make a statement on the outcome of the Government's market access review of the barriers faced by small brewers?

Sir Alan Campbell: I congratulate the organisers of the festival. Carlisle has a very proud history of brewing and I know that my hon. Friend is a strong advocate for the success of much-loved local breweries. We are currently assessing the beer market to identify any structural barriers preventing small breweries from accessing pubs, and I will make sure that the relevant Minister hears her words.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Recent studies from Stanford university and others have shown a clear link between excessive phone use, addictive social media algorithms and deteriorating mental health outcomes for young people. Technology in this area is evolving at an extraordinary speed, meaning that legislation such as the Online Safety Act 2023 is not being implemented fast enough before new harms emerge. Our NHS is picking up the pieces. In my constituency, over 6,000 young people are waiting for a first contact with mental health services, and that takes eight months. Will the Leader of the House please find space in Government time for a debate on how we can protect young people by addressing the growing connection between digital addiction and mental health?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. That question was far too long.

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady can seek either a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate, because I am sure her concerns are shared by other Members. That way, she can hear an answer to her point from the relevant Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Shorter questions, please. I call Torcuil Crichton.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): A return flight from my Western Isles/Na h-Eileanan an Iar constituency to Glasgow can cost £600 return. That is enough to make Donald Trump think twice about coming to his mother's home island. There is an air discount scheme, but what we really need is a public service obligation, with Government support for those vital social and economic flights. Will the Leader of the House lean on the Department for Transport to get together with the Scottish Government, Loganair and the local authority to make those flights more affordable for islanders and for the President of the United States?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will raise that with the Department and ensure that my hon. Friend gets the answer he seeks.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): May I join the Leader of the House in his acknowledgment of the start of the poppy appeal? Is he aware that our British Legion in Northern Ireland is now required to have an appointed EU rep to handle compliance for safety issues for products distributed, sold or given for donation during the poppy appeal. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is ridiculous and will he speak to the appropriate Minister so we can have a meeting about it?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that Minister will have heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns. A meeting might be appropriate or, indeed, he may wish to raise it through an Adjournment debate on the Floor of the House. It is a timely topic.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I have heard from local residents, as well as local refugee charities in Reading, who are all calling for the use of hotels to house asylum seekers to end as soon as possible. That practice began five years ago as a result of the previous Government's irresponsible build-up of the backlog of claims. Will the Leader of the House set aside time for the Government to update us on the progress that they

[Yuan Yang]

have already made to speed up claims processing, as well as to set out the timeline for closing down hotels such as the one in my constituency?

Sir Alan Campbell: As my hon. Friend says, we inherited a broken system. We are working as fast as we can to close all asylum hotels as quickly as is practicable. We have already halved the number open, and I encourage her to raise this particular case at the next Home Office questions. In the meantime, I will make Ministers aware of the matter.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The last Conservative Government promised to replace Cornwall's EU structural funding pound for pound after Brexit, but they only delivered a quarter of that through the UK shared prosperity fund. Under this Government, Cornwall faces a devastating cliff edge on that vital funding in March. Please will the Leader of the House help all Cornish MPs convene an emergency meeting with Treasury Ministers ahead of the Budget to ensure that Cornwall is not left high and dry?

Sir Alan Campbell: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says because, as he acknowledges, we have some powerful advocates for Cornwall on the Government side of the House. I will make sure that Ministers are aware of that request and see what we can achieve.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Across Telford, residents and businesses tell me that they are not getting reliable 5G connections for broadband or their mobile phones, despite the fact that surrounding towns and cities do. Some tell me that getting even a 3G or 4G signal is a real challenge. Can we have a debate in Government time about the importance of digital connectivity for economic growth and access to public services, and what more can be done to connect Telford?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for his area and rightly puts this in the context of not just his constituents' frustrations but the importance of economic growth. I suggest he seeks a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate, so that he can raise the concerns directly with a Minister.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The Chinook Justice Campaign presented a petition to Downing Street this week asking for transparency about the Mull of Kintyre crash in 1994. The Ministry of Defence at Boscombe Down grounded these Boeing Chinooks before the flight, but the special forces pilots were blamed by the RAF, only to be exonerated fully and given a posthumous apology by the Defence Secretary in 2011. Can the Leader of the House press the Defence Secretary, the Justice Secretary and the Victims Minister, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), to have compassion and meet the families, so that they can finally gain an understanding of what happened all those years ago?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will draw that to the attention of my right hon. Friends. This is a serious matter that needs a serious response. It is a devastating situation for the families, so I will draw that to the attention of my right hon. Friends, as the hon. Lady requests.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I recently met a constituent whose husband died while serving in the police force and who now finds herself in a difficult position. Under the 1987 police pension scheme, surviving partners do not receive lifelong survivor benefits, whereas under the 2015 scheme, they do. She feels, understandably, that this creates an inconsistency for families who have already given so much to public service. Could we have a debate on police pensions to discuss whether more can be done to ensure the system treats all police families with consistency and compassion?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand very well what my hon. Friend is asking for. Although there are currently no plans to review the scheme, I urge him to call for a debate, so that he can make his case, which I am sure will be supported by others across the House, and ensure that Ministers hear the significance of this.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Last week I visited ReMind, a dementia charity in Bath. In an earlier answer, the Leader of the House mentioned the modern service framework for dementia and frailty that was promised in the NHS 10-year plan. Can we have a statement from the Health Secretary when that framework is forthcoming, given the urgent need for certainty for all those affected by dementia?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I said earlier, we are determined to bring forward the framework. When that happens, I will make sure the Health Secretary hears the hon. Lady's call to accompany that with a statement, so that she can hold Ministers to account.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is brilliant that new playgrounds are being built in Derby, including in Stockbrook Park and in Knightsbridge in Mackworth. Stockbrook Park is also home to an incredible local grassroots football club, the Stockbrook Colts, whose play has been stopped because the pitch they play on is unusable and in need of repair. They deserve a ground that matches the effort they put in. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on grassroots football and its importance to our local communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: Grassroots sports clubs are at the heart of our local communities, and I am genuinely sorry to hear of the issue that my hon. Friend raises on behalf of her constituents; I know she is doing everything she can to support them. She may wish to apply for a Backbench Business debate, to express her concerns and to hear from Ministers about our £400 million investment in grassroots sports facilities across the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am deeply troubled by the horrific rise in attacks against the Christian community in Nigeria, including the destruction of churches, kidnapping and the recent murder of 13 Christians in Plateau state on 14 October. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those appalling attacks and urge the Foreign Secretary to outline what action the Government will take in response to escalating persecution?

Sir Alan Campbell: We share the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and I join him in condemning any acts against churches and religious groups. The Government are

committed to defending freedom of religion and belief for all. I gently point him towards Foreign Office orals on 28 October, where he may want to raise this directly.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I have met representatives from local businesses in the Jaguar Land Rover supply chain, and there can be no doubt that this Government's £1.5 billion guarantee to support JLR has safeguarded thousands of jobs across the west midlands. Given the increasing cyber-threats facing UK industry, will the Leader of the House commit to scheduling a debate in Government time on strengthening cyber-resilience across manufacturing and other critical sectors?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend may wish to seek his own debate on these matters, to highlight this issue and the support the Government gave to JLR and all the companies that support it. He will know that cyber-security is an important matter. We are working with the National Cyber Security Centre to provide businesses with tools, advice and support to protect them against cyber-attacks. I think a debate to highlight this issue would be well attended.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Four years ago today, 17-year-old Phoebe Johnson tragically died in a car crash on the A514 in my constituency. The driver of the car she was in had only been driving for eight weeks and admitted she was too drunk to drive after leaving a house party. Phoebe's parents Nicky and Paul said:

"Our lives will never be the same again."

They are working with the Brake campaign to push for a graduated driving licence system, to improve road safety and prevent further young lives being lost. Will the Leader of the House commit Government time for this to be discussed in Parliament?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay my respects to Phoebe's family. It is an unbearable tragedy when this happens, and it happens too often. Work is under way to deliver an updated strategic framework for road safety—that will be the first one in over a decade. I will ensure my hon. Friend receives an update on that, and should she seek a debate, I am sure it would be well attended.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I recently returned from Kyiv, where I visited a rehabilitation centre supporting those injured by the Russian invasion. I was deeply moved by the dedication of the Ukrainian clinicians working under immense pressure. As a physiotherapist, I recognise the vital role that allied health professionals play in recovery. It was Allied Health Professions Day last week, and I would like to thank all the dedicated clinicians for the unconditional service they provide every single day. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the importance of healthcare professionals collaborating internationally to help Ukrainians and the UK?

Sir Alan Campbell: That is a very timely question, and I thank my hon. Friend for her commitment to this cause. We are delivering equipment and training to Ukraine, including specialist physiotherapy and prosthetics, and we are a world leader in military rehabilitation, contributing to NATO-funded Operation Renovator. She may wish to raise these points at the next Defence questions or apply for an Adjournment debate to push these matters further.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): For 17 years, the *Stirling Observer* has run its "Give a Gift" appeal, rallying big-hearted people, businesses, schools and community groups to make sure no child wakes up on Christmas morning without a present to unwrap. This year's appeal launched this week. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the *Stirling Observer*—and especially the brilliant and tireless Kaiya Marjoribanks, who has driven this appeal from day one—and consider making time for a debate on the vital role local newspapers play in strengthening our democracy and the communities we all serve?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly will join my hon. Friend in commending the *Stirling Observer* for the wonderful work it does with the "Give a Gift" appeal and in praising Kaiya for her dedication, ensuring that children in Stirling and Strathallan have a gift to unwrap on Christmas morning. It is a really good example of a local newspaper rallying the community for a brilliant cause.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the announcement that, after a strong local community campaign, Hayes police station front counter will remain open? Can we make time in the House to discuss the importance of police front counters, such as the one that needs to reopen at Uxbridge, and rebuilding neighbourhood policing?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will indeed join my hon. Friend in welcoming the announcement. He has been a doughty campaigner on this issue, and I am sure he will continue his campaign with regard to Uxbridge. We are committed to ensuring communities have a visible police presence, and we are taking action on that through the Crime and Policing Bill, but he may wish to press this further by applying for a debate.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): This week, Reform-led Kent county council reneged on the £500,000 agreement it made with my local authority, Medway council, to maintain operations at key tourism and investment organisations, demanding a 100% increase in the contribution from Medway. Does the Leader of the House agree that competent leadership in local government is vital and that Reform is clearly not able to govern or deliver for residents?

Sir Alan Campbell: Competent leadership is really important for local government, and there is a duty to local taxpayers to spend money wisely. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. As I said earlier, if there is an Adjournment debate on Kent county council and Reform's track record to date, I am sure it will be well attended.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for wheelchair users. The group has recently received extensive evidence that there is a clear need for independent oversight of wheelchair providers, and for

[Daniel Francis]

verifiable data from the sector. Many service users are not provided with a wheelchair within a suitable timeframe, and many have little choice but to go private to access equipment. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on wheelchair provision, and the need for sector reform to ensure that wheelchair users are provided with the equipment that they need?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this really important issue, and for his work as the chair of the APPG. I welcome the support that NHS England provides to integrated care boards to ensure that services are effective and efficient, but we know of too many cases where people are still waiting too long to get access. My hon. Friend may wish to use the next Health and Social Care questions to raise the issue, but I will make sure that Ministers are aware of the problems that his constituents are experiencing.

Black History Month

12.30 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Black History Month.

I am honoured to open this debate on Black History Month, which, for the second year running, is being held in Government time. It is a chance to honour those who came before us, to celebrate their lives and their courage, and to recognise the huge contribution that our black communities make in Britain today.

In her powerful opening speech in last year's debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare) made the very clear argument that black history is British history. She said:

"the lives of black Britons are the building blocks of our nation, from the Roman occupation to the Windrush generation; because history is never static, but a story constantly being told and re-told over again; and because the voices of black Britons have so often been marginalised and dismissed, ignored and overlooked."—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 446.]

She was right: generation after generation, black Britons have been present on the frontline of efforts to break down barriers, even when set against persistent and sometimes hostile opposition.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister and the Government for bringing us this debate. What the Minister said applies to my constituency of Strangford. People from Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, Pakistan and India contribute to the work-life and economy of Strangford, as well its culture, religion and history. I think we all recognise their contribution, and the Minister is making that point in an absolutely excellent way.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He describes powerfully the contribution to his community and our country of those from all backgrounds and nations.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): This week, it was reported that the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), who is herself a descendant of Dutch Jews, and whose family lost members during the Holocaust, spoke about the desirability of creating a "culturally coherent" society, and her plan to return many UK residents to their "home". Such rhetoric fans the flames of racism and division. Does the Minister agree that this is their home?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I think we are all shocked by such sentiments. I am the daughter of two people who came to the UK in the 1960s, and I think that the intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) better reflects the contribution made by immigrants to this country. People must recognise that this is our home, this is our country, and we do belong here.

During the debate, we will hear about the excellent contributions that those from minority ethnic communities have made to civil society, sport, politics, the armed forces, arts, business and much more, because this country's heritage of black excellence is long and proud. Black

History Month is a reminder of the legacy of those whose talent and fortitude took them and this great country forward, often in deeply challenging circumstances. We should remember drivers of change, from Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano in the 18th century, to Claudia Jones, Trevor Carter and Olive Morris in the 20th century; and we celebrate the black change-makers we see today, from Idris Elba and Naomi Campbell on the world's great stages, to those in Parliament, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who is in her place, and Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in wishing her a very happy birthday tomorrow. All are icons, visionaries and change-makers of our time, and we demand that this be a country where everyone is able to get on in life, regardless of their race.

Although fighting injustice has brought progress, the fight has not been without pain and sacrifice. Let me say a few words about where we find ourselves today. We see the growth of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States, and it is for progressives to defend our values of decency, tolerance and respect. We recognise the way people feel today, and the impact of the rise in racism, and together we must send a message that we will fight it once again.

People of colour across the country have told me about fearing for themselves, their families and their future. All of us are coming together as a nation in a coalition that unites, rather than divides. Doing so in Parliament today is crucial. A senior businessman contributing millions to our economy recently told me that when he went for a pub lunch in Buckinghamshire, he was told to "go home". He was home. We thought those days had gone, but we are reminded that the progress we have made in law, culture and values must be defended, and that today we must consciously make the choices that will build the Britain of tomorrow. That makes it even more important that we remember and continue to tell the stories of those who came before us, and learn from the past.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): In 1835, John Kent became the first black police officer not just in the Carlisle constabulary, but in any police force in Britain. I recently approached Historic England to ask that John Kent be commemorated with a blue plaque in Carlisle. Does the Minister agree that John Kent's plaque should be just one of hundreds that Historic England should add to commemorate and celebrate the contribution of black Britons?

Seema Malhotra: That is a very powerful point. It is vital that we recognise the contribution made by those from minority ethnic communities to our history, public services, economy and society. We stand on their shoulders today.

I was pleased this week to visit Bristol and the historic M Shed Museum, which tells the story of the city. It brings that story to life through marvellous displays on the Bristol bus boycott, the Colston statue and the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. Those powerful exhibitions provide the historical context of Bristol's role in movements for race equality and social justice. I met community leaders and got a real sense of the lived experiences and challenges, and heard views from those on the ground about how we drive real change. I was also grateful for the conversations with my hon. Friend Baron Rees of Easton in the other place.

Yesterday, at M Shed in Bristol, I had the privilege of meeting the Bristol bus boycott elders, including Guy Reid-Bailey, and hearing directly from them about the Bristol bus boycott, which helped bring about the Race Relations Act 1965, introduced by a Labour Government. Guy was 17 years old when he was refused a job as bus driver because of his colour. At the time, that was legal. He told his youth worker, Paul Stephenson. Of course, Paul was furious, and he spoke to the bus company—in vain; it refused to change its mind. With the help of Roy Hackett, Audley Evans, Owen Henry and Prince Brown, they called for a boycott, because if their labour was not good enough, nor was their money.

Two days later, on 29 April, the Bristol bus boycott began. Together, blacks and Asians marched peacefully, with purpose, shoulder to shoulder. Students from the University of Bristol and sympathetic Bristolians marched with them, in solidarity. They were joined by their local MP Tony Benn, and even Parliament's very first black life peer, Sir Learie Constantine, loaned his support. Of course, he too had infamously suffered from the colour bar some years earlier.

After four months of marching with dignity for equality, on 28 August 1963, the bus company caved in and agreed to employ people of all colours. This victory for equality happened on the same day that Martin Luther King gave his iconic and immortal "I have a dream" speech during the march for freedom on Washington DC.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I will.

Paulette Hamilton: Will the Minister outline what steps she is taking to ensure that equality and opportunity are at the heart of this Government's five missions?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Just to help Back Benchers, when you intervene on a Member, it is up to them whether they want to take the intervention; you do not need my authority.

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and the work she does. She will be aware of the importance of tackling barriers to opportunity, and that everyone, regardless of their race, background, religion or colour, should be able to get on in life. That mission of tackling barriers to opportunity is one of the key priorities of this Government, and I will certainly be talking further about the work we have done in the last year, and will continue to do in this Parliament, to ensure that Britain is a place where anyone and everyone can achieve their ambitions.

I was speaking about the important date of 28 August 1963. Three weeks later, on 17 September, Raghbir Singh, a Sikh, became Bristol's first bus driver of colour. On a personal note, it was also in 1963 that a young Sushil Kumar Malhotra made his way to the United Kingdom from India by ship to start work as an engineer in London. This was the environment in which my father took his first steps in the United Kingdom. His journey, like the journeys of many whom I met yesterday,

[Seema Malhotra]

was one of courage; he was navigating a United Kingdom that, at the time, had no race laws. He was setting up in life, dreaming of and hoping for a better future for his family.

In Bristol yesterday, local community artist and activist Julz Davis recounted the story of the impact of the Bristol bus boycott and subsequent campaigning against the colour bar by Paul Stephenson, who passed away last year. His campaigning caught the attention of future Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who contacted Paul and promised to bring in a race relations Act if elected. Harold Wilson kept his promise, and Labour introduced the Race Relations Act in 1965, the UK's first ever anti-racist law. It was strengthened in 1968, 1976 and 2000 before being superseded by the Equality Act 2010. This year, we proudly mark the 60th anniversary of the Race Relations Act, and our theme for this Black History Month is, "Legacies of Action: understanding 60 years of change and challenge". The racism that our forebearers experienced and that shaped their everyday lives must not be forgotten, even as we continue to make progress to redress the past.

As we continue to acknowledge and celebrate the lives and achievements of black Britons, I want to mention a few others. Last summer, I joined Lord Simon Woolley, principal of Homerton College and deputy vice chancellor of the University of Cambridge, for his charter night. As the first black man to lead an Oxbridge college, he and other inspiring leaders, such as Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu and Sonita Alleyne, two other black Cambridge college heads, are transforming one of the oldest academic institutions in the world, helping to ensure that our institutions are inclusive and truly representative.

While we celebrate Maro Itoje proudly captaining England and the British and Irish Lions this year, we remember the racist abuse that John Barnes received from his own fans at the height of his career in the 80s and 90s and, indeed, the more recent racist abuse of black England players, called out by England manager Gareth Southgate as "unforgivable". In so many ways, we as a nation have come far, but the battle is not yet won.

We know that it remains the case for too many people in 2025 that their access to opportunity is determined not by work ethic or talent, but by assumptions based on race and ethnicity; that people who have lived here for generations, who work hard in our schools and hospitals, who defend our country, who raise families and who shape the very fabric of our communities up and down the country are told, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) highlighted, that they do not belong here. We can all be clear that there is still so much to do. Indeed, the fight for racial equality is not over.

Throughout its history, Labour has consistently built on the foundations of the Race Relations Act 1965 to outlaw discrimination based on race in employment and housing and to place legal duties on the police and public bodies. Each new law took crucial steps to build a fairer society and has laid the foundation for progress that continues today. That is why we are building on past successes to tackle racial discrimination today, and it is what drives our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity and put equality at the heart of our plan for change.

Today we can celebrate the most diverse Parliament in our history and a series of further firsts, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) becoming the first black Deputy Prime Minister and the first black Lord Chancellor. Over the last year, I am proud of the work that we have done in government, in the Windrush reset that we announced last October and in taking forward our work on equalities.

Let me say a few words about the appalling injustice of the Home Office Windrush scandal. I said last year that the fact that people who came to Britain to help at a time of great need should later be made to feel that they did not belong here was, and remains, an outrage. Ros Griffiths, chair of the Friends of Windrush Square, opened the "Windrush Untold Stories" exhibition at the Home Office this week. She said:

> "When the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks in 1948, it brought more than passengers, it brought promise. It brought teachers, nurses, engineers, artists and dreamers. It brought a generation that helped rebuild Britain after the war, laying the foundations for the society we live in today.
>
> But Windrush Untold Stories reminds us that history is not only what is recorded, it is what is lived. For too many, that journey of hope became one of hurt. The Windrush scandal revealed the pain and injustice experienced by people who had given so much to this country.
>
> This exhibition is about bearing witness, reclaiming dignity and ensuring that the lessons of the past are never forgotten. It is also about celebrating the resilience, creativity, and brilliance of the Windrush Generation and their descendants, people who despite adversity, continued to build, to create and to love."

The exhibition has been displayed as part of this Government's fundamental reset of the approach after the Home Office-Windrush scandal, in which we have re-established the Windrush unit in the Home Office and recruited a Windrush commissioner—the Reverend Clive Foster MBE—who will serve as an independent advocate for those affected by the scandal, assure delivery of the Windrush compensation scheme and make recommendations to embed lasting change in the Home Office and across Government. We have implemented the new single named caseworkers process for the Windrush compensation scheme to streamline the process and increase transparency. I am proud that we have also launched a £1.5 million grant-funding programme for organisations at grassroots level to provide advocacy and support for people who need help with the compensation scheme application process.

No serious ambition to face those challenges and tackle inequality is possible without also prioritising the perspectives of those affected, with communities telling us the nature and impact of discrimination. We must do what too many Governments before us have neglected to do: listen. That is why, in March, we announced a new race inequality engagement group, chaired by Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon, to help the Government's plans to seize opportunities and remove barriers to racial equality.

The group's core aim is to strengthen the Government's links with ethnic minority communities, enabling effective two-way dialogue on the Government's work to tackle race inequalities. The group met for the first time in June at 10 Downing Street, at a meeting joined by the Prime Minister. In September, I joined the group as it held its first thematic roundtable in Birmingham, one of our most diverse cities. There, the group closely examined the actions taken by the National Police Chiefs' Council

to build trust and confidence with black communities through the vital police race action plan, and reviewed the work with the British Business Bank and others on tackling barriers to finance for ethnic minority entrepreneurs.

Everyone has the right to feel safe and protected by those who have been granted the power to uphold the laws of this country. That is a minimum expectation. We have a long tradition of policing by consent: order is maintained primarily by a trusting relationship between the police and the community. That must apply to every community, without exclusion or exception.

I am also proud that we are building on the foundations of the past to deliver a legislative programme to address many of the inequalities that persist in our society. We are committed to introducing mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting for large employers. Our public consultation on ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting closed in June, and we are considering the responses in order to inform our next steps in developing the legislation. The measures will be taken forward in the upcoming equality (race and disability) Bill, which we have committed to publishing in draft within this parliamentary Session. We will work closely with businesses on developing and implementing that commitment to ensure that reporting is beneficial and helps to identify tangible actions.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate that the draft will be published in this Session, but when the Minister has more information on the timeline for its publication—before or, as is more likely, after Christmas, for example—will she update the House so that we can get ready to scrutinise it and assist with her work, which we very much support?

Seema Malhotra: Indeed, the hon. Lady and I have sat on many a Committee to scrutinise legislation, and I understand the desire for clarity. There are still stages to go through to ensure that we fully consider the responses to the consultation, and work with the Leader of the House on bringing forward that draft legislation, but I will endeavour to keep the House updated on progress.

We know that claimants face significant barriers when bringing pay discrimination claims on the grounds of ethnicity or disability. That is why we have committed to making the right to equal pay effective for ethnic minorities and disabled people.

I look forward to today's debate. I thank all hon. Members who are here to take part in what I am sure will be a celebration of a defining characteristic of our country: its diversity. We recognise that that diversity is in the very fabric and essence of our institutions and our society. The languages we speak, the food we eat and the culture we enjoy are a result and reward of a country that is confident with difference, that faces outward to the world, that is proud of its identity, and recognises, as we all do, that what is so important is that we have more in common.

Indeed, the story of our nation is a story still being written—a story of contribution, of recognition, of hope, of ambition, of partnership, of continuing conversation, listening and learning, and of ensuring that all voices are in the room. I will share a quote that I read yesterday at the Rebel Curators project in Bristol:

> "We share a common history, but yours is quite different you see, so when I talk about liberty, it is through my eyes that it must be. And if we have to rebuild then I think first you should ask me."

In this Black History Month, we mark not only the stories of individual achievement, but the story of a nation—because black history is British history. Parliament must foster that collective national spirit. It must be a place that reflects the richness of modern Britain and drives the work of reconciliation through inclusion, representation and opportunity. Our strength is in our unity of purpose. When every community can see themselves in the national story and know that national purpose cares for them, and when every young person knows that there is space for their firsts too, then we will truly be the country that we claim to be.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): If the House will indulge me, when listening to the Minister I was thinking about my own parents' stories, especially that of my mother, who would carry me into this country. Who would have thought that I would make history by sitting here in the Speaker's Chair? But my mother's story is far more relevant, and her name is Farzand Begum.

I call the shadow Minister, and my constituency neighbour, Mims Davies.

12.58 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very proud of my constituency neighbour; it is wonderful to see you in the Chair this afternoon. I am pleased to speak in this debate on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition.

This year's Black History Month theme is "Standing Firm in Power and Pride". It invites us to reflect not only on the achievements of black Britons but on the strength, resilience and leadership that have shaped our nation. This is rightly a moment to honour those who stood firm in the face of adversity, led and continue to lead with pride, and transformed institutions, communities and culture. I am jealous of the Minister's visit with Lord Woolley of Woodford. When I was at the Department for Work and Pensions, I tried hard to coincide with him but covid got in the way, so I am delighted that the Minister was able to achieve that.

The Conservatives agree with the Minister, and I would like to state clearly that black history is British history. Black Britons have shaped the nation in which we live in ways that we are only beginning to recognise and grasp; I fully recognise that myself, as I learn more. So I agree with the Minister wholeheartedly and, in the spirit of many a Thursday afternoon debate, I am sure we all recognise that there has been progress, and that there is always more to do.

From sport to science, politics to public service, black Britons have been woven into the fabric of our society and they have become household names and inspirations. They include members of the current team of victorious Lionesses, as well as those from previous teams. One of the most wonderful ladies who I have had the chance to meet is Nikita Parris—I am a big fan—but others include Alex Scott, Jess Carter and many more. They prove that people can be black, British and proud, which is a message that we need to hear right now.

[Mims Davies]

Other inspirations include Dame Floella Benjamin, who sits in the other place—I am showing my age and my era when I say that she was on my screen when I was growing up—and the amazing age-defying Naomi Campbell—wow!—as well as Idris Elba OBE, Sir Lewis Hamilton and Sir Steve McQueen. I join the Minister in wishing Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon a very happy birthday for tomorrow.

When we think of athletes, we remember Jessica Ennis-Hill and Katarina Johnson-Thompson. HerMove East Grinstead, which is championed by the town mayor, is trying to get more women involved in sport. We also have the "This Girl Can" campaign, but HerMove is a growing focus in my town and across the country. We were delighted when Dame Kelly Holmes gave it her seal of approval, showing that she is inspiring another generation.

As the Minister rightly said, each generation stands on the shoulders of previous pioneers. It is right that we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Race Relations Act 1965, which is a landmark in our legislative history. Standing at the Opposition Dispatch Box, I find it remarkable how many turning points and changes happened in this very building. How amazing that we, as elected representatives, get to stand on the shoulders of those previous pioneers and work together. As we commemorate this milestone during Black History Month, we reflect on how far we have come and reiterate how far we have to go.

We remember the lives and legacies of pioneers, such as Paul Stephenson, who led the Bristol bus boycott in 1963, and Lord Herman Ouseley, the former chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. Among others, their courage and conviction laid the groundwork for progress that we see today. Some 14% of Members of Parliament come from ethnic minority backgrounds, which is progress. Representation is matched by action. We are still working on that in the Conservative party, but we continue to push in that direction.

We honour the Windrush generation, just as the Minister did, whose story is central to black British history. The voyage of those on the Empire Windrush is now rightly seen as a defining moment that led to the contribution of Caribbean migrants, including many who made immense changes to our NHS. Some 7.4% of NHS staff are black, building on the legacy that began with thousands of Caribbean women answering the call to fill staffing shortages in the 1950s and 1960s, giving up their lives to help us with our lives.

That gives me a chance to mention the pin that I am wearing—I have got so many on today; I feel like we are pinned up sometimes—which is the Black History Month badge that I got from Amazon. Who would have thought it? Amazon! It really has everything, doesn't it? I recently visited Amazon in my constituency and I was given a badge of the Amazon emblem, Peccy, who is a little parcel. There was a display and it has been doing some work with staff in my constituency. We really see everything in the wonderful job of being an MP, and that was wonderful to see.

As the Minister highlighted, black history in Britain did not begin with Windrush. It stretches back centuries. The first black MP is believed to have been elected in 1767. Many children rightly know and recognise the immense contribution Mary Seacole made during the Crimean war. That speaks to our nation's long-standing and complex history, which we all need to understand and learn about.

This week we celebrated the 220th Trafalgar Day. Despite the horrendous and shameful role that Britain played in the Atlantic slave trade in the 18th century, the 19th century saw a turnabout, with the Royal Navy being used to hunt down slave ships. It is estimated that up to 150,000 Africans were liberated from slavery in America as a result of those direct actions, which we should rightly be proud of and all grow to understand.

I am proud too that when the world faced an enemy of the utmost racism during the second world war, 16,000 Caribbean men and half a million Africans served Britain to fight back against the tyranny that faced them. Those stories are often airbrushed from our national memory and not fully understood, so challenging those omissions is part of Black History Month and something that we must all do.

We must also confront the present. The racism and abuse in the Euro final in 2021 was a stark reminder of the work that is still needed, as the Minister said. There is still too much racist abuse on social media, particularly around sport. As sports Minister, I took that head-on and worked incredibly hard to tackle that abuse on the pitch, which has been seen too often in sport. Sport should provide an opportunity to celebrate, so I know that past and current colleagues will continue to work tirelessly on the issue of racism and wider issues.

Our landmark inclusive Britain action plan tackled racial disparities, and I am particularly proud of that initiative from our time in Government. Before we left office, we delivered on 62 of the 74 actions in just one year after the plan was announced. As a Minister, I was proud to work on access to investment, social mobility and entrepreneurship for all in government. It is vital that this Government build on that and lean into it, as the Minister said. It is vital to understand ethnicity pay gap reporting, and I would be keen that, when she can, the Minister shares the responses to enable scrutiny and understanding of any potential legislation.

As Members of Parliament, we must ensure that Black History Month remains a space for reflection, education and, importantly, celebration, and never division. It must not become a political football. As the Leader of the Opposition has said and as I have reiterated from the Dispatch Box today, teaching black history as British history is vital, including highlighting the contributions of figures such as Lord Ribeiro, a pioneer in keyhole surgery, and Lionel Turpin, a world war one veteran whose story deserves further recognition.

I look forward to celebrating with others the outstanding contributions of those in our constituencies and further afield of whom we are so proud, and hearing contributions from Members across the House. I agree with the Minister: this is a positive story that we can all continue to write. We can celebrate unity, we can reject tokenism and we can boost real opportunities and outcomes, so that social mobility is truly here for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It gives me huge pleasure to call the Mother of the House.

1.9 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): In this Black History Month, I am sorry to have to say that any objective assessment of the current state

of racial justice in this country would not be a wholly positive one. Representation is the great success story. We have to acknowledge the progress that is registered: we have a black female Leader of the Opposition, a Pakistani-heritage Home Secretary, a black Caribbean-heritage Lord Chancellor and at least 90 black and minority Members of Parliament. When I entered the House in 1987, there were no black MPs whatsoever, and for 10 years I was the only black female MP. Sadly, increased representation has not been accompanied by the improvement in policy and practice that some of us would have liked to see.

Many in this House have waxed lyrical about the contribution made by the Windrush generation of migrants from the Caribbean, and I share that admiration for their bravery and their accomplishments. My mother was one of that generation of West Indian women who came to this country and helped to build our NHS. However, I point out to the House that at this point, the majority of Windrush migrants have not had their compensation. If the Minister is not aware of that, I urge her to look into it and ensure that these men and women get their compensation before they pass away.

Although we can wax lyrical about the Windrush generation today, all too often in the current political debate migrants are spoken about as if they make no contribution at all. We say, "You can only come if you are highly paid. You cannot automatically bring your family. We will charge you thousands of pounds, even though we need you. You may have no rights as citizens or workers. We may even expel you from this country, where we have previously granted you and your family the legal right to stay." That is not contributing to the cherishing of our migrant class; it is creating a class of third-class Gastarbeiter.

Among all these other things, it is being suggested by those on both sides of the House that, "You may have to train British workers for your job." I am old enough to remember when employers were responsible for in-work training. Sadly, this policy is the logical conclusion of Brexit and of putting the interests of business way before the interests of people. We should remember that all this debate on migration is largely aimed at people with black or brown skin. I do not hear the same anxiety and concern about migration from Hong Kong or Ukraine.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for the points she is making. Does she share my concern that much as in the US, where rhetoric has shifted through a sudden strategy away from explicit conversation about race to coded references about race, we should be concerned by the change in rhetoric? We no longer see racial terms being deployed and instead talk about things such as cultural coherence.

Ms Abbott: I do agree. We have to be very careful about talking about progress when, as my colleague says, a lot of the debate on race is pursued by using code, but the issue still remains the colour of our skin. The hue and cry about immigration today does not apply to migrants from Hong Kong or Ukraine. I am not in favour of that, but the targeting and constant demonisation of migrants clearly highlights a theme; sadly, the theme is racism.

Matters are hardly any better for the long-established black and Asian British communities in this country. Sadly, we have had successive Governments who attempt to deny the existence of racism at all. One issue that I feel very strongly about is educational underachievement. Even after poverty is accounted for, mixed white and black Caribbean children and black Caribbean children have among the lowest levels of educational achievement. Among other things, black children see three times the amount of exclusion as white children. They are going into university in greater numbers, but the proportion is lower than in the population as a whole.

The levels of exclusion for children—both black and white—have alarming consequences for their life chances. A former director general of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, said that on the day a child is excluded from school, they might as well be given a date and time to turn up in prison. If we wish seriously to address the life chances of this generation of black and minority ethnic children, we really have to address issues in relation to education. To my knowledge, none of the four past Secretaries of State for Education—or even the current Secretary of State for Education—have ever mentioned black children and education. They prefer instead to speak solely of the disadvantages of white working-class pupils.

I will give another example of this rampant colour-blindness when it comes to education: the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is currently going through Parliament, makes no mention of race. This year's child safeguarding practice review says that there is a significant silence when it comes to talking about race and racism in child safeguarding. I have worked for many years on issues in relation to black children in education, and I plead with Ministers to start to address this issue. We are talking about millions of children who are being failed by the system.

What is true of education is true for black and Asian people throughout their lives and across all important areas, such as jobs, pay, housing, healthcare and mental health, as well as in all aspects of the criminal justice system. I remind the House that black people face higher police stop-and-search rates, higher rates of arrest and higher rates of conviction, and are more likely to receive custodial sentences for longer periods. There is a two-tier justice system in this country, and the victims are black people and, increasingly, Muslim men.

On top of all that, those suffering these indignities have to listen to a daily diet of claims that they are all a drain on public services. Without migrants, many of our public services would not be as strong as they are. They have to hear that they get preference in housing—which is a sick joke, as anybody who deals with housing casework in ethnic minority communities will know. They have to hear that they are all sexual predators and paedophiles, which is the most monstrous lie straight from the 1930s political playbook. Finally, they face the indignity of being told that those who want to take to the streets, try to burn asylum seekers out of their accommodation and randomly attack Muslims have "legitimate concerns".

It is one thing to wax sentimental about the bravery and accomplishments of an earlier generation, but they were, without exception, migrants. I am confident that they would want a debate that looks not just back, but forward to a fairer and more just society in relation to

[Ms Diane Abbott]

race and migration. I am aware that many Members of this House are not paying attention to this debate, but hopefully some civil servants will read it in *Hansard*.

My parents came to this country in the 1950s. They did not come to be a drain on the public sector, or to harm society in any way. They came to help rebuild Britain after the second world war, they came to contribute and, yes, they came to make a better life for their children. I have to pay them credit; I have to honour them and that whole generation—so I ask the Minister and the House that we move beyond the sort of debate we are having on migration and that we address issues in relation to race, including education and crime. We have to look at those issues. Otherwise, everything we are saying in today's debate is purely lip service.

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

1.20 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is an honour and a privilege, although also slightly daunting, to follow the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who speaks so powerfully on this subject.

This year's theme for Black History Month, "Standing Firm in Power and Pride", speaks to a long and ongoing history of courage, resilience and leadership—of driving change in the face of injustice—and to the pride, purpose and strength found in black communities around the world. We owe an enormous debt to the black British community; from the Windrush generation's foundational role in building the NHS to the countless trailblazers who pushed boundaries in politics, the arts, science and activism, their legacy is woven into the fabric of this country. However, the work is far from done. Too many people still face daily injustices, from racism and hate speech to unequal opportunities and barriers that prevent full participation in society. Prejudice continues to harm lives, communities and trust. We must acknowledge that reality and act to change it.

I am proud that the Liberal Democrats are committed to standing firm in this fight. We reject racism in all its forms and are determined to drive meaningful change, but very sadly, we saw again last summer that racism is still far too prevalent in our society. It creeps into everyday life, especially for people of colour, including my constituent who told me at a surgery last week that his wife no longer feels welcome. He told me that he fears for the future of his mixed-race children and desperately wants more politicians to stand up and stand firm against prejudice and hate—to call it out for what it is. It is vital that those of us with platforms do so.

I want to be clear: racism is abhorrent. It is not representative of my wonderful, diverse community in Chelmsford or, by and large, our wonderful country as a whole, and it must be called out. Like the rest of the UK, Chelmsford has a proud history of being a welcoming home for everyone and, for the avoidance of any doubt, I am proud to say that we are better for it. Recognising this, my party and I are clear that we must address past injustices, including implementing the Windrush lessons learned review and ending the Conservatives' hostile environment policy.

Let me turn to an issue that is very close to my heart: maternity services. I think everyone across the House knows that maternity services in general are in dire straits. Indeed, although I applaud the incredible hard work of midwives and NHS staff who are battling a system that is so obviously not fit for purpose, the problem is so systemic that a casual observer might be forgiven for thinking that women have only been giving birth for a few years. I and countless others have spoken on this matter on many occasions. It is crucial that the Government implement the immediate and essential actions in the Ockenden review and reverse their decision to end the ringfencing of £100 million for vital improvements to maternity care. I mention this specifically today because Liberal Democrats are clear that we must urgently address the appalling, disproportionately high maternal mortality rates for black women and eliminate racial disparities in maternal health. This must happen right now. It surely cannot be right that we continue to accept these inequalities today on the promise that there will be more parity in the future.

Looking to our friends in other countries, I recently returned from a British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Senegal in west Africa. It was wonderful to return to a country where I had spent a year as a student. It was especially heartening to see the progress that Senegal has made in the intervening quarter of a century, and the pride with which its elected officials talk of the strength of their democracy, in a region beset by violent conflicts. They are keen to strengthen ties with other countries around the world, especially the UK. Like us, they are ambitious when it comes to increasing trade—working together for the mutual benefit and growth of both of our economies—and to tackling the huge inequalities that persist. It is clear to me that working together with our friends across the world is what truly helps keep us all safe; indeed, I wear a pin today as a symbol of the new UK-Senegal friendship group that we have formed to further that aim.

Closer to home, I pay tribute to some of my own constituency's local organisations, which affirm this year's Black History Month theme of "Standing Firm in Power and Pride" day in and day out. The Over 50s Black Men Forum—a not-for-profit group that has been established in Chelmsford and across Essex for some years, and is chaired by my constituent, Enitan Kane—does excellent work improving the health and community voice of black men over the age of 50, and aims to reduce future dependency on the NHS among older black men. Working with UK Government Departments, the NHS, local councils and sports organisations, O5BM now has projects across much of the south and east of England, providing critical support for community-led programmes that improve this marginalised group's health, that tackle inequalities and that challenge prejudice.

More recently, O5BM has launched an oral history project. Its title, "Soro Soke - O5BM", is from a Yoruba phrase translating to "speak up". As it says, it is highlighting

"the untold stories, memories, and experiences of older Black men in Essex,"

encouraging them to

"speak out, raise their voices, and demand change".

Creating such projects, where black people are given space to remember and celebrate their cultural heritage, communities and local stories, is so important. As O5BM points out, this is true for a number of reasons—from

Essex-born black British youth learning about the experiences of their elders to celebrating the joyfulness of our diverse communities in Essex, and creating an inclusive and accurate history of our British Isles more broadly. We must all preserve history, teach younger generations about how far Britain has come, and draw inspiration, knowledge and courage from such stories to continue the work of challenging discrimination and improving the lives of the black community.

On that note, Black History Month also presents a wonderful opportunity to build community, which is one of the greatest tools we have against division and hatred. In my constituency, the New Generation Development Agency is running some brilliant community events, supported by Chelmsford city council and the local business improvement district, Chelmsford For You. Whether it is NGDA's "Chattie 'n' Pattie" drop-in sessions or providing an open space for people to share their views and experiences of race equality, these events provide space for the recognition of local black community voices and teach others how to be better allies. They help us all to better empathise and strengthen our relationships with our neighbours. They reinforce that humans really are not that different from one another, and we should all be sceptical of those who claim otherwise. We all have dreams, we all experience loss and love, and we all have one life.

This Black History Month, as we honour the pioneers, the local activists and the next generation, Liberal Democrats are clear: we stand with you; we will stand firm in your power and pride; and we will continue working for a more just, equal and inclusive United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Dawn Butler.

1.28 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are all very proud that you have made history and sit in that big Chair for lots of people to see.

I welcome the Government's decision to hold today's debate on Black History Month in Government time—something that I have called for many times. Before I forget, I want to congratulate Brent council on its excellent Black History Month event yesterday. I also thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), for her speech—her words are always really quite moving. The only thing is that when we look behind the shadow Minister and see none of her colleagues, it makes us think that she is the only one who thinks like that in her party. However, we are glad that she does, and we chair the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament together, and we do that very well. I am pleased that we have at least one good voice in her party.

October is an exhausting month for a lot of us, and that is not just because it is Diwali, and yesterday was Hindu new year, and we celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas, too. I was proud yesterday to wear my sari in the Chamber, and I wrapped it myself. I did 50-odd squats trying to get in to ask a question in Prime Minister's questions—I was not called—and my sari stayed intact, so I was proud of myself. October is also Breast Cancer Awareness Month, although I have avoided a lot of that this year, as it is triggering, but we cannot avoid talking about Black History Month.

I saw a powerful affirmation on Jools TV that goes:

"I love myself, I love my skin, I love my hair, my melanin".

I thought that was so amazing. It is for kids, but adults can take a lot from that, too. Since last year's Black History Month, we formed the Parliamentary Black Caucus. The founding members include Josh Babarinde, the Mother of the House, Diane Abbott—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We do not read out the names of Members; their constituencies will suffice.

Dawn Butler: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I should know better. I will have to google all their constituencies. Anyway, we have some amazing founding members of the black caucus, and that will go from strength to strength.

Among all the positivity, I am tired. When we see 110,000 people marching in London led by a far-right racist, it is absolutely exhausting. It is triggering, too, and not just for me, but for my parents' generation and for everybody who has ever suffered racism. It is true that not everybody on the march was racist, but there definitely were a hell of a lot of racists on that march. When people say, "I want to get my country back," I wonder, "Back from whom?" There is a South African calling the shots. The racism that has increased and escalated since March is not even new; it is quite old, and it is from the apartheid era and slavery.

I will read the House just a few of the racist messages that have been sent to me. One said:

"You're not English and you don't belong in the country, deport yourself".

ChadKing97 said:

"There is no 'our' you african monkey".

RojamWej said: "Pipe down monkey". Bahicks1905 said: "Fuck off you ape." Another one said:

"You are going home. You know it, we know it."

It just gets worse and worse, and it is not new. They have not even upgraded their racism. It is just old, pathetic and annoying, but it is scary.

Ms Diane Abbott: A young lady who came to work for me years ago said that she had never seen the word nigger so often in her life, and she did not expect that.

Dawn Butler: The Mother of the House receives more abuse than every single MP in this House. Sometimes I wonder about this disregard or disrespect. When I came into Parliament in 2005, there was only one black woman MP, the Mother of the House. The Mother of the House has suffered offensive and horrendous abuse. What do we do? How do we stop it? How do we end it?

Let us start with the flag. The flag is for everybody who is British, right? Those people who have tried to weaponise it—not tried to; they have—have always weaponised it. My brothers were chased down the road by skinhead racist thugs wrapped in the flag to kick their heads in, and I have always said that if we are

[Dawn Butler]

going to reclaim the flag, we have to reclaim it with a narrative and with context. We cannot just put the flag on everything and think it will be okay.

I would like to see a couple of things. I would like the Government to work with the royal family to change the word "empire" to "excellence". I mentioned that many years ago, but now is the time. The royal family are looking to modernise, and it would be a great way to modernise, because at the end of the day we are recognising people who are excellent in this country.

If we were to unite instead of fight, what would change? That is what a lot of people are scared about. The people who are trying to get other people to hate are monetising that hate. As we have seen with a lot of people, money does not make you happy. The truth is that if someone gets their joy and energy from hating other people or from racism, there is something misaligned in how their brain works. Racism and hate makes most of us tired—it is absolutely exhausting—but I say to the racists that they have not broken the Mother of the House and they will not break me. From time to time, I might get tired, but I will continue to stand firm in power, and alongside me will be my allies. They will be black, white, brown and everyone in between, because there are more of us than there are of them.

If people do not believe me, there is a clip of an incident that happened in Brent just recently with a white woman called Miranda. She runs the Tiny Pod podcast, and she witnessed a young black man being pulled out of his car by a police officer and his head banged on the floor. Blood was dripping from his head, and she recorded the whole thing. She was extremely vocal in her allyship and advocacy to ensure that no other harm was done to this young black man. The police said to her to move away, and she said, "I am not moving away. I am staying right here." In the end, the young black guy said, "No, I want her with me." He said that not because she was a white woman, but because she was protecting him. As I say, there are more of us than there are of them.

In Wembley arena next year, Stand Up to Racism, Hope not Hate and other organisations are going to hold a Love Music Hate Racism concert. It will be one of the biggest in the country, and it will be a powerful event. I am trying to get Adele to come back. If anybody knows her, let me know. We will have the biggest names in the music industry, and we will show how great Britain is through our diversity and our love of music and not racism.

I want to end with some words from John Lewis, the civil rights activist. He said:

> "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. We used to say that ours is not the struggle of one day, one week or one year. Ours is a struggle of a lifetime, or even many lifetimes, and every one of us, from every generation, must do our part. And if we believe in the change we seek, then it is easy to commit to doing all we can…Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble…because the responsibility is ours alone to build a better society and a more peaceful world."

Our power lies not in money, media or control; our power lies in our numbers and in our courage and our collective fight for justice. It is against them—those who try to divide us—but when we stand united, we will win.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With hope and optimism, I hope Adele gets that message.

1.38 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is quite scary to follow the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who are both formidable advocates against injustice. I have done several debates with the hon. Member for Brent East, and I have so much respect for how she speaks to the Chamber. She was talking about that tiredness that people are feeling just now, from constantly having to fight for every single thing, and constantly having to argue against the injustices being served on her constituents and mine, as well as those of a significant number of Members across this House. It is absolutely tiring, but if she or the Mother of the House ever wants a cup of tea, a bit of allyship or, as we say in Aberdeen, a bosie—a cuddle—they should give us a shout. We are happy to oblige and to be united together.

The Mother of the House highlighted the cognitive dissonance that some politicians seem to have: they stand up and talk about Black History Month, while simultaneously refusing to discourage people who are protesting against migrants. That is really important. We need to remember that we cannot talk about the injustices that so many people face just once a year in this Chamber; we need to be fighting every single day. Every day that we have energy, we should be using it to ensure that there is an anti-racist narrative across society.

I represent Aberdeen North, one of the more diverse constituencies in Scotland. I will focus on the city of Aberdeen, because the census results are broken down by city rather than constituency, so it is much easier to do that. About 13.4% of people in Aberdeen come from a BME background, which is not that high, but over 20% of people in Aberdeen were not born in the United Kingdom, which is pretty high for Scotland. Some 2.5% of people in Aberdeen were born in Nigeria. There are 5,600 Nigerians—people who were born in Nigeria, not the descendants of immigrants—living in Aberdeen. We have a significant number of people who are working every day, who are contributing and who are making a difference.

I will mention some individuals, from both the past and present, who have made a difference in Aberdeen and Scotland. However, I note that there are so many people whose names we will never mention, who are working quietly as carers or in our NHS and doing jobs that are really difficult. I have been a carer, and it is a really hard, physical job that so many people do not want to do. To those who are making people's lives better and doing miracles every single day, and whose names I do not mention, thank you for your contribution. It is massively appreciated.

I will first talk about some figures from the past. There is a wonderful part of the University of Aberdeen website that talks about the history of black Aberdonians and people who graduated from the university. Christopher James Davis, who was from Barbados, graduated in 1870—we think he is the first black graduate—in medicine, and then went to volunteer as a doctor in Sedan during the Franco-Prussian war. Sadly, he died from smallpox in the same year that he graduated.

Nathaniel Thomas King graduated from Aberdeen in 1876. He moved back to Nigeria and was one of the trailblazers in improving sanitation in Lagos. Again, he was another medicine graduate from Aberdeen.

Edward Tull-Warnock was a dentist in Aberdeen and Glasgow. His father was born in Barbados, although Edward was born in Folkestone. His brother was probably the first black commissioned officer in the British Army. As I say, Edward himself was a dentist, and he was not called up to the war because of that. We needed dentists during that time, particularly because so many people who volunteered or who were called up were rejected on the basis of the quality of their teeth and how likely they were to be ill as a result, so dentists were often an exempted occupation. Edward practised as a dentist for a significant number of years, latterly in Glasgow. Again, he was a real black trailblazer—potentially the first black registered dentist in Scotland.

In some of these cases I am saying words such as "potentially", and I cannot talk about early women graduates of Aberdeen University because the registers just are not there. The rolls are there, but there is not enough information and the research has not been done. The university is looking to rectify that in the future, but, again, there are stories that will maybe never be told, because we just do not have the information.

I want to highlight some of the people in my constituency, and in Aberdeen more widely, who are making a difference, and whose stories might not otherwise be heard. Bertha Yakubu MBE came to Aberdeen in 1993 and really struggled with isolation. Bertha and the African Women's Group in Aberdeen wrote a book called "African Women Speaking", one of the most powerful books I have ever read. It is about their experiences of coming to Aberdeen and Scotland, how different it was from the countries they were born in, how different the experience was, and how difficult they found it to integrate, to find fellow feeling, and to find love and support in the community in Aberdeen. It really is a brilliant book, and I urge Members to get hold of it. Bertha now does a huge amount of work supporting women who are suffering from domestic violence by providing them with kinship, love and support, and by just being there for them. That is sometimes what people need to gain the courage to flee.

I want to talk about Ify Anyaegbu, who is in charge of FACEYOUTH, a charity that focuses on mental health. It focuses on young people, and on reducing the disadvantage that they feel in Aberdeen. I have met her on a number of occasions, and she is an absolute force of nature. She will do everything that she can to try to reduce disadvantage in Aberdeen.

Jane Akadiri is the founder of Touch of Love, an empowering and uplifting Christian community in the city. It does a huge amount of good, particularly with disadvantaged groups and people on the lowest incomes.

Florence Igboayaka, the founder of the Period Place, has written a book called "The Period Comic", which is excellent. If young people aged between eight and 14 want to learn about what periods are like, the comic is a fabulous place to start, and I thoroughly recommend it. She has also created a line of period products for women with heavier period flows, which I understand a lot of African women have. Across the UK, a significant number of women from all heritages are not served well by the period products currently on the market. She also started, in Aberdeen, the "walk to give her a voice", which is focused on ensuring that women feel safe, and can walk in their communities and talk about the things that matter to them. We should be able to talk about periods and the menopause, and to get the support that we need.

Those are some incredibly inspiring women, and my city would not be the place it is today without all the work that they do in our communities.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The hon. Lady may not know that I was a pilot in the Royal Air Force. I used to do a lot of work advocating for young black people entering STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—industries, so I had the great privilege of visiting Aberdeen on a number of occasions. Unfortunately, I will not be able to visit next week, when the Association for Black and Minority Ethnic Engineers holds its annual conference in the hon. Lady's constituency. The association was created by Dr Nike Folayan MBE and is supported ably by Folayo Osekita, who is a representative of Leonardo. Will the hon. Lady join me in recognising the excellent work that they do, creating a new history for her town?

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. I have met the Association for Black and Minority Ethnic Engineers. Unfortunately, I did not realise it was having its conference next week, but I thank the hon. Member for letting me know. It is a fabulous organisation. There continues to be a very tough glass ceiling in engineering. We are getting a huge number of more diverse candidates and graduates coming through in engineering, but at the highest levels of senior management—for example, in the energy industry—we are struggling to make that breakthrough, and to have enough black and minority ethnic individuals, so I support his comments. I support the Association for Black and Minority Ethnic Engineers, and I will do everything I can to assist it in breaking that glass ceiling. There is also a glass ceiling for female engineers. There is intersectionality here; it is particularly difficult for black female engineers to get to the highest senior management positions. I will keep doing everything I can to support that organisation and others.

To build on what the Mother of the House said, and what the hon. Member for Brent East said about the protests, the societal views being expressed right now are horrific. However, there has been an undercurrent for a very long time, and this is stuff that people have been thinking. Part of what drove some people to vote for Brexit was views such as, "There's too much immigration—I don't want all these people here." I am sure all Labour Members have read "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists"; they will know that it talks about the Conservatives of the time putting forward the racist narrative that "All your problems are caused by the immigrants. We just need to get rid of them." This has been a narrative for 100 years, and we still need to counter it—perhaps more so today than ever, and certainly more than we have needed to at any other point in my adult life. We need to do everything we can to stop these racists being allowed to say anything they want.

Ms Diane Abbott: I agree with the hon. Member that some of this negativity around race and asylum has always been there. Does she agree that the rise of

[Ms Diane Abbott]

Reform has emboldened people who always thought like that to speak publicly in that way? Does she also agree that none of the parties in this House should be chasing after Reform? That is a brick wall for a progressive party.

Kirsty Blackman: I could not agree more. People have had these racist thoughts and have kept quiet about them, but they are now emboldened to say them out loud because of people like the Reform MPs, and because of the racist narratives being brought forward. No one should be looking to chase policies such as mass deportation. None of us should be putting forward those policies. We should recognise and celebrate the impact of people who have chosen to live in our country.

I want to tackle one of the narratives put forward by some of the racists in my constituency: they have said that the saltire is a Christian symbol and is only for white Christians. That is not true. The saltire is for anybody who was born in Scotland, or chooses to come to our country to live, to contribute to working life, and to be part of our wonderful, vibrant communities. It is for every single one of us. It is not just for Christians and not just for white people; it is for everyone. We can all—everybody living in Scotland, everybody born in Scotland and, frankly, everybody who wants to—celebrate and love the saltire and claim it for our own.

I know I am taking quite a bit of time, but I want to talk about a few more issues, particularly some Government policies. I really appreciate the work being done on removing the pay gaps, including the ethnicity and gender pay gaps. It is looking at what more can be done, and particularly at intersectionality, and cases where people are multiply disadvantaged. All of us have a responsibility to check our privilege. We have a responsibility to think about the fact that we have our privilege—we get high salaries as Members of Parliament, and we may be educated, white and middle-class—while other people face multiple detriments, and multiple forms of judgment and prejudice. They are finding it harder and harder to make it through. They are so tired because of the constant drip, drip—or sometimes gush—of negativity against particular immigrants.

A few things in the immigration system disadvantage people who are not white. There is still a significant issue with the refusal of visitor visas for people from countries where people are not white. There is a significant refusal rate for visitor visas for people from Nigeria. I still struggle to fathom why some constituents should be less able to have their mum come over to see them graduate than others who are born in another country, but are white. It feels like there is a racial element to that. Any work that can be done to ensure that the visitor visa system is fairer, and to make it more likely that people can get their relatives over to visit, would be incredibly worthwhile.

The "no recourse to public funds" system has now opened up, and applies to far more white people than it used to—I disagree entirely with "no recourse to public funds"—but under the system, there are families who are struggling to feed their children. There are families who were not supported throughout covid. What particularly bothers me is that they include families with young children. I do not think we should have the "no recourse to public funds" system, but if we are going to continue to do so, I do not think it should ever apply to families in which anybody is under five—or under 18. Children should never go hungry because a family has no recourse to public funds, particularly if family members have lived and worked here. Sometimes their having no recourse to public funds is no fault of theirs; a Home Office mix-up has put them in that situation, and they have been banned from working for a period. That is horrific, and "no recourse to public funds" needs to go.

On the changes in residency requirements for leave to remain, so many of my constituents have contacted me saying, "I bought a house in Aberdeen because I was under the impression that I would get indefinite leave to remain after a five-year stay. The Government have now changed that to 10 years. I don't know if they, or the next Government, whoever they may be, will ever allow me the right to stay, but I will have to continue to pay health surcharges every year in the meantime." Those people may have chosen to live in Aberdeen in order to work in our NHS and to make our communities better. I do not think we should have any change at all in the residency requirements, but any move to make changes retrospective would be incredibly unfair. There would need to be an equalities impact assessment to show what percentage of people disadvantaged by the policy were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I am willing to bet that the figure would be incredibly high, and it is therefore a policy that no progressive Government should pursue.

However, I wanted to be positive. I wanted to talk about the incredible work that my constituents have done, but I could not do so without recognising that it is a scary time. I hope that voices from across the House today—and the voices of my constituents, uplifting and championing their friends and colleagues, and those who work in charities—can at least bring a ray of sunshine right now. We cannot fix everything overnight, as the hon. Member for Brent East said. This is a very long-term project, but we will get there. We will keep causing a little bit of trouble—good trouble—where we need to, and we will do everything we can to ensure equality, recognise that we have more in common, and make the difference that really is needed.

1.59 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I am always very pleased to speak in this House during Black History Month. I say that not out of ceremony, but out of conviction. I believe that it matters for black Britons watching today to see this Parliament take time to reflect on our history, our struggle and our contributions. It matters that our story is not confined to footnotes or commemorative months, but recognised as part of the very fabric of British history. Each October, I believe this debate should be on the Order Paper as a matter of course, yet too often it has been absent or dependent on the will of a few determined Members. Let me thank all those involved in ensuring that this debate takes place during Government time.

Many of my colleagues will rightly use this opportunity to honour the giants of black British history—the leaders, thinkers and ordinary people who achieved extraordinary things, often in the face of unimaginable obstacles. I pay tribute to them all, but today I want to use my time differently. I want to speak frankly about why, decades after the civil rights movement and years after

Black Lives Matter brought millions to the streets, we still have not tackled racism in this country and beyond. I want to say plainly that we have not tackled racism because we have not fully committed to repairing the inequality we had a part in creating. We have not committed to reparatory justice.

In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, more than 240,000 people signed a petition calling on the Government to include Britain's role in colonialism and enslavement in the national curriculum. It became one of the most signed petitions ever submitted to Parliament and that moment felt like a turning point. I sat in the debate that followed. I remember the sense of hope that at last we would be honest about our past, honest about the empire that built Britain's wealth and honest about the lives it destroyed, because hundreds of thousands of British people wanted it. Yet five years on, and 39 years after Black History Month was founded in the UK, very little has changed. Britain's colonial past is still treated as an optional topic, not a foundational one. Black British history is still squeezed into one month and often taught only by those teachers who go above and beyond, using their own time and resources.

Many young people grow up learning in history a lot about our monarchy, but not about our empire. The history of our monarchy is important—it speaks of how our country came to be. Some might be surprised to hear that I am a fan of the odd period drama. Those stories are very interesting, but it has to be wrong that some never hear about Queen Nanny of the Maroons, Mary Prince, Olaudah Equiano, the Bristol bus boycotts, or even the role of the British state in the enslavement of millions. That speaks to the fact that our country does not want to engage with these issues. Young people are taught about industrial innovation, but not about who paid the human cost for that progress. That cherry-picking of what to teach points to something more worrying, because we also miss out on learning about other working-class struggles, such as the miners' strikes and the suffragettes —those stories that educate us on the power we hold as citizens and the things people have done to challenge injustice. We cannot say that this nation is facing its history when it still refuses to teach it fully.

We have talked a lot about patriotism recently. Let me be clear: I do not believe that patriotism is about pretending that our history was glorious and benign; patriotism is about being honest enough to confront the truth, because only a nation unafraid of the truth can hope to build a just future. I believe that in order to stand firm in pride and power, as the theme of this Black History Month asks, we must address these issues, because where is the pride in not recognising you are wrong, and where is the power in not tackling global injustices that have failed to be repaired?

Last night, I had the honour of delivering the National Union of Journalists' Claudia Jones memorial lecture. Claudia Jones, the journalist, activist and mother of the Notting Hill carnival, taught us something very powerful. She taught us that the struggle against racism can never be separated from the struggle against imperialism. She wrote:

> "Imperialism is the root cause of racism. It is the ideology which upholds colonial rule and exploitation."

That is not just a historical observation; it is a diagnosis of the present. When far-right politics rises across Europe, when migrants are scapegoated and when global inequalities widen, Claudia Jones's words feel prophetic. She understood that racism at its root is not about personal prejudice or isolated ignorance. Too often, we try to reduce it to the "few bad apples" argument. Racism is structural. It is the operating system of an economic and political order built through empire that exists today. It is the logic that justified, and still justifies, stolen land, stolen labour and stolen wealth. It is the logic that said that some people are disposable so that others might prosper.

Racism did not appear by accident. It has no factual basis. Racism was engineered. That is why I say that we cannot dismantle racism without repair. If racism is built into the economic foundations of this country—in land, in labour and in capital—then the remedy must also be material. We cannot tackle a problem without getting to its roots. It was not enough for us to express deep regret and other platitudes. It was not enough for us to change a few names and statues and call it progress. We must repair the harm structurally, economically, culturally and politically. That is the very heart of the global movement for reparations.

This year, the all-party parliamentary group for Afrikan reparations, which I chair, hosted the third annual UK reparations conference. We saw hundreds of activists, scholars, lawyers and community leaders come together from across the world and the message was clear: the demand for repair is no longer a fringe issue; it is a moral and political necessity. And yet in Britain we still refuse to apologise for our role in enslavement and colonialism. We refuse to return stolen artefacts. We even refuse to return human remains, denying dignity even in death. We refuse to engage meaningfully with reparatory justice. Even last year, when the Commonwealth nations called for a mere discussion on reparatory justice, we said no. What does that sound like, given the history of the Commonwealth? Our country has not apologised, it has not repaired and it has not made amends.

But the tide is turning and young people are asking the right questions. Institutions are beginning to confront their own archives. The debate can no longer be buried or delayed. We have to be clear that reparations are not only about money. How could they possibly be? If people think the call for reparations is a call for cash, they have not been listening. How can it be? What amount of money could ever really compensate for what happened, which was one of the greatest crimes in human history: enslavement, trafficking, genocide, ecocide, widespread theft and everything in between. Reparations are about truth, restitution and transforming relationships between nations, between communities and between the past and the present. Reparations are about acknowledging that Britain became one of the richest nations on Earth not just through industry and ingenuity, but through the extraction of human life and labour from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and beyond.

When enslavement was abolished, it was not the formerly enslaved who received compensation; it was the enslavers. They were paid the modern equivalent of billions of pounds for the loss of human property. British taxpayers, including black Britons, finished paying off that debt in 2015. That is not distant history; it is the present. It is certainly the present in my taxpaying history. Meanwhile, the descendants of those who endured generations of forced labour received nothing—to this day, not even an apology. Their names were often erased from the story of their own liberation. Freedom has

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

been paraded as a gift. When I talk about reparations, I, the descendant of enslaved and colonised people, am often told that I should be grateful that Britain abolished the slave trade. I am proud of the role that this country, my country, played in the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, but that alone cannot be absolution. I am sorry, but I cannot see how, just because an arsonist feels guilty, we would absolve them for starting the fire in the first place.

The injustice I speak of did not end with that emancipation. It continued through colonial rule, through the Berlin conference that carved up Africa without a single African present, through artificial borders and economic dependency, and through the extraction of resources that continues to this day. It means that at the UN in 2025, African nations still have to get up and ask to be included in the UN Security Council, despite the fact that African and Caribbean nations make up the majority of the countries in the world. When people ask, "Why reparations?", I ask in return, "Why did we ever think that freedom without repair was enough, or that it was freedom at all?"

In this Parliament, I am proud to be part of the legacy of the late, great Bernie Grant, who stood in this very Chamber and called for reparations when few dared to. Without truth, there can be no justice. Without justice, there can be no healing. That is why the all-party parliamentary group believes we need a commission for truth and reparatory justice. The commission would not simply investigate the past; it would examine how legacies of that past are alive in the present in the racial wealth gap, health inequalities, educational disparities and the policing of black communities.

None of these patterns is accidental. They were built, and because they were built, they can and must be dismantled, but that will happen only if we have the political courage to do so. To do it, we have to move away from this lazy, reductionist style of politics, which often talks about what we cannot do instead of talking about what we can do.

Every major institution in this country—banks, universities, the monarchy, museums—carries traces of wealth extracted through colonialism and enslavement. The evidence is in the bank ledgers and shipping records and in the foundations of buildings across this city. That history does not belong in footnotes; it belongs in how we shape our policies today.

No individual group needs permission to demand justice. The call for reparations is grounded in international law, in human rights and in the moral truth that those who profit from crimes against humanity have a duty to repair them. This is not about guilt or unpicking the past, as I have been accused of doing previously—it is about responsibility. It is about not division, but healing.

However, healing cannot begin when the truth has not been told. That is why the teaching of black history as British history is in itself reparatory. If we are serious about tackling racism, we have to be serious about this repair. Racism is about not just words or attitudes, but material conditions—who owns wealth, who holds power, and who has access to housing, healthcare, safety and dignity. Racism persists because the harm has never been repaired.

The call for reparations has survived centuries because it speaks to something beyond politics. It speaks to the human need for recognition, justice and dignity, and to the possibility of renewal—not just for the nations that were wronged, but for Britain itself, because black Britons are part of that story. I could be the richest person in this country and rise to the highest office in this land, but I understand that I will never escape racism; by its very nature, until there is justice for every single person who looks like me, nothing will change in that regard.

Now the world is changing and our place in it is precarious if we do not change our attitude, which still feels rooted in empire. I want our country—my country—to be looked on with respect and admiration, not because it never got anything wrong, but because we had the courage to put what we got wrong right.

2.12 pm

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Hon. Members may be wondering about my jacket today, and the truth, frankly, is that I am tired of being upstaged by the threads of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler). However, this jacket is also a symbol of my identity. I got it when I went to Zambia in July in my role as trade envoy to southern Africa. The fabric is what we call chitenge, and it is the same kind of material that my mother, and indeed her mother, Joesphine Hambelele Nakun Tunga, wrapped me in at birth. That visit was important to me because I am proud of my heritage, but my home is here in London. That is my identity—I am British Zambian. That is my story.

Last Friday, I visited Centrepoint in my constituency and had a great conversation about opportunities for young people. One conversation with a young woman has stuck in my mind because of what she said, which was

"I am Black British. That is who I am, and I want you to know both of those things."

Why is that such an important thing to say? For me, it is about what we are proud of. It is about freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

We must remember that those ideas were first written into the story of this nation on the fields of Runnymede in 1215. Magna Carta laid down the truth that still binds us: that no one, not even the most powerful, is above the law. Those are the foundations on which our democracy was built—the freedoms from which so many nations, such as the United States, derive their own, and the freedoms that underpin the very concept of a free world. They are the principles of democracy for which our country fought in the face of fascism and Nazi Germany in this nation's finest hour—our greatest generation.

Yet standing quietly above those meadows, looking down on the birthplace of liberty, is another monument: the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial, which bears the names of more than 20,000 men and women who have no known grave. Above the place where freedom was first signed into existence stands a memorial recording the names of those who gave their lives to defend it.

When I led the Royal Air Force's ethnic minorities network, we used to visit the memorial every year. We would walk among those names—black, brown; Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu—from across the Commonwealth,

remembering the people who came not as visitors but as defenders of Britain, standing shoulder to shoulder against fascism and tyranny. Among them is Noor Inayat Khan, a British Indian woman raised in London who trained as a wireless operator in the Royal Air Force and worked for the Special Operations Executive. She was captured, tortured and executed in Dachau for refusing to betray her comrades. Her final word was the cry of "Liberté", or freedom—the same freedom signed into being below her memorial on the fields of Runnymede. Her life and her death complete that circle—from the parchment that promised liberty to all peoples to the courage she displayed in preserving it.

Though his name is not carved on the walls of Runnymede, Flight Lieutenant Johnny Smythe stands in that same lineage of service, sacrifice and selflessness. A Sierra Leonean who flew with the Royal Air Force, he was shot down and held in a prisoner of war camp. Yet when he returned to Britain, he chose not to turn away, but to help to rebuild it. Working in the Colonial Office, it was Smythe who conceived the idea of recalling a troopship, the Empire Windrush—a troopship filled with our veterans who had fought for our freedom, who we know as the Pilots of the Caribbean—back to our shores, full of servicemen and nurses. That act gave birth to a new chapter of our shared history. So when hon. Members hear the words "You called…and we came", let us remember that it was not the voice of a white official, but the voice of a Sierra Leonean man—a black British man and RAF officer who had already fought for his country's freedom. That is how deeply black history runs within, not beside, British history.

This is how we counter division and exploitation. This is how we undo the false narrative and understanding of our history and our British identity that caused the Windrush scandal and that is enabling our enemies—the enemies of freedom, equality and British values—to mobilise today, because we are now seeing those things regularly online, on our streets and in parts of our media, frankly, that we would have never seen a few short years ago. We are seeing vicious hate speech and open racism. Racists are speaking out with not only impunity, but the sense that they speak for the spirit of the moment, and we must be clear that they do not.

That is what we are fighting against. But what are we fighting for? I think we can see a positive narrative emerging in our communities. I want to give an example from South Woodford, where the community came together after a sequence of events that caused real fear in our community and across Leyton and Wanstead. After the racism and extremist violence we saw during Tommy Robinson's march last month, the appalling antisemitic attacks in Manchester, the firebombing of the mosque in Peacehaven and the calculated vandalism designed to intimidate—including the flags raised on the viaduct across from the South Woodford Islamic centre—we were brought together by Councillor Joe Hehir, Dr Fahim from the Islamic centre, Rabbi Richard Jacobi from East London and Essex Liberal synagogue and Reverend Dr Elizabeth Lowson from St Mary's parish church Woodford. Dr Fahim united us with his words, but they were also the words of the broader community and the leadership of South Woodford society, including Pearl, Louise, Rena—and her excellent tea, I must say—Elaine Atkins MBE and Andy Pike. Their simple message was: "Love South Woodford. Hate racism."

Here is what I think we can do next. We will raise our flags. We will celebrate our synagogues, our mosques, our churches and our community in South Woodford. We will gather together as a community and talk about our history under our flag. We will do that across the constituency, and celebrate with pride all the people in our community, regardless of where they come from. We will celebrate with other migrants like me and our beloved Okan Aslan, who next week will also identify as being British.

If we are serious about tackling hatred, and standing up to those who would tell us that this is not our land, then we must ensure that these stories are not confined to a single month, or to those who already know them, like me. The stories of Noor Inayat Khan and Johnny Smythe, and the people like me who have come after them, must be owned by and taught to and by us all. When every child in this country knows that our history is all of our history, we will not defeat the far right; we will remove the ignorance that fuels and creates it. Ultimately, we need to do that—otherwise, we cannot defeat it.

We are not yet in the same place that Noor Inayat Khan and Johnny Smythe were. We need to defeat the want, ignorance and fear from which hate is drawn. We need to prevent malign actors from exploiting anger and alienation, and the evils that create them. Black history—black British history—is our greatest weapon in doing so.

2.21 pm

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): My remarks will be influenced by my membership of the Health and Social Care Committee, and by the fact that I am the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on black health. Also, like my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), I have the pleasure of being a trade envoy: for Morocco and francophone west Africa. We share a great interest in that continent.

I will focus my remarks on health. When we talk about health and black people, very often we talk about the huge improvement in recognition of one outstanding person: Mary Seacole, who is now just talked about as a nurse who did wonderful things in the Crimea. She has reached the august stage of not just being referred to as "the black Florence Nightingale"; she is now referred to in her own right, but it took an immensely long time for that to happen.

The hon. Members for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) referred to the contribution made by the Windrush generation. The history of the national health service and of our country's black community are intertwined. The people who came on Windrush and other boats, and the successors to them, are now retired and are served by the national health service, but the people who came after them are still the bedrock of the national health service. They provide the majority of the care that we all expect to receive, but we know that their contribution has not always been well rewarded.

There is still a huge issue today regarding how well the national health service serves people of colour—how well it serves black people. That was brought home to me quite starkly by one of the most challenging things that has confronted any of us in our recent history: the covid pandemic. As a cabinet member for health and

[Ben Coleman]

social care in a London council at the time, I would see the vaccination figures every week among people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Consistently, people from an African-Caribbean background would be the least likely to be vaccinated; they would be the most reluctant.

A lot of people were saying things like, "Oh, this is just because they are prey to misinformation or have irrational fears. All we need to do is put them in front of people of religion, or footballers, and it will change everyone's mind." I found that slightly odd, so I talked a lot to people to try to understand why it was happening. I should say that I went to a London comprehensive school with people who were black, white and from all sorts of backgrounds. I have always been aware of racism, but I thought that things had got a lot better. From talking to black people about covid and their feelings about the NHS, I realised that things were really not as good as I had liked to pretend to myself.

The situation was not driven by a need to educate people or make them aware; the problem was that there was a lack of trust in the NHS, and it did not come from nowhere. If people consistently get less good access to care, less good treatment and less good outcomes, it is not surprising that when they are told, "Trust us, we're the NHS," they say, "Well, you haven't always obviously had my best interests at heart, so forgive me a certain amount of reluctance to do so."

We have a very serious problem in our country of people getting less good healthcare simply because their skin colour is different, which is completely absurd—it sounds very childish of me to put it in that way, as it is so ridiculous—and what I saw during that time on the council made me think, "How do we address it? How do we create the trust that we need everybody in this country to have equally in the NHS?" Our Select Committee is trying to grapple with those questions in different ways. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned the issue of black maternal health. She is right that maternal health services are a huge problem.

The Health and Social Care Committee recently undertook an inquiry into how to improve black maternal health services. I will talk a little bit about it, because I think what we came out with provides a bit of a road map for transforming the NHS's treatment of black people across the board, and for improving services across the board. We started by confronting the shocking fact that a black woman is 2.3 times more likely than a white woman to die during pregnancy or childbirth, or in the post-natal period. As a slight aside, the figure used to be even worse; it used to be almost five times. It has only got better because everything has got worse for white people as well. There is a huge problem in maternity services in this country generally, but the disparity still remains: black women are 2.3 times more likely to die than white women—in 2025, in one of the richest countries in the world.

We heard repeatedly that the disparity was not the result of social factors, biology or other things; it was simply racism—it was not direct, not overt, not thought through, but racism was one of the core drivers of the disparity. The statistic that black women are 2.3 times more likely to die than white women is not just a statistic, because behind every number is a woman who did not come home to her family; a child left to grow up without their mother; and a partner, parent or a friend left devastated by a death that was preventable.

We were encouraged to be optimistic, so I want to be optimistic against that stark background. I think things can improve if we want them to improve. The Committee made a number of recommendations on maternity care. They are specific, but as I say, I think they have some universal applications. I will share them, and suggest how each can apply to the NHS more broadly to tackle racism, so that everyone gets equal care, no matter who they are.

First, we heard some really strange things. For example, we heard evidence about black women being told by both black and white doctors, "Oh well, you're black. You can cope with more pain, can't you?" It is incredible that people are still having that said to them. Other problems include symptoms not necessarily being identified —things like skin rashes and pre-eclampsia discolouration —because doctors and nurses are not properly trained to understand the differences in skin colours, and how to recognise these problems in black people as opposed to white people.

The Committee simply thinks that it would be useful if we had mandatory anti-racism training. That is not training against being racist; it is training in cultural competency, understanding differences—they could be colour differences or cultural differences—and respecting all patients, not just some. Surely it is the job and the fundamental duty of anyone in public service to be there for everybody, not just some people. We would like the training to be not just mandatory but informed by lived experiences, not by assumptions. At the time some people said to me, "Let's just get people in front of churchmen and churchwomen and then they'll take the covid vaccine." It must not be those sorts of assumptions; we must actually listen to people and understand their lived experiences in order to tackle unconscious bias and racist assumptions.

The good news is that there is a model for this that works. Last night I was at a really interesting presentation by the Caribbean & African Health Network on something called the black health improvement programme. It was commissioned by the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership to address the health inequalities that were exposed by the covid pandemic, and it is now operating in Greater Manchester and Enfield. It offers GPs culturally appropriate education and training, informed directly by talking to the community. It covers institutional racism, health inequalities and lived experiences, and it is grounded in reality. We need to look at that and learn from it. We must scale up such programmes for use across the whole NHS.

Marie Goldman: The hon. Member speaks very powerfully and knowledgeably, in particular about maternity services. I note with interest the maternity services review being kicked off by the Government at the moment. Does the hon. Member agree that many of the changes he is suggesting could be implemented right now and that we do not need to wait for the outcome of that review before we get started?

Ben Coleman: The hon. Member makes a very good point. I will run through a few more proposals from the maternity report, but they will not surprise Members;

they are not radical or new. What would really be radical and new would be if one of these reports— I think I have read at least six reports about black people getting less good treatment from the NHS—had their recommendations implemented. That would be radical. We on the Health and Social Care Committee are looking forward to the Government's response to the report and are hoping to see the recommendations implemented. If they are implemented for maternity care, we hope that they can be applied more broadly.

The maternity services development fund has sadly been slashed from £95 million to £2 million. The money has been given to integrated care boards to parcel out, but they are all facing 50% admin cuts, so maternity services will have to compete with every other local priority. We need dedicated ringfenced budgets, and we need budgets for areas where there are specific racial health inequalities, such as conditions that affect some people more than others because they are black. I am thinking of fibroids, for instance, and sickle cell awareness, which I will come to in a minute.

I turn to another thing that is essential in the NHS. The Health and Social Care Committee was glad to have the new chair of the NHS, Dr Penny Dash, in front of us being interviewed before her appointment. She said that one thing that is really important to her is data, data, data—and I agree. However, the extraordinary thing is that ethnicity data collection in the NHS is not very good. But it is not impossible to do. There was some work done on assessing disparities in maternal morbidity outcomes. It was almost complete in March 2023 under the previous Government, but when the Committee asked Ministers in June 2025 how it was going, we were told that it was good news and that it was still being developed and was expected within less than three years. That means it will have taken potentially six years to complete something that was meant to be almost finished. This is very slow and unacceptable progress.

Kirsty Blackman: I was pleased to hear the hon. Member highlight some good practice. As a parent, you get slightly obsessive about your children's health and tend to google what is going on with them. The NHS website—nhs.uk—has improved monumentally over the years. For instance, when it comes to rashes it says, "Rashes will present differently on black and brown skin," and it shows pictures of how that might look. I am glad that the hon. Member highlighted good practice. Does he think it is possible to lift and shift the good practice we see, such as on the NHS UK website and with the Greater Manchester example he mentioned, and do that across the board?

Ben Coleman: Absolutely. I think the hon. Member and I are advocating the same thing. I have to say—quick plug here—that the NHS app is quite good. If anyone does not have it, I would sign up and get it. If people do not get it and give feedback, we cannot make it any better. I am quite impressed by the app. I was shocked to see how many times I have been to the doctors in recent years, but all the information is there.

One way to achieve what the hon. Member for Aberdeen North and I want to achieve is by collecting better data on what is going on. We need mandatory data collection. We need to look at deaths, near misses and complications. We need to report disparities and take action when they are revealed. We also need people to be accountable for taking action. We could look at a whole range of areas to see the disparities and differences that exist in treatment and outcomes between black and white people. We could look at cancer diagnosis timing and survival and mental health, sectioning and treatment, which is a huge issue. We could look at pain management, analgesic prescribing, referral rates to specialists, treatment escalation decisions, patient satisfaction and how we measure that, and complaint patterns. We need data on all these areas so that we can address the issues and take action.

Then we need to look at the workforce. The Government are coming out with a workforce plan later this year, which is hugely needed. There is a shortage in the workforce in some parts of the NHS, in particular maternity services, but the workforce issue is not just about numbers. It is about having staff who understand and respect patients, and this comes back to the cultural issues. It is difficult enough for women being patronised as a patient, but it is even more difficult for black women.

Peter Prinsley: Sadly, my experience as a consultant in a rural part of England is that, shockingly, some patients are still reluctant to see black doctors and nurses. Although my hon. Friend is talking about the experience of patients, I think we also must consider the attitudes of patients towards our staff and the way in which staff are treated by some patients.

Ben Coleman: My hon. Friend makes a strong point, and I could not agree more. There is some data out there. Hospital trusts collect data each year on how their staff are feeling about a whole range of things. I looked at my local hospital trust's data and one question it asks is: "Do you feel that you have suffered more discrimination this year from patients and from colleagues and managers?" I have not looked for a couple of years, but sadly the last time I looked it was getting slowly worse.

This is definitely an issue. If people are foolish enough to think that somebody's skin colour is going to affect their ability to do their job properly, it makes it more difficult for staff to provide care to the whole population. Black NHS staff need to have safe working environments. They encounter racism, and they should not. It is interesting that you talk about doctors—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member means "he" not "you".

Ben Coleman: I am most grateful for the correction, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is interesting that my hon. Friend talks about doctors, because honestly there are not that many people in leadership positions in the NHS who are black, and that is another issue that needs to be addressed.

I have used the word "racism"—as we all have—in a way that is perhaps not easy to do everywhere. I have to say, when I first started becoming aware of the huge differences there are in how people are likely to experience health services depending on whether they are black or white, I did not feel at all comfortable using the word "racism". Sometimes when people say "structural racism" when talking about racism, people will say, "I am not a racist!" but that is not what is being talked about, so it is very difficult to enter this conversation.

[Ben Coleman]

I remember when I was on the council I was once on a big Zoom call with 150 people to discuss the inequalities work we were doing. A black woman talked a lot about micro-aggressions, and I asked her, "When you are talking about micro-aggressions, aren't you talking about racism?" She answered, "Yes, yes. But you can say that. I can't." So I think it is incumbent on people like me—a white middle-class gentleman of a certain age—to be allies, as many hon. Friends and hon. Members here are being, and to stand up and talk about these things and name them for what they are.

We can effect change. We can do the radical thing of implementing the change that is needed, but to do that we need to have leadership that wants to actually effect the change. We have found, sadly, that black women facing poor outcomes is shaped by systemic failings in leadership and accountability as well as in training and data collection. We need senior leaders to be held accountable for racial health inequalities. That means that they need to be aware of them, which means they need the data. We need Care Quality Commission inspections to specifically assess equity in care delivery. Trust boards should be specifically responsible for monitoring and addressing disparities, and performance metrics should include equity indicators. That all sounds terribly onerous, but it is not. It can become part of the normal way of doing things; it just has to be introduced at some point. As I said, these are not radical suggestions, but to do them would be radical.

Indeed, the really radical thing to do—this came out of the Committee—is just to listen properly to the women needing maternity services. I saw a terrible programme during covid where a woman was talking about her daughter, who was 20 and had gone to see her doctor. She was talking about being in immense pain. The doctor said, "Well, black women have differently shaped cervixes, so that is probably why." She died in childbirth. That sort of thing happens all the time; we just do not talk about it all the time. It has to stop. We need to listen to black patients.

Black patients talking to us said, "I had pain. I reported pain and I reported symptoms—I just wasn't believed." Their concerns were dismissed. That pattern appears not just in maternal health services but right across healthcare.

Mr Calvin Bailey: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. It is important to highlight the simple things like listening to people, but we must also get over our inherent reluctance to speak about health inequities when we are speaking to each other. Prostate cancer, for example affects one in four black men, whereas it impacts one in eight white men, partly because we do not discuss the fact that it is more prevalent in black men and we need to conduct diagnosis much earlier. Does he agree that if you are a black man or you have a history of prostate cancer in your family, you should go and get a prostate prostate-specific antigen test as early as possible—as early as 45? I will not make reference to my own age or the fact that I have had a test myself.

Ben Coleman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—my youthful friend—for that comment. I could not agree more. When I became aware of this problem back when I was a councillor, we instituted a programme to build trust within the black and minority ethnic community in the NHS. As a result, we had hundreds of conversations in the community with people from the NHS and with people of colour. One black gentleman, who I think was a little older than 45—he was probably not far from my own age—went and had a prostate test as a result, and it was found that he had prostate cancer. If he had not had the test, who knows what the situation would be these days. I therefore fully support my hon. Friend's call for everybody to have prostate cancer tests. I have had one myself, and fortunately, like him, I think things are all right.

When we get feedback from patients, we need formal mechanisms for registering that—it should not be done in the typical ad hoc, amateur way—and we need to co-produce the changes with the people we are actually meant to be there for. Also, when people complain about discriminatory treatment, we need to consider that seriously, and the NHS needs to respond in a much more open-hearted, open-handed and open-minded way than I am told it often does. The Committee did the inquiry and came up with specific recommendations that affect black maternal health, but I think they spread right across the piece of black people not getting as good healthcare as they should, and as white people do.

I end on a specific example of something quite close to my heart because of friends: sickle cell disease. As we are talking about black history, I would like to pay tribute to Dame Elizabeth Anionwu, a wonderful woman and the UK's first sickle cell nurse. She has done so much to educate me and other people and improve services in this country.

People may not know much about sickle cell if they are not black. It causes intense pain and organ damage. Crudely, cells get shaped like sickles, and it can cause strokes; it can even cause early death. It is often overlooked, mainly because it affects black and minority ethnic people.

Imperial College healthcare NHS trust is currently running a wonderful programme that serves my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham. It is one of only seven centres in the country piloting what is called a renal haematology triage unit, which is one of those sexy NHS titles, but it just means if a person suddenly get a crisis and needs to be seen swiftly, they do not have to wait for hours and hours in accident and emergency; they can get swift pain relief. That is vital for making sure that the problem does not get seriously dangerous seriously quickly. I went to visit it and talked to patients and staff. It is a terrific centre that has made a huge difference to people's lives, as they are able to go to work and look after their children more easily. It is inspirational—but, sadly, it is a pilot. In the normal world, we do a pilot, we see if it works and, if it does, we try to find the funding long term. Often, in the NHS it means, "We have got a bit of money left over. What can we do?" or it means, "Let's do a project for a few years and call it a pilot." We need to keep the funding for those seven projects across the country, which are offering urgent, swift pain relief for people with sickle cell, after April. That is one thing that I am working on at the moment. We have to show everybody that they matter equally. We have to build trust.

So let us build trust, let us acknowledge the harm that has been done and let us do the work on training, comprehensive data and workforce issues. Let us name racism and tackle it head on. Let us listen to black

patients and ensure that services for conditions such as sickle cell are as important to everybody as they are to just a few. We cannot change history—we can recognise it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), who has just left the Chamber, said—but we can change the future. We have the evidence and the recommendations. We know what needs to be done. I have not said anything new or anything that will have shocked the House. The only thing that is shocking is that there is often so little willpower to make the obvious and necessary changes that are needed. I will keep fighting for that to happen, and I hope that everyone in the Chamber will fight alongside me.

2.45 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in the debate. I am proud to be the son of an Irish immigrant. My dad Richard came over to the UK with his family when he was a young boy. They were looking for safe accommodation and paid work. I remember him sitting me down when I was a young boy, and telling me that his family, when in search of those things, would often come across two notices: "No Irish" and "No Blacks". To learn that at such a young age, and to understand that prejudice was so built into our society, fired in me a desire to fight racism. It also continues to shock me, because that was not the distant past, but very recent indeed. This Black History Month, we celebrate the black men and black women who shaped Britain's history—Bournemouth's too—but we must also remember what many of them were forced to endure.

I am proud to represent Bournemouth East. Bournemouth is a young upstart—we can compare it with Christchurch, which is 1,200 years old, and Poole, which is 800 years old—that was really built from scratch only about 200 years ago. It was made by people who came from London and the home counties. It is, and has always been, a melting pot, and it is proud of that. It is a beautiful place to live, work and be, and I am proud that it is such an inclusive place.

Because Bournemouth is such a young town, black history is built into what Bournemouth has been. I think of Thomas Lewis Johnson, who was born into slavery in Virginia in 1826 and experienced slavery's full brutality—physical punishment, harsh labour, the denial of basic human rights, and the mental trauma that will have gone with all that—but eventually he found his freedom. He became a minister and travelled the world preaching hope and equality. In the 1890s, he made Boscombe in Bournemouth his home, and he named his house Liberia in tribute to African independence. He became a British citizen in 1900 and, supported by a local community who recognised his courage, was able to do such things as write his autobiography, "Twenty-Eight Years a Slave", in Bournemouth. It tells a story of faith, resilience and humanity. In it, he wrote,

"Though my body was confined my spirit remained free, and it was faith that guided me through the darkest hours."

I am also thinking about Lilian Bader, who broke barriers of her own decades later. When racial discrimination kept people of Caribbean heritage out of the armed forces, she refused to accept it. In 1941 she became the first black woman to serve in the Royal Air Force, training as an instrument repairer and rising to acting corporal. After the war, she earned a degree, became a teacher and settled in Bournemouth with her family, and that legacy of service continued through her sons. She said,

"Father served in the First World War, his three children served in the Second World War. I married a coloured man who was in the Second World War, as was his brother who was decorated for bravery in Burma. Their father also served in the First World War. Our son was a helicopter pilot, he served in Northern Ireland. So all in all, I think we've given back more to this country than we've received."

That legacy of service and that history—that Black history—is British history, and it is Bournemouth's history. Their contributions call us to keep on building a town and a country where everyone's contribution is seen, valued and celebrated.

I want to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy). It is absurd that we cram black history into a month, and that we do not have a requirement for it to be taught in our curriculum. We rely on teachers—who are already frazzled by their heavy workload, and who have been looking for light at the end of the tunnel for so many years—to do the research, and to find the resources and time to teach black history, as well as other history, such as that of the civil rights campaign that led to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the history of gender equality, and LGBT+ history. We need to entrench the struggles of our country in the teaching of our curriculum, so that the children we raise know fully, as citizens, what our country has been through, and what its story will be. That is particularly true because, unfortunately, those contributions are being erased.

Nobody in Bournemouth should feel uncomfortable, unsafe or undervalued, yet I know all too well just how many black and Asian members of my community have felt targeted and excluded. I am thinking of a recent surgery appointment; a young black medical professional came and talked about his desire to live in Britain all his life. He said he would finish his shift, and on leaving the hospital, he would have to look over his shoulder, because he was concerned about being attacked. I heard the same story from an employee at Bournemouth university. I also think of an email that I received recently from the mum of a lovely young lad I know in Bournemouth called Dan. The message said:

"Lots of us out here silently vibrating on an axis of vigilance—anxiety, powerlessness, anger—wondering when the violence will touch us and our loved ones."

That woman describes herself as a London exile. She moved to Bournemouth for a better life and a more tolerant society, and now, in this day and age, she is worried about her young boy having to experience the violence that she fled when she left London. She says that in London, she saw the British National party rampaging in the streets where she lived, and she worries that is coming to Bournemouth. It should be no surprise, and no shock, that I, as their Member of Parliament, will say that black lives matter. Before it was a political movement or a social organisation, it was a statement of fact, and it remains one. Black lives are important, yet some, in their actions and words, seek to cast doubt on that truth.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. He has mentioned people who have come to this country and contributed

[Warinder Juss]

greatly. As he and other Members have said, the problems we face are ones that we did not think we would see in this day and age. Only last week, I posted a photograph of myself out door-knocking and speaking to constituents, and somebody posted, "Another foreigner representing Wolverhampton." I grew up being racially attacked, including physically, because I wore a turban and because of the colour of my skin, but even so, the comment shocked me, because I did not expect to hear it in present times. When I was thinking of how I would respond to that person, I wondered whether I should point out that 60% of NHS workers were not born in this country. As I was formulating a response, somebody responded, "Well, why don't you stand at the next general election?". I thought that that was a really good way of countering the comment.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to face these issues, and that we need allies—people who are not black—to take part in Black History Month? That is how we will tackle the racism that people like me still feel. Anybody in public service will feel vulnerable, so we need as many people as possible to take part in this movement, and in the celebration of Black History Month.

Tom Hayes: I found my hon. Friend's words very moving, and I appreciate his testimony. That will have been hard to share in the Chamber, but it is so important that he did, and I am sorry that he is going through those experiences. I agree with him entirely. I sometimes hesitate to contribute to these debates, because I do not want to take time from colleagues who have first-hand, direct experience of what it is like as a black person, but my hon. Friend has picked up on a really important point: allyship at this time is crucial. I will do everything I can to stand up for both my hon. Friend and the black people I represent, and I know that colleagues in this Chamber will do exactly the same. We must stand against racism.

On that point, it concerns me deeply that we have had a summer of such discontent, which promises to be a longer period of unfortunate hatred. Flying the flag should unite us, not divide us. One of my earliest memories is seeing Linford Christie draping the Union flag around himself after winning the Olympic gold in 1992. It was a wonderful moment, yet at present, there are people whose intention in flying the national flag is to exclude.

When the intention behind flying the flag is to cheer on our national sports team, it brings pride and belonging; it creates the joy and happiness that our country strives for. But when the intention is so deliberately to intimidate, and so consciously to exclude some people in my town of Bournemouth and across our country, it can only ever fuel the rising tide of racism that I know we all in this Chamber and across our country wish to reject. It makes no sense to me—indeed, it feels not just wrong and unfair but illogical—that, in some cases, the flag is flown in celebration of black and Asian footballers, and in other situations, it is flown to make their communities feel unwelcome. We should stop that. We should come together. We should unite as one country.

Let us not merely honour Black History Month in words and speeches, perhaps with the announcement of a statue, and with a further debate next year and the year after, in which we commit to doing things. Let us take action. Let us build a future in which equality is our shared legacy. I say that particularly to my constituents in Bournemouth, because we have been rocked by a summer of discontent, with frequent protests, which seem to have coincided with many years of feeling lost and hopeless.

Bournemouth is a young town, but over the course of its history, it settled into who it was. It was a seaside town, and people knew what our industry and our sectors were about. In recent years, with austerity and the loss of key employers, the town has lost its way a bit. It is looking to tell a different story. It is looking to tell a story of inclusion, hope and happiness. Just as black history has always been key to Bournemouth's history, the contributions of black boys, girls, men and women will be key to Bournemouth as it finds its new story. We will move forward together, united against racism, and determined to build an equal, fair and just society under one flag.

2.58 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities, and the Mother of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), on their excellent speeches, as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Brent East (Dawn Butler), for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) and many others. Rather like my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), I sometimes wonder about the appropriateness of speaking in a debate like this, but I am delighted that our comments are being accepted in the spirit of allyship, which is absolutely how they are intended.

I want to celebrate this year's Black History Month. It is very relevant in my constituency of Watford, where there is an active and engaged black community. I particularly pay tribute to the Watford African Caribbean Association, which was founded by Sam Lusack, Randolph Henry and Althea McLean in 1976, making it one of the oldest such associations in the country. In fact, there is a lovely quote from Althea on the WACA website, which I will read, because it is quite inspirational:

"Let us resolve to keep going regardless of the many challenges, each one of us can do something and together we can achieve."

The association is now led by Clive Saunders and it does amazing work for the community in the constituency, including providing activities for the over-50s, a lot of support around sickle cell, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) spoke about, and community help, advice and engagement. During covid, it did great work as well. We know that black and minority ethnic people were disproportionately impacted by covid. Clive is a typical representative of an excellent community organisation in that he is always delighted to see me, but he is jolly well going to hold me to account when he does, and we love him dearly for that.

I should also like to pay tribute to the chair of Watford borough council, Favour Ezeifedi, who was a fellow councillor of mine for many years. She has overcome adversity and persevered to achieve many great things locally, and does tremendous work to support young people especially through her church.

This year is the 65th anniversary of Nigerian independence, and I recently had the pleasure of attending one of several celebrations held in my constituency. The

generosity of the event organisers was remarkable, and I was really surprised to find one of my caseworkers there with her father. I had not expected her to be present, but she and her father had taken their car to the garage opposite the venue for repairs, and while they were hanging around, the organisers asked whether they would like to join them in their celebration. That was tremendous—an A+ for diary management for my caseworker.

I would also like to put on the record my support for One Vision in my constituency, which is led by Enoch Kanagaraj. It has just won a national award for its incredible health work with faith communities. It has deep links in the community. As was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham, many people are intimidated by going to an NHS setting to receive testing and treatment and so on, but often they will go to their church. One Vision has done tremendous work in bringing health and faith together to enable people to be tested for diabetes, for example.

I also thank Eva Mbiru, a community activist who hosts Spiced in Watford, which supports women in the constituency. We must also celebrate the legend that is Luther Blissett from Watford football club. Having already given so much to Watford over the years, he and his partner Lauren do incredible work to support the veteran community in my constituency.

3.3 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of my party. I thank hon. Members for their powerful, important and wide-ranging contributions. It is clear that we share a commitment across the House to recognise the achievements of black Britons and to address the challenges that remain.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities concluded that Britain is a model as a multi-ethnic society with shared national values, and

"a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world".

That is not to ignore some of the issues that have been raised in the Chamber, but to acknowledge rightly our progress and potential. If any country can continue to advance equality of opportunity for black people, it is this one.

As has been mentioned, the Leader of the Opposition is the first black woman to lead a major political party in the UK. As we have agreed today, black British history is a powerful weapon to challenge racism, tackle underachievement, tackle inequalities in health, education and justice, and ensure the economic opportunities that we want and desire for all our constituents. That was drawn out by Members across the Chamber.

Turning to the contributions, it is a pleasure to be in this the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), because I remember watching her on the telly on "This Week". That was my favourite show, and I very much enjoyed watching her. It was pertinent and valuable that she drew out the importance of migrants who support our public services, and the disparities and disadvantages in educational outcomes that remain for too many black children.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) rightly raised the maternal health disparities. To respond to the concerns she raised that relate to my party's tenure, we did launch a maternity disparities taskforce in February 2022 to explore inequalities in maternity care in order, vitally, to improve outcomes for women. It focused on disparities faced by women from ethnic minorities and those living in deprived areas, who saw a lack of parity with others. We launched a £50 million fund to tackle health inequalities in maternity care, as part of our women's health priorities of 2024, to build a consortium to deliver research, which has been raised today, and capacity over the next five years. I hope the Minister will undertake to hold to account other Departments to ensure that that is built on. I am sure that she will take that opportunity after the debate, especially as it has been mentioned by Members across the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), who mentioned the fact that we co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, spoke bravely and movingly again about the direct racism that she receives. That is abhorrent, unacceptable, unwarranted and unbelievable in this day and age. I love the "I love myself" affirmation—I think I might start telling myself that in the mirror every morning. Maybe we should all do so if we need to get away from the kind of rot we get on social media. I absolutely agree with the points she made about one particular party that is trying to take people back to some kind of past and is offering a mirage. It needs to pick a side—capitalist, socialist or populist—but it is not a direction that I want to go in.

The hon. Member also mentioned that there is no joy or energy in racism; it is pure negativity. She might know that I love my music, so I am happy that DJ Love Spoon might be able to make an appearance at her event. The quote that she read about making some noise was exactly right.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) is not in his place at the moment—

Mr Calvin Bailey: Ahem!

Mims Davies: Oh sorry, he has moved—how could I miss him in that jacket? Talking about making some noise, the hon. Member's jacket has made a splash in the Chamber today. He rightly spoke about pride in being black and British, and that was brilliant to hear.

The hon. Member and others spoke about prostate cancer rates for black men. The Prostate Cancer Support Organisation recently held an event in my patch with the East Grinstead and District Lions club. Just last Saturday, more than 1,000 men came to the Meridian Hall for the seventh annual event to get checked. Sometimes it is in those less formal places that people can have conversations that tackle stigma and concerns around health. As we have heard from other Members, sometimes it is people like Brian and his team starting those conversations that gives people the confidence to go to the NHS and other more formal structures. That gives me the opportunity to gently but I think rightly challenge the men's and women's health strategies. This is not just about waiting lists; it is about real interventions and change for people.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned the Scottish word for "cuddle". The Welsh word, "cwtsh", was quite a new one for me. She spoke about everyday miracles. I think there is a danger, in all this negativity, that we miss those everyday

[Mims Davies]

miracles in our constituencies. That is not to mention the miraculousness of dentistry over the decades—over history—and how vital those people have been to us.

The hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) rightly spent much of his time reflecting on the value of our Select Committees and of addressing the outcomes for black people in the NHS. I urge him to work with his party on the issues of birth and women's health. The Government rightly say that they are committed to the women's health strategy. Again, I implore Ministers to remain committed to working together on that, because we know what a difference it can make.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about being radical—he said that being radical is about implementation. They say that the first iteration of policy is operations, so let us get this going so that it can really make change. There are so many changes in NHS England. Rightly, we are all taking a forensic look at that, but there is a lack of interest in outcomes for Wales, and a lot of money is going in directions that we might not always be comfortable with, so let us use this opportunity to challenge inequalities.

The Minister for Equalities mentioned the ethnicity pay gap reporting. It is vital that we fully understand the scrutiny and consider potential legislation.

I know that for the hon. Member for Brent East—I hope that I can call her my hon. Friend—this is so personal. October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and many of us will have been wearing pink on various days and highlighting events across Parliament. Women from all backgrounds need real advice. We talked about stigma around prostate cancer and black men's health, but we also need to ensure that for women there are conversations about breast health and breast cancer. Sadly, we are still seeing poorer breast cancer outcomes for women in ethnic minority communities. Breastcancernow.org has a brilliant symptoms checker for every woman to use. When I was working with Wellbeing of Women on issues related to the menopause for black women, it struck me that the outcomes and workplace experiences are still too wide-ranging. This is a great opportunity to raise those issues.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) mentioned "No Blacks, No Irish" signs. My dad was the main contractor for Brighton and Hove council in the '70s and '80s, and he employed many Irish people. In fact, I thought that most people spoke with an Irish accent. It was quite a surprise to me growing up that there was a Sussex accent, which is remarkably different. I remember those days of "Auf Wiedersehen, Pet" and so on. The hon. Gentleman was absolutely right. That was a real experience for families and it shaped people. I thank him for sharing that.

The hon. Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) highlighted local organisations, trust, and the approach of churches—that is important. The Hope church in East Grinstead does great work in my patch, particularly on job search and helping men in particular not to feel alone.

To conclude, let us work with energy in Black History Month to boost real opportunity across society and produce real outcomes, real change and real understanding. I say that MP stands not for Member of Parliament but for "most persistent", because our job is to stand up for the voiceless. We must confront racism and make a direct difference. By being true to the theme of this Black History Month, which is "Standing Firm in Power and Pride", and through our strength, resilience and leadership in this House and across our communities, we will see real change. That change lies in all our hands and will happen by us working together.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To wind up for the Government, on her first outing as a Minister, I call Taiwo Owatemi.

3.15 pm

The Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury (Taiwo Owatemi): It is an honour to speak in today's debate. We have celebrated 60 years of change, and we have spoken honestly about the range of challenges faced and to be overcome as we go forward. Before responding to some of the points raised today, I would like to pay tribute to those who make up the most diverse Parliament ever.

When the Race Relations Act was passed in 1965, Parliament looked very different. There were zero ethnic minority MPs and 234 fewer women sitting on these Benches. It is a testament to how we have grown as a nation that so many groups are now represented in the House. My grandmother could never have imagined that her granddaughter would one day speak from the Front Bench of the House of Commons, closing a debate on race and equality, so it truly is an honour to be here with everyone today.

I have listened intently and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their thoughtful and heartfelt contributions to this important debate. One theme in particular has stood out: the power of storytelling. It is through stories that we understand our past, give meaning to our present and inspire others to build a better future. I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for speaking passionately about the themes of this Black History Month: "Standing Firm in Power and Pride" and "Legacies of Action: understanding 60 years of change and challenge". We have heard many stories pointing to the importance of history, and about crucial issues that I would like to address.

The Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), raised the Windrush compensation scheme. We recognise the importance of speeding up the process and the role of the Windrush commissioner in ensuring the delivery of the compensation scheme. Since the end of August this year, the Government have paid over £116 million to over 3,000 applicants; 93% of applicants have received final decisions.

Hon. Members raised maternal health—an issue that, as a young black mother, I am very passionate about. I am glad to represent a Government who aim to tackle racial inequalities for both women and babies. Frankly, it is indefensible that race should have any bearing on how we bring children into the world. We have launched an independent investigation into NHS maternity and neonatal services to understand the systemic issues around why so many women, babies and families experience unacceptable care. The investigation will deliver an interim recommendation by December, and publish further findings by spring 2026.

Dawn Butler: I thank the Minister for talking about health inequalities in the black community. Does she agree that we need to look at how we use AI systems, so that we do not automate bias and discrimination through their use?

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank my hon. Friend for the point she rightly makes. It is essential that we look at the impact of AI when addressing health inequalities.

Tackling persistent health inequality is a key aim of the Government's mission to ensure that the NHS is fit for the future. We are determined to ensure that one's health outcomes are not determined by ethnicity or where one lives. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) for the work he does on the Health and Social Care Committee, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton). Sadly, the issue of the workplace harassment and abuse of black and minority ethnic NHS workers is a key issue raised by NHS leaders. I know the Government are working hard to address those challenges.

On the issue of reparations, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for her contribution and work. The Minister for Equalities had a number of valuable conversations during her visit to Bristol yesterday about the need to ensure an honest conversation on the impact of our country's past. That also included a discussion on the reparative futures programme at the University of Bristol, which is looking at systemic injustice related to transatlantic slavery.

Ms Diane Abbott: The entire House is concerned about the educational outcomes of working-class children in general, but does the Minister accept that if we only ever talk about white working-class children, black parents and black communities may believe that their children are being ignored?

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank the right hon. Member for raising that point. The Government are looking at how to address educational outcomes for all groups.

It was heartbreaking to hear from my hon. Friends the Members for Brent East (Dawn Butler) and for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) about their experiences of racism. Racism is completely unacceptable and has no place in our society, and any instance in which it occurs must be treated with the utmost seriousness. That is why we have a strong legal framework in place to deal with the perpetrators of racist and other forms of hate crime, and we expect the perpetrators of this abhorrent offence to be brought to justice.

Kirsty Blackman: Does the Minister agree that not only do we need to be not racist, but we need to be anti-racist, in order to tackle the situation in society right now?

Taiwo Owatemi: Absolutely. We have to be proactive in speaking out against racism in any area or situation in society in which we see it.

It was disappointing and concerning to hear about of the police incident raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East. There is no space for racism in policing or for intolerant policing.

One reason I like the Black History Month debate is that it provides an opportunity to hear from Members across the House about the wonderful trailblazers in their constituencies, in both the past and present. It was wonderful to hear from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) about her constituents Bertha, Ify and Jane—about all the work they do and the contribution they are making to make Aberdeen North a better place for all.

It was also wonderful to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) about Johnny and Noor; from my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) about Lilian and her family's legacy of service; and from my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine)—I really hope he enjoyed the best jollof rice in the world. It was good to hear from him about the contributions from Clive, Councillor Favour and Enoch from One Vision.

We cannot have a Black History Month debate without recognising the trailblazers in this House. The Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, was the first black female MP, and she paved the way for other young girls, like myself. I always feel incredibly lucky to be able to sit on these Benches with her—something that I never thought I would be able to achieve.

It is also wonderful for this year's Black History Month debate to be chaired by Madam Deputy Speaker, who is the first ethnic minority Deputy Speaker. It would not be right of me to speak about the contributions made by trailblazers in this House without mentioning our own Serjeant at Arms, who was previously in the Chamber. He is the first black holder of his post in its history of over 600 years. He was appointed in 2019, and moved to this country in the 1990s after being born in Nigeria.

In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Mims Davies: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Taiwo Owatemi: I am happy to.

Mims Davies: I just wanted to say that most of the things the hon. Lady has said from the Dispatch Box were brilliant, and I believed every word, apart from that she is a mother—she looks so young.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That may be outside of the scope of this debate. Minister, you may wish to respond.

Taiwo Owatemi: I will take the compliment—I thank the shadow Minister very much.

As this debate has made clear, this nation has a rich and proud history of breaking down barriers and opening doors for everyone to thrive—one that speaks directly to this year's Black History Month theme, "Legacies of Action". This is our legacy, and our action remains ongoing, beyond the measures that my hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities and I have set out today. We should not be satisfied with where we are; we still have a long way to go. Our fight for equality is urgent, and it continues.

There have always been those who seek to create division—who do not wish to see communities not just surviving, but thriving together. They will tell us that

[Taiwo Owatemi]

incorporating different types of people into our nation is something new that has been forced on us. To them, I say this: tell it to the black dockworkers, sailors and business owners of 18th-century Liverpool and Bristol, who built communities in the face of prejudice; tell it to the Windrush generation, who helped rebuild Britain after the war and made this country home; and tell it to the campaigners, artists and leaders of today, who continue to drive change and enrich every part of our national life. This is Britain—diverse, determined and proud. We have thrived because of that diversity, and we would not be the nation we are without it. Let us tell those stories and write new ones—stories of black Britons who have shaped, built and enriched this country. That task is as vital now as it has ever been, and with our first black president of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the great David Harewood, together with the brilliant Cynthia Erivo, I am sure that the future of our country's storytelling is bright and bold.

Finally, I thank all Members, not only for their powerful contributions to today's debate but for the work they are doing across the country throughout Black History Month. Later this week, I will be joined by journalist Trish Adudu, musician Sandra Godley OBE and Detective Inspector Andrew Mitcham at the University of Warwick, helping to break down barriers and open doors to opportunity for the next generation. I know that many Members are also marking Black History Month in their constituencies, sharing stories, championing change and helping to build a fairer, more inclusive Britain for us all. It is that energy, dynamic enthusiasm and sincerity that gives me hope—hope that the fight for equality will not only be continued, but that it will one day be won.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well done.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Black History Month.

Decarbonisation of Cement

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jade Botterill.*)

3.29 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Cement may not grab headlines, but it quite literally holds up our country. Virtually every hospital, school, bridge and home is built using cement. Without a thriving cement industry, it will not be possible to deliver the renewal our nation needs and the 1.5 million homes the Government have committed to build.

Derbyshire is the proud home of Britain's cement and lime industry. This critical material has been made there for generations, sustaining families, supporting our local economies and making the midlands one of our country's great industrial powerhouses. Today, Derbyshire and neighbouring Staffordshire account for around 40% of all the cement and lime produced in the UK, and the industry supports more than 2,000 high-quality and well-paid jobs in our communities.

However, cement also produces significant carbon emissions, with around 7% of all carbon emissions globally coming from cement—more than come shipping and aviation combined. To put that in scale, in the UK, cement produces more carbon emissions than the entire city of Birmingham. We simply cannot tackle the climate crisis, safeguard our planet for future generations and deliver a net zero economy without tackling this issue.

At the same time, our UK cement industry faces increased pressure, with UK cement production now at its lowest levels since 1950 and imported cement making up an increasing share of the market. Decarbonisation should never mean deindustrialisation, and without action, we risk losing high-skilled jobs across the midlands and the north and an industry that is vital to our nation.

It is therefore essential that we invest in new technologies and make the UK, and Derbyshire in particular, world-leading producers of clean, green cement. Many of these technological innovations are already being pioneered right here in Britain. For example, Cambridge Electric Cement has developed a means of recycling used concrete back into cement, and the Institution of Structural Engineers notes that nine British-based cement innovations are working to take captured carbon and store it within the concrete itself.

I was also pleased to recently meet with Coolbrook, which is developing a heater that will heat air up to 1,700°C without burning fossil fuels. That would allow cement plants to replace the fuel used for burning with electric heating and reduce the amount of CO_2 produced by between 30% to 40%. I encourage the Government to do all they can to support those emerging technologies and to use their research and development funding to ensure that such exciting innovations become commercially viable.

However, even if we reduce emissions from energy to zero, two-thirds of cement emissions are the by-product of the chemical process used to produce cement, and these emissions cannot be cut without carbon capture and storage. That means that even if all the exciting developments I have mentioned succeed, we cannot achieve zero-carbon cement without carbon capture and storage. Indeed, the fact that carbon dioxide is

created as part of the chemical process used to make cement means that only carbon capture can eliminate the majority of emissions from its production.

To be clear, these projects have nothing to do with prolonging the use of fossil fuels. It is entirely about ensuring that we can safeguard this vital and important industry and protect the secure, high-quality, unionised jobs that are rooted in local communities such as the Hope valley. Without carbon capture and storage, we either have to stop producing cement or we fail to decarbonise—neither is an option that we can afford.

That is why Peak Cluster is so important. Based in the Hope valley, it is the world's largest cement decarbonisation project, with the potential to decarbonise 40% of the UK's cement and lime production. Under this project, carbon produced in Derbyshire through the production of cement will be captured and transported to Morecambe Net Zero, which will repurpose the Morecambe bay gas fields into a permanent and secure carbon storage facility, capable of storing more than 1 billion tonnes of CO_2. That is a real example of how a just transition can protect workers and communities while reducing carbon emissions.

This world-leading innovation will also deliver major economic benefits for our country, supporting more than 13,000 jobs and attracting around £5 billion of private investment. It also has the potential to remove more than 3 million tonnes of CO_2 each year, equivalent to a quarter of all the emissions created in Derbyshire and Staffordshire every single year.

That is why I was delighted that, in July, the National Wealth Fund announced that it would make its first venture into carbon capture and invest £28 million in Peak Cluster. This historic step demonstrates how the National Wealth Fund can play a major role in crowding in private investment and create the good, clean jobs of the future. It is estimated that every £1 of public investment in the project will deliver £4 of benefits. This is an economic opportunity that we cannot waste.

However, the job is not done yet. The investment from the National Wealth Fund is hugely welcome, but it is only the start. For the project to reach final investment decisions and unlock billions of pounds in private capital, industry needs one thing above all: certainty. At present, there is no clear route to market for carbon capture and storage projects beyond the track 1 and track 2 clusters. Without a defined framework for projects like Peak Cluster, private investors are left in limbo, which risks stalling progress just when momentum is building. We have seen too many examples in the past where projects received initial support from Government, only to stall because the next stage of policy never followed through. This cannot be another one of those cases.

I have two specific questions for the Minister. First, will he confirm that the Government will establish a clear route to market for industrial carbon capture projects beyond track 1 and track 2? Establishing a clear route to market would give investors and operators confidence that a final investment decision on Peak Cluster and Morecambe Net Zero will be made within this Parliament. The sooner that is done, the sooner businesses will have the certainty needed to invest, and the sooner all of us will benefit from the growth that such investments will deliver.

Secondly, will the Minister commit to introducing a contract for difference-style model for carbon capture to ensure that projects like Peak Cluster have the revenue certainty needed to attract private capital? Contracts for difference played a key role in enabling the widespread growth in renewable energy, and can also play a major role in supporting the growth of carbon capture technology. However, investing in clean cement here in the UK will be of no use if our builders import more polluting cement from abroad. The amount of imported cement has tripled over the last 20 years. Not only does imported cement have a higher carbon footprint, but the use of such cement undermines our British industry. The Government's announcement that they will introduce a carbon border adjustment mechanism is therefore very welcome news, and demonstrates that this Labour Government will not allow our industrial industries to be offshored.

Furthermore, builders must also be incentivised to use cleaner, greener cement, and this will only be done if there are clear incentives to do so. It is therefore time for us to legislate to ensure that all developments report on how much carbon is released through the production and use of construction materials. Mandatory embodied carbon reporting is needed to drive down the emissions released from construction. Mandatory reporting would provide consistency to the construction industry, which must currently deal with a patchwork of local regulations, and reporting would also help stimulate the growth of lower-carbon building materials. Only sufficient demand will enable low-carbon technologies to develop at scale, and this demand can only be achieved through appropriate regulation.

The EU has plans to introduce mandatory embodied carbon reporting from 2028, and to set project limits on embodied carbon from 2030. When we left the EU, it was made clear that we would not reduce our environmental and climate standards, and I encourage the Government to align with the EU. The introduction of embodied carbon requirements in the EU also means that if we fail to decarbonise cement in the UK, our cement industry could be locked out of such markets, as builders will be required to use only low-carbon products in construction.

It is time once again to forge our future

"in the white heat of technology".

By acting now, we can safeguard our historic industries, support our Government's mission for growth, and deliver a more sustainable and greener world. It is time to be ambitious and to back British industry. It is, after all, desirable that the materials that build Britain are made in Britain.

I finish by returning to Peak Cluster. After all, whatever other positive interventions we make, simple chemistry means that we cannot cut the majority of emissions from cement without carbon capture. If we do not invest now, we will simply kick this can down the road, allowing other countries to move ahead of us and develop this emerging industry before we do. Today, I once again encourage the Minister to invest in jobs, British industry and decarbonisation. That can be done only if we establish a clear route for carbon capture projects not included in track 1 and track 2, and I encourage the Minister to establish such a route as quickly and urgently as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Minister. I see he is very ably supported by Edmund Ward, whom I recall from my career history.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Chris McDonald): I am so pleased that, due to a quirk in the timings, we have almost two hours for the discussion of cement. I will endeavour to make the best use of the time available.

I very much thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) for raising the issue of cement manufacture in the UK. I share his concerns about the current level of cement production both for Derbyshire and for the UK. I hope that by the time I resume my place on the Treasury Bench, he may feel a certain sense of reassurance given the priority I am personally giving to this issue. He made the case admirably for the cement sector based on the jobs and the impact on the local economy. I will endeavour to add to that economic argument by outlining the importance of the cement sector to the UK more broadly.

Breedon's Hope cement works in my hon. Friend's constituency is the largest in the UK. It supports 270 jobs in his constituency and contributes £60 million to the local economy. In my role as Minister for Industry, I intend to be as vocal and visible an advocate of British industry as he is for the industry in his own constituency. To be clear, my objective as Minister for Industry is to ensure that we secure a sustainable and prosperous future for this UK heavy industry.

Before I talk more broadly about the challenge of decarbonisation, I will briefly set out the role that the cement sector plays in the UK. Cement is of course an incredibly ancient material, which was developed and used extensively across Europe by the Romans. However, it would be wrong to think of it as a material of the past. It is subject to constant innovation, as we heard from my hon. Friend.

If you will forgive me for saying so, Madam Deputy Speaker, cement is quite literally the foundation of our modern economy. It is the essential ingredient used to construct everything from homes and hospitals to bridges, schools, roads and energy infrastructure. Without cement, there would be no new housing developments or transport networks. That is why we recognise in our industrial strategy that the cement industry is an essential ingredient in our eight key growth-driving sectors and part of our foundation industries.

Some of this Government's biggest and most ambitious delivery programmes depend on the strength and durability of cement, including our plan to build 1.5 million homes over the course of this Parliament and the development of our clean energy infrastructure such as nuclear and offshore wind. However, it is also an economically important sector in its own right, contributing £340 million in gross value added and employing 1,500 people in high-skilled, high-wage jobs, with a wage premium 24% above the national median wage and 6% to 8% above manufacturing benchmarks. Indeed, businesses in places where there are cement kilns are often the most highly productive, with the most highly paid jobs.

My hon. Friend outlined the challenge of decarbonisation, and we need to find a way for the UK cement industry to cut emissions in the future. He mentioned that it is a very energy-intensive energy, and he rightly pointed out that the challenge in decarbonising cement is due to the calcination process in the manufacture of clinker. I have no extreme desire to turn the House into a lecture theatre, but it may be helpful to dwell for a moment on the chemistry of cement production.

The process involves heating limestone to over 1,450°C to transform it into lime. In and of itself, this process releases the carbon dioxide that had been trapped in the limestone for millennia, and two thirds of the emissions are from the calcination process. They are an inevitable by-product of the cement production process, and they cannot be abated by fuel switching.

That problem was recognised a few years ago by none other than Bill Gates. We imagine that Bill Gates goes to very exciting parties in California, but maybe they are not as exciting as we might think. He says that when he is at a barbecue with friends talking about decarbonisation, as they often do, his friends say to him, "Bill, decarbonising steel is very difficult," and I know that is true from my career. He always says to them, "If you think decarbonising steel is difficult, decarbonising cement is almost impossible." This is a challenge that even Bill Gates finds it difficult to address.

However, the UK has always been a pioneer in overcoming such challenges. As we have heard, many technologies have been developed in the UK, and I will expand on those in a moment. The UK has been a pioneer in cement, too. The invention of Portland cement 200 years ago by William Aspdin sparked a construction boom that shaped the country that we know today. That is what we need to harness now: innovation to face the challenge of decarbonisation. I will outline some of the progress that the industry and Government are making. There are, essentially, three opportunities for us in decarbonisation. The first is reformulating cement, so that it intrinsically has less carbon. The second is reduction—using less cement on each construction project. There are a number of ways of doing that. The third, which my hon. Friend described extensively, is carbon capture, which is a good place to start.

My hon. Friend spoke of the Peak Cluster carbon capture utilisation and storage project, which is partly located in his constituency. As he mentioned, the project has been developed outside the Government's carbon capture usage and storage cluster sequencing process. It is an important project that aims to store over 3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide from the cement and lime factories that support jobs across Derbyshire, Staffordshire and the north-west. It could potentially decarbonise around half of our cement industry.

My hon. Friend mentioned the investment of £28.6 million secured from the National Wealth Fund, alongside £31 million of private sector investment. Just this week I met not only the Peak Cluster team, but Sumitomo, which is one of the largest private sector investors in the proposed pipeline. I look forward to further conversations with the Peak Cluster project to help bring this initiative to fruition. He asked me about contracts for difference. I recognise that there could be a role for contracts for difference. It is an area that I would be prepared to look at more closely in future.

Reformulation is about changing the recipe for cement, so that there is less embodied cement in each tonne produced. There are a number of other cutting-edge

projects at various stages of development, although none has been fully commercialised. I alluded earlier to the historical role of cement. Again, this is not an entirely new endeavour. I mentioned that the Romans were particularly strong in the development of cement. The Pantheon in Rome has a marvellous dome, over 43 metres in diameter, which is constructed from three different formulations. There is limestone in the heavy cement at the bottom, and pumice stone at the top. Ultimately, changing the clinker that we use is at the heart of how we reduce carbon emissions in cement. I will outline a few projects that are ongoing.

First of all, there is Material Evolution's MevoCem green cement project. It is working with global building materials company CRH, and has a pilot production facility in Wrexham that uses alkali fusion technology to produce cement at ambient temperatures, with no heat and using industrial by-products. Reclinker, formerly Cambridge Electric Cement—another project my hon. Friend mentioned—uses electric arc furnace slag and demolition waste to reduce clinker. Both projects began their experimental and pilot work at the Materials Processing Institute. Madam Deputy Speaker, if you refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, you will see that I worked there in the past; I have worked on one of those projects, and supported another.

There is also Ecocem's ACT, or activating cementitious technology. It is a low-clinker cement including limestone filler—this takes us back to that original initiative in ancient Rome—which is chemically activated to produce a strong, durable and low-emissions product. Today, I met one of the company directors when I visited the Amtest laboratories in Canning Town. You may think, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do nothing other than talk to people in the cement industry, so interested am I in this technology.

However, it is not just the technology that we need; we also need improvements in standards. Developing cement is no good if we cannot use it, and we can use it only if we have confidence in its application in the long term. I was pleased to learn that industry is working on this, having developed a Flex 350 standard, which aims to be part 3 of BS 8500. That should hopefully give insurers confidence, and enable builders and designers to use some of these new materials. Innovate UK, as my hon. Friend mentioned, has supported many of these products; in fact, it has been overwhelmed by applications for new cement technologies.

Between the cement technologies and the reduction in cement that I mentioned, we could reduce carbon dioxide emissions per tonne and overall by around 40%. Of course, that leaves a residual amount for which carbon capture and storage, either through a pipeline or some other transport network, would be required.

Let us turn to the economic opportunity of cement. The pioneering work I have referred to is not just about cutting emissions and protecting our environment; we should not be blind to the huge economic opportunity. In 2023, the UK consumed just over 11 million tonnes of cement, but we produced only 7 million tonnes ourselves. The remainder, around 30%, was imported from primarily European countries, including France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. This is quite a new situation, as it was usual for the UK to produce the cement that we needed in our own economy. Cement is very heavy, and it is expensive to transport. I see this as a lost opportunity to capture additional economic value for the UK.

Let me put it this way: if we produced domestically what we currently import, we would need to increase production by half. A 50% growth rate in the UK cement industry is conceivable; it would mean around five additional cement plants in the country. Between them, they would create around 750 jobs and £170 million in gross value added, and would eliminate nearly half a billion pounds in the trade deficit on cement that we had in 2023. Low-carbon cement also opens up new market opportunities. The Norwegian Brevik cement plant is now operating with carbon capture. It has sold out of its low-carbon cement in 2025, and has a growing order book.

I recognise that there is an important role here for not just technology but people. I welcome the support of the Institute of Concrete Technology, and I hope to be able to work with the Institution of Chemical Engineers. I place a very high value on the role that our professional institutions can play in helping people in our industries to transfer their skills across to new green technologies.

I turn to how the Government are supporting the industry. I start by acknowledging that the previous Government failed to recognise these opportunities. They neglected our heavy industry. By failing to invest in clean energy infrastructure, they left us dependent on fossil fuels and uniquely exposed to high energy prices, which led to a bills crisis across society. Heavy industry, including cement, was neglected.

The previous Government accepted that decarbonisation meant de-industrialisation; this Government do not. Through our industrial strategy, we are taking action to reduce industrial electricity prices. We are consulting on uplifting the network charging compensation scheme, a component of the British industry supercharger, from 60% to 90%, and we will publish a response shortly. The Government will also introduce the British industrial competitiveness scheme from 2027, which will reduce electricity bills by up to 25% for over 7,000 eligible British businesses.

The Government are also committed to delivering a UK carbon border adjustment mechanism to tackle the risk of carbon leakage, and we have published draft legislation to enable us to deliver it by January 2027. That mechanism will ensure that highly traded carbon-intensive products from overseas, including products in the cement sector, face a comparable carbon price to UK goods. I understand that it will give industry the confidence that it needs to invest in the UK. I was asked today to ensure that the cement industry faces a level playing field, and the carbon border adjustment mechanism will contribute to that.

I know that my hon. Friend is also interested in emissions reporting. The Government have just consulted on an embodied emissions reporting framework, which will simplify and harmonise existing private sector data and instil more confidence in the data that is being produced. It aims to help producers with measuring, reporting and verifying the embodied emissions of industrial products in a more standardised and comparable way. The objective of that is to remove information failures and support buyers in making informed purchasing decisions.

[Chris McDonald]

The Government are determined to mark a departure from the de-industrialisation of the past. We know how vital heavy industry such as cement is to our economy, to our most important building projects, and for thousands of well-paid jobs across the country. The Prime Minister himself has spoken of our determination to renew Britain through investment in new homes, infrastructure and public services. That renewal will also mean a re-industrialisation of parts of our country that suffered from factory closure and a lack of investment under the previous Government.

A new age of industrial renewal has begun. I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, and I look forward to working with him and the cement industry on how we can secure investment and grow the industry in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

3.56 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 October 2025

[Wera Hobhouse *in the Chair*]

Work of the County Court: Government Response

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): We begin with a Select Committee statement. Andy Slaughter will speak on the publication of the second special report of the Justice Committee, "Work of the County Court: Government Response", HC 1387, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Andy Slaughter to respond in turn. Questions should be brief, and Members may ask only one question each. I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for me to make a statement on the Government's response to the fourth report of the Justice Committee, "Work of the County Court".

Two independent reviews into the criminal justice system, those of David Gauke on sentencing and Sir Brian Leveson on the criminal courts, identified the crises in our prisons and criminal courts, and suggested solutions for the Government to address, including in legislation. The Committee welcomes the reviews, but there is an absence of an equivalent review into civil justice.

Our report called for a root-and-branch review of the county court, including a sustainable plan for reducing the systemic delays and inefficiencies we found. We are disappointed that the Government have rejected that recommendation, although pleased that they have adopted almost all the other recommendations in the report and that their rationale for rejecting an independent review is that our report sets out a detailed blueprint for action. The 17 recommendations that the Government have accepted focus on the most pressing issues facing the court.

The county court is the principal forum for delivering civil justice in England and Wales. It is where millions of our constituents, and businesses large and small, encounter the justice system, but, as our inquiry found, it is a system in crisis. I echo the Minister's thanks to all who contributed to our inquiry and report; the many people and organisations that submitted written evidence and gave oral evidence; and those who contributed to our roundtable and welcomed us on our visits.

I also pay tribute to my predecessor as Chair, Sir Bob Neill KC, the former Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, under whose leadership the inquiry began in October 2023. Following the Dissolution of Parliament and the general election, the current Committee agreed to continue this important piece of work and press the Department on the performance of the county court.

The county court hears a vast array of cases, from the recovery of personal and corporate debt to landlords' recovery of property and personal injury claims. In 2024, it heard more than 1.7 million claims. However, the average time for a small claims case to reach trial now exceeds 50 weeks, and for more complex claims the delay is even longer—more than 79 weeks. The evidence we received was deeply concerning. The length of delays is resulting in cases being settled at an undervalue.

Despite the county court being a single unified court, the length of delay depends on a court user's postcode. We found that such regional differences are severe and result in a postcode lottery. Courts in London and the south-east are some of the worst affected, with examples of cases being delayed by more than two years. The Civil Justice Council told us that when all courts were ranked by their average delay, four fifths of the worst performers were in London and the south-east. In its response, His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service notes that it publishes regional data that can be analysed by court, but we did not find any evidence of HMCTS sharing areas of good practice based on this data or of curiosity as to why any differences across England and Wales are occurring.

Our overarching conclusion was stark: the county court is a dysfunctional operation that fails to adequately deliver civil justice across England and Wales. The issues in London and the south-east typify issues faced across the county court. Behind the weeks of delays is a picture of insufficient judicial capacity, high staff turnover and inadequate training to support court users effectively. We found that the civil judiciary is no longer an attractive profession, and we were told of the poor working conditions and administrative burdens that the role now requires. Both the Lady Chief Justice and the Master of the Rolls agreed that there was an overdependence on fee-paid judiciary to plug the gaps of insufficient judicial recruitment.

We also heard that court staff are overstretched and poorly paid, with high turnover and use of agency staff undermining the efficiency of an already strained system. Court users felt unsupported by staff who could not provide updates on cases, while the centralised phone lines and inboxes were often left unanswered. That is simply not good enough. Those issues are symptoms of a wider delay. We put it to the Department that such symptoms must be addressed urgently if meaningful change was to be achieved. We recommended that any future review must include an in-depth assessment of staff recruitment and retention, including workload, capacity and regional disparities. We also recommended that the review look at the judicial offer. We are pleased the Government have accepted those recommendations.

As part of our inquiry, we visited Northampton county court, the Civil National Business Centre and the central London county court. What was particularly shocking was the poor condition of all those buildings. Our report highlighted the deteriorating physical state of the county court premises, with reports of asbestos, broken heating, leaking roofs and rat and insect infestations. The significant disrepair of the estate impacts staff morale and disrupts court operations, causing yet further delays. There are also problems with accessibility for

[Andy Slaughter]

those with disabilities. I take this opportunity to thank the court staff across England and Wales for their commendable efforts to operate an already crumbling system in such conditions.

In August 2023, £220 million of capital investment was announced, to be spent solely on the court estate across both criminal and civil jurisdictions. We are pleased that the Government have agreed to provide the Committee with a breakdown of how that funding was spent and how much, if any, was directed to the county court estate. We are also pleased to hear of recent capital projects at Taunton, Barnet and Norwich. It remains clear, however, that these projects and previous funding fall well short of what is needed to address years of chronic under-investment across the court estate.

I turn to other areas of funding. Legal aid was originally introduced to ensure access to justice. Through successive reforms, its scope has been reduced, leading to an increase in litigants in person. Self-represented parties usually do not have a legal background and struggle with procedural rules and court practice. In 2019, the Ministry of Justice recognised that litigants in person continued to require greater support in navigating court procedure, but little has changed. The Committee has embarked on a major review of access to justice, but in the absence of more funding for representation, more must be done to help litigants in person navigate the system.

In 2016, HMCTS launched a £1 billion project called the reform programme. It aimed to modernise the court and tribunal systems and transform them through digitisation. However, the project was continually modified and reduced by HMCTS and its timetable extended four times. It finally concluded in March this year. The reform programme was meant to bring end-to-end digitisation to the county court. By March 2025, it had achieved that in only 23% of cases. In practice, the reform programme delivered only two services solely for use in the county court: the damages claims portal and the online civil money claims service, both of which have faced heavy criticism. We heard of the dual running between new and old systems, a failure to take on feedback from practitioners and the continued and successive reliance on paper, adding unnecessary costs to the taxpayer and leaving an analogue system in a digital age.

We concluded that the reform programme was ultimately over-ambitious and under-delivered. The majority of the civil justice projects were de-scoped, culminating in a fragmented digital system. We recommended that HMCTS review all de-scoped work and prioritise its digitisation to bring a true end-to-end digital service to the county court. We are pleased that, in their response, the Government confirmed that such a review has taken place. A digital county court would offer the opportunity to integrate artificial intelligence early on. We welcome the Government's AI action plan for justice and commitment to AI in encouraging mediation, which aligns with our own conclusions and recommendations.

Our report concludes that the county court is the Cinderella of the justice system, beset by delays, a crumbling estate and a failed attempt at digital reform. The Government response fails to reassure us that the MOJ has a concrete plan to improve civil justice comparable to Sir Brian Leveson's and David Gauke's reviews into the prisons and the criminal courts. In the absence of an equivalent independent review, we hope our report can provide a blueprint to reduce the systemic delays and inefficiencies that plague the system. The county court is where justice is most often sought by our constituents. It must not be allowed to fail them.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind Members that we have to finish the statement at 1.50 pm. Anyone who wishes to speak, please bob—including the Minister, if she wishes to ask a question. Please keep comments short, and Members can only ask one question.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The report to which the Government are responding outlines that the county court is in complete crisis. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) said, the county court is where the majority of our constituents will encounter the justice system, and it is the Cinderella service of the justice system. Does he agree that it is under pressure and experiencing significant operational problems, that the state of disrepair of the buildings is absolutely emblematic of a system that is completely in crisis, and that more must be done to repair and reinstate these buildings? It is totally unfair that we should ask court staff, be that the judiciary or the staff who back up the judges, to work in those circumstances. It is appalling.

Andy Slaughter: As I think I set out in the statement, there are problems all along the line. There are problems with representation. There are problems with access. There are problems with systems remaining on paper when they should have been put online long ago. It might therefore be thought that the physical state of the buildings is a lower priority. In reality, it is not, because it affects recruitment and the efficiency of the court, and it means that, over a period of time, courts become toxic places to work. That is why I went out of my way to praise the court staff, because they are doing an excellent job in very difficult circumstances. None of us wants to work in a sick building.

I hope that the Government will address this, and that we will find out how much capital money is going to the county court. The Minister may be able to tell us that to today. Certainly, the problem has to be tackled. That is true in the magistrates and Crown courts as well, but particularly in the county courts.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I previously worked in the county court system, and the problem that my hon. Friend has highlighted is a long-standing one. The Government have accepted that the county court is where most of our constituents access the justice system. Does he agree that the county court cannot carry on as it is at the moment and that we need a fundamental reform of the system, which must involve a systematic and comprehensive review of its operations, because it is crucial that our constituents have access to swift and fair justice?

Andy Slaughter: A fundamental review was attempted under the last Government, which involved closing many county courts around the country. We were told that the money released from the sale of those courts would go either into the maintenance of the rest of the estate or, more probably, into the reform programme, and so lead to digitalisation of the system. We have seen all the court closures but not the improvement in service that was supposed to result, so unfortunately here we are.

I used the Master of the Rolls figure of 23% for the amount of digitalisation that has occurred. It is key to a 21st-century system of civil justice, and that is why I am glad that the Government have looked at the future for digitalisation. I hope they will tell us that there is a clear and realistic path to achieving that, because it is where we need to go. It is ridiculous to be running a paper-based system in the 21st century. It is inefficient, it is costly and it is not providing justice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman and his Select Committee for all they have done. I understand that the recommendations in the report are specific to England and Wales, but the issues, difficulties, problems and shortcomings the hon. Gentleman has referred to are the same in Northern Ireland. Ever mindful that this is a devolved matter, is it the intention of the Chair and the Select Committee, and perhaps the Minister as well, to share the report's recommendations? They were not all accepted, but the ones that were accepted are good. I am a great believer, as is everyone in this Great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that we are always better together, so can we share the recommendations and ensure that we can make the advances in Northern Ireland the same as in England and Wales?

Andy Slaughter: First, I am delighted to see the hon. Gentleman in his place. I thank him for his interest in the subject and for his question, to which my response is yes. I hope our work is useful—the Government have said it is—within the jurisdiction of England and Wales, but, equally, many of the same points apply to Northern Ireland and, indeed, to Scotland. I do not know whether the Minister is going to intervene on the two points we have heard from my colleagues or on the point from the hon. Gentleman, but I am sure she has heard his point and will make sure that the work is shared. In any event, I undertake to ask my secretariat to ensure it is communicated.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I understand that am allowed to ask a question, so I will frame this as one. As the Minister with responsibility for the courts, I am tremendously grateful to the work of the Justice Committee. The report on the county court and the lens that the Committee has placed on our civil jurisdiction is incredibly welcome because, as the Committee says, the focus that the Department places on criminal justice cannot be allowed to divert from the important reform programme that we need in the county court, for all the reasons the Committee has stated.

With the helpful lens that the report places on the county court and the recommendations that the Government have taken on board in mind, and although I would be first to acknowledge that we have a long journey to travel, does my hon. Friend agree that the latest civil justice statistics—on delays in small claims coming down; on delays in fast, intermediate and multi-track coming down by almost seven weeks; on the greater use of mediation in small claims; and on a new electronic document-processing mechanism, moving away from the frustrating paper-based process—are all steps in the right direction that take on board the thrust of his report? Does he agree that that represents some progress towards where we need to get to?

Andy Slaughter: I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Minister for the fact that the Government have accepted the vast majority of the recommendations, as I have already put on the record. Without making this too cosy, it gives me confidence that my hon. and learned Friend, as the Courts Minister, is seized of this issue and understands its seriousness. That came across in the evidence she gave to the Committee, and she has the background and skills to ensure that change happens. That gives us a lot of confidence.

On my hon. and learned Friend's specific point, yes, I concede that there are some early indicators of improvements. We would like to see that continue over the years to come. We are very conscious of and aware that—this is obviously no fault of this Minister or this Government—there has been a very long process of decline, which means the climb out will be quite slow. We want steady progress along the way. As the Minister says, the report identifies many problems, but the digitalisation one is crucial. I hope we can soon see the new programme for that, because that is how the courts will become efficient, usable and customer friendly. I know it was tried in good faith under the reform programme, but we have to be honest and say that that has largely failed. The ball is now in the Minister's court to try to succeed.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Thank you. That ends the statement.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS
GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

NHS Workforce Levels: Impact on Cancer Patients

1.50 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of NHS workforce levels on cancer patients.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Hobhouse. I declare an interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital. Also, a family member has shares in a medical company.

Being a cancer survivor, cancer diagnosis, treatment and outcomes are important to me. I thank the 136 people who responded to my survey ahead of this debate, and the Chamber engagement team for helping to highlight the real experiences of cancer patients across the country. I also thank all the organisations that have helped me and my office to prepare for the debate.

Shortfalls in the NHS workforce are no secret. Consultants, nurses, radiologists and oncologists are all working flat out to deliver care but are being held back by staff shortages, limited equipment, outdated buildings and a lack of training. This is a legacy of the last Conservative Government. The new Labour Government must act swiftly to support our NHS workforce and deliver world-class cancer care.

I welcome the commitment to a new national cancer plan that was confirmed on 4 February 2025—World Cancer Day—after I called for a national cancer plan on 31 October last year. That plan must prioritise early diagnosis and improved treatment. Perhaps it could even be launched on World Cancer Day 2026, which is 4 February.

According to Lilly UK, only one third of NHS staff believe there are enough people for them to perform their roles effectively. The Royal College of Radiologists reports a 29% shortfall in radiologists, or 1,670 consultants, which is set to rise to 39%, or 3,112 consultants, in five years. An extra 346 radiologists are now needed to clear the diagnostic backlog—equivalent to 9% of the current workforce. The Royal College of Pathologists found that 60% of consultants said their departments lack adequate resources, including staff.

Clinical oncology faces a 15% shortfall, forecast to reach 19% by 2029, with smaller cancer centres suffering vacancy rates six times higher than larger ones. In genomics, only 60% of tests are delivered on time, mainly due to a shortage of pathologists. In 2022, NHS England reported a 12% mammographer vacancy rate, rising to 15% in the midlands and south-east, and 36% of the workforce are due to retire within the next 10 to 15 years. Mike Richards' 2020 review found that histopathology activity had increased by 30% between 2018 and 2019, while consultant numbers rose by just 8%. The gap continues to widen.

The UK also has among the lowest numbers of MRI, CT and PET scanners per million of the population among comparable nations, with just 10 CT scanners, 8.6 MRI units and 0.5 PET scanners per million. Even when equipment exists, staff shortages mean it is often not used. One survey respondent arrived for a CT scan to find no staff available to operate the machine.

In August 2025, only 69% of patients began treatment within 62 days of urgent referral—far below the 85% target, which has not been met since December 2015. That is the fault not of this Government but of the last one, but this Government need to make some improvements.

Early diagnosis is key to survival, yet 73% of hospitals are failing to meet the 62-day target. Between January and July 2025, only 66.7% of breast cancer patients began treatment within 62 days of referral. According to data from Breast Cancer Now, if the 85% target had been met each month, 2,931 more people would have started treatment on time. Even under Labour we are continuing to struggle. The Government are not making enough of a difference yet. But I must say again that the problems in the NHS are down to 14 years of Conservative Governments.

Best practice recommends a triple assessment, a clinical exam, imaging and biopsy in a single appointment, yet between 2020 and 2022 only 68% of people received that, due to staff shortages. The failure to streamline diagnosis creates delays and backlogs. Nearly everyone who is diagnosed with bowel cancer early survives for five years, but only one in 10 survive if they are diagnosed late. Still, just 38% of patients in England are diagnosed at stages 1 or 2. One respondent shared how her daughter, who was diagnosed with stage 4 bowel cancer, waited months to start treatment due to delays caused by workforce issues.

In July 2025, only 50% of lower gastrointestinal cancer patients were treated within 62 days of referral, although 93% began treatment within 31 days of a decision to treat. That shows that the delays occur early in the diagnostic process. At the same time, 91,400 people were waiting for a colonoscopy or a sigmoidoscopy. Around 28% waited for more than six weeks and 13% for more than 13 weeks. The Government must increase endoscopy and pathology capacity, and that requires the improvement of staffing levels.

Less survivable cancers—lung, liver, brain, oesophageal, pancreatic and stomach—are most affected by workforce shortages. Only 35% of pancreatic cancer patients receive treatment within 62 days. Less survivable cancers account for 20% of cases but cause 42% of cancer deaths, with a five-year survival rate of just 16%, compared with 55% in more survivable cancers. A new national cancer plan must include a strategy specifically for less-survivable cancers.

Between 2015 and 2023, one in four leukaemia patients faced avoidable diagnostic delays. A Leukaemia UK survey found that insufficient phlebotomy capacity was the top reason for delays in basic full-blood-count tests—a simple, inexpensive diagnostic tool. Acute myeloid leukaemia patients who faced avoidable delays were 22% more likely to die within a year of diagnosis. The Government should audit and invest in phlebotomy services, as called for by Leukaemia UK and the Royal College of General Practitioners. The Government also need to establish a national register of available phlebotomy sites.

Cancer remains a leading cause of death from disease among teenagers and young adults, but it is too often missed. Around 46.3% of 16 to 24-year-olds saw a GP three or more times before diagnosis, according to the Teenage Cancer Trust. That diagnosis delay is exacerbated by a nationwide decline in GPs, meaning longer waits and reduced access to diagnostic services. The national

cancer plan and workforce plan must ensure that all frontline healthcare professionals—from GPs to A&E staff and opticians—are trained to recognise cancer symptoms in young people. Services in deprived areas also need support. Those communities face heavier workloads, greater pressure and less funding. The Government must provide targeted support for those areas.

Forty-three per cent of brain tumour patients saw a healthcare professional three or more times before diagnosis, and 55% of parents said their child's tumour was misdiagnosed. In 2020, 45% of brain tumours were diagnosed in emergency settings—double the 22.5% for all cancers.

According to the Brain Tumour Charity, shortages of neuroradiologists and limited imaging access, alongside GP training gaps, have caused these delays. GPs should be allowed to request neuroimaging directly for concerning symptoms. For prostate cancer, in July 2025, only 55% of men began treatment within 62 days—a 5% drop since January. Even this year, we are still heading in the wrong direction. Men are waiting weeks or months for MRI and biopsy results due to staff shortages. England also has one of the lowest numbers of radiologists per head of population in Europe, a situation that must be rectified.

Clinical nurse specialists are essential to patient support, yet in 2024, 31% of blood cancer patients did not know who their clinical nurse specialist was, and 22% did not know how to contact them. That information is from Blood Cancer UK. Among secondary breast cancer patients in 2019, 25% had not seen a CNS since diagnosis, and only 65% said their CNS had sufficient time for them. For leukaemia, just 9% were offered a holistic needs assessment, which CNSs help to deliver. The national cancer plan must ensure that every patient has access to a CNS, but instability is worsening.

The Royal College of Radiologists' 2024 census found that colorectal oncology has the highest locum reliance, at 13%. One in five colorectal consultants will retire within the next five years. How are we going to replace those healthcare professionals? The British Association of Urological Surgeons reports that 12% of consultant roles are unfilled, with a growing reliance on costly locums.

In haematology, the east midlands has twice as many vacancies as filled clinical scientist roles, with 32% of haematology clinicians planning to reduce their working hours. Again, the Royal College of Radiologists reports that the median age of radiologists leaving fell from 56 in 2021 to 49 in 2024, and for clinical oncologists from 59 to 54 in one year. Around 20% of clinical oncology consultants will retire in the next five years.

The NHS is losing staff faster than it can replace them. What will the Government do to replace those doctors before they retire? People with less survivable cancers often have rapid disease progression and experience severe symptoms. Around 70% of pancreatic cancer patients receive no active treatment; many are too unwell or diagnosed too late.

Specialist symptom management and supportive care must be expanded to reduce emergency admissions and improve quality of life, yet the NHS cannot currently deliver this. Less survivable cancers must have their own section in the national cancer plan. Advanced treatments such as CAR T-cell therapy for leukaemia are not available everywhere due to a lack of trained staff and infrastructure, resulting in a postcode lottery for lifesaving treatment. The Government must invest in training, especially in primary care, and increase specialist training places in radiology and oncology, as called for by the Royal College of Radiologists. The Government must also end recruitment freezes. On research, only 12% of brain tumour patients have taken part in a clinical trial, and 42% say they were never informed about opportunities to be part of a trial. Investment is needed in research, nurses, radiographers and infrastructure, as well as in embedding research into routine care and protecting staff time to deliver trials.

The Royal College of Radiologists is clear that delays caused by staffing gaps are endangering patients. Without investment, waiting times will lengthen, treatment delays will worsen and costs will rise. I hope it is clear to all of us that workforce shortfalls are a massive barrier to early diagnosis and effective, timely treatment across all cancers. The Government must increase recruitment, training and retention, support primary care referrals, invest in diagnostic infrastructure and education, guarantee access to clinical nurse specialists and prioritise support for patients with less-survivable cancers. Those steps must underpin the national cancer plan and the 10-year workforce plan. Lives depend upon it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind all Members that they should bob if they wish to speak. The debate will run until 3.10 pm, and I intend to call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson at 2.38 pm.

2.6 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): You will not be surprised to hear, Mrs Hobhouse, that it is a pleasure to serve under you. I thank the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest: my lovely wife has worked as part of the NHS workforce in Scotland for around 30 years, and on Monday she is due to start a one-year secondment to the Marie Curie hospice in Edinburgh, so I take this opportunity to wish her well. As I have more time to speak debate than expected, let me also take this opportunity to thank all the people in Edinburgh South West who raise money for that hospice, including BobCat Alpacas, which recently raised around £10,000 at its open day.

This morning I met with MacMillan Cancer support, as I am sure other Members did too. I want to recognise its efforts across the UK in supporting people facing a diagnosis, as well as recognising groups in my constituency such as The House of Hope, which supports people with a breast cancer diagnosis. We have to recognise the pressure that NHS staff are under—not just my lovely wife, but staff right across the NHS in the UK, although I will start by talking about England.

The pressure on the staff who are supporting cancer patients in the NHS is why I absolutely welcome the forthcoming workforce plan and the national cancer strategy. I hope they can make a real difference to staff and cancer patients in England. I am proud that it is a Labour Government that are showing real ambition—the word ambition is important here—but I support Cancer Research UK's ask for a dedicated cancer workforce

[Dr Scott Arthur]

planning strategy. I also agree with Leukaemia UK that the 10-year workforce plan must enable and support the delivery of the national cancer plan. I am sure that is not a controversial view—it makes absolute sense.

I have been lucky to table a private Member's Bill on rare cancers, and through that I have met many cancer charities. I have to say that all of them respect the work of the hon. Member for Wokingham—I am trying to find one that does not, but they all do. I recently met with Blood Cancer UK to talk about its work, and it informed me about this debate. I was asked to raise the situation in haematology in England, which is particularly concerning.

Blood cancer accounts for a third of cancer deaths in the UK, but Blood Cancer UK says that treatment is continuously impacted by staffing shortages. It told me about how one patient shared that they had had seven different consultants in the past five years, and they were terrified about not knowing who to contact if their symptoms got worse—not a great situation. Figures from Blood Cancer UK show that in south-east England the vacancies for advanced haematologist nurse practitioner roles are 111% greater than the numbers in post, so there are more vacancies than people in post. That impacts both patients and the staff in post, for whom it must be incredibly stressful.

I hope that in the upcoming workforce plan the Government recognise the central role that haematologists play in cancer care. We have to recognise that having a haematology workforce that is staffed to the correct level has benefits well beyond cancer care. I hope the Government will put measures in place to address the shortfalls. As the hon. Member for Wokingham said, steps to drive up the recruitment and retention of clinical nurses will be crucial.

Let me turn to Scotland, where of course health is devolved. Back in August, I welcomed the news that the risk of dying from cancer in Scotland had reached a record low, which is a fantastic landmark. However, the data only covered the period up to 2022. In 2025, cancer waiting times in Scotland have never been worse. The Royal College of Radiologists has indicated that, without addressing staffing, the situation will only get even worse. Right now, that seems unthinkable. Data shows that there is a 25% shortage of radiologists—again, a discipline that has benefits well beyond cancer care—and a 19% shortage of oncologists. One in five consultant haematologists are near retirement, and there is low recruitment into the sector, so patient groups are very concerned about what that means for the future.

The Scottish Government say that they are investing in cancer treatment, yet patients have been failed and left without effective care—that is the reality when we look beyond the press releases. Hon. Members do not have to take my word for it: Dr Iain Kennedy, who chairs the Scottish council of the British Medical Association, said that Scotland is now divided between people who can afford to go private and those forced to "languish" on NHS waiting lists. We often think about people going private for cosmetic work, or perhaps even hip surgery, but if people in Scotland, or anywhere, are going private for cancer care, that is a real inequality.

Cancer mortality rates for the poorest in Scotland are 78% higher than those for the richest. That shames me as a Scot, and I want change. The Scottish Government are failing to address the very low staffing levels that feed these issues. There is no workforce plan. The UK Government are currently looking at one, but there is none in Scotland. They actually had one, which expired in March this year. I checked it this morning, and it did not even mention cancer care. Perhaps that is why we have the worst cancer waiting times on record.

While the UK Government are taking action through the workforce plan, which I look forward to hearing more about from the Minister, the situation in Scotland looks like it can only get worse. We will have an election for the Holyrood Parliament next year. I hope that cancer care is a key part of the discussion, because it is in real crisis in Scotland. The country needs change. Our NHS needs change.

2.13 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) on securing this important debate. It is unusual to be called so quickly; we are often oversubscribed, so it is a pleasure to be able to say something a little more substantive than what I had initially prepared.

I want to talk about the impact on the workforce in my area, Harrogate and Knaresborough, and across the Yorkshire and Humber region. We need a strong and sustainable NHS workforce, which is critical to improving cancer outcomes. There is rising demand: the number of people in Yorkshire receiving urgent checks for cancer has doubled in the past 10 years and is projected to keep rising. Cancer services in our region are consistently failing to meet national targets.

Action is desperately needed to make the NHS a more attractive and sustainable career choice. That includes investing in training, improving retention and prioritising staff wellbeing. One of the biggest frustrations I hear from local staff at our hospital is the inability to even find a place to park at work and the impact that that has on the surrounding area.

I welcome the forthcoming workforce plan. I know that a number of organisations, including Yorkshire Cancer Research, will be keen to submit evidence to ensure that the needs of cancer patients in our region are fully addressed. We need to make sure that staffing levels are delivered and that the support for growing demand is not left behind.

There are a number of gaps in the workforce across my patch. Yorkshire has the lowest rate of clinical and medical oncology consultants of any region in the country, at 5.1 per 100,000 people aged 50 and above, compared with 6.6 nationally and 11.3 in London. The regional shortfall in clinical oncology consultants is 18%, higher than the national average of 15%.

As has been mentioned, we are also experiencing shortfalls and shortages in services and support staff, such as clinical radiologists. There is considerable concern, with 79% of clinical directors across Yorkshire and the Humber—the highest proportion in England—saying there are insufficient radiologists to deliver safe and effective care. The current shortfall is 33%, and the figure is projected to rise to 41% by 2029, placing Yorkshire among the worst-affected regions.

We are also experiencing the complexity of an ageing workforce. Yorkshire and the Humber has the joint highest proportion of clinical radiologist consultants expected to retire over the next five years—22%, compared with 20% in the rest of England—and a lower than average forecast of growth in that role.

I hear from local people that some of the barriers they face to accessing cancer pathways are at the point of general practice. Difficult conversations often occur at the GP. Timely access is crucial, yet we have significant variation in GP availability across the country and even across Yorkshire. For example, in Kingston upon Hull East, each GP services 3,664 patients, which is more than double the number in Sheffield South East. With one in two cancers diagnosed late, improving access to GPs is vital for early detection and therefore better outcomes. I have received a number of emails from people completing their training in the NHS as GPs and doctors on their concerns about their ability to find work. I hope the Minister—and, going forward, the workforce plan—can address that.

Research-active hospitals deliver better survival outcomes, even for patients who are not directly involved in trials. For example, bowel cancer patients treated in NHS hospital trusts with high levels of research participation had improved survival outcomes in the first year after diagnosis. What worries me is that across Yorkshire we saw a 25% decline in clinical academic posts between 2012 and 2022, which was four times higher than the national decline.

When we talk about the NHS workforce and its impact on cancer, it is important to acknowledge that the charity sector often supplements the work our NHS does. In my constituency, we have Harrogate Hospital and Community Charity, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. I was pleased to run the Paris and London marathons to raise money for it earlier this year. It is a fantastic organisation that does amazing work on the ground, going above and beyond what the NHS can provide for people with a range of health issues. Last year, I was able to attend a Macmillan coffee morning at the Sir Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre, and today I attended the Macmillan coffee morning here in Parliament.

Broadly speaking, the feedback I hear from anyone accessing cancer facilities and services in my patch is that our local provision is fantastic. One constituent, John Fox, who has recently gone through those services, described an amazing team that was supportive, caring and helpful. It is important, while we talk about the issues that we are facing, to highlight some of the positives and the good experiences that people have.

In summary, what I would like to see going forward, and what I hope the Minister might be able to comment on, is how we will better invest in training, recruitment and retention of staff in the NHS and how we will address regional inequalities and support research capacity.

2.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for raising this matter, which affects constituents in every part of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I always admire the hon. Gentleman because of the personal experiences with cancer that he tells us about. I have heard about them from him personally, but also in this Chamber. His heart is for those with cancer, and those who suffer and need to find a cure. I congratulate him on all he does.

As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) mentioned, the Macmillan coffee morning was this morning. Macmillan put forward some recommendations this morning, and I wonder whether the Minister has had an opportunity to have contact with the group. Macmillan is always helpful—it is not here to catch anybody out—and it was putting forward positive ideas on how to do things better. Perhaps the Minister can indicate whether that opportunity has come forward.

In this life, there are not many things that I say I hate—when I use that word, I mean it—but I do hate cancer. I hate the devastating effect it has on people and families. I hate that children suffer and that their parents can only stand by and watch, as happens on many occasions. I hate that children are left motherless or fatherless and that nothing can be done. I hate having to deal with that dreadful disease. But most of all I hate that we cannot cure it—at least, not yet.

One of my requests to the Minister, who is always incredibly helpful, is on research and development. Statistically, one in two people we meet—half the people in this room—will have cancer; 50% will survive, and 50% will not. The research and development is so important for getting to the day when we find a cure. I know the Minister is committed to that, and I hope she can give us some idea what is being done on that.

Each of us in this place will have been touched by cancer. I think of my own dad. My dad has been dead now for 10 years, but he was a cancer survivor on three occasions. He put that down—as I would as well—to the skill of the surgeon, the care of the nurses and the prayers of God's people, which helped him get out the other side.

We can argue about microwaves, about preservatives in food and about genetic or carcinogenic factors, but this debate is about ensuring that NHS workforce levels enable every sufferer to have the best chance possible to fight cancer. As the hon. Member for Wokingham and others who have spoken have said, we are not there just yet. There are insufficient NHS workforce levels in Northern Ireland—I know that that is not the Minister's responsibility, but I want to give a flavour. Things are not that different there; what happens in Northern Ireland happens in England, Wales and Scotland. If cancer patients have delayed diagnoses and treatments, that can lead to potentially life-threatening consequences and increased anxiety. First, people are anxious about their health, and then they are anxious about how to pay the bills: "Do I get benefits? Can I get some help to get me through? Can I get my mortgage extended?" People have to face up to really life-altering circumstances, and unmet support needs as well.

Then we have the shortages in key roles, such as specialist nurses, radiologists and surgeons. Unfortunately, that means that treatment targets are frequently missed and patients do not receive the full support they require during and after treatment. The situation is worsened by growing waiting lists, increased workloads for existing staff and a lack of resources for both acute and community-based care.

[Jim Shannon]

The hon. Member for Wokingham spoke about pancreatic cancer. Many cancers are devastating, but pancreatic cancer is one of the worst. In the last 10 days, a young lady from Greyabbey, a village close to where I live, died of pancreatic cancer. She was 31 years of age, with a five-year-old son and a partner. I remember others. When pancreatic cancer is diagnosed, it is too late, because it has already taken effect and the body is already succumbing to that terrible cancer. That is why I go back to research and development. Will we find the cure for pancreatic cancer someday? Will we be able to diagnose it at an earlier stage so that we can give the treatment and help that are needed?

Dr Arthur: I know that this subject is important to the hon. Gentleman. Pancreatic Cancer UK is a fantastic charity. Unfortunately, he could not make this year's Labour party conference in Liverpool, although he is always welcome to attend—Labour MPs go free, so he is welcome to join up. However, Pancreatic Cancer UK was there with scientists who are looking at a new diagnostic tool that, believe it or not, is based on a breath test. They can analyse a small particle in our breath to give an indication of whether there could be something that needs further investigation. That is a great example of how investment can help to save lives while bringing jobs to the UK. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will congratulate Pancreatic Cancer UK on all its work in this field, and on that little piece of progress.

Jim Shannon: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's encouraging intervention. That is what it is all about. Of course, I attend my own party's conference—I am not sure I would attend anyone else's. Party conferences are a great opportunity to meet groups that are working hard, and they come to our conference too. That breath test is encouraging, and perhaps it will be part of the next stage of curing cancer, and particularly pancreatic cancer.

The target of starting treatment within 62 days of an urgent GP referral is not being met, with only 37% of patients receiving treatment within the critical window—those figures are from 2023. As of September 2023, some 545,000 people in Northern Ireland, which has a population of 1.95 million, were waiting for elective care. My goodness, is that not a scary figure? That issue is not the Minister's responsibility, but it worries me when I consider it. It is the highest number on record. Waiting times for in-patient admissions and out-patient appointments, including for cancer patients, have increased dramatically since 2020.

There are shortages across multiple disciplines, including paediatricians, administrative support, pathologists, radiologists, chemotherapy nurses and palliative care staff. For example, while the number of clinical radiologists has increased, which is good news, the Royal College of Radiologists estimates that the workforce is still 50% smaller than is needed to meet demand. Yes, there have been advances, but we are not there quite yet. Current staff face extreme workload pressures, leading to a fear of missing early diagnoses, and also burnout for those whose commitment to help their patients is above and beyond what their wage packet might indicate.

We are not coping well. A constituent came to my office to ask why her first smear test results took 16 weeks to come back, and why she had to ring her GP on three occasions to get them. On her behalf, I had to email the doctor's surgery and the health trust so that the biopsies were taken. It is easy to understand why her anxiety levels were through the roof. She now has to wait a further six to eight weeks to see whether she needs treatment. My goodness, it is little wonder that people are so worried, anxious and stressed.

The fact is that waiting times affect the mental health of even the young and the fit. If we are to give people the tools they need to win their health battle, as we need to, it begins with efficient diagnosis and treatment. We are not getting it right, and that is a fact. We can do better. Our constituents believe they are losing the battle before it truly begins, so what do we need to do? We need to bring our workforce up to par by ensuring that money in the NHS is spent appropriately and is not, to use an Ulster Scots word, frittered away.

I make a plea to the Minister for more research. I really believe that what we spend on research will be for the future and finding all the cures. If we go back a few years, only one in three people survived cancer; now it is one in two. That is an advance, and perhaps the day is coming when everyone can be in that place. I think of Queen's University Belfast as one example. Its partnerships with medical companies to find cures are incredible, and those that it has found through its research are some of the best in the United Kingdom, if not the world.

To conclude, our NHS staff are second to none, but at times they seem to be working with one hand tied behind their backs, and that must cease. We must ensure we have sufficient funding to free them up to do the job and to fight cancer throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—always better together.

2.30 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for securing this important debate highlighting the issue of staff shortages and the impact on cancer patients and the outcomes that they achieve.

Cancer should be a top priority for any Government, and the UK—with its historically thriving life sciences sector—could and should be a global leader in cancer research and outcomes. Sadly, at the moment, that is not necessarily the case. The last Conservative Government broke their promise on a 10-year cancer plan that would have made a real difference to patients. We must put an end to the tragedy of people losing their lives because cancer treatment takes too long to start. No one should be unable to receive treatment because there is not enough equipment or sufficient staff to properly support them. It is a scandal that so many people live in treatment deserts and are forced to take incredibly long journeys for treatment, often after weeks of waiting for that treatment to begin.

In that context, the introduction of a national cancer strategy is incredibly welcome. It should help to boost cancer survival rates. I am very proud that my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham—who, as we have heard, is a widely respected cancer campaigner—has helped to secure a commitment from the Government to introduce such a plan. It is really important that when this plan comes, it is meaningful. The Government should take bold action: ensuring that every patient

starts treatment for cancer within 62 days of their urgent referral, recruiting the cancer specialists we need, and replacing ancient machines and delivering new ones.

The situation on the ground at the moment is not very good. My constituents in North Shropshire have had to deal with some of the worst backlogs and performance in England for years. One told me that they waited almost a year before their treatment began—that is simply not okay. Look at the target of treatment starting within 62 days of urgent referral: Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust only achieved 68.8% for the month of August this year, compared with a target of 85%. That, however, is a significant improvement on its previous situation, with performance against that target improving by more than 15.4% over the past year. That progress is welcome, obviously. I am optimistic that it will be sustained and I commend and thank the tireless work of staff across the trust in driving those improvements.

Staffing levels, especially for radiologists doing diagnostic scans, have been a large part of the problem in Shrewsbury and Telford. Outsourcing the interpretation of those scans has led to a dramatic improvement in the speed at which the results come back and demonstrates the importance of having enough skilled staff and the speedy diagnostics that can help with early treatment commencing. That issue is particularly severe in rural areas. I hope that the workforce plan, which will go with the cancer strategy, will address that. BMJ Group research found that every four-week delay to starting cancer treatment is associated with a 10% decrease in cancer survival. Constituents such as mine, who have had horrendous waits for treatment, are bearing the lethal brunt of delays.

NHS workforce statistics show that between June 2020 and June 2025, the number of full-time-equivalent cancer specialists has risen: by 32% for clinical oncologists, 48% for medical oncologists and 27% for the clinical radiology workforce. Clearly, those statistics are welcome. However, analysis from the Royal College of Radiologists argues that the increase in workforce capacity has not kept pace with the ever-growing demand for cancer services, which is inevitable in an ageing population with poor health.

In 2024, the Royal College of Radiologists estimated that the clinical oncology workforce was about 15% smaller than required to meet demand, and projected that that shortfall would rise to 19% by 2029. It also reported that, among the 50 cancer centres surveyed in England in 2024, 76% of heads expressed concerns about patient safety due to workforce shortages.

We also cannot ignore the reality of working conditions in our NHS and their impacts on staff retention. The previous Conservative Government left our NHS under unbearable strain, with professionals working under intense pressure in crumbling hospitals and often without the resources they needed, rather than in safe clinical settings. That does not help the retention of a highly skilled and experienced workforce.

There are also woeful shortages of specialist training places, meaning that we do not have the cancer specialists we need. At the same time, there is rising doctor unemployment despite growing need for their services. It is a damning indictment of the Conservatives' mismanagement and failure to plan the workforce. A workforce plan for the NHS—including a workforce plan to support the cancer strategy—is imperative, and must address the issues of retention and career progression for doctors, nurses and other skilled staff across all specialisms.

While routine NHS workforce statistics are not available for nurses working in cancer specialities, a nursing fill-rate dataset obtained by FactCheck for "Channel 4 News" showed that a third of acute trusts in England were missing at least 10% of their planned nurses across haematology and oncology wards, based on monthly average data between January 2023 and November 2024. That is why the Liberal Democrats are pressing for more cancer nurses—so that every patient has a dedicated specialist nurse supporting them throughout their treatment—and for expanded community nursing.

We have also been campaigning for the UK to lead the world in cancer research through new funding and the waiving of burdensome fees and bureaucracy for international researchers. We would set up a dedicated fellowship scheme for US cancer scientists, who have seen their funding gutted by President Trump.

Without, for example, sufficient radiographers, specialist nurses and diagnostic equipment, even the most promising screening initiatives introduced here risk being delayed or underutilised. The Government need to commit to the funding of early screening programmes, and to training and retaining the workforce required to deliver them. A comprehensive, well-supported roll-out would allow thousands of people at risk to be diagnosed at a much earlier stage, when treatment is far more effective and survival rates are significantly higher.

The national cancer plan provides a huge opportunity for the Government to turn cancer care around in this country and deliver world-class care for every community. I look forward to seeing them deliver that plan, and ensure that it is deliverable through an associated workforce plan, at the soonest opportunity.

2.37 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) on securing this debate.

Across the United Kingdom, an estimated 3.5 million people are living with cancer. We all know a friend, family member or co-worker who has battled the disease, and, sadly, we also all know of somebody whose life was cut short by it. Our country faces an ageing population, which will mean more cancer cases in the years to come; the longer we live, the greater the risk.

Troublingly, cancer rates are also rising among those in their 20s, 30s and 40s, so getting cancer care right today will mean the difference between lives saved and lives lost tomorrow. We know that the NHS cannot deliver timely, effective cancer care without the workforce trained to provide it. We owe it to patients fighting cancer today—and the 50% of us who will face cancer tomorrow—to fix the situation.

NHS staff are carrying out more cancer checks than ever before: more than 3 million a year in 2024, compared with less than half that a decade ago. In the last five years, we have also benefited from an increase in the number of clinical and medical oncologists in the NHS as well

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

as of clinical radiology staff. Sadly, however, demand for services is fast outpacing the supply of staff, putting teams under immense pressure. Last year, more than 74,000 people in England were not treated on time for cancer, increasing their risk from the disease.

Formal training for medical staff begins at university. The previous Government increased the number of places at medical school, and increased the number of medical schools by building five new ones. This Government have said that they will increase the number of medical school places. Could the Minister confirm the places that they will fund for next September, bearing in mind that the application date has now passed?

The next step, postgraduate training, faces challenges too. The previous Government, as I said, increased medical school places. They also removed the resident labour market test because of the shortage of doctors. The Secretary of State appeared to understand back in Easter the effect that that was going to start to have, as the newly trained doctors came through their postgraduate training.

Over the last two years, the number of international medical graduates applying for training posts has also increased dramatically. The application ratio for postgraduate training posts has gone up substantially and there is a risk that some junior doctors will not get a job. There is also a risk that international medical graduates who get more of the places will return to their country of origin after they have completed training, so we will have unemployed British trainees and doctors who return after training, leaving us with a shortage of consultants in a few years' time. That issue has been highlighted by the British Medical Association, of which I am a member. Sadly, it has announced that doctors will go on strike from 14 to 19 November this year, partly as a result of pay and partly as a result of job shortages.

The Secretary of State was vociferous in his criticisms of the previous Government when doctors went on strike. What will he and the Minister do to get the doctors back to work? Cancer treatment requires surgery, oncology, haematology, radiology, pathology and geneticists—every specialty across the NHS, including, sadly, paediatrics and sometimes even neonatologists.

There are also challenges across the nursing sector. We saw nurses this year coming out of nursing college with qualifications, but without the posts to go to. There is also a need for other allied health professionals—pharmacists, radiologists, laboratory staff, mammographers and research assistants. Will the workforce plan reflect this? When will it be published? Will it make projections about the population with cancer and will the Government publish those, too? The Government committed to more MRIs and CT scanners. How many new ones have they got in place? How well are they progressing with their targets?

We have heard about the importance of research today. Scientists are a key part of our cancer workforce. We heard yesterday in the Chamber about the challenges that the life sciences sector is facing. The £1 billion investment from Merck for King's Cross has been shelved. The more than £200 million investment from AstraZeneca in Speke, near Liverpool, has also been shelved, and other investments are paused or mothballed. The industry is talking about poor Government engagement, employment regulations, increased employment taxes such as national insurance, and how they are increasing the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access payment rate.

What are the Government going to do to ensure that we have research in this country? Research is a real success. We have the best scientists in the world. We have cutting-edge treatment, trial drugs and novel approaches. Those are all more accessible earlier if they are done in the UK. They also provide good jobs for the British workforce. What work is the Minister doing with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology team? What representation is she making to the Treasury to ensure that supporting research is part of the Government's actions as well as messaging? Will the supporting research be part of the cancer plan? What support is the Minister giving to rare cancers, particularly those that are particularly lethal such as pancreatic cancer? What about brain tumours, where survival has shown little or no improvement? What focus will the cancer plan have on those?

I sat on the Rare Cancers Bill Committee. The rare diseases framework points out that one in 17 of us will get a rare disease during our lifetime. The current framework initiated by the last Government runs out in around three months' time. Do the Government plan to replace it? If so, what with and when?

Sadly, as I said earlier, children and teenagers—young people—also get cancer, and they have particular needs as they go through puberty and young adulthood. The workforce therefore has to have particular strengths because of the work involved. I commend the work of the Teenage Cancer Trust and the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) is doing. Can the Minister confirm that young people's and children's cancer will form an important part of the cancer plan?

Computer scientists will also be key to the cancer workforce. We have heard about the importance of AI. Computers can already identify skin cancer from benign lesions in many cases. The Health and Social Care Select Committee, which I was part of in the last Parliament, visited Stanford in California. We saw how AI was being used to look at mammograms and how, rather than using two doctors, they used one doctor and an AI computer. That was better than either two computers or two clinicians. What is the Minister doing to ensure that, from early education in schools, we are teaching the right skills to develop the right workforce for the AI of the future?

We are getting better at treating cancer, so thankfully there is life after cancer, but post-cancer care is important too. Some people live with things such as lymphoedema, amputations and stomas as a result of their cancer treatment. What focus does the Minister expect there to be in the workforce plan and cancer plan on those issues?

Palliative care is important for those who cannot be treated successfully and whose cancer cannot be cured, but hospices are in crisis across the country. The Government have given extra money for capital, and some for children, which is of course welcome, but hospices across the country are facing huge costs, particularly from the national insurance measures in the last Budget, and neither fund will cover that for adult hospices.

Right across the country, we hear about adult hospices that are closing beds. What will the Minister do about that in her plan? How does she expect us to decide on the assisted suicide Bill when palliative care is facing such difficulty? What about the mental health workforce? It is important that people are supported through their cancer journey.

We had the 10-year health plan, with which came the promise of a workforce plan and a national cancer plan, but across the country the British people are waiting. They watch the Labour Government crafting glossy catalogues of intent but failing to deliver for our NHS. The time for planning and prevarication is over. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.46 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for securing the debate, and for getting through it—I hope he is well. I thank other hon. Members for their contributions. As others have noted, I am aware of the work that the hon. Gentleman has done, using his experience for good, on access to primary care, radiotherapy and cancer. He has campaigned on behalf of his constituents in Wokingham and people across the country, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said. He has been a keen advocate for the NHS workforce's importance to delivering the health services we need.

I thank the wife of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) for her service and wish her well in her new role at the hospice. It is really good to have a voice from Scotland in these debates. My hon. Friend spoke about the shocking and deeply concerning waiting times that our friends and families in Scotland are experiencing. The Scottish people will have a chance to start reversing the situation next May. I hope they take that opportunity, and I look forward to joining my hon. Friend to try to make that happen.

I have my green jacket on, but I am sorry that I could not join today's Macmillan coffee morning, which the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), is working very closely with Macmillan and many other cancer charities as she develops the cancer plan. She is in good contact with them; they do great work, and we will ensure that we continue to talk through their many asks of the Government as she develops the workforce plan.

As many hon. Members said, half of us will have a cancer diagnosis in our lifetime. The health team has certainly taken our full part in that, as 50% of us have had a cancer diagnosis. Some of us are still undergoing treatment. Although more than three quarters of all people diagnosed with cancer in the UK are 60 and over—as hon. Members said, the population is ageing—I decided to get mine at 59. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire is also younger than 60, and the Secretary of State would not forgive me for not reminding everybody that he is only in his early 40s. We make the point well: as other Members said, that although incidence will increase as a result of our ageing population, cancer can strike anybody at any age.

Diagnosing and treating cancer is a growing part of NHS elective activity, and responding to demand in a way that best suits patients is crucial. That includes the issues that the hon. Members for Wokingham and for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) raised about the variability we often see even in a small geographical patch, and certainly between different cancers. The hon. Member for Wokingham talked about clinical nurse specialists. Mine were absolutely fantastic, and I did know who they were. The statistics he outlined are deeply concerning, so those points were very well made. Our mission to tackle cancer and the other biggest killers is underpinned by the 10-year health plan published earlier this year, focusing on those three shifts: from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention.

On the workforce plan, we know that we need an effective and sustainable workforce to deliver better outcomes for everyone, including those with cancer. In the 10-year health plan, we set out that, to deliver a workforce fit for the future, we need a new, sustainable approach to workforce planning. Our 10-year workforce plan will be different. It will set out how we will create a workforce ready to deliver a transformed service for patients when and where they need it, with more empowered, flexible and fulfilled staff.

Since we launched our call for evidence on 26 September, we have been struck by the huge enthusiasm of staff, the sector, stakeholders and colleagues in sharing their thoughts and ideas with us. Many have said that they would like more time to have those conversations, to test ideas and to work together to deliver a truly reformed service. I am grateful to them for raising that, and it is why we have made the decision to give more time to that process. We will now publish the plan in the spring of 2026. A spring publication will allow us to have more detailed discussions with partners, hon. Members and other stakeholders, not just to listen but to work in a truly joined-up way to deliver for staff and patients.

The shadow Minister helpfully outlined all the decisions that were made by her Government over the last few years—decisions that essentially led to many of the workforce problems we now have. We are trying to resolve those problems, and we will. She informed the House that the resident doctors committee has now decided to go on strike again, which is, of course, deeply disappointing. It will be damaging for the work we want to do, and we urge it not to go ahead. However, we will continue to commit to ensuring that the workforce is fit for purpose, including to diagnose and treat cancer. We will progress with the work that we have already started.

In July 2025, there were over 5% more staff in the key cancer professions of clinical oncology, gastroenterology, medical oncology, histopathology, clinical radiology and diagnostic and therapeutic radiography than in July 2024. There were also more doctors working in clinical oncology and more radiology doctors, compared with last year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West asked particularly about haematology. NHS England has invested in expanding specialty training posts in high-demand disciplines, including haematology, and is supporting local systems to retain and develop multidisciplinary teams. That includes increased medical training posts in haematology, and enhancing the scientific workforce supply through other initiatives.

We have also ensured that the cancer-facing workforce are put on a more stable footing to ensure they have the stability they need to continue to provide the care that patients need. In 2025, we provided grant funding to the

[Karin Smyth]

Royal College of Radiologists to encourage foundation and internal medicine trainees to specialise in clinical oncology. That work is currently under way and involves a series of webinars as well as targeted engagement. In 2024-25, around 8,000 people received training either to enter the cancer and diagnostic workforce or to develop in their roles. As part of that, more than 1,600 people were on apprenticeship courses, with more than 270 additional medical specialty training places funded. More than 1,000 clinical nurse specialist grants were made available to new and aspiring CNS workers, and it is a really valuable service.

Tom Gordon: I thank the Minister for giving way. As ever, she is most generous with her time. She has outlined the positive steps that the Government are taking to address the workforce challenge. Could she elaborate on the points I made about the inequalities between the north and the south in the NHS and the cancer workforce?

Karin Smyth: I do not have those numbers to hand but, as we outlined in the 10-year health plan, we are particularly committed to people in rural and coastal communities with regard to workforce and access to many other services. If there is anything specific the hon. Gentleman is not aware of, I am happy to furnish him with more information. We are, however, minded to rectify the variability across the country, even within towns and cities, let alone rural and coastal communities, whether that be in the north, south, east or west.

We will ensure that ongoing investment in practice education continues to enhance clinical supervision, education and training across cancer and diagnostic workforces. That will increase placement capacity, support staff retention and contribute to high-quality patient care.

We will not only ensure that the cancer workforce have the numbers to succeed, but also the skillset. Training academies in imaging, endoscopy and genomics are all being delivered across regions to provide intensive skills development and to support new models of care. We will also ensure that staff have the skills to adopt the treatments needed by cancer patients. Adoption of innovative cancer treatments is often clinician-led and self-identified, with doctors seeking out specialist training opportunities themselves. This may include overseas fellowships or short courses, after which skills are cascaded locally through continued professional development, multidisciplinary teams and peer-to-peer learning.

The complex challenge of tackling the cancer and workforce issues we face will not be solved with a single solution, which is why the Department will be publishing a national cancer plan in the new year. The plan will have patients at its heart and will cover the entirety of the cancer pathway from referral and diagnosis to treatment and ongoing care, as well as prevention, research and innovation. The national cancer plan will build on the progress of the 10-year health plan to improve survival rates and reduce the number of lives lost to the biggest killers.

On 4 February, we launched a call for evidence on the national cancer plan, which closed on 29 April. We received over 11,000 responses from individuals, professionals and organisations who shared their views on how we can do more to achieve our ambition. We have worked with crucial industry figures in the development of the national cancer plan, including the Royal College of Radiologists. The submissions are being used to inform our plan to improve cancer care. As I said, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, is working hard on that issue.

I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for her recognition of the improvements being made at Shrewsbury and Telford and for her contribution, and that of other local MPs, in supporting that trust. Those are very welcome improvements.

On research, the life sciences sector is critical to this Government's growth mission and we want to make this country the best place to do life sciences. Of course, the Department is working closely with colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department for Business and Trade, and His Majesty's Treasury to make that happen.

Finally, through this Government's action on workforce and cancer capacity, we will ensure the NHS has the staff it needs to treat cancer patients safely across the country. I thank the hon. Member for Wokingham for securing this debate.

2.57 pm

Clive Jones: I thank you, Mrs Hobhouse, and the Minister for leaving me time to sum up the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for her contribution and her kind remarks, and I thank other Members for their kind remarks as well. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed so much to today's debate, each having special stories to tell about the areas they represent. All of them are fantastic campaigners for the cancer community.

We can all agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon): we all hate cancer. In fact, I am sure everybody in this room today hates cancer.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Jones: I will make some progress.

I must also say a big thank you to all the cancer charities and life sciences companies that have provided valuable insight into the state of the NHS workforce and its effect on cancer patients. The impact of NHS workforce levels on cancer patients is a serious topic that needs to be discussed, and the experience of patients needs to be highlighted. Today has raised key demands for the Government to address.

The Government must increase endoscopy and pathology capacity. They should audit and invest in phlebotomy services, as called for by Leukaemia UK and the Royal College of General Practitioners. They also need to establish a national register of phlebotomy sites. The Government need to provide targeted support for the most deprived areas of the country, which are under immense pressure, and they need to replace doctors who they know are likely to retire in the next few years.

The Government must up their game on cancer. They have been left a very difficult legacy, with no money and no enthusiasm to change the way we deal with cancer, which is a really sad indictment of the previous Conservative

Government. Finally, the Government must increase recruitment, training and retention; support primary care referrals; invest in diagnostic infrastructure and education; guarantee access to clinical nurse specialists; and prioritise support for patients with less survivable cancers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of NHS workforce levels on cancer patients.

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Building Safety Regulator

[Sir Desmond Swayne *in the Chair*]

3.10 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of the Building Safety Regulator.

It is an unrivalled pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate and colleagues from four different parties for adding their names to the application. Since being elected last year, I have been searching for something that the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and I can agree on, and I am thankful that we finally managed to find it. The breadth of support demonstrates the shared determination across the House to make the system work better. I also thank those from across the industry for their tireless campaigning on the issue, as well as for the constructive way they have worked to ensure that we can get safer buildings across the housing system and provide the supply that is so desperately needed.

Across the construction and development sectors, there is rightly a growing frustration about how the new building safety regime operates in practice. Everybody supports the principle of safer buildings, but there is increasing concern that the system as it stands is holding back progress on building the new homes that are so desperately needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and I sought this debate because of the growing concern across industry that the Building Safety Regulator, while well intentioned, is becoming a real barrier to hitting the 1.5 million homes target that we promised at the general election and that it is so important we achieve.

We should be absolutely clear that this debate is not an attack on the principle of building safety—very far from it. Seventy-two people lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017—72 lives needlessly and tragically lost. It remains a stain on our national conscience that it took such a disaster to ensure that we have proper accountability and testing in the building industry.

The Building Safety Regulator is a vital part of ensuring that nothing like Grenfell ever happens again, but it has to work. Time and again, developers and councils tell me exactly the same story: that schemes are stuck in the system and that, although the regulator is supposed to process applications within 12 weeks, tens of thousands of homes are still stuck to this day. The latest figures suggest that 22,000 homes are waiting for a remediation decision and that 33,000 new homes are waiting for approval. The cost of that is severe: according to the Centre for Policy Studies, there has been a 73% drop in housing starts in London over the past year, with the regulator one of the biggest causes. It is good to see today's Government announcement on the ways we are going further to get the London housing market moving again, but the industry will still say the Building Safety Regulator is one of the biggest obstacles.

Perhaps the biggest travesty is that if we do not build new safer homes, more people in this city and across the rest of the country are stuck in more dangerous and older properties. That is before we even start to consider

[Chris Curtis]

the thousands who are stuck in temporary accommodation —one child in every classroom—or those who are paying extortionate rents because this country has failed for decades to build the homes that are needed.

We now see a growing backlog in the BSR because telecoms infrastructure is being caught up in the new regulations for high-risk buildings—I say this in a building where I still cannot seem to get good phone signal, because we are not building the mobile phone infrastructure that is required across the city. That is causing real practical problems. It threatens to seriously impact the delivery of new buildings, particularly when rooftop installations are involved. If that is not addressed quickly, it could slow down construction and digital roll-out at exactly the point when this country needs to be improving both.

The delays affect not just developers but people: the families living in buildings that are still awaiting remediation and the people who know that their homes are not yet deemed fully safe. The stress that causes day after day is unimaginable. When we talk today about process, paperwork and delays, we must remember the human beings at the heart of this issue.

The economic impact is also huge: rising insurance costs, development finance drying up and higher up-front fees—all before a single brick gets laid. It has a real effect on the viability of building, particularly in our bigger cities. Peter John, the former head of Southwark council put it bluntly:

> "The greatest single burden developers have faced over the last five years has been the introduction of the Building Safety Regulator. The unintended consequence of improving building safety cannot be to cut off the supply of new homes."

He is right.

Melanie Leech of the British Property Federation told the Select Committee that BSR delays are holding back two thirds of the build-to-rent pipeline. As we are rightly reforming the Renters' Rights Bill, which was considered in the Commons again yesterday, we need to ensure that new build-to-rent properties are built, in order to keep the system unclogged. Fewer new rental properties obviously means higher rental prices for everyone else. The Home Builders Federation says exactly the same: the delivery of high-rise developments has "ground to a halt".

Earlier this week, the Government held their regional investment summit, and the message could not have been clearer: the UK is open for business, full of opportunity and led by a Government determined to drive growth. But investors also reminded us about the hard truth that investment is global, and if it takes too long or if it is too difficult to see a return here, capital will simply go elsewhere. We must pull down the barriers to investment and make it easier for growth to happen right here in the UK. If we are serious about growth, we need to back the builders, not the blockers.

The good news is that fixing this does not require a huge amount of money from the Treasury—given how difficult it is to get money out of the Treasury—and it is not primarily about huge amounts of new spending. But it does mean investing in the right people: the experts who can process complex applications quickly and accurately. Will the Minister confirm whether the BSR will have the flexibility to offer market rates to attract those people, rather than being constrained by standard civil service pay bands?

Secondly, it is about culture. Too many developers tell me they face a "computer says no" approach—an invalid application is simply rejected, forcing the whole process to restart. That would be frustrating enough over 12 weeks, but over nine months or more it is a killer for confidence. One of the most frustrating stories I have heard in all this is from a developer who was asked by someone at the Building Safety Regulator to slow down the speed at which they were making applications, to stop the BSR from becoming overwhelmed. At a time when this Government are rightly determined to speed up house building, it is frustrating to see an arm of government trying to slow the process down.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and the Backbench Business Committee on this debate. My hon. Friend talks about the frustration of a nine-month delay, but the BSR is supposed to work to a 12-week turnaround. Is he aware that 338 council homes at the Bermondsey biscuit factory have already been held up for 54 weeks? When approached, the BSR asked for another 12 weeks to complete the application decision.

Chris Curtis: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments, which show exactly the kind of consequences we are facing because of what has been happening to the Building Safety Regulator. If we are not building new social homes, we have to ask where they are going to be instead. Quite often, children aged one or two are stuck in temporary accommodation, not learning to walk or crawl properly and having their life chances curtailed because this city and this country have failed to build the homes to give them a proper life chance. It is important that we stand up to the blockers who stand in the way of that.

Could we move to a more collaborative approach, in which BSR staff can work iteratively with applications to resolve issues as they arise, rather than starting from scratch each time? I have heard worrying reports of inconsistency, with different teams taking different decisions on similar cases. What is being done to ensure greater transparency and consistency? Has the Department assessed whether further guidance is needed for both applications and the regulator itself?

The BSR has said that it hopes to clear the gateway 2 backlog before Christmas. I welcome that level of ambition, but will the Minister confirm what support the Government are providing to make it happen and whether new applications submitted after that point will be turned around within 12 weeks? Once gateway 2 approvals start to come through, we will start hitting the gateway 3 process, which is the sign-off after construction and before occupation. What preparation is being made to ensure that that process does not simply become the new bottleneck?

I will finish with a slightly wider point. Grenfell was a national tragedy caused by unforgiveable negligence, and it was right that the state responded, but when we design new regulations or regulators, we must remember the cost of getting it wrong. In this case, the cost is

stalled projects, families waiting longer in unsafe homes, tens of thousands of children waking up this morning in temporary accommodation, and families paying unaffordable rents. The intent was sound; the implementation has been a catastrophic failure.

The lesson is clear: future systems must be built with feedback loops from day one, clear service standards, real-time data on performance, and consistent guidance. If the first version falls short, as it will from time to time, we need rapid reform, not months of drift while the consequences stack up. That is not about weakening safety; it is how we deliver better and faster. It is how we honour the lives of the 72 people we lost at Grenfell—not only by saying, "Never again," but by building more of the safe, modern homes that this country needs, with a regulator worthy of the trust we place in it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. I suggest a time limit of five minutes. Mr Tice, do you wish to speak?

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): In due time.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Oh, I see. That is very gracious of you. We will have Mr Mike Reader then.

3.21 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) for doing tireless work to co-ordinate it on behalf of us both. I thank his team as well.

I want to start by echoing my hon. Friend's comments on the disaster that was Grenfell. Waking up on my birthday, 14 June, to see the disaster unfolding in front of my eyes is something that will stick with me for the rest of my life; I am reminded every single time I celebrate a birthday. As we move away from the disaster, I am always very much reminded of the impact not only on the families who lost loved ones, but on the hundreds of other families and the community that was devastated by Grenfell.

To complement what my hon. Friend said, I have heard from the industry that the principles on how the Building Safety Regulator should work are very sound. We should work in a way that puts safety up front. There is a golden thread of data. When I joined the industry 20 years ago, one of my jobs as a graduate was to go and hunt O&M—operation and maintenance—manuals to find out exactly what had been built on site and how on earth we could improve it. There is a thread of information so that we can make decisions in relation to maintenance and operation, and there are very clear duty-holder liabilities and requirements, which were missing at Grenfell and in the industry.

In practice, we are seeing poor performance, which is why this debate was called. We see a regulator that is risk-averse and adversarial and that has an outdated approach, despite being a very new regulator. It prevents the delivery of safe, affordable homes, which is critical given the housing crisis and the homelessness crisis we inherited from the Conservative party.

I am perhaps a glutton for punishment. I give up my time as a Back Bencher to go to quite a number of breakfast events, dinner events and roundtables to talk about the sector that I am passionate about—the construction and built environment sector—as someone who built a 20-year career working in that great industry. It used to be about growth and change, when Opposition Members were in power as Ministers, but now the Building Safety Regulator comes up time and again as a real industry frustration. The BSR is widely regarded as actively hindering the construction of new homes—as a key blocker of the Government delivering 1.5 million homes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North said, 22,000 homes are awaiting approval for remediation and 33,000 new homes are waiting for approval.

Sometimes, it is not even homes that are stuck in this process. A small to medium-sized contractor from Northampton, Briggs and Forrester, spoke to me about doing the Guildhall in the centre of London. One might not think that that scheme would be caught up, but there are two grace and favour flats in the Guildhall, so the whole thing got stuck in the BSR and was delayed by over six months—all they were doing was replacing chillers on the roof and some mechanical and electrical equipment. Had those two flats not been there, the scheme would have been rushed through and we would have seen one of the great feats of engineering in our city renewed and improved.

I am hearing some worrying things, which I have raised with the Minister, about a trend in London for developers to seek to develop hotels that, once built, are flipped into long-term rents, avoiding the BSR. There is now a grey market of people finding ways of avoiding going through the BSR, including by building alleged hotels that then become rental accommodation under long-term leases.

I do not want my contribution to be only negative. I welcome the reforms, and particularly today's announcements: the recruitment drive, the new BSR innovation unit and the new leadership, which I think will make a big difference. However, I have to ask the Minister why the industry does not feel like it is seeing the benefits. Is it because that is not enough, or because the Government have been poor at communicating what we are doing to fix this mess? I encourage the Minister to do more to talk about the things that we are changing, because we also need to change the industry culture of talking ourselves down and talking only about the issues that we face.

I started my career 20 years ago in the construction sector as a civil engineer. I am fortunate to chair the all-party parliamentary groups for excellence in the built environment and on infrastructure and to be Labour's construction champion. On Monday, I put out a LinkedIn post saying that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North had secured this debate and that we would like views from industry. Generally, people have welcomed what has happened. There are lots of different proposals for how we could fix this: improving the way that fast-track lanes work; a ratings system for developers; digitising the process; competitive pay, as my hon. Friend said; and even a pre-application process so that developers can engage early to address the issues, as we do in the planning process. I encourage the BSR to consider

[Mike Reader]

private sector partnerships to build capacity, because I do not believe that we can recruit quickly enough to deal with the problem.

From what I have heard, the fundamental thing that makes a difference to delivery—whether it is in projects or something like the BSR—is culture. We have heard about a "computer says no" approach and a binary blame culture. The BSR does not believe that developers are trying to do the right thing and is bureaucratic and combative. I have heard that 70% of submissions are returned to developers on their first submission. The majority of those returns are not because of safety concerns, but because of documentation errors. That is not what we want the regulator to do. We want it to focus on safety, not ticking boxes. The regulator should be a problem solver, it should be collaborative, and it should help us to deliver brilliant, affordable, safe homes.

When I joined the industry 20 years ago, people talked about Latham and Egan, and about trust, teamwork and collaboration being central to how we deliver things in the sector. Twenty-five years later, that should still be the case. The Construction Leadership Council, co-chaired by my former boss Mark Reynolds of Mace, has done some brilliant work on that, for which I commend it thoroughly.

I end by encouraging the Minister to challenge her officials on the culture that they are creating. It has to be a culture that says, "Yes, let's do it together," rather than, "No, come back and try again." I have a number of questions for the Minister. The BSR has said that it will clear the backlog by 26 January. Does she feel confident that it can achieve that? The Construction Leadership Council co-chair said in front of a Committee that he believes it will be able to get down to a five-week approval process. How achievable is that? Can the Minister commit to making sure that there are more proactive communications on the issue from her Department so that we can start to deal with the negative sentiment in the market, encourage investors to invest in high-rise and mid-rise schemes, and start building the homes that we need in urban areas?

Can the Minister challenge her officials to make sure they are ready for gateway 3? About three weeks ago, I attended a breakfast where the director of one of the UK's biggest commercial firms told a room of 50 people, to some quite shocked faces, that she had been considering having a year in their programme to deal with gateway 3 beyond gateway 2, as we see projects now come through. That is a real risk, because we will have buildings finished, but the capital that is tied up in them will not be able to be released through sale or rental. It could really collapse the market.

Finally, there is a suggestion that the new construction regulator could envelop the Building Safety Regulator within its remit. That will need primary legislation. It may well come through in the next couple of years, but knowing now how long things take to get through Parliament, we could be waiting until 2028 or 2029. Can the Minister assure us that if the scope expands and we see a construction regulator whose remit includes construction products and other things, we will not lose the focus on building safety and getting that process going?

I have one more ask of the Minister. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment, our next inquiry will be into the Building Safety Regulator, so I hope that she will help us with evidence and support us in engaging with industry and helping the Government to fix the problem.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Can we try harder to stick to five minutes?

3.31 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I will do my very best, Sir Desmond, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Members for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Northampton South (Mike Reader) on securing this important debate. The Building Safety Regulator has the potential to hinder dramatically the Government's laudable regime of building more homes and more affordable homes. We all remember the horror of Grenfell, and having this entity is probably the right way forward, but there are certain key lessons that are rapidly being learned.

Hon. Members have spoken about some of the specific details, but I fear that the consequences of this issue are even greater than we may imagine. I have been listening to businesses from the property industry, which is my core industry—I started digging trenches in 1983, so I have been in the industry a long time. House builders and investors are now telling me that they are done. They are just not going to bother. We have heard experiences of people allocating a year from completion to occupation. Investors are saying, "We're not going to bother. We're going elsewhere." We have to act faster on this.

There are a couple of key things that we need to consider, including the application of a strange thing called common sense, which, too often among regulators, is sadly not very common. When we have traditional building materials that have stood the test of time for hundreds of years, be it brick or concrete, we could apply common sense to say, "Well, if using those materials, there should be a fast fast-track process." I question also whether the whole concept of gateway 1 is necessary at all. If a project gets to gateway 2, that covers gateway 1. A developer is not going to spend hundreds of thousands or several millions on a planning application and get on site if they know they are not going to pass gateway 2, so why bother with gateway 1 at all? Numerous other examples have been talked about.

Although there have been changes, we need to monitor those changes very quickly. It may well be that what we need is either an outsourcing or—dare I mention the word—competition. A competitive process or regulator could operate alongside the existing process, so that it does not act as too great a block. If it does, we will suffer the worst of all worlds, one in which those who most need new homes in our cities, particularly affordable homes, suffer the most. As a consequence of well-intentioned—but badly implemented and organised—caution and prevention, they will miss out. The numbers are as bad or worse than people fear, particularly in city centres.

The issue also means that people are just not bothering to develop on brownfield sites—I have a number of them in my constituency—because the costs are too great, and because of the fear of the Building Safety

Regulator and of ever-more regulation that may make the situation even worse. There is an enthusiastic pressure on the Minister and the Department to listen to these concerns and respond to them with constructive answers and keep everybody updated. As other hon. Members have said, the Minister should communicate that rapidly to industry participants. She needs to give the industry confidence that it is worth bothering to seek planning and start on site on important new housing projects here in the United Kingdom and help us all to create growth, wealth and more homes.

3.35 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) for securing this important debate.

The housing crisis is one of the defining challenges of our generation. We clearly face a series of overlapping problems: a crisis of poor quality and unsafe homes, affordability and now also housing delivery. I hear about the impact of that in Uxbridge and South Ruislip every day at my surgeries and via my inbox. It is clear that this problem is chipping away at our growth potential, health and educational outcomes, and even public confidence in our political system. The Government have rightly set an ambitious target of 1.5 million new homes over the course of this Parliament to address those issues. We must do everything we can and leave no stone unturned in meeting that challenge.

I am concerned that the BSR, in its current form, is now acting as a barrier to delivering new homes at the pace required, particularly taller buildings, which disproportionately affects house building in urban areas such as my west London constituency. As hon. Members have expertly set out already, the BSR requires all prospective high-rise buildings to pass through three stages of approval, and at each stage, developers are seeing significant delays and setbacks.

Applications are routinely spending 25 to 40 weeks at gateway 2, and some developers I have spoken to have even seen applications take over a year, compared with a 12-week target. Approximately 70% of gateway 2 applications were rejected or invalidated, and only seven out of 40 applications at gateway 3—which is supposed to be a post-construction formality—were approved last year.

Some rejections will always be necessary and may be critical to ensure the safety of developments. The Grenfell inquiry revealed systematic safety failures in the construction industry, but we have to get the balance right and the system has to be effective and fair. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North said, we have to look at safety holistically. Safety is one form of risk and impact, but if we are not remediating homes or building homes, we are not moving people out of damp or mould, homelessness or temporary accommodation, which has immense safety implications for our population.

Over the summer, I wrote to the BSR to raise my concerns about its efficiency. In reply it highlighted a high volume of non-compliant applications. My response is to ask, what is it doing to ensure compliance? The BSR should work collaboratively with the sector. Major developers have cited contradictory communications from the BSR about safety standards, which have been exacerbated by a high turnover of staff and have led to unnecessary delays in projects.

A large developer hoping to build 6,000 homes near my constituency in west London described the issues with the BSR as an "existential" threat to its business, and said that in one current application, the BSR team were not even appointed to work on the application until week 15 of what should be a 12-week process. Those issues are having a significant impact on housing delivery, especially in urban and high-density areas, and we have seen massive falls in new housing starts in London in the first quarter of 2025.

Unpredictable and unreliable regulatory processes weaken the attractiveness of investment in British housing developments, leading to delays in projects progressing and causing costs to spiral. We all know that the construction sector is under serious strain—17% of all insolvencies in May 2025 being construction companies—and that this emergency requires an emergency response.

There are many reasons for the construction sector and housing delivery to be weakening, some of which—such as international issues and construction material costs—are out of the Government's control, but this reason is not out of their control. It appears that an overly adversarial culture has been allowed to develop between industry and the Government over recent years. Although we must look seriously at who was to blame for the failures that led to the horrific scenes at Grenfell, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader), it is important to work collaboratively to solve those issues.

Markets work best when there is a genuine partnership between industry and the Government, and where builders and regulators work together to achieve shared goals. I am pleased, therefore, that the Government announced plans this summer to start moving forward on those issues with a more collaborative model of regulation, and that they have listened to and acted on industry concerns about the capacity of the BSR by hiring 100 new members of staff. I also welcome the new fast-track process being developed and a number of measures that the Government have taken.

We need up-front guidance about expectations, so that everyone understands what is required and expected. I was a cabinet member for planning in a London borough for seven years, and we would have clear planning guidance documents, a pre-application process to discuss applications, and dialogue about applications—not a yes/no, binary, approve-or-reject approach. The view was that the role of planners and regulators should be to resolve issues, approve sustainable development and ultimately support growth. We now need that approach at the BSR.

The BSR needs to focus on crucial safety issues and avoid mission creep. I have heard stories of prolonged discussions and disagreements over the colour of the paint in internal hallways—clearly, the system has not been working. The BSR can and should play a role in restoring the public's confidence in construction post Grenfell. It should be a vital safety backstop, but it cannot be allowed to become a roadblock to all development. If the BSR loses the trust of industry, loses us investment as housing stalls, and loses the public's confidence as they are unable to live in new, safe and affordable homes, that would be a regressive step.

[Danny Beales]

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North for securing the debate. I hope the Minister will agree that the BSR must be reformed further and faster if we are to meet our target of 1.5 million new homes.

3.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I commend the hon. Members for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Northampton South (Mike Reader) for introducing the debate. It is always great to be here to give a local perspective from Northern Ireland.

I commend the Government and the Minister in particular for their commitment to the 1.5 million homes. I hope they can achieve that, but some things have to be in place for it to happen. One of those relates to the Building Safety Regulator. Northern Ireland does not have a building safety regulator equivalent to the one in England, but we are strengthening building safety regulations, which are enforced by local councils across Northern Ireland.

Building regulations in my constituency of Strangford are carried out by Ards and North Down borough council and, to a lesser degree, by Lisburn and Castlereagh city council and by Newry, Mourne and Down district council. My relationship with them has always been positive and helpful. When we bring something to their attention, they do their best to contact the office right away. Local building control enforces health, fire safety, energy and safe accessibility—all the things that I hope the Building Safety Regulator here would do as well.

The safety of derelict buildings is an issue I have mentioned before. Some of the ones in my constituency raise deep concern, and there is a call for building safety officers to step in and do their bit. For example, in the past few years young people have been breaking into a number of derelict two-storey homes and businesses in Court Street in Newtownards, the main town in Strangford. They were using them for under-age drinking and antisocial behaviour—drug smoking and other things. The antisocial behaviour is one thing, but it has been noted that the buildings may not have been safe for people to be in, even prior to their dereliction. In such instances, there is a real need for further consideration to be given to having a building safety regulator, which could support what the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North and others have put forward as the key issue here on the mainland.

The safety of housing has been a key theme in this debate, and I wholeheartedly agree with what has been said, especially as we instinctively think of the likes of Grenfell. The devastation that that caused for so many people is imprinted on our minds forever.

We have a housing crisis across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have homes that are not deemed safe or habitable for our constituents. Work can be completed through the Building Safety Regulator to enforce the maintenance of homes so that they are safe for people and their families, and in Northern Ireland the local building control will do the same.

Ever mindful of your request to be pithy, Sir Desmond, as you always are, I will conclude. We reflect on lessons learned from past tragedies, including Grenfell. Building safety is our moral responsibility. Everyone should have the right to feel safe and sleep soundly at night, knowing that the homes they are in, as well as their places of work, are safe. While England is the Minister's jurisdiction, I respectfully request that she looks to commit to ensuring that Northern Ireland follows with similar rules and that building legislation be looked at and, more importantly, improved for everyone.

3.44 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) on securing this debate.

I start by briefly reminding hon. Members why Britain's building safety regime needed such radical reform after the Grenfell Tower fire, which took place eight and half years ago in my constituency of Kensington and Bayswater, with 72 people losing their lives in an entirely preventable and foreseeable tragedy. The bereaved, survivors and our community are still waiting for justice. We hope it will come soon.

As the Grenfell Tower inquiry revealed, there were a litany of systematic failures that led to the fire—a failure to learn lessons from previous fires, most notably the Lakanal House fire in 2009; a failure of Conservative Ministers to update approved building regulations; a failure of manufacturers to produce safe cladding; a failure of builders and architects to ensure safe design; and a failure to spot risks on the part of local building control, who signed off an unsafe building. There are many more.

As many Members will know from their own constituencies, this problem stretches far beyond Grenfell. Today, more than 5,500 residential buildings contain dangerous, flammable cladding and fewer than half of mid and high-rise buildings have even begun remedial work. That is up to 1 million people still stuck in unsafe buildings, victims of the building safety crisis that is ruining lives.

Many of those residents have themselves suffered due to the performance of the Building Safety Regulator. Other Members have not yet mentioned that there are almost double the number of major cladding remediation projects awaiting gateway 2 approval than there are new builds. The housing journalist Pete Apps wrote today of a housing association-owned block that has been waiting since November 2023 to install new fire doors.

I welcome the new chair of the Building Safety Regulator, Andy Roe, being so candid last month with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, of which I was a member up until this week. Mr Roe said:

"if we have not shown very significant change by the end of the calendar year, we run the risk of losing the complete confidence of everyone in the regulatory regime."

That is why it is so important.

It has been felt in recent months that there has been something of a campaign about the Building Safety Regulator, and some of that campaign is driven by a desire to roll back changes in building safety introduced post Grenfell. I totally reject the false choice between safety and house building. I believe we need a regulator that works. That means being specific about what changes

will make the system more predictable and faster, to help deliver on the Government's housing goals, while ensuring that we do not compromise on safety.

I can assure hon. Members that I have never met anyone involved in campaigning for truth, justice and change for Grenfell who does not want to see this Government tackling this country's housing crisis, including by increasing the supply of social and affordable homes that would get children out of temporary accommodation in constituencies like mine, which has some of the worst housing inequality in the country.

The question for me is not whether the BSR should exist, but how it can improve. I welcome its improvement in transparency. We can now get a breakdown of the reasons behind the delays.

We have already heard some really constructive suggestions. They include: hiring more registered building inspectors centrally, given that 27% of the backlog is due to a lack of registered building inspectors being able to get on to projects; engaging in predictable pre-application dialogue; having clearer guidelines for submissions; moving away from a staffing project model that relies on ad hoc multidisciplinary teams that take too long to form, which were described to our Committee as "dysfunctional" by Mr Roe; and perhaps even considering whether more minor improvement works, which are the majority of projects in the BSR, could be dealt with outside the scope of the full gateway process, to keep the BSR focused on the higher risk projects.

I welcome the Government's decision to unlock the building safety fund to social housing providers, as well as the £39 billion for the affordable homes programme, the remediation action plan to devolve responsibility down to local level, so that we get that building-by-building conversation on fixing the cladding crisis, and the construction products regulation process. Those are all positive steps.

In closing, like other colleagues, I ask the Minister how much she is able to keep track of the hiring process for the 100 new staff, including the 15 new inspectors, who Andy Roe told us would be in place by the end of September. How do we deal with the skills shortage? What conversations is she having with the Department for Education to co-ordinate the construction skills package announced several months ago? Will that include the types of skills that we need for the BSR? Will the BSR moving under the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government deliver the additional transparency and accountability that we need on performance? I hope this debate can contribute to a better BSR that can tackle the building safety crisis and the housing crisis together.

3.50 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is a pleasure as always to serve under you, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Members for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) on securing this important debate.

Eight years ago, London watched on in helpless horror as Grenfell Tower burned. Some 72 lives were lost, families were decimated and a community was changed forever. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that this was by no means a natural disaster; it was the direct result of a failed system that was allowed to prioritise cheap, flammable cladding over people's lives.

Almost a decade on, that system is still failing. Other major fires have burned on and seared themselves into our memory. In 2019, Richmond House in Worcester Park in my constituency burned to the ground, and tomorrow I will visit the Hampton estate, where the rebuilt Richmond House stands. In August last year, a building on Freshwater Road in Dagenham caught alight just days before the final Grenfell report was published. In July this year, we watched on as a major fire ripped through a 17-storey complex in Walworth. Those are just a few examples, but there are many more.

Londoners are on edge every time they see a breaking news story about a building fire. They worry that another terrible tragedy is unfolding—another awful fire that will uproot lives and impose a terrible toll on communities. Hundreds of thousands of Londoners do not have confidence that they are safe and that they can sleep easy at night in their own homes. They live with cladding that hugs their home, keeping them warm in the winter and cool in the summer, but that threatens to become a towering inferno, leaving residents reliant on waking watches and, too often, faulty fire alarms. For too long, developers have been getting away with rolling the dice with people's lives.

When the Building Safety Regulator was established through the Building Safety Act 2022, people living in these unsafe high rises were promised action by the previous Government, but instead of accelerating remediation the BSR has become one of the biggest barriers to removing dangerous cladding from buildings. Since the BSR came into force in 2023, construction projects have been delayed, costs have spiralled and thousands of residents remain trapped in unsafe homes. One of the reasons for that is that the BSR approval process is weighed down by complex bureaucracy.

Cladding remedial works to high-risk buildings cannot begin until the regulator has signed off the scope of the works. Officially, approval should take eight weeks for existing buildings and 12 weeks for new projects; in reality, cladding remediation applications are routinely taking more than 30 weeks and sometimes more than 40 weeks. We have heard even longer waits reported by Members in this Chamber.

The communication from the regulator has been equally inadequate. Developers and housing associations report one-way communication and applications disappearing into the void. When a response finally comes, a high proportion of applications are rejected at the validation stage. That cannot just be labelled as administrative lag; it means months of avoidable risk for thousands of people.

In many ways, the regulation is currently manifesting as the worst of both worlds, standing in the way of not just progress in remediating the existing properties, but building the next generation of safe, affordable homes that we need to end the housing crisis. The situation is not helped by the fact that there is a mismatch between the Building Safety Act's definition of building safety risks and the approach to identifying defects under the PAS 9980 fire safety standard. That is quite clearly a lower standard that fails to take action on major fire safety risks and does little to nothing to bring down extortionate insurance premiums.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that the standards for remediation under PAS 9980 should match the statutory standards in the Building Safety Act, so that there is a clear rulebook for everyone. If the Government

[Luke Taylor]

want applications to the BSR to be faster, they must ensure that those submitting them are equipped with all the facts and given clarity about what is required to meet the right standards, and that the process for approving those applications is as fast as it is rigorous.

Those two vital aspects of solving our housing and safety crisis—speed and accuracy—need not exist in tension; for the BSR to be effective, it must be more comprehensive. Limiting its scope to buildings over 11 metres tall is narrowing its ability to properly scrutinise and facilitate works on many other vulnerable apartment buildings. Indeed, Richmond House, which I mentioned earlier, would not have fallen under its remit, despite the fact that it housed 23 flats across four storeys. I invite the Minister to outline what plans—if any—exist to bring those standards together, facilitate faster processing of applications for works, and extend coverage and support to those in buildings less than 11 metres tall.

What compounds this crisis in perhaps the most nefarious way is the impact it is having on leaseholders, too many of whom are still paying out of their own pockets for dangerous construction and regulatory neglect. They are sent eye-watering bills, living in fear of the next service charge. They are treated as an afterthought in a housing system that increasingly seems rigged in favour of developers. The Liberal Democrats will not accept a housing market in which ordinary people are left powerless while corporations walk away scot-free, and we are concerned that the building safety levy that the Government have proposed will not provide sufficient funding for all required remediations. It makes no sense whatsoever for the BSL to exclude properties under 11 metres, but that is what the Government are pushing ahead with.

There must be a thorough and funded plan to assist leaseholders in properties under 11 metres to make their properties safe to live in. The Government should be taking swift and serious action to ensure that all leaseholders, including those currently excluded from the BSL, are protected from remediation costs in defective blocks with safety risks, as defined in the 2022 Act. I hope that the Minister can shed some light on whether the Government are considering taking those further steps, because leaseholders—not just in London, but across the country—are watching, and will be hoping not to be let down once again.

None of this should detract from the need to build the next generation of green, affordable and safe homes. I reject the implication we sometimes hear that there is some inherent tension between those objectives. If we want to truly solve the housing crisis in this country with a renaissance of sensible and community-driven house building, we have to recognise the defects in the existing system upon which we are layering new infrastructure. Two things can be true at once—that allowing safety standards to become a barrier to house building will damage our long-term economic security, and that accelerating new building without rigorous safety standards and proper accountability for developers will damage our physical security.

There are those who say that only a small fraction of new build units are defective, but I remind them that the fraction will account for a much larger overall number of units as we grow that stock. We can and must do both. A sensible, progressive, interventionist Government would recognise that their purpose is exactly that— not just to regulate the market, but to play an active role in it, discouraging cowboys and faceless, careless developers with rules, standards and real, comprehensive enforcement.

In fact, any Government worth their salt would see this issue in its wider context: a housing market that is fundamentally broken, not just by years of inaction on house building or by the great council housing sell-off, but by decades—maybe even centuries—of lopsided relationships between leaseholders and landowners. If we are really to put the power back into people's hands and reconcile the two dreams of housing that have dominated in this country over the past century—the right-wing dream of democracy in which everyone has an ownership stake, and the left-wing dream of a nation in which everyone's right to shelter is guaranteed, no matter their income—we need to end the broken leasehold system altogether, both for owners and for renters.

I invite the Minister to tell us why the Government have failed to commit, as the Liberal Democrats did at our recent conference, to ending that lopsided relationship by giving leaseholders new powers and rights to take collective ownership. Why have they not committed to removing dangerous cladding from all buildings, while ensuring that leaseholders do not have to pay a penny towards that removal—as is only right, because of the regulatory failure that enabled it? Why have they not committed to holding developers to the highest possible standards and introducing tougher oversight of building inspectors, and not just to capping unreasonable service and estate management charges, but to abolishing ground rents on all existing leases?

That is the radical but necessary action that we must take, and actions such as these, which actually fix issues that our constituents face, are how we defeat the new populists on the right and the left who offer nothing more than simple slogans and catchy TikToks. It is up to the Government to respond to our calls and deliver the necessary changes.

3.59 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond, and to take part in this debate on the building safety regulator. I thank the hon. Members for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Northampton South (Mike Reader) for securing this debate and for their opening speeches, both of which I thought were extremely reasonable and set the tone for what has been a largely reasonable debate in which there is much common ground.

It is a primary duty of any Government to ensure that everyone has a safe and high-quality home to live in. Progress has been made in recent years to ensure the nation's housing stock, with the share of non-decent and unsafe homes witnessing a decline in the last decade. Official statistics from the National Centre for Social Research, funded by the Government, show that under the last Government the prevalence of non-decent homes fell from 17% in 2019 to 15% in 2023, with falls across every tenure. The focus of this debate is the building safety regulator and its performance since being established by the last Government.

Through the Building Safety Act, the BSR was created with the intention of regulating higher-risk buildings, raising the safety standards of all buildings, and helping

professionals working in the sector. It was established in good faith, with sensible aims that any Government would agree were needed at the time; and, pertinently, as I think every speaker has referred to this afternoon, it was done in the light of the tragic loss of 72 lives in the appalling Grenfell Tower fire. As a former chairman of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, I was taken to Grenfell Tower by the London Fire Brigade a week after the fire. I went to the top of the building and saw at first hand the devastation that had been wreaked there and the consequences of years of inadequate building safety control, so I believe the motivations behind the creation of the BSR were entirely understandable.

However, there is simply no point in denying that the BSR is not working today as it was originally intended. The truth is that it is proving to be a major additional contributor to a malaise that Britain has been suffering from pretty much since the turn of the millennium. Put simply, we struggle to build. Britain is now constrained within a self-imposed straitjacket of over-zealous red tape, which prevents much-needed development while at the same time causing absurd outcomes such as £100 million bat sanctuaries.

The context of this debate is worth noting. As we know, the Government have ambitious targets for housing delivery, having insisted that they will build 1.5 million new homes by the end of this Parliament; but with at least 25% of this Parliament now behind us, they are miles behind schedule, and barely a third of what should have been built by now is actually completed. The new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), has publicly said that his job should be on the line over whether or not he meets the target. Unfortunately for him, nobody believes that this Government will meet their housing target in just one Parliament: not the Office for Budget Responsibility, not Savills, not the Home Builders Federation, not Professor Paul Cheshire of the London School of Economics and not the National Federation of Builders—the list goes on and on.

In London the situation is particularly dire, not least because of some of the policies in the Mayor of London's London plan. A further problem coming down the line is the possibility of the Government's making changes to the landfill tax. At present, potentially toxic landfill is taxed at £126.15 per tonne, whereas harmless inert waste such as soil or concrete is taxed at £4.05 per tonne, and nothing at all if it is used to fill up former quarries. However, there are strong rumours circulating that the Government are thinking of abolishing the quarry exemption and switching all landfill up to the higher rate. Building industry experts have estimated that that rise, which is in excess of 3,000%, will add up to £28,000 to the construction cost per home. That is especially an issue in London, where the high proportion of apartment buildings generates much more landfill than elsewhere.

The impact of such a change on the construction industry is obvious. As inflation sits stubbornly at nearly 4%, twice the target level, alongside anaemic growth and increased costs to the industry, including materials and fuel, additional costs to the building trade are stacking up.

It is in that context that we need to consider the performance of the building safety regulator. The BSR is not only moving too slowly to fulfil its purpose, but wielding the axe to too many of the applications crossing its desk. As the hon. Member for Northampton South said, the Building Safety Regulator rejects about 70% of applications to begin construction, compared with roughly 10% to 15% of applications that get rejected in the wider British planning system.

Something is very clearly wrong here. When 150 high-rise residential construction projects are delayed across the UK because of the BSR, when schemes are delayed 38 weeks longer than the target time for approval, and when 60% of affected schemes are in London, the city with the highest need and the greatest demand, it is clear that we must work together to realise a better future for the BSR and to unchain the industry from some of the restraints it currently wears.

The Building Safety Regulator is all too often a handbrake on development, rather than an accelerator of safe and effective development. I welcome the Minister to her place in her first Westminster Hall debate, and I know she will be eager to tell us about the Government's attempts to reform the BSR and solve this issue in June earlier this year. On the face of it, increasing the BSR's headcount could be a positive move, but only if the staff brought in have the requisite technical expertise in building and fire safety and are thus able to accelerate the planning process. By simply increasing the BSR's capacity, the Government have not yet been able, as was promised in an MHCLG press release,

"to enhance the review of newbuild applications, unblock delays and boost sector confidence",

because it has not solved the core issue: the number of application rejections.

As the British Property Federation has argued, improved dialogue with applicants and more guidance on the BSR application process would go a long way to speeding things up by vastly increasing the likelihood that applications are right first time, rather than their having to be revised after being rejected. In the age of artificial intelligence, mandating machine-readable submissions and building an electronic file management system that ingests structured data would be immeasurably useful, enabling the use of commercially available AI to triage completeness, flag inconsistencies and vastly speed up the process for both the applicants and the regulator.

As was said earlier—I believe by the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), but I stand to be corrected—introducing greater transparency around the BSR's performance is certainly welcome. The new fast-track process seems like a good idea, although it remains to be seen whether it is effective, but clearly more needs to be done.

Reforming the operation of the BSR should not be about making developments less safe. Changes must instead tackle the fundamental problem: being process-focused to the point that we fail to deliver. That is particularly true in places such as London, where it has now become difficult to build anything at all. The existing urban environment lends itself to denser developments, which are inevitably viewed as higher risk under the BSR and therefore face very lengthy delays and huge additional construction costs. Consequently, there is a danger that we risk urban sprawl into the countryside and the destruction of the green belt, with homes being forced into communities with an inability to meet the infrastructure demands of all new residents.

[Gareth Bacon]

It is important that all sides work constructively, across Government and Opposition, to deliver remediation, building safety and the best outcomes for local communities. This debate has encouraged me that we can work across the House to tackle burdensome regulation in the housing and planning industry, including where the Building Safety Regulator is playing its well-intentioned, but undeniably imperfect role. That requires real and serious focus from the Government, who will have to act far faster than they have done to date. I will listen with interest to what the Minister says.

4.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) for securing this important debate on the performance of the Building Safety Regulator, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for so ably setting the context of this debate around the terrible Grenfell disaster. I recognise much of what he and other Members have said. We will make changes where necessary and we are focused on the outcome, which is a country with the safe homes that it needs.

Colleagues will have seen today's announcement from the Mayor of London and the Secretary of State concerning a package of support for house building in the capital. The package is designed to improve the viability of housing developments in the near term, boosting the number of new homes, including affordable homes, to be delivered in the next few years. This action to accelerate development goes hand in hand with our continuing commitment to make sure that homes are safe.

The regulator plays a vital role in ensuring the safety of residents in high-rise buildings. Since its establishment under the Building Safety Act 2022, it has been central to delivering post-Grenfell reforms and restoring public confidence in the safety of the built environment. I appreciate and acknowledge the concerns raised by industry stakeholders, developers and Members of this House regarding delays, operational challenges and the impact on housing delivery. These are serious issues, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss them openly today.

In June, MHCLG announced its intention to transfer the Building Safety Regulator from the Health and Safety Executive into a new dedicated body under the Department, making it clear where responsibility lies. A statutory instrument to enable the transfer is expected to be laid before Parliament next month. This move will ensure that the BSR provides a dedicated focus for building safety and will strengthen accountability to Ministers and Parliament. Furthermore, it marks an important milestone towards the Government's commitment to an integrated single construction regulator, as recommended by the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

A dedicated programme team has been established to manage the transition of people and services from the Health and Safety Executive to the new body, ensuring a smooth and orderly transfer without the disruption of the BSR's ongoing operations. As we heard today, Andy Roe has been appointed non-executive chair of a new board within the Department to take on the functions of the BSR as part of initial steps towards creating a single construction regulator. That is the technical explanation, but put simply, he is chairing the BSR. I have been truly impressed by how hands-on he has been.

Andy, probably more than anyone in this room, understands the necessity of balancing the need for new housing with the safety of those houses. He brings a wealth of experience in safety regulation and leadership from his previous role as commissioner of London Fire Brigade. He is supported by the new chief executive officer for the BSR, Charlie Pugsley, who was also a senior officer in the London Fire Brigade. The new leadership team are already implementing significant operational changes based on their extensive industry experience.

Turning to gateway 2, we recognise that delays are unacceptable, which is why the Government announced these changes to the BSR in June. They are not just personnel changes, but substantial changes that have improved the way the regulator works. As part of the reforms, a new innovation unit is already managing 27 new build applications, consisting of 6,192 housing units. The innovation unit is already demonstrating progress, with the majority of applications currently meeting or bettering the 12-week service level agreement for processing applications. The BSR has also recently announced a new batching process for category A projects. This consolidates the teams used to review applications into one organisation, significantly reducing delays. The BSR has also committed to recruiting 100 new staff by the end of the year to boost its capacity.

Since July 2024, the BSR has met weekly with industry bodies to address gateway challenges and has increased two-way engagement with applicants. We are clear that the conversation must deepen. The BSR also plans to introduce an account manager model, where applications from large developers will be grouped and assigned a dedicated point of contact to ensure that issues are identified at the earliest opportunity. New guidance, developed in partnership with the Construction Leadership Council, has been published to help applicants clearly understand what is needed for a successful submission. The BSR is actively supporting the Construction Leadership Council to publish a further suite of industry guidance—expected around mid-November—on the statutory documents accompanying building control approval applications, staged approvals and gateway 3. The BSR is continually reviewing its guidance to help duty holders understand the legal requirements and how to comply.

My hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North and for Northampton South (Mike Reader) both raised concerns about gateway 3 approvals. Gateway 3 is still new and only a few projects have reached it so far. As more projects reach this stage the backlog should clear, making specialist support more available to the BSR. Class 2 registered building inspectors are now able to handle simpler, high-risk work which frees up class 3 inspectors to focus on new builds and remediation, helping make the best use of available resources.

As of early September, BSR has received 16 gateway 3 applications for new build high-risk buildings, with nine already approved and issued with completion certificates, while seven remain under review. Those figures will grow as more schemes reach completion. Some applications

have moved through quickly, demonstrating what a well-prepared submission can achieve. Others have required additional information before assessment could progress. This early experience is helping both developers and the BSR to refine the process, making sure it is consistent, efficient and firmly focused on safety outcomes.

The BSR has previously committed to improving operations by December. To support transparency and accountability, as we have heard, it published performance data on 16 October and will do so monthly to track progress publicly against that commitment. It reported that in August, gateway 2 determinations hit a record 209 across all application types. A total of 152 national new build applications are being progressed—that is 33,670 homes—with the newly established innovation unit handling 27 of these.

Most applications in the innovation unit are meeting or exceeding the 12-week service level agreement for new build applications, and the BSR expects nearly all new build applications to conclude by December, with the final three closing in January 2026.

The first recommendation from phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry was to create a single construction regulator to tackle complexity and fragmentation in the regulatory system. The Government have already begun implementation, starting with improvements to the BSR and plans to transition it into the new arms-length body. We intend to legislate when parliamentary time allows and will publish a prospectus later this year to set direction.

My colleagues asked a number of questions, in particular regarding skills and salaries. The BSR was designed to draw on industry experience while also managing the known shortage of skilled specialists. However, as the construction sector and partner regulators rely on the same limited pool, this continues to constrain the BSR's capacity. While offering higher pay might attract talent, it risks destabilising partner organisations by shifting, not solving, the shortage. A long-term workforce strategy, like that under way in the fire service, is needed to build system-wide capacity, and we are working on it with local authorities, the BSR and registered building control approvers to help shape it.

In conclusion, the Government remain firmly committed to a building safety regime that is both robust and proportionate—one that protects residents while enabling the delivery of much-needed homes. We have listened to the concerns and taken decisive steps. We want to improve processes and ensure that they are fit for purpose. The reforms announced earlier this year are designed to address the very issues that have been debated today, and we will work closely with industry, residents and Parliament to ensure that the regulator delivers effectively. I am very grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North and for Northampton South for securing this debate, and I look forward to the continued dialogue ahead.

4.18 pm

Chris Curtis: I will be as quick as I can. I welcome the Minister to her place and thank her for her response. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) for bringing their experience from industry and talking about some of the things they believe we need to do to address these problems.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), who has had experience of homelessness and therefore knows personally the importance of getting this right. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), who reminds us of the backstory and the tragedy that made it so important for us to set up the Building Safety Regulator and get this right.

My first debate in this House was about building safety, and I talked about my brother, who is one of the brave local firefighters in Milton Keynes. If there were an incident in a high-rise flat, he would be one of the people risking his life to fix it, so it is important that we get building safety right. He will be one of those going into unremediated buildings unless we have a Building Safety Regulator that can act quickly enough to enable remediations, and he will be one of those going into older and unsafe buildings if we cannot move residents into safer buildings because we cannot build them in the first place.

We cannot forget the human cost of getting this wrong. I hope we are not back here in a year's time still talking about a regulator that is not moving quickly enough and a country that is not building enough homes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the performance of the Building Safety Regulator.

4.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 23 October 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Employment Rights Bill: October Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): The Government's top priority is to grow the economy and improve living standards. We are clear that we cannot build a strong economy while people are in insecure work. For too long, employment law has failed to keep pace with fundamental changes to how, when and where we work. This has allowed bad actors to take advantage of loopholes in the current law via exploitative practices, fuelling a race to the bottom, undercutting responsible businesses, and eroding the living standards of working people. We are clear that unfair competition, where a bad employer undercuts a good employer by reducing the terms and conditions of service for their employees, is bad for business, bad for workers and bad for growth.

Our plan to make work pay will modernise our employment rights legislation, extending the employment protections already given by the best British companies to millions more workers across the country. Strengthening this underlying framework will make work more secure and predictable, putting more money into working people's pockets and strengthening the foundations that underpin a modern economy. It will also offer dignity to those going through the toughest personal circumstances, support working families to juggle the demands of work and raising children and help more working parents to stay in the workplace. This is a win-win. Policies that improve workforce wellbeing and job satisfaction also improve retention, boost productivity, promote fair competition and economic growth.

We are committed to full and comprehensive consultation with employers, workers, trade unions and civil society. By delivering this change together, we will back employers who do the right thing and give hard-working people the security, fairness and job satisfaction they deserve. As set out in our "Implementing the Employment Rights Bill" publication (published 1 July 2025), we are taking a phased approach to engagement and consultation on these reforms. This will ensure stakeholders have the time and space to work through the detail of each measure and to help us implement each in the interests of all.

Today I am launching an initial package of consultations covering the following four measures. Alongside a programme of direct stakeholder engagement, these will support us in determining how best to put our plans into practice.

Consultation 1: enhanced dismissal protections for pregnant women and new mothers

Discriminating against women because they are pregnant or on maternity leave is already unlawful. However, pregnant women and new mothers continue to face a significant and unique risk to their job security. Every parent should feel secure at work, and that includes ensuring motherhood is not a barrier.

Starting with the Employment Rights Bill, the Government are introducing legislation which will make it unlawful to dismiss pregnant women, mothers on maternity leave, and mothers who return to work for at least a six-month period—except in specific circumstances. The Bill establishes the requisite powers to then set out the detail of the policy in regulations. Other powers taken ensure that those taking other types of family-related leave can be brought into the policy's scope, subject to the outcome of the consultation.

The consultation seeks views on how the enhanced dismissal protections should work in practice, including the "specific circumstances" in which the dismissal of pregnant women and new mothers should still be allowed; when the protections should start and end; whether other new parents should be covered by the protections; policy measures to support implementation and impact; and how to mitigate against any unintended consequences.

This consultation will close after 12 weeks on 15 January 2026.

Consultation 2: bereavement leave

Bereavement and the loss of a loved one is a deeply personal experience that impacts everyone differently. In some cases, employees will need to take time and space away from work to grieve; in other cases, employees might wish to continue working as normal. For too long, employees facing bereavement have had to navigate their grief without the security of knowing they have a legal right to the time they need away from work. While many employers do give their employees the time they need, some do not. Fair competition demands some statutory protections for bereaved workers.

The Employment Rights Bill introduces a new statutory right to bereavement leave which will ensure all employees have a right to time away from work to grieve. Government amendments tabled on Report in the Lords extend bereavement leave to include pregnancy loss before 24 weeks, to enable the Government to consult on the full range of bereavement leave and ensure long overdue recognition for the women and families affected by pregnancy loss.

The Bill provides framework powers to establish the new right to bereavement leave, and we are consulting on the details to be set out in secondary legislation, ensuring that the entitlement is fully informed by the needs of both employers and employees from the outset.

The Bill sets out that the leave must be a minimum of one week and employees must be allowed at least 56 days from the date of the loss in which to take the leave. The consultation will ask questions about who should be eligible for bereavement leave, including specific questions on different types of pregnancy loss. The consultation will also ask for views on the maximum length of leave and the timeframe in which it should be taken, and what else the Government can do to support employers to implement the new entitlement to bereavement leave, such as guidance. Lastly, the consultation will ask for views on what notice and evidence requirements an employee may be required to give to an employer to allow us to balance the needs of bereaved individuals with the needs of their employers to manage staff absence with minimum disruption.

This consultation will close after 12 weeks on 15 January 2026.

Consultation 3: trade union employer duty to inform

A lack of awareness about the right to join a trade union may be contributing to reduced engagement from workers in collective bargaining and access to representation when they need it. At present, employers are not required to inform workers of this right, either at the start of employment or subsequently. While employees and workers are legally protected if they choose to join a union, there is no obligation on employers to make them aware of this. This legal omission needs correction in law.

The Employment Rights Bill will introduce a new duty on employers to provide their workers with a written statement of their right to join a trade union at the start of their employment and at other times. This new duty addresses an existing information gap by ensuring workers are better informed of their rights.

This consultation seeks views on how this duty should work in practice—what the statement should say, in what manner it should be given, and how often the statement should be delivered outside the start of employment.

The consultation will close after eight weeks on 18 December 2025.

Consultation 4: trade union right of access

Effective trade unions are important to tackling insecurity, inequality, discrimination, poor working conditions and low pay. The best employers value their role in the workplace and experience the benefits of working in partnership.

Within the current legislative framework, trade unions do not have an independent right of access to workplaces protected in law. They may only act through individual members or by voluntary access arrangements with employers. Where membership is limited, and there are no voluntary arrangements in place, there is limited scope for trade unions to represent and support their members in employment-related matters.

The Employment Rights Bill will establish a new legal framework for unions and employers to negotiate access into the workplace, formalising a trade union's right to access workplaces physically, and to communicate with workers both in person and digitally. A statutory access framework gives clarity to employers on how to agree access and will enable unions to contribute positively to workplace culture, fostering open communication and trust between workers and employers and leading to more stable and constructive industrial relations.

We are seeking views on how this framework should operate in practice, consulting on the practical details of the policy before we set them out in secondary legislation. The consultation will cover how unions will request access and how employers will respond; factors the Central Arbitration Committee will take into account when determining whether access should be granted and on what terms; and how breaches of access agreements should be assessed by the CAC.

The consultation will close after eight weeks on 18 December 2025.

Next steps for consultation

This package sets out the next steps in delivering our plans. As trailed in "Implementing the Employment Rights Bill", further packages of consultations are planned for later in the autumn and into the winter. These will be central to shaping the practical implementation of this legislation, helping Government deliver reforms that are both effective and inclusive. It is in everyone's interest to get the relationship between employer and employee right. These consultations will help us make work pay for both.

[HCWS986]

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Victims: Interim Compensation Payments

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): On 9 July 2025, the infected blood inquiry published its additional report on compensation. The inquiry made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet Office and to the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to ensure that fair compensation is provided to every person that is eligible without delay.

As of 21 October, IBCA has contacted over 3,614 people to start their compensation claim; 3,371 have started the claim process; 2,476 people have received an offer, totalling over £1.8 billion; and so far 2,033 people have had their compensation paid, with more than £1.35 billion paid in compensation by IBCA. IBCA has now contacted all registered infected people to begin a claim, and the Government expect IBCA to open the service for those who are infected and unregistered, deceased infected and affected this year.

I am pleased that progress is being made, but I acknowledge the calls from the community highlighting the need for faster payment. That is why, on 21 July 2025, I informed the House that the Government would make a further interim payment of £210,000 to the estates of infected persons who were registered with an infected blood support scheme or predecessor scheme on or before 17 April 2024 and who have sadly passed away.

This is in addition to the interim payment of £100,000, which opened for applications in October 2024, meaning an estate could be eligible for up to £310,000 in interim payments. Since applications opened, over 600 estates have received payment, totalling over £60 million.

Today, I can announce that the process under which estates can apply for a further interim compensation payment has now opened. I hope this payment goes some way in recognising the hurt of those who have been impacted by losing their loved ones due to infected blood and blood products.

These payments will be delivered through the existing infected blood support schemes. They will be made to the estates of deceased infected persons As with all compensation payments related to infected blood, it will be exempt from income tax, capital gains tax and inheritance tax, and disregarded from means-tested benefit assessments.

Only the personal representative of the estate is able to make the application. Applicants will need a grant of probate, letters of administration, or—specific to Scotland—a grant of confirmation to evidence entitlement to claim interim compensation on behalf of the estate. To assist the legal process of obtaining this evidence as quickly as possible for those that do not already have it, applicants can claim back their exact legal costs up to

£1,500. The application form is available to download online at gov.uk, together with full guidance on how to apply.

For those estates that have already received £100,000, an expedited application form is available. This requires much less information from the applicant than provided previously. Estate representatives can access this directly by contacting the UK infected blood support schemes.

I hope this additional interim payment brings some relief to the families impacted by a scandal that is a shameful mark on our national history. Please rest assured that delivering compensation for every eligible person remains an utmost priority for this Government.

[HCWS984]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Greenhouse Gas Removals: Independent Review

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The independent review into greenhouse gas removals has published a report of its findings and recommendations to Government.

In February, the Government commissioned the independent review of GGRs and appointed Dr Alan Whitehead CBE as the independent chair, to consider how options for GGRs, including large-scale power bioenergy with carbon capture and storage and direct air carbon capture and storage, can assist the UK in meeting our net zero targets, out to 2050. The review terms of reference were published on gov.uk at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/greenhouse-gas-removals-ggrs-independent-review/independent-review-of-greenhouse-gas-removals-terms-of-reference

The independent review has engaged extensively with industry and stakeholders through a call for evidence, industry roundtables and the net zero all-party parliamentary group.

The Government welcome this report's findings and will consider the recommendations as we get on with our clean energy superpower mission, which will not only tackle the climate crisis, but will boost our energy security, protect households from energy price spikes, and create thousands of skilled jobs across the country.

Greenhouse gas removal technologies will play a key role in achieving our net zero target and it's important we consider how best to deploy these.

I thank Dr Alan Whitehead for undertaking the review and everyone who contributed.

[HCWS983]

Energy Retail Market: Strengthening Customer Protections

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): Today I am announcing Government plans to deliver stronger protections and a better deal for energy consumers. The Government are publishing our response to the consultation on third-party intermediaries and launching two new consultations on strengthening the Energy Ombudsman and standardising business energy contracts linked to smart meters. These plans will directly support working people, and the businesses that employ them, and drive forward the Government's commitment to an energy market that puts consumers first.

Regulation of third-party intermediaries

The Government have listened to the voices of working people, small businesses and industry, keenly expressed in responses to our consultation and by Members of this House, including prominently by my hon. friend the member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards).

I am proud to announce today that the Government intend to directly regulate third-party intermediaries, including energy brokers, by appointing Ofgem as regulator when parliamentary time allows.

Many energy brokers, price comparison services and other TPIs provide a good faith and good value service to their customers. But throughout the consultation and more widely, consumers, suppliers and others have provided evidence that confidence in the business energy market, and energy brokers in particular, has been undermined by a subset of unethical and exploitative rogue actors. This minority of rogue brokers have used dubious sales tactics, biased and misleading information, and deceptive commission payments to profit from charities and small business who just wanted a fair deal on their energy contracts.

That is why the Government are taking decisive action, introducing direct regulation of this market, moving to appoint Ofgem to create additional protections and fighting to get a better deal for energy consumers. Regulation will support good faith TPIs by clearing out bad actors and creating an even playing field that rewards quality services and enables pro-consumer innovation.

The Government's decision to regulate this market will ultimately give consumers confidence that TPIs are acting in their best interests and enabling them to benefit from the smart, secure and sustainable energy system of the future.

Standardising business energy contracts linked to smart meters

In addition to TPI regulation, the Government are also protecting small businesses through proposals in our consultation published today on business energy contracts linked to smart meters. These new regulations would standardise the use of fixed-term energy contracts that require businesses to install smart meters, in response to the increasing use of these contracts by energy suppliers. From 2027, suppliers will need to co-ordinate the roll-out of these contracts and follow a legally binding customer protection code. Through these rules, the Government will ensure that these contracts are implemented fairly and consistently across the non-domestic energy market.

Smart meters bring significant benefits to non-domestic consumers, helping them to better manage their energy use and save money on their bills, giving them access to more innovative tariffs, and removing the need for manual meter readings and estimated billing. The consultation announced today will ensure that businesses are better protected and know what to expect when moving to a contract that requires a smart meter.

Strengthening the Energy Ombudsman

In addition to these measures, which focus on protecting small businesses, the Government are seeking to increase protections for all consumers in the energy market.

Today I am also able to announce a third set of proposals that would improve protections for households as well as small businesses.

The Government want to eliminate bad practice and prevent problems arising, but when things do go wrong, we want consumers to have access to faster, fairer and easier redress. That is why we are planning to strengthen the Energy Ombudsman, ensuring that when it rules in a consumer's favour, that decision is implemented and things are quickly put right.

The Energy Ombudsman's dispute resolution service is available to all households and small businesses as an alternative to legal action to resolve consumer complaints against energy suppliers, heat networks providers and some energy brokers.

The Government's plans would legally require suppliers to comply with the ombudsman's rulings. Further, where a company has not implemented a decision on time and in full, the ombudsman would be given the power to order companies to compensate their customers. With these proposals, consumers will be able to trust that when the ombudsman rules in their favour, their supplier must act.

The proposals would also speed up the process for consumers receiving redress. We are proposing to halve the time before issues can be escalated to the ombudsman from eight weeks to four, and to cut the time for a decision from the ombudsman from six weeks to four. Consumers would have access to a legally-binding decision as quickly as two months after their initial complaint, with the outcome implemented within a further month. This is a significant improvement on the four or five month wait that many consumers currently experience to have things put right.

Together these steps will prohibit anti-consumer practices, improve consumer access to redress if issues occur and take a substantial step towards an energy market that puts consumers first.

[HCWS982]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Company Performance Reports

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Today, the Environment Agency will publish its environmental performance assessment (EPA) for 2024 and Ofwat will publish their water company performance report (WCPR) for the 2024-25 financial year.

These assessments are being brought together for the first time, as a first step to join up economic and environmental regulation of the water industry ahead of the formation of the single water regulator.

Ofwat's report shows a mixed picture, with improvement in some areas such as internal sewer flooding and increasing the number of vulnerable customers included on the priority services register. However, both reports show that pollution and customer experience performance remain concerning. Polluting our waterways is unacceptable and we are taking decisive action. The increased transparency and accountability in the sector is revealing the full picture. The sector must now step up to deliver improvements for the benefit of customers and the environment.

Since July last year, this Government have introduced the landmark Water (Special Measures) Act which provides the most significant increase in enforcement powers to the regulators in a decade, giving regulators the teeth they need to take tougher action against water companies. The Act has started to drive meaningful improvements in the performance and culture of the water industry. It has banned unfair bonuses, and Government have ensured money is ringfenced for investment.

A record 87 investigations into water companies have been launched in England since the election, as part of a crackdown on sewage dumping. The Environment Agency has increased its capacity for inspections of water company assets fourfold, with over 4,000 inspections completed from April 2024 to March 2025. As of April 2025, the Environment Agency has increased its target for inspections to 10,000 inspections per year as part of the Government wider focus on holding companies to account and improving our water environment.

To fund their tougher inspections and enforcement regime, the Environment Agency has increased its water quality charges to £149 million from 2025-26, ensuring water companies, not taxpayers, pay the cost of regulating the sector. These charges include permit charges on water companies for inspections and the new enforcement levy, which will enable Environment Agency to recover the costs of their enforcement activity.

Since the start of this year, water companies have been required to publish data related to discharges from all storm overflows within one hour of the discharge beginning. In addition to this, the Water (Special Measures) Act introduced a new duty for water companies to publish data related to discharges from all emergency overflows within one hour of the discharge beginning. This will create an unprecedented level of transparency, enabling the public and regulators to see where, and how often, overflows are discharging, and hold water companies to account.

The Government also updated the guaranteed standards scheme (GSS) regulations resulting in an up to tenfold increase for customer compensation when they have been failed by water companies. A key step in the Government mission to reform the water sector, the move marked the first uplift in compensation rates in 25 years, recognising the urgent need to bring payments in line with inflation and properly compensate households for poor service.

And yesterday we kick-started the process of introducing new automatic penalties, which will deliver swift action if water companies break the rules. These penalties will streamline the penalty process for offences that can be identified and evidenced quickly, delivering a transparent and robust enforcement regime that drives real change.

On 23 October 2024, the Government also asked Sir Jon Cunliffe to lead the biggest review of the water sector since privatisation in 1989. Following Sir Jon's final report, the Government announced the intention to establish a single regulator for water, to improve regional planning, and to establish a new statutory water ombudsman. The Government also intend to end operator self-monitoring, transferring oversight to the new regulator and transitioning to open monitoring to increase transparency and help restore public trust. To support transition to this new regime, we announced our intention to update ministerial guidance and direction to Ofwat and the Environment Agency and will publish a White Paper, responding to the independent review.

The reports published today show the full extent of the problem, and we have already taken action to reform the water sector. While we cannot expect change to happen overnight, these measures, alongside a record £104 billion investment in water infrastructure, means together we will clean up our rivers, lakes and seas.

[HCWS985]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong: Six-monthly Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today and is available as an attachment online. It covers the period from 1 January to 30 June 2025. The report has been placed in the Library of each House. A copy is also available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/six-monthly-report-on-hong-kong-january-to-june-2025
I commend the report to the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-10-23/HCWS988

[HCWS988]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Menopause and the NHS Health Check

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): My noble friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health (Baroness Merron) has made the following written statement:

> Today I am pleased to be updating the House on a key step we are taking to support women who are going through the menopause.
>
> Menopause is a major life event affecting all women in a variety of ways, both short and long term. Each year around 400,000 women in the UK enter menopause and around three quarters will experience symptoms, lasting an average of seven years.
>
> While menopause is a natural stage of a woman's life course, symptoms are common with one in four women experiencing the impact on every area of life, at home and at work with women's employment rates falling as the number of menopausal symptoms they report rises.
>
> That is why we are taking action to ensure women are supported through this journey.
>
> Every five years, people aged between 40 and 74 without pre-existing heart conditions are invited to an NHS health check, aiming to detect people at risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and kidney disease.
>
> Perimenopause symptoms can often start from the age of 40, with most women starting the menopause between the ages of 45 and 55, so NHS health checks provide a key opportunity to reach and support these women.
>
> We have listened to women, organisations like Menopause Mandate and the all-party parliamentary group on menopause who have long campaigned for the menopause to be included in the NHS health checks.
>
> That is why we will ask all local authorities to introduce a new element to NHS health checks in 2026. This new menopause question included in the NHS health check will mean eligible women aged 40 to 55 can access advice about the menopause and perimenopause more easily.
>
> We know that women have faced difficulty with access to NHS services being fragmented and through this change we are delivering on our commitment to women's health, by personalising services to support individuals to manage their health, as set out in the 10-year health plan.
>
> Together, we will ensure women feel supported and are able to access high quality information on the menopause, including advice on managing symptoms and where to seek support.

[HCWS989]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Accountability Rapid Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Today, I am publishing the police accountability rapid review, an independent report commissioned by the Government in October 2024. The review was conducted by Timothy Godwin OBE QPM and the right hon. Sir Adrian Fulford between November 2024 and May 2025. The review will be available on gov.uk.

The review examined two key legal issues:

> Whether the legal test for use of force in police misconduct cases should be raised from the civil to the criminal standard; and
>
> Whether the threshold for determining a short-form conclusion of unlawful killing in inquests should revert from the civil to the criminal standard of proof.

The review concludes that the current legal framework has created confusion, inconsistency, and a chilling effect on police morale, particularly among firearms officers. It recommends the Government the criminal law test for use of force in misconduct cases and carries out a public consultation on the standard of proof in inquests.

I am pleased to confirm that the Government accept both recommendations. Police officers have an exceptionally demanding role. They have to run towards danger, tackle dangerous criminals and put their lives on the line to keep the public safe. We are determined to ensure both that officers are supported in making difficult decisions in the line of duty and that we have robust and transparent systems of accountability. We are committed to a policing system that commands public confidence and protects those who serve with integrity and professionalism.

Police officers need to be confident they can act decisively in challenging situations. Anything that undermines this confidence affects their ability to protect the public. This uncertainty is neither fair on them, nor in the public's interest. That is why we have accepted the recommendation to raise the legal test for use of force in police misconduct cases from the civil to the criminal standard. This will not water down standards or make officers less accountable. Any officer falling below the standards we expect has no place in policing, and we have brought in measures to ensure they are swiftly dismissed. Hesitation and second-guessing can cost lives, and this Government will do everything we can to make our streets safer.

Making this change will require amendments to the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020. I will consult the Police Advisory Board for England and Wales, as required

by statute, before making the necessary changes. Subject to that process, my intention is that those changes will come into force by spring 2026.

The report also highlights the need for greater consistency and fairness across criminal, disciplinary, and coronial proceedings. It finds that the current framework where different legal standards apply to the same set of facts can lead to confusion, reputational harm, and a loss of confidence among police officers and the public alike.

The Deputy Prime Minister welcomes the recommendation that the Government should undertake a full public consultation on the standard of proof for unlawful killing in inquests. This is a matter of significant legal and constitutional importance, with implications beyond policing, including in prisons, healthcare, and workplace safety. The Ministry of Justice will publish a consultation paper in due course.

These issues go to the heart of public confidence in the police accountability system. We must ensure that our legal standards are coherent, proportionate, and uphold the rule of law, while also supporting those who serve the public in challenging circumstances.

This Government have set out bold plans to ensure that the police have the confidence of the communities they serve, and that officers have the confidence that they need to do their vital and often extremely difficult job of keeping us all safe.

Since Parliament was last updated in April, we have made considerable progress in implementing the wider measures we committed to in the accountability review. This includes:

The Crime and Policing Bill is progressing through Parliament and will make changes to: provide for a presumption of anonymity for firearms officers who are subject to a criminal trial following a shooting, align the threshold for police and Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) referrals of police officers to the CPS with the threshold used by the police when referring cases involving members of the public, allow the IOPC to send cases to the CPS where there is sufficient evidence prior to their final investigation report, and put the IOPC's victims' right to review policy on a statutory footing. The Bill is currently in the Lords.

To help ensure consistency and clarity, the IOPC and National Police Chiefs' Council have introduced two new protocols, the first regarding the investigation of deaths or serious injuries on the roads involving police officers, and the second protocol is in regard to the expectations and arrangements for the use of subject matter experts in IOPC independent investigations concerning the use of force by police officers.

New police vetting regulations and changes to police misconduct, performance and complaints regulations came into force in May, followed by the publication of operational vetting guidance in July.

The development of phase one of a national database of lessons learned when death or serious injury take place after police contact or pursuits is now complete. This is being developed by the College of Policing, and phase 2, the development of a fuller featured national database including a wider range of data sources, will commence shortly.

This builds on the progress we had already made, including the Director of Public Prosecution's review of CPS guidance and processes in relation to charging police officers for offences committed in the course of their duties, which was completed in January 2025.

We will launch a wider review to address systemic barriers to timeliness in the police misconduct system to improve public and police confidence shortly.

I remain committed to build on the strong progress we have already made.

[HCWS987]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Greater Cambridge: Sustainable Growth

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Today, I set out further steps the Government are taking to realise the full potential of Greater Cambridge as part of our plans to supercharge growth in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor.

The Oxford-Cambridge region is already home to world-leading universities and globally renowned science and technology firms. It has the potential to become one of the most innovative and economically dynamic areas in the world. However, numerous long-standing barriers to further growth, from inadequate transport connections to a lack of affordable housing, are preventing it from realising its true potential.

The supply-side constraints evident across the Oxford-Cambridge region are particularly acute in Greater Cambridge. Its economic growth has been a phenomenal success and the city and its environs are home to the most intensive science and technological cluster in the world. Yet, Cambridge's continued position as a world-leading centre of innovation is dependent on tackling infrastructure deficiencies, commercial accessibility and housing affordability.

In October 2024, I appointed Peter Freeman to chair the Cambridge Growth Company (CGC)—a subsidiary of Homes England. The CGC was tasked with working with local partners to develop and implement an ambitious plan for high-quality sustainable growth in Cambridge and its environs. Its efforts to unlock and accelerate prime development opportunities have already facilitated the delivery of over 9,000 additional homes, a new cancer hospital, and new commercial and laboratory space.

In addition to identifying and enabling near-term development opportunities, the CGC was asked to develop the evidence base to support an infrastructure-first growth plan and a long-term delivery vehicle. Based on the work the CGC has undertaken over the past year, I believe that the nature, scale and complexity of ambitious and high- quality sustainable growth in Cambridge and its environs will require a delivery vehicle with the necessary powers, authority and access to finance.

I am therefore announcing today that the Government intend to consult on establishing a centrally-led development corporation to deliver nationally significant growth in Greater Cambridge.

To support the delivery of new homes, infrastructure, business and laboratory space, and a programme of water-saving measures, the Government are also making available up to £400 million of initial funding. This ambitious funding package will provide the CGC and a future delivery vehicle with the capital needed to unlock and accelerate key sites, remove barriers to sustainable growth, and boost housing supply.

In order that the benefits of further growth will be felt by new and existing communities alike, we are committed to an ongoing partnership with local leaders, communities and residents. Their insights, knowledge and direct input will steer the precise form of any

delivery vehicle's ambition. Should a decision be taken to establish a centrally-led development corporation, it is our intention that local democratically elected leaders would be invited to join the board. There will be opportunities to formally shape the Government proposals as part of the future consultation process.

To demonstrate the Government's firm commitment to realising the full potential of Greater Cambridge in the months and years ahead, I can today also confirm the following:

A new chief executive will be recruited to lead the next phase of the CGC's ambitious programme.

The Department of Science, Innovation and Technology will provide a £15 million grant for the University of Cambridge's innovation hub to build a flexible, world-class lab space where life science and technology start-ups can begin their growth journey to becoming global businesses.

The CGC is working with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough combined authority and other local partners to explore options for mass rapid transit solutions for Cambridge.

The Government have instructed Anglian Water to accelerate planning for wastewater infrastructure upgrades required to accommodate development and growth both now and for the Cambridge Growth Company's long-term ambitions for expansion in Greater Cambridge. This will report to Government by early 2026.

Work continues with local partners and the advisory water scarcity group to deliver our water efficiency programme. The first phase, backed by £5 million of investment, is already under way and will roll out water retrofits in social housing and public buildings across the city.

Investment announced today will go towards expanding delivery of the water efficiency programme and wider water package to address water scarcity. We will also use Cambridge as a testbed to trial innovative water interventions, including working with experts to switch on the water recycling system at the Eddington site in north-west Cambridge next year.

We will continue to update Parliament on the work of the Government in Greater Cambridge, and the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor.

[HCWS990]

Housing Delivery

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Today, I set out further steps the Government are taking to realise the full potential of greater Cambridge as part of our plans to supercharge growth in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor.

The Oxford-Cambridge region is already home to world-leading universities and globally renowned science and technology firms. It has the potential to become one of the most innovative and economically dynamic areas in the world. However, numerous long-standing barriers to further growth, from inadequate transport connections to a lack of affordable housing, are preventing it from realising its true potential.

The supply-side constraints evident across the Oxford-Cambridge region are particularly acute in greater Cambridge. Its economic growth has been a phenomenal success and the city and its environs are home to the most intensive science and technological cluster in the world, yet Cambridge's continued position as a world-leading centre of innovation is dependent on tackling infrastructure deficiencies, commercial accessibility and housing affordability.

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To support the delivery of new homes, infrastructure, business and laboratory space, and a programme of water-savings measures, the Government are also making available up to £400 million of initial funding. This ambitious funding package will provide the CGC and a future delivery vehicle with the capital needed to unlock and accelerate development on key sites, remove barriers to sustainable growth, and boost housing supply.

In order for the benefits of further growth to be felt by new and existing communities alike, we are committed to an ongoing partnership with local leaders, communities and residents. Their insights, knowledge and direct input will steer the precise form of any delivery vehicle's ambition. Should a decision be taken to establish a centrally led development corporation, it is our intention that local democratically elected leaders would be invited to join the board. There will be opportunities to formally shape the Government's proposals as part of the future consultation process.

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The CGC is working with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough combined authority and other local partners to explore options for mass rapid transit solutions for Cambridge.

The Government have instructed Anglian Water to accelerate planning for the waste water infrastructure upgrades required to accommodate development and growth, both now and for the Cambridge Growth Company's long-term ambitions for expansion in greater Cambridge. This will report to Government by early 2026.

Work continues with local partners and the advisory Water Scarcity Group to deliver our water efficiency programme. The first phase, backed by £5 million of investment, is already under way and will roll out water retrofits in social housing and public buildings across the city.

Investment announced today will go towards expanding delivery of the water efficiency programme and wider water package to address water scarcity. We will also use Cambridge as a testbed to trial innovative water interventions, including working with experts to switch on the water recycling system at the Eddington site in north-west Cambridge next year.

We will continue to update Parliament on the work of the Government in greater Cambridge, and the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor.

[HCWS990]

PRIME MINISTER

Digital Identity Scheme: Departmental Responsibility

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of Government update. In order to deliver this cross-Government priority, the Cabinet Office will have overall responsibility of the new digital identity scheme, including policy development, legislation and strategic oversight.

The Cabinet Office will work alongside the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, who will be responsible for the technical design, build and delivery; and other Departments. This will be effective immediately.

[HCWS981]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 23 October 2025

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