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27 October 2025**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 27 October 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 774

TWENTY THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 27 October 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

STANDING ORDERS (PRIVATE BUSINESS)

Ordered,

That the following amendment to the Standing Orders relating to private business be made: in Standing Order No. 224—*Examination of public bills by Examiners*—after paragraph 6, insert—

“(6A) In the case of a public bill in relation to which the Examiner decides standing orders are applicable, or of any additional provision in such a bill, the Examiner will not report that the bill, or additional provision, is non-compliant with a standing order on the ground that the date, or dates, specified in the standing order has, or have, not been complied with, provided that the Examiner is satisfied that anything which was required to be done on, or by, a date specified in that standing order has been done on, or by, a date that is appropriate, having regard to the purpose of the standing order in question.”—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I want to make a short statement on the work of the Speaker's Conference. The House knows how seriously I take the security of this House and its Members, staff and families, and so a year ago, I established the conference to consider the security of Members, candidates and elections, and the threats against them. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the many Members and Members' staff who contributed their time and insights

to the conference. Your experiences have been vital in shaping the findings and recommendations outlined in the report. We published our first report in June, and today we publish our second and final report.

We now come to topical questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I call Catherine Fookes. [*Interruption.*] I beg your pardon; I have been given the wrong piece of paper.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Pension Age Increase: Institute for Fiscal Studies Report

1. **Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his Department's policies of the report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies entitled, “How do people already out of employment fare when the state pension age rises”, published on 17 September 2025. [906001]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): The clocks went back at the weekend, and you nearly put them forward again, Mr Speaker.

I am pleased to be here answering my first set of questions as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I look forward to my exchanges with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), and the other spokespeople in the House.

The state pension age will rise to 67 from 2028. We continue to support later-life planning by helping people review their health, finances and skills—for example, by having specific work coaches for over-50s in our jobcentres. Consideration of the future of the state pension age is already under way, as asked for under the Pensions Act 2014.

Mr Dillon: I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position. In my seat of Newbury, over 5,200 women have been unfairly affected by changes to the state pension age. Those women were wronged through no fault of their own, and they deserve justice. With a High Court hearing due in December, this could be a crucial moment for the Government—a moment to finally do the right thing. Will the Secretary of State now listen to the ombudsman's recommendations and commit to providing compensation to women of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign?

Pat McFadden: I have to remind the hon. Member that when his party was in government, it supported the acceleration in the rise of the basic state pension age, and that has given rise to some of the questions he raises. You would not expect me to comment on ongoing litigation, Mr Speaker, and I will not, but I can assure the hon. Member and the House that we will take all relevant factors into account when considering the process for the future.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Previous to my election to this place, I worked for a homeless charity in Harlow called Streets2Homes. One of its cases involved a man who was homeless due to delays in getting his state pension. How is the Department ensuring that delays like that are not commonplace?

Pat McFadden: We hope that those entitled to the basic state pension receive a seamless and fast service. This is a pension that people contribute to throughout their life, and when they reach state pension age, we of course hope that they get it as soon as possible.

Access to Work Scheme

2. **Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** What steps his Department is taking to assess the effectiveness of the Access to Work scheme in helping to enable long-term career progression for disabled people. [906002]

9. **Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve the Access to Work scheme. [906009]

11. **Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD):** What changes have been made to the Access to Work scheme in this parliamentary Session. [906011]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Access to Work does an important job, but current delays with the scheme, and our ambition for an 80% rate of employment, point to the need for reform. The consultation, launched in the “Pathways to Work” Green Paper, closed on 30 June. We are reviewing all aspects of the scheme in the light of the responses that we received.

Bobby Dean: A constituent came to my surgery the other week who felt pretty frustrated that the Access to Work scheme, which once supported him, was pulling the rug from beneath his feet as he progressed in his career. He has been a model example; he has not let his multiple neurodivergent diagnoses hold him back. He has worked hard and, with support, has earned a promotion

to a deputy leadership position. At that point, the DWP decided to reassess him, and it downgraded his support—right at the moment when he felt he needed to maintain that support, given his new responsibilities. Can the Minister assure us that when the reforms come, they will ensure that people are supported over the progression of their career, as well as into work in the first place?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Obviously, I do not know the details of the case that he refers to, but it is important that Access to Work and our wider employment support enable people not just to get into work, but to thrive once they are there, exactly as he says.

Marsha De Cordova: The Access to Work scheme provides vital support, and it is one of the best forms of support for blind and partially sighted workers, but when their awards come up for review, they find that their support and awards are being significantly reduced. Given the Government's commitment to keeping Britain working, will the Minister explain why blind and partially sighted people are seeing their support cut? Will he agree to meet me and sight-loss organisations to see how we can address some of the challenges with the scheme?

Sir Stephen Timms: There has been absolutely no change in the policy on Access to Work, but there has been more scrupulous application of the existing policy and guidance over the last year. That means that Access to Work awards have been more consistent, and I know there have been cases in which support has been reduced. I am looking forward to attending the forthcoming meeting of the all-party group on eye health and visual impairment, which my hon. Friend chairs; that might give us an opportunity to discuss the issues she has raised.

Martin Wrigley: On 20 May, I met the Minister to speak about Access to Work claims that were being denied, changed or reduced, all contrary to the guidelines. The Minister assured me that it was a communications issue, that the guidelines had not changed and that officials were going to fix the problems by speaking to the local jobcentre. The problems were not fixed. Since then, both Dawlish Gardens Trust and the No Limits café in Newton Abbot have ceased to provide Access to Work services because the system just is not working and, they said, every claim was being rejected. That assessment has been mirrored by the Access to Work Collective. Who changed the guidelines, and why? Are they simply being ignored to save money at the cost of vulnerable adults? If the Minister would like more information, I am happy to meet him again.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman again, but I assure him that the policy has not changed. In fact, just last week we published the spending figures on Access to Work, which went up by 17% in the last year and by 32% in the year before that. I do not know what happened in the particular case the hon. Gentleman referred to, but would be happy to look at it further.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Access to Work is vital. At the high end of the scale, it can sometimes be more expensive. I have in my constituency a very senior person in the world of theatre who runs Graeae theatre. She requires Access to

Work support but, even with the right support, there is not enough for her needs, because she needs a British Sign Language interpreter with her at all times. Graeae theatre is at the pinnacle of assessing what people need, and I would love to invite the Minister to visit it, because staff there are great at supporting disabled people into work, with and without Access to Work support.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am aware that a big chunk of Access to Work funding goes on British Sign Language interpretation, and it is not unusual for people who draw on that support to hit the cap, which increased last year and is now £69,920 a year. We will look at that, along with all other aspects of the scheme, in the review we are undertaking.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Back in May last year, while in opposition, the Labour party was outraged to learn that the average processing time for applications to the Access to Work programme was running at 43.9 days. In fact, so outraged were Labour Members that they made it a manifesto pledge to tackle that problem. After more than 15 months in government, Labour is far from having slashed waiting times; applicants now have to wait an average of 93.6 days. That is more than twice the waiting time under the previous Government. After a year in government, the Labour party has doubled the misery and uncertainty suffered by disabled people—why?

Sir Stephen Timms: We are fixing the very serious problems left behind by the previous Government. The number of people who are processing Access to Work applications has been increased by 118 since May last year, but the hon. Gentleman is right that delays are still a problem. That points clearly to the need for reform, which is what we are getting on with.

Post-16 Education: Skills Needed in the Economy

3. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure that post-16 education provides the necessary skills to support the economy. [906003]

6. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure that post-16 education provides the necessary skills to support the economy. [906006]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Skills are vital to give young people opportunity, for economic growth and to our country's renewal. That is why, as part of our youth guarantee, we are increasing short courses for high-demand sectors such as artificial intelligence and construction, expanding the number of youth hubs, and partnering with sports clubs to get help to people where they are in the community. Last week, we published the skills White Paper, which sets out the next steps for training the workforce of the future.

Baggy Shanker: I still want every young person in Derby to see technical education and apprenticeships as first-class, not second-best, routes to success. University

technical colleges, from which students are four times more likely to progress on to apprenticeships, are key to unlocking that success. Will my right hon. Friend meet Pride Park UTC to discuss its plans to give young people in Derby real choice and real opportunity by rolling out a new technical centre in our city?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend has spoken often about this, and I believe that he started his career as an apprentice. As a former Rolls-Royce worker, he will have noted the skills White Paper, and of course he knows all about the importance of that company to the city of Derby. I congratulate Pride Park UTC on its plans for a new technical skills centre, and I will ensure that he gets a meeting with me or with the relevant Minister.

Helen Hayes: My Committee's recent report on further education and skills highlights the poor amount of information on vocational and technical training opportunities, including apprenticeships, available to young people while they are in school. We recommend that UCAS be expanded to provide a single portal for information on academic, vocational and technical opportunities, so that every young person is aware of how they can train in the skills that they need to access a good job. Will the Secretary of State consider this recommendation, and work with the Department for Education to deliver it?

Pat McFadden: I welcome that question, as my hon. Friend raises a very important point. If we are going to have equal status for higher education and apprenticeship routes, we should look at how the information about them is disseminated to potential applicants. I hope that she will be pleased to hear that I have already asked the Department to begin work in this area.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): One of the worries about the new regime and Skills England is the loss of independence, and the loss of what we had in the former Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education: a guaranteed business voice, written into law. How will the Secretary of State ensure that business has a voice in setting standards, and in making sure that those standards are upheld, so that everybody can have confidence in the changed system?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the business voice and employers' voice is very important in this. When I wrote the new remit letter to Skills England, I asked it to take into account the views of employers, because it is very important that the skills system is training people in a way that employers want, and that meets the future demands of the labour market.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and to his new responsibility for skills. The Government recently reduced the amount of funding for level 7 apprenticeships, so can he tell the House what assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of this reduced funding on the number of nurses in training?

Pat McFadden: The apprenticeships and skills budget, like every other budget, demands choices. We are choosing to prioritise the level that we need in the economy, and the areas where the value is greatest. That does imply

certain choices, and I am confident that the choices we have made will benefit the workforce as a whole, and future opportunities.

Employment: People with Health Conditions

4. **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people with health conditions into work. [906004]

23. **Emma Lewell** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people with health conditions into work. [906023]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We are determined to open up opportunities in work for people with health conditions. The Keep Britain Working review will be published soon. In Pathways to Work, we have 1,000 work advisers supporting this group, and we will devolve powers, so that areas can shape their own joined-up local work, health and skills offer.

Steve Race: I recently visited Pluss in Exeter, which supports people living with physical disabilities and mental health conditions back into employment. I met some of the fantastically committed mentors, who provide tailored training and support, helping hundreds of people who have been long-term unemployed into meaningful jobs, boosting their confidence and helping them rebuild their lives. Does the Minister agree that under the last Tory Government, disability employment was shockingly neglected? In contrast, this Government's recent announcement about Connect to Work funding for Devon will help many more people back into the workplace.

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The disability employment gap has been stuck at around 30 percentage points ever since 2010. What he refers to in his constituency sounds like a great example of exactly the kind of resource we want to draw on in each area to make sure that disabled people have the opportunities in work that they were denied in the past.

Emma Lewell: The Motability scheme provides a lifeline to people with disabilities, allowing them to get to health appointments, study, maintain employment and so much more. Cuts to the scheme risk increased health needs and increased unemployment, which are likely to cost much more than any short-term savings. Does my right hon. Friend agree that before any proposed cuts are implemented, it is vital to carry out a proper impact assessment?

Sir Stephen Timms: I can assure my hon. Friend that there will be no changes to the eligibility conditions for the mobility component of the personal independence payment, or indeed other aspects of PIP, until the conclusion of the review, which I will be leading and co-producing with disabled people. That is expected to report in autumn next year.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): When severe mental illness strikes, it can be devastating and totally debilitating, but the problem from the Department's point of view is that its symptoms are invisible. There have been reports of people faking mental illness in

order to gain benefits. Is the right hon. Gentleman satisfied that his Department has appropriate checks in place?

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, appropriate checks are in place. As I have just mentioned, we are undertaking a review of the PIP assessment, and we will need to look carefully, together with disabled people, at the way in which those decisions and judgments are made.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): At a recent roundtable at the Eyres Monsell club for young people in my constituency, parents told me that their young adults with learning difficulties, who volunteered for years, often with major supermarkets, still struggle to secure work. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that young people with high-functioning learning disabilities in long-term volunteering roles can access clear pathways into paid employment?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. He will have seen, as many hon. Members will have done, recent publicity about a particular case of this kind. At the moment, the proportion of people with severe learning disabilities who are in employment is tiny, so we are working with employers and some very good supported internship programmes in the hope of opening up opportunities for work, and I hope we will see many more opportunities in the future. We appointed an expert panel earlier this year to look at how better to support people with neurodivergence into work, and the panel is coming forward with some interesting proposals.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Health Equity North recently produced an analysis for the Select Committee that revealed that getting just 5% of people with disabilities or health conditions into employment would yield cost savings of over £12 billion. What progress is being made with employers to enable sick and disabled people who want to work, and are able to do so, to get into employment?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I agree with her about the tremendous value, for the people who benefit and for the economy more widely, of opening up opportunities in employment in the way that she described. That is exactly what the Keep Britain Working review, led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, is looking at. I am looking forward to Sir Charlie's report, and I am sure my hon. Friend will find it interesting. I expect it to be published quite soon.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Four thousand people in Somerset, many of them with disabilities, are being transitioned from employment and support allowance to universal credit. They were assured that they would not lose out, but one constituent waited three months with no income at all, until an intervention by me and the Department. Somerset was not warned about this transition, which is causing it huge difficulties with assessing the implications for council tax benefits. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that, just as people were told, they will not lose out in the transition to universal credit?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am not sure why the news of the transition did not reach Somerset; the plans have been quite well publicised. We have put in place a careful enhanced support journey for people, including a number of people on ESA, who might struggle with the transition. The hon. Gentleman raises a particular case, but if there are other cases where there are difficulties, we are able to provide extra support to ensure that people can make the transition without hardship.

Carer's Allowance

5. Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): How many people are in receipt of carer's allowance. [906005]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Some 975,000 people are being paid carer's allowance in England and Wales, including some 900 people in the hon. Member's constituency.

Dr Chambers: We all know that carers give everything to care for their loved ones—physically, emotionally and financially. The Government received the carer's allowance report three months ago, and under Lib Dem pressure have agreed to publish it by the end of the year. Do we know how many carers will be unfairly penalised in the six months between the Government receiving the report and publishing it?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree with the hon. Member's characterisation of the degree of commitment and sacrifice being made by very large numbers of carers right across the country. As he has said, the report, which we commissioned from Liz Sayce, will be published by the end of the year, together with the Government's response—and his question will be addressed in that response.

Young People: Employment, Education and Training

7. Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support young people into employment, education or training. [906007]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): When we came to office, almost 1 million young people were not in education, employment or training. This Government are determined to offer young people proper opportunities. Our youth guarantee will ensure that 18 to 21-year-olds are learning or earning, helping to prevent them from becoming economically inactive almost before their careers have even begun. As my hon. Friend might have seen, the Chancellor has announced that a jobs guarantee scheme will be a future part of this work.

Kirsteen Sullivan: With one in six young Scots not in education, employment or training, including hundreds across my constituency, I welcome the Government's youth guarantee to give young people the training or job support they need. However, with stubborn youth unemployment, the Scottish Government's swingeing cuts to the college sector and employers warning that Scottish apprenticeships are less favourable than those in England, how will the Secretary of State work to ensure that young people across the UK can benefit from this Government's ambition?

Pat McFadden: Not for the first time, we have to point out that the Scottish Government have benefited from the biggest financial settlement since the introduction of devolution. It should not be too much to expect that at least a proportion of that should be spent on expanding opportunity for young people in my hon. Friend's constituency and throughout Scotland. Scotland has given so much to the world in creativity and innovation, and it is absolutely critical that the next generation of young Scots get the chance to do the same.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Skills bootcamps in Cumbria have provided a great opportunity: 60 hours of training for young people in disciplines as varied as coding, scaffolding and project management. The cost to deliver those bootcamps across the whole of Cumbria is £2.7 million—chicken feed compared with the benefit that those young people and their future employers get out of them. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with his friends in the Treasury to ensure that that scheme is maintained and continued?

Pat McFadden: I am always having conversations with my friends in the Treasury. I agree with the hon. Member that flexibility and some short courses in the skills and training system are very important. Not everything has to be done according to the exact same formula and recipe, and shorter training courses have a big part to play.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new job and wish him luck in it—especially because, with every day that passes under this Government, we see fewer people enjoying the chance to start a new job. Unemployment has gone up month after month. Nearly 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training because of this Government's policies, jobs tax and business red tape; even the Pensions Minister's former think-tank agrees with me. People all around the country are out looking for work—young people who want to get on in life and all those trying to provide for their families—so can the Secretary of State tell us and them when he will get unemployment down?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady has a short memory. The Government in which she served presided over the biggest slowdown in living standards in recent memory, and there are 358,000 more people in work now than there were at the start of the year. We will keep supporting young people into work and will change the system that we inherited, which had the wrong incentives and a lack of support. We are putting both of those things to rights.

Helen Whately: No surprises there, Mr Speaker; the Prime Minister can put new faces on the Front Bench, but they still do not have the answers. The right hon. Gentleman criticised the previous Conservative Government, but we got unemployment down to a 40-year low—a record Labour could only dream of. The Government do not want to be held to account. Worse still, the right hon. Gentleman knows that what he is doing will not work, because the country is looking down the barrel of more tax rises in next month's Budget, which will kill yet more jobs and opportunities.

Whether it is graduates looking for their first job or older people being made redundant, people are crying out for a Government who are on their side. What will it take to get the Chancellor to understand that it is businesses that create jobs, not the Government, and does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the more the Chancellor damages the economy, the bigger the welfare bill will get?

Pat McFadden: Since we came into office, interest rates have been cut five times, helping businesses and households. According to Lloyds, business confidence is at a nine-year high, and there is to be much more private investment, including the £150 billion announced during the recent state visit. Add to that the trade deals that the Conservatives could not secure—there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of the economy and I hope the hon. Lady shares them.

Child Poverty

8. **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reduce the number of children in poverty. [906008]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State co-chairs the ministerial child poverty taskforce, which is leading our work across Government to develop the UK-wide child poverty strategy, which will be published later this year. We are considering all available levers to give every child the best start in life, building on work that is already under way across all four nations. Ahead of publication, the Government have already taken action for the whole UK, including introducing a fair repayment rate and improving the adequacy of the standard allowance of universal credit from April 2026.

Seamus Logan: The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that because of this Government's policies—especially the two-child cap—more than 100 children are dragged into poverty every day. That equates to almost 3,400 children between now and the Chancellor's autumn statement at the end of next month. Here is a lever: as child poverty in Scotland is falling, why does the Minister not finally listen to reason by scrapping this cruel policy? Why is he waiting? Why does he not just act now?

Andrew Western: This Government are acting now. We have already announced that all children in families in England that are in receipt of universal credit will receive free school meals, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty. We have capped the cost of school uniforms, and introduced a new crisis and resilience fund. Our Child Maintenance Service reforms will lift 20,000 children out of poverty, and much more will be done when the child poverty taskforce reports later this year.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Despite what those on the far right try to claim, the cost of living crisis remains the main issue that people face. One way to really help struggling families would be to lift the two-child benefit cap—that would lift hundreds of thousands of children across the country out of poverty,

including many in my constituency. Is it not the case that the forthcoming Budget should announce that the two-child benefit cap will be scrapped?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend will understand that I am not going to make policy from the Dispatch Box. What I would say to him, as I have already said to the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), is that all available levers are under consideration as part of our child poverty taskforce, which will report later this year. We will do what it takes to bear down on child poverty. There are many levers that we can look at using to do so; we have pulled some already, and we will continue that work.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Every Member in this Chamber shares a commitment to lifting people out of poverty, especially children; we just have different views on how to go about it. Children in workless households are nearly four times more likely to live in poverty than those in households where adults work. We know that work pays, yet we on the Conservative Benches find ourselves surrounded by parties that are just itching to scrap the two-child benefit cap, resorting to yet more sticking plasters, like universal breakfast clubs, to reduce uncomfortable figures without putting in the hard work to tackle their causes. Does the Minister share my concern that lifting the two-child benefit cap will increase worklessness, and can he guarantee that taxes will not go up in next month's Budget for adults who work hard and make careful decisions about family size in order to pay for the £3.6 billion it will cost to lift that cap?

Andrew Western: I am stunned to hear that the fight that the Opposition Front Benchers are choosing to pick on this occasion is opposing universal free breakfast clubs, when we know that well-fed children have hungry minds. [Interruption.] For those chirping from a sedentary position, that is exactly what the shadow Minister. What I find even more staggering are the lectures from an Opposition who left almost 3 million people in this country economically inactive and around 1 million young people out of work. They dragged 900,000 children into poverty, when the last Labour Government lifted 600,000 out. It is the last Labour Government who we will be taking lessons from, not the last Tory one.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I note that last year the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that it is open to debate as to whether the two-child limit is harmful. I note also that this policy has been the most impactful in driving children—more than 730,000 of them—into poverty. Will the Minister acknowledge that the two-child limit is harmful and work with Treasury colleagues to overturn it?

Andrew Western: I am happy to acknowledge the findings of the Child Poverty Action Group, which I think has put forward the statistics that the hon. Gentleman sets out. I remind him and all Members of this House that this is not the only lever available to us and that all levers are under active consideration. I also remind him,

as I have reminded other colleagues, of the steps that this Government have already taken, including the roll-out of free school meals to all families in receipt of universal credit, which alone will lift 100,000 children out of poverty.

Workforce Skills

10. **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure that skills provision meets the needs of employers. [906010]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): The skills White Paper, which we published last week, will create more opportunities. As I said in response to an earlier question, my remit letter to Skills England makes clear the importance of working closely with employers. Employers have told us that they want more flexibility in the apprenticeships levy, so the growth and skills offer is delivering that, with more foundation courses and short courses launching next year.

Claire Young: At a recent roundtable meeting in my Thornbury and Yate constituency, small businesses told me about the particular challenges they face in delivering apprenticeships. Given that the Secretary of State's Department is now responsible for this important policy area, what is he doing to reform apprenticeships to make them easier for small and medium-sized enterprises to deliver, and what support will he provide so that more can do so?

Pat McFadden: We want apprenticeships to be available to employers of all sizes. We have reduced the length of time an apprenticeship needs to take, and I think we can go further with short course flexibility, which should be particularly helpful to small and medium-sized employers.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I recently visited Premier Forest Products in Newport to learn more about the vocational training and employment opportunities that the business is offering to care-experienced young school leavers in Newport, with some wonderful success stories. Will the Department look at the model that company is creating and can the Secretary of State say more about how the Government are working with businesses to make sure that such opportunities are more accessible for people from all backgrounds, including those who are care-experienced?

Pat McFadden: I am happy to look at the experience of that particular employer. I enjoyed a recent visit to a different part of south Wales to open an opportunity hub, which is aimed precisely at getting more young people into work, particularly those who have been out of the labour market through long-term sickness issues. We want to support Wales in doing that, and we have allocated an extra £10 million to this work over the coming year.

Indexation of Pension Rights

12. **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): If he will take legislative steps to ensure that companies who previously provided indexation of pension rights accrued before April 1997 but have since lapsed, reintroduce indexation from April 2026. [906012]

16. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What steps he is taking to help tackle the potential impact of the lack of indexation on pre-1997 pensionable service in defined benefit pension schemes on people affected. [906016]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I obviously recognise the challenges facing those without inflation protection, particularly after the cost of living pressures of recent years, and I think that recognition is shared by Members on both sides of the House. I met a cross-party group of MPs earlier this year to discuss exactly this issue. Reforms in the Pension Schemes Bill give trustees more flexibility to share surpluses in their DB pension schemes with employers, and to negotiate for members to benefit from any such sharing of surpluses. That could include discretionary increases to address the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith).

Dame Nia Griffith: As a result of the efforts of pensioner associations, we know that there have been unintended consequences of the Pensions Act 1995, which made it legal to stop payment of indexation to the pre-1997 pensioners of successful multinationals such as 3M and Hewlett Packard Enterprise, who, having been recruited with the promise of index-linked pensions, are now suffering hardship. Their pensions have already been frozen for at least 15 years, despite healthy funds and trustees' pleas. What will the Minister do to stop this dishonourable practice, so that these companies deliver the financial security that they promised?

Torsten Bell: I absolutely recognise the issue that my hon. Friend has raised: any of us in that situation would want those pension increases to continue. She is aware of the legal background, but I should point out that scheme rules govern when inflation-linked increases can be paid. They are not changed retrospectively, but the Pensions Regulator has spelt out that trustees should consider those who are not receiving inflation-linked increases when making their decisions, and should also consider the history of making such awards—particularly in some of the examples that my hon. Friend has given. As I have said, I think that the provisions in the Pension Scheme Bill give trustees more power to argue for those increases.

Helen Morgan: I have been contacted by a constituent who, along with her husband, worked for Hewlett Packard. They accrued their pensions before 1997, and now, along with about 50,000 members of the Pre-97 Alliance, they are facing real financial hardship. In 10 years' time, their pensions will be pretty much worthless. Will the Minister not consider legislating to ensure that these people are not left in poverty, having been promised proper pensions when they started work for the companies concerned?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Lady has mentioned a specific company, although a small number of others are in the same position. I am sure that not only the people running that company but the trustees will have heard the powerful case made by Members on both sides of the House. These decisions must be made in line with the scheme rules, but no one wants savers to see the value of their pensions fall over time, and I hope that employers will take the case being made in the Chamber seriously.

Child Poverty: Cornwall

13. **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of child poverty in Cornwall. [906013]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): It is unacceptable that 23% of children in Cornwall are living in relative poverty. We will set out measures to tackle its structural and root causes in our child poverty strategy later in the year.

Ben Maguire: Child poverty cannot be tackled if children have nowhere safe to live. One of the most shameful legacies of the last Tory Government was Cornwall being left with more than 700 children living in temporary accommodation, while only 1.4% of homes are now affordable to families receiving the local housing allowance. What assessment has the Minister made of the extent to which that shortfall in affordable homes is driving child poverty rates even higher, and what urgent steps will he take to reverse it?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the appalling living standards and conditions in which some children—and, indeed, some members of the broader population—find themselves living. My advice to any Liberal Democrat Member would of course be to stop blocking the homes that we so desperately need. Let me also remind the hon. Gentleman that this Government have invested £39 billion in the delivery of social and affordable homes, because, unlike the Liberal Democrats, the Labour party is determined to tackle the housing crisis and to “build, baby, build”.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a Cornish question, and I am calling Perran Moon, so I ask others please not to stand.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker.

I represent the most deprived constituency in Cornwall, which is itself one of the most deprived areas in northern Europe. Child poverty shot up under the Conservatives. Today our local further education college—Cornwall college, rated “outstanding” by Ofsted—is turning away young learners in construction and engineering because of a lack of space. The college has a solution allowing it to expand, but will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the issue and help our amazing young people to break this cycle of deprivation?

Andrew Western: I am sorry to hear of the situation that my hon. Friend has outlined. If the Secretary of State is unable to meet him, I would be more than happy to do so.

Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Scheme

14. **Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on establishing the youth guarantee trailblazer scheme. [906014]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): The trailblazers are up and running and have been delivering support for young people since earlier this year. That includes, for example, mental health support and flexible work experience sessions. We have extended the programme for a further year, bringing the total funding to £90 million. The insights from those trailblazers will inform the national roll-out of our youth guarantee.

Patricia Ferguson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the actions of this Government, in supporting young people, are in stark contrast to the situation in Scotland, where we have had 18 years of SNP neglect, with the college sector suffering a 20% cut over the past five years? Does he also agree that, as the energy sector in Scotland transitions to greener forms of energy production, the jobs and skills needed to bolster that industry could be taught at those colleges, and that we risk having a double whammy of young people not being able to take on these important jobs, while lecturers are paid off and our colleges are in dire financial straits?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of the energy transition. As I said, the Scottish Government are receiving the largest spending review settlement in real terms since devolution was established. We know that young people in Scotland have the talent, but are their Government backing them by giving them the opportunity? We believe that a proportion of those funds should be devoted to that. I am pleased to say that, for example, BAE Systems will be a major beneficiary of the £10 billion deal to build Type 26 frigates for Norway—a critical investment in European security, and one that I hope the Scottish Government have got around to supporting.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and wish him well in his new role. I am quite confident that he will give us all the answers we wish to have. Northern Ireland continues to have a higher proportion of young people not in employment, education or training—some 11% to 13%—compared with the UK average, so what discussions has he had with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that the necessary support and opportunities are provided to young people in Northern Ireland?

Pat McFadden: There should be no part of the United Kingdom in which we do not give young people the maximum opportunity. I had a good working relationship with the Northern Ireland Executive in my previous post, and I hope to have a good working relationship with them in this post, with the shared agenda of giving our young people the best possible chance in life.

Benefit Sanctions: Neurodiverse Claimants

15. **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that benefit sanctions are proportionate when considering neurodiverse claimants. [906015]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Work coaches are required to tailor work-related requirements to claimants’ capabilities and circumstances, and they can pause them if that is appropriate.

Josh Babarinde: My constituent Ross has neurodiversities and is in employment, working at a garden centre, but his income is supplemented by universal credit. After inadvertently missing a telephone appointment with a job coach, he was sanctioned, losing out on two months-worth of rent, and he risked being made homeless and losing his job if his parents had not been there to step in. Can the Minister assure folks such as Ross that they will be powered up by our benefits system, not punished when they make innocent mistakes?

Sir Stephen Timms: We certainly do want the system to support people such as Ross. If work-related requirements are missed, the reason for that should be asked for, with seven days allowed for an answer. There should also be a pre-referral check before a sanction referral takes place. If the hon. Gentleman would like to send me the details of what happened in that particular case, I will happily look into it.

Topical Questions

T1. [906026] **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): I am very conscious of the responsibilities of the Department, which touches millions of lives in this country every month. We have joined up skills and employment support in the Department to bring the skills system closer to the labour market, and, as part of our youth guarantee, we have announced that it will include a backstop jobs guarantee. Together with that and Connect to Work, we are both tackling the incentives in the system and providing critical support, because my priority is to have a welfare state that looks after people when times are tough, but also provides a platform of opportunity to help get them out of welfare and into work.

Catherine Fookes: At the Conservative party conference, the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury called for the state pension to be means-tested. This has caused deep concern to pensioners in Monmouthshire who have worked hard all their lives and built up modest savings. Under the Conservative party's plans, they would risk losing their state pension. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, under this Labour Government, the state pension will remain available to all?

Pat McFadden: I am happy to say that what my hon. Friend says about means-testing is not the Government's policy, but can the Conservatives confirm whether it is theirs? The shadow Chief Secretary let the cat out of the bag. Can she confirm that this is not her policy, or is it that her leader still sticks to the position she set out earlier this year when she said:

"We are going to look at means-testing?"

Are they still looking at it, or are they not?

Mr Speaker: The good thing is that the Government are only responsible for their own problems. I call the shadow Secretary of the State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Indeed, questions are to be answered by the Government on this occasion.

The right hon. Gentleman has an important and not always easy job. I am sure that we all remember the fiasco before the summer when the Government tried to make welfare savings and ended up legislating for welfare spending. Since then, the Prime Minister has said that there is a "clear moral case" for welfare cuts, and the Chancellor has said that she "can't leave welfare untouched". Does the Secretary of State agree?

Pat McFadden: I notice that the hon. Lady did not want to clarify the position on means-testing the state pension. Welfare reform is happening all the time. We passed important changes to the universal credit system that were voted through by the House and, as I said, we are putting in place important employment support to help not only long-term sick and disabled people but young people into work through many of the policies that I have talked about today.

Helen Whately: I cannot help but notice that the Secretary of State continues to attempt to deflect from his job of answering the questions. The fact is, we just heard that he will not commit to making the welfare savings that his Prime Minister and his Chancellor have said they need to make. I thought the Prime Minister was meant to be in charge.

Getting people off welfare and into work not only saves money; it is morally wrong to condemn people to a life on benefits. Without welfare reform, this country is stuck on Labour's broken record of higher taxes and lower growth. We have even offered to help the Secretary of State, so why will he not commit to making welfare savings?

Pat McFadden: We inherited a situation that had 3 million people inactive and almost 1 million people not in employment, education or training. We are putting in place critical employment support to help long-term sick and disabled people into work, we have changed the incentives through legislation on the universal credit system, and we are increasing the number of face-to-face checks in the system, which fell on the Conservatives' watch. What do people think it fell by? Do we think it fell by 10%? Do we think it fell by 30%? No, it fell by 90% under the system over which the hon. Lady's Government presided.

T2. [906028] **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): Many other hon. Members have today outlined the proven track record of Access to Work in enabling disabled constituents to access employment, in addition to the challenges posed by the current shortfall in funding. Some £1 billion-worth of additional employment support funding has been announced this year. Can the Minister reassure the House that Access to Work remains one of the potential avenues for that funding?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Demand for Access to Work has risen sharply. I mentioned earlier that spending went up by 17% over the past year, but I do not think Access to Work can replace a well-designed support programme. That is what we are determined to put in place, and the

Department's new, independent disability advisory panel will help us work out the best approaches to employment support.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Government have made a promise that those transferring from legacy benefits to universal credit will find themselves no worse off, yet Liberal Democrat colleagues from all over the country are finding that people are worse off. Will the Minister share evidence of how the Government are supporting the most vulnerable where they find themselves worse off?

Sir Stephen Timms: Transitional protection is available for people making the transition across, and I spoke earlier about the support being provided through the enhanced support journey to people for whom the transition may be particularly difficult. I am thinking, for example, about some people on employment and support allowance. If the hon. Member is worried about particular cases and would like to send me the details, I am very happy to look at them.

T3. [906029] **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): For too long, too many people in the north-east have been left behind due to stubbornly high unemployment, but the economic inactivity trailblazer offers an opportunity to tackle the often complex reasons that sit behind that. Can the Secretary of State set out how this will work alongside existing programmes such as the new deal for north-east workers to support people into fulfilling productive employment?

Pat McFadden: People should not be denied the opportunity to work, which is why the Department has backed the economic inactivity trailblazer in the north-east with £10 million this year and a further £10 million next year. It is testing new ways to help people overcome barriers to work. We are determined to turn around the situation that we inherited from the Conservative party, and we are working closely with the excellent Mayor of the North East to bring these policies together.

T4. [906030] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Only 30% of people with autism are in work, compared with nearly 55% of disabled people. Charlie, who is celebrating his 31st birthday on Saturday, lives in Baltonsborough with his parents, but like many young adults with autism, he has struggled to find employment. His mother, Jenny, told me yesterday that Charlie is a classic example of wasted talent, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that adults with autism and other special educational needs can find fulfilling and secure employment?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Member raises an important point, and I agree about the importance of not wasting talent in the future. That is the reason for the reforms we are introducing. Earlier this year we set up an expert panel to advise us on how best to support people with neurodivergence into employment, building on the work of Sir Robert Buckland and his review of autism employment in the last Parliament. We have now received that advice from the expert panel and are considering how to take that work forward.

T6. [906032] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I still have parents in my constituency coming to me because they are not getting the money their children need. One constituent reports her ex repeatedly self-declaring employment until the Child Maintenance Service catches up with them, switching on to benefits for a few months, dropping to £7 a week and then returning to self-employment to restart that cycle. Online forums openly trade tips about how to avoid child maintenance. What will the Minister do to close these loopholes and ensure that every child gets the support they need?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Government plan to consult on changes to the calculation that will automatically capture more income types within that calculation. Where parents wilfully avoid their financial obligations, the CMS financial investigation unit does have the powers to act and will investigate. Child maintenance is key to keeping children out of poverty, and we will use these powers wherever necessary.

T5. [906031] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): The 25-year-old son of one of my constituents unfortunately lost his leg when it was amputated above the knee after a motorcycle accident, but he was awarded personal independence payment and a specially adapted car, and he has been able to rebuild his life. However, in August he was told that the PIP and the adapted car would be withdrawn from him. Sadly, he is clearly not going to get any better. How can we be in a situation where people whose condition is permanent are having their support withdrawn?

Sir Stephen Timms: I would be very happy to look into the particular case the hon. Member raises. Of course, an appeal process is available, so I hope that her constituent has submitted an appeal. If she lets me have the details, I will gladly have a look at the case.

T7. [906033] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Earlier this month I visited the Spear programme in north Kensington, which is doing fantastic work in supporting young people back into employment through programmes that the DWP data lab has found to have a significant impact. Could the Secretary of State outline how evidence produced by units such as the data lab will help guide the trailblazer funding to get young people back into work?

Pat McFadden: The Spear programme was one of the first organisations to go through an evaluation with the data lab a few years ago. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the findings from that were really positive, and I am delighted that his constituency is located in one of the youth guarantee trailblazer areas. As we have reiterated several times, it is crucial that we do everything we can to help young people into work and address the issue, which we inherited, of people not in employment, education or training.

T8. [906034] **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): Many young care leavers living in supported housing want to increase their hours at work but find themselves caught in the benefits trap. YMCA Eastleigh tells me that this

is impacting care leavers in my constituency. What recent discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues on reforms to the tax and benefit system to make work pay for young care leavers?

Sir Stephen Timms: There is a problem in the interaction between housing benefit, which provides housing support for people in supported accommodation, and housing support in the universal credit system. That interaction does cause difficulties, and I think that is what the hon. Lady is referring to. We are looking at that at the moment. We are talking to other parts of government and working with people such as YMCA and Centrepunt to look at the problem and what we can do to fix it.

T9. [906035] **Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): Many of my constituents are experiencing delays in migrating to universal credit, due to years of Tory mismanagement of our welfare system. This is a stressful time for claimants and a very busy time for the Department. Will my right hon. Friend outline what steps the Department is taking to ensure it is fully resourced, so that delays are reduced and claims are processed?

Andrew Western: The Department is prioritising ensuring that there is adequate staffing resource available to support claimants and deliver migration smoothly and on time. I am concerned to hear what my hon. Friend says about the experience of his constituents in Coatbridge and Bellshill. I will look into this issue further on his behalf and report back to him.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): The Trussell Trust recently reported that three in 10 people who were referred to food banks in 2024 were in working households and that the majority, 72%, were on universal credit. What more can the Government do to ensure that work pays and we can take low-paid workers out of poverty?

Pat McFadden: I recently spoke at an event in Parliament hosted by that organisation. I am pleased to say that its report said there had been a small drop in the use of food banks over the past year. We have put the household support fund, now the crisis and resilience fund, on a proper basis for the next three years to support those families in the most desperate need.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): Giving sick and disabled people agency and drawing on lived experience sets the only path to getting policy right, so that they can access work appointments and get out of their homes, avoiding worklessness, health decline and isolation, with their mobility support needs recognised through PIP. Further to the Minister's previous answer, will he ensure that any policy reforms to PIP mobility payments are fully co-produced with sick and disabled people?

Sir Stephen Timms: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the review of the PIP assessment, including the mobility element of that benefit, will be undertaken fully in co-production with disabled people and disabled people's organisations. I will be setting out very shortly how the review I am going to be leading will be undertaken.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Business is crying out that the Employment Rights Bill will cost jobs. Now, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, the spiritual home of the Secretary of State—

[Laughter.]—says it will cripple the jobs market, especially for young people. It is not a laughing matter. What is the Secretary of State's view? Will the Employment Rights Bill help his Department to increase employment, or will it cost even more jobs?

Pat McFadden: It should be no surprise that a Labour party supports better rights at work for people. History is replete with warnings that better employment rights would result in fewer jobs. Those were the warnings the Conservative party gave when we introduced the national minimum wage many, many years ago. Of course, it is important that when legislating on these issues we do it closely in consultation with employers. That is precisely what we intend to do.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Some 47% of children in my constituency live in poverty. The Minister mentioned that he will consider all levers. Does that include speaking with the Treasury to look at a wealth tax to bring in much-needed money to the Treasury to remove the two-child cap?

Pat McFadden: As we have discussed a number of times, of course we want to reduce child poverty. My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that, when it comes to tax, that is a matter for the Chancellor and not for me.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and wish him well. Last week, I attended a drop-in for the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign where I was informed that there are currently 4,320 women in Dewsbury and Batley affected by the WASPI scandal. That number was previously higher, but many of the women have already passed away without justice. On 27 July I wrote to the former Secretary of State regarding her support for the WASPI campaign after being contacted by more than 40 of my constituents, but I have yet to receive a response. With the Government still refusing to engage in civil mediation to deliver justice to the WASPI women, will the new Secretary of State reconsider meeting campaigners to find a just way forward?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): The previous Minister for Pensions met representatives of the WASPI campaign in order to hear directly from them about their experiences. She was the first Minister to do so in eight years. I will look into the details of the letter the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his office and thank the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), for a recent visit to the DWP debt and fraud centre in my constituency. There are 95 jobs at the centre doing tremendous work across the UK, proving that civil service job dispersal does work. Is this not a template for other Departments and an example to the SNP Government in Scotland, who have dispersed no jobs, no power and no funds from Edinburgh?

Andrew Western: I endorse everything my hon. Friend has said. I had a fantastic visit to the very beautiful constituency that he is fortunate enough to represent,

where I saw exactly what can happen through our places for growth initiative, which looks to relocate jobs out of London and into places such as Stornoway.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I have met many pensionable-age constituents, most of whom live on the Duck estate, who have lost their entitlement to pension credit because of as little as 50p. Does the Minister agree that pension credit, the employment and support allowance and PIP assistance could all do with more common sense and a little less of a “computer says no” mentality?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. In general, lots of life could do with less “computer says no”, so on that basis we will agree. On the specifics of the question she raises about pension credit, the nature of the system is obviously that it provides a guaranteed level of income; it is not setting out an entitlement like universal credit, so there does have to be a limit somewhere, and I am afraid that that does mean that some people will always be on one side of it. What we do not want to see in a system is too many things in that winner-takes-all perspective—I take the point she raises.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I recently visited Drake Hall women’s prison in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, which has the brilliant initiative of a Halfords training centre to support people into employment once they leave the prison estate. It supports people all over the country, not just in my constituency. Can the Secretary of State tell me what conversations are happening with the Ministry of Justice about supporting or expanding schemes like that?

Pat McFadden: That sounds like an excellent initiative. Of course, if we are to rehabilitate prisoners, it is important that they get training and the chance to get into constructive employment after their sentence. I am sure that that applies not just to the prison in my hon. Friend’s constituency but throughout the country.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Alan Marnes is a constituent of mine in Southoe who has staunchly campaigned since 2002 on the issue of the lack of indexation for pre-1997 pension rights, having been one of 140,000 people who lost their occupational pension.

I wrote to the Secretary of State more than two months ago asking whether the newly revived Pensions Commission will address the issue of failed pension funds and I have still not received a response. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and Alan to provide some much-needed clarity on such a long-standing issue?

Torsten Bell: I am not absolutely clear whether the particular case that the hon. Gentleman is raising relates to people within the Pension Protection Fund and the financial assistance scheme or to a pre-1997 indexation within a solvent pension scheme, but if he writes to me with the details I will absolutely make sure that I come back to him.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): One in three children in my constituency is growing up in poverty. With the Budget approaching, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about scrapping the two-child limit—a policy widely recognised as one of the biggest drivers of child poverty in Britain today?

Pat McFadden: We have already taken action to reduce child poverty, by extending free school meals to all families on universal credit, and we will of course explore other avenues. We want to reduce child poverty—in stark contrast to the record of the Conservatives.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): When my constituents move into new social housing, they find it stripped of perfectly good white goods, curtains, carpets and so on. What can the Government do to address this? It is driving my constituents further into poverty and benefit dependency. It is also environmentally destructive. Surely there is a way through this issue, so can I call on the Minister to work with others across Government to address it?

Andrew Western: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. It might be better raised at questions to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but as he asks me to pick this up with Ministers across Departments, I am happy to do so. I can tell him that the crisis and resilience fund—formerly the household support fund—is in place to support people setting up in their new homes, as are grants that are available from housing associations directly.¹

1.[Official Report, 3 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

North Sea Oil and Gas Industry

3.40 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if he will make a statement on the future of the North Sea oil and gas industry.

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The North sea will be at the heart of Britain's energy future. For decades its workers, business and communities have helped to power our country and our world, and they will do so for decades to come. The oil and gas industry has lost around a third of its entire workforce in the last decade as oil and gas production has declined. A plan is now needed. That is why in March we consulted on a framework for building a world-leading offshore clean energy industry in the North sea, alongside managing existing oil and gas fields for their lifespan. We will respond to that consultation in the coming weeks.

Alongside that, we published our clean energy jobs plan, which sets out that over 400,000 more good jobs are to be created across the UK, including 40,000 in Scotland, by the end of the decade. That is facilitated thanks to record investments in clean energy as well as over £50 billion of private investment since July 2024 thanks to the certainty our plans have created.

Turning to today's news, colleagues will be aware that Petrofac Ltd has for some time been working on a restructure relating to its global portfolio. The restructuring plan failed, following the unexpected termination of a contract by TenneT—a Dutch transmission company. At 7 am today, holding company Petrofac Ltd announced that it will be entering administration. While that is obviously disappointing for the company, it is the product of long-standing issues with its global business.

Contrary to misleading reports today, the UK arm of Petrofac has not entered administration and is continuing to operate as normal—as an in-demand business with a highly skilled workforce and many successful contracts. Indeed, only last month Petrofac's UK arm extended two significant contracts, demonstrating that the business has a viable future. Today's announcement covers only the top-level holding company Petrofac Ltd, which has no employees. The Petrofac group has faced long-standing challenges, including a high-profile £77 million financial penalty imposed in 2021 following a Serious Fraud Office investigation into bribery.

We understand that there is reason to be optimistic about a commercial resolution that includes the UK arm. The Government have been, and will remain, in close contact with the company. I repeat this to the House: the UK business has not entered administration. It is successful and growing, and it will continue to operate as normal.

Andrew Bowie: Another week and yet another hammer blow to our North sea oil and gas industry, another gut punch to energy workers and another blow to our energy security. Whatever the Minister says today, the blame lies squarely with this Labour Government. [*Interruption.*] They do not like to hear it, but it is true.

Today, the energy giant Petrofac has entered administration, casting doubt over the future of its 2,000 employees in Scotland—as its global headquarters is in Aberdeen—and the countless more who are supported indirectly through the supply chain. As the Minister said, this company has had issues for many years, but the hostile environment in the UK continental shelf created by the Government has made operating here nigh on impossible for far too many companies.

Our offshore energy industry has seen thousands of redundancies since the 2024 general election. Harbour Energy completed a new round of redundancies just last month and, with depressing regularity, we hear of more job losses in the North sea. Whether at Harbour Energy, Apache, Hunting or Petrofac, each job lost means uncertainty for a family, a mortgage jeopardised, investment fleeing our communities and our world-class supply chains and skilled workforce pushed towards extinction.

How many more will it take for the Secretary of State to change course? These are political choices. This is a manufactured decline. As a direct result of the hostile trading environment, the “closed for business” sign is hanging over the UK continental shelf. From the energy profits levy extension increase to the ban on new licences and the refusal to defend the Government's decision on Rosebank and Jackdaw, the odds are stacked against the North sea industry, damaging the business environment, threatening investment, harming our economy and undermining our energy security. These are political choices that have resulted in job losses.

What steps are being taken to support Petrofac's HQ employees in Aberdeen? How many more jobs have to be lost across the industry for the Government to change course? When will the thousands of jobs promised through GB Energy for Aberdeen and around the United Kingdom materialise? Will the Minister personally act and ask his boss—the Secretary of State for Energy—to change course, or is he content to sacrifice Aberdeen, the north-east and our energy industry on this vainglorious campaign to destroy our fossil fuel industry?

Michael Shanks: On Petrofac, the hon. Gentleman should be careful with his tone. To come here and try to undermine efforts to find a buyer for the UK arm and to talk down a business, which, as I just outlined, is a successful and growing business in the North sea, is deeply irresponsible. There have been long-standing issues at the company; he of all people should be well aware of that, given his previous role as a Minister in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. All of us across the House have a responsibility to support the company at the moment, not to undermine it, and to send a positive message to those workers, the suppliers and the customers that the UK arm is continuing to operate as normal. All the signs are that there is a viable long-term future for the company, but that will not happen if we have comments like those made by the hon. Gentleman undermining that business.

On the wider question of the North sea, the hon. Gentleman should know as well as anyone that we lost over a third of the jobs in the North sea during the Conservative party's time in government. He wants to pretend that the transition arrived in July 2024, but he was in government when those jobs were going, and the Conservatives failed time and again to come up with

[Michael Shanks]

any credible plan for managing the future of the North sea. We will not do that. We will come up with a plan. That is why we are building the industries of the future on hydrogen, on carbon capture, on offshore wind and on the supply chains—the very investments that he and Conservative Members turn their backs against time and again. They are turning their backs on the future of the energy story in the North sea as they are more interested in exploiting problems than solving them. Time and again, they have learned no lessons from their time in government, when they left these workers without a credible plan. We will not do the same again.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend outline to the House how the Government are delivering the clean energy jobs plan, which will see 40,000 new jobs in the clean energy industries in Scotland by 2030? I am sure that move will be welcomed around the Chamber. Will he advise us what support will be given to that plan by the Scottish Government?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend makes an important point about building up the industries of the future. I have said on a number of occasions that we should rightly be proud of six decades of oil and gas in the north-east of Scotland, and we should be proud of the work that that workforce has achieved, but we should also recognise that we have been in transition for a long time. Building up the jobs of the future in carbon capture, hydrogen, offshore wind and supply chains is how we ensure a long-term, viable, sustainable future in the north-east—alongside oil and gas for many decades to come.

The particular work that the Scottish Government need to do in this space is about improving the skills offer so that more of Scotland's young people can take up the 40,000 jobs we will create over the coming years. That is a huge opportunity for Scotland's young people, but only if we improve Scotland's education system.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): This is worrying news. Petrofac is one of the North sea's largest offshore contractors, but it is entering administration today after years of financial difficulty. While I cannot share the desire of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) to ditch the Climate Change Act 2008, I do share his concern for those 2,000 jobs in Scotland and those workers who face uncertainty about their future, so the Secretary of State must act swiftly to find a sustainable path forward, hopefully secure a buyer and safeguard those skilled jobs.

This underlines why the Liberal Democrats have called for an independent just transition commission, putting oil and gas workers and local communities front and centre. It was good to see the much-awaited publication of the Government's clean energy jobs plan last week. However, we know that job creation is not happening fast enough to keep up with job losses in the North sea, so can the Secretary of State and the Minister confirm what will be done to fill that gap in the meantime—in the short term—and to deliver a genuinely just transition that keeps those skilled workers powering Britain's clean energy future?

Michael Shanks: First, can I just say what a contrast it is when someone rightly responds to this concerning issue in a serious way and does not talk down the industry? This is where the House should stand taller and recognise that that company is doing good work and that there are 2,000 workers out in the North sea right now carrying out their duties. We want to ensure that there is a viable future for the company, and we are doing everything that we can in that space. All the signs are that it is a growing, successful business, and we should recognise that and talk it up, not talk it down, as the Conservative party seems hellbent on doing.

On the hon. Lady's wider point, she is right to say that the future of clean energy involves tens of thousands of jobs across Scotland and hundreds of thousands across the UK, but that we need to ramp those jobs up as quickly as possible and ensure that people can achieve those jobs. We are doing what we can around looking at the skills framework, but we also ensuring that, through the investments we are making through Great British Energy, those jobs come forward much faster and that people are supported to move from jobs in oil and gas into jobs that have a real correlation in skills. We are picking this work up after the failure of the previous Government to have any plan. We are moving as fast as we can, and we will see more on that North sea plan in the coming weeks.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I have to say that this is a very underpowered urgent question. It is similar to a two-stroke engine attached to a rowing boat—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. When I decide on an urgent question, I do not need to be questioned about how urgent it is, or whether it is like a two-stroke engine or a 50 cc—actually, some of us think it might be a three litre.

Torcuil Crichton: I was, of course, referring to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who knows full well that he has missed the story here. Petrofac went into administration because the Dutch Government cut a contract for offshore wind farm developments. I dare say that that raises concerns about the viability for finance and the supply chain for the offshore wind farm industry, but as the Minister has pointed out, and as the shadow Minister well knows, Petrofac is successful in the UK. It has 2,000 jobs in the UK and it has contracts in the UK, so we need less scaremongering from this underpowered Opposition and more assurance from the Minister that he will look after those jobs.

Michael Shanks: I will just reflect on something that my hon. Friend said. This is a global company, and it has not had its troubles to seek for some time. It was subject to an investigation back in 2017, and it has gone through a number of restructuring routes since then. Ultimately, that process came to an end when it lost a significant contract from TenneT, one of the Dutch transmission operators. This is a company that has faced global headwinds for some time, but I repeat to the House that the UK business has a viable long-term future. It is already growing, it is successful, and we have a responsibility across this House to talk up British businesses and the workers in those jobs, not to talk them down.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): May I convey in the strongest possible terms to the junior Minister the anger and anxiety that is felt by my constituents in Aberdeen? Right now they are providing energy security to each and every one of us on these isles, as well as revenue to his Treasury, yet their only reward, and the only certainty they seem to have on this Government's watch, is that of looming job losses. May I ask—*[Interruption.]* He shakes his head. May I ask him to come to Aberdeen and explain to my constituents when he is going to listen to the trade unions, the academics, the workers and the industry and protect that industry, not only for our energy security but for Scotland's economy?

Michael Shanks: I am in Aberdeen regularly and do meet constituents of the right hon. Member who work in renewables, carbon capture and hydrogen as well as in oil and gas. It is his constituents who will benefit from the investments that Great British Energy will make, for example, which he failed to vote for, and who tell me that after a long period of having no credible plan—*[Interruption.]* He can shout me down all he wants; he asked a question—

Mr Speaker: Order. I brought the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) in early because I thought that was right for his constituents and because he had applied for an UQ, but I do expect a little respect, even if he does not like the answer.

Michael Shanks: The right hon. Member asks a serious question, and I am trying to give him an answer, if he would but listen for a few moments. We take the issue of job losses seriously—of course we do—but we have to recognise that over 70,000 jobs have been lost over the past 10 years because there has not been a credible plan on the future of the North sea. We are going to deliver that alongside new jobs in the energy future.

I also say to the right hon. Member that I am somewhat confused what the SNP's policy is on this because, as far as I understood it, it is exactly the same as this Government's policy, which is to look at the licensing position. If he is telling us now that the SNP's position has changed, that is news to me and, I suspect, to the House, but of course, the SNP has not published the draft energy strategy, which has been in draft form for two years, so it is hard for anyone to know.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the UK arm of the company, which is an in-demand business with a highly skilled workforce and many successful contracts, has a long-term future in the UK, particularly in the context of our clean energy jobs plan announced last week and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) pointed out, some of the risks around the development of offshore wind in Holland?

Michael Shanks: We have obviously been liaising with the company over quite a long period of time on the restructuring; indeed, the previous Government did as well. We have been looking at this issue and will continue to work very closely with the company to ensure that there is a viable long-term future for the UK part. But it is an in-demand business and, as I said just last month, it expanded some of its contracts, which

shows that it is successful. Of course, it has a highly skilled workforce working in a huge range of jobs right across oil and gas.

The wider question about investment into renewables is also one that we should take seriously. We have a huge opportunity in the United Kingdom to capitalise on the economic opportunities that come from offshore and onshore wind, hydrogen and carbon capture, but that requires consistency and a view that the UK is a safe place to invest—things that were threatened by the Conservatives.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Anyone who has met businesses in Aberdeen will know that they rely on the oil and gas sector. This Labour Government's "net zero at all costs" policy is a disaster for high-quality skills and jobs in the north-east and across Scotland. What urgent action will the Government take to restore confidence and stability in the energy sector?

Michael Shanks: I reject the hon. Member's assertion that this Government are somehow following a course without looking at the evidence. Clearly, oil and gas is a crucial part of our energy mix and will be for decades to come—we have been clear on that—but so too is building up what comes next. That means investing in the supply chains that were so often not part of the building of infrastructure that we have in our waters. We towed things in and switched them on, but had none of the jobs that went with them. We are determined to change that, but that comes with having a credible industrial strategy and a long-term plan for the future of the North sea, which we did not have under 14 years of the previous Government.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): Incredibly, it is now eight months since the Prime Minister announced £200 million from the National Wealth Fund for the industrial future of Grangemouth. I have had meetings with numerous companies that have proposals and are, frankly, impatient to get started. When will this money be spent, and when will those jobs come to my town? All there is to show for it so far are the bones of an unjust transition and industrial devastation.

Michael Shanks: We have been looking at a number of proposals. I met the five companies that are the frontrunners for National Wealth Fund investment, along with the Scottish Government Energy Minister. A number of propositions are to be taken forward, and I hope we will have an announcement to make in due course. Of course, we have been trying not to just spend £200 million on the first thing that comes along but to find the genuinely long-term, viable industrial opportunities that deliver jobs at Grangemouth, not just for a year or two but long into the future. The hon. Gentleman is right that for far too long the site has been the victim of a lack of planning, and it is an example of a just transition done wrongly. We want to make that different by having a serious plan for long-term jobs on the site. The NWF has brought companies to the table, and we will deliver an announcement on that in due course.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I accept the Minister's comments about Petrofac, but it is a very worrying day not just for the 2,000 workers whose jobs

[Christine Jardine]

are at stake but for the entire oil economy in north-east Scotland. Two things are missing that we desperately need in Scotland: one is investment in the jobs and skills that we will need for the renewable industries the Minister talks about, and the other is the reform of the taxation system and the windfall tax to ensure that it is consistent for the North sea area. What are the Government going to do about those things?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady is of course right that any announcements like this are worrying not only for those directly involved but for the wider community. I entirely recognise that point. She is right that it is critical to invest in the jobs of the future. We have worked with the Scottish Government—because we do work with them—to deliver joint funding for transition support so that workers can get the direct skills support they need to move from an oil and gas job into a renewables job. That is really important, but we also need to see much more upskilling of the next generation, who can take advantage of the jobs we will create in the clean energies of the future. On the question of taxation, I am afraid that is a matter for the Chancellor.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): My constituency includes small and medium-sized enterprises and large businesses that work in renewables, oil and gas, solar, onshore wind and offshore wind. Does the Minister agree that some of the outbursts today from Opposition Members, both Conservative and SNP, will do nothing but undermine confidence for those companies? Furthermore, can he please reassure me that he is working extensively with colleges and employers in Scotland to ensure that we see a skills transition from oil and gas into renewables, so that people in my constituency can take full opportunity of the investments that the Government are making?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that huge opportunities are coming. I have said that we should be proud of the history of oil and gas, and we should also be really proud of what the industry is doing to transition into the future. We need to do much more to ensure that jobs are delivered now, but certainty and confidence that the plan is not going to change overnight is critical for how we get private sector investment into the UK to deliver on those jobs. That is also why it is so important that we look at skills in the round.

I have to say that, despite the outbursts today, the SNP in Holyrood and the UK Government are working closely on ensuring that the skills opportunities are delivered. Would I like that to go further? Of course I would, and I hope we will have a change of Government and can make that happen. This only works if we have a serious approach to recognising the challenges, building the jobs of the future and ensuring that people can take advantage of the opportunities right across Scotland.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): We urgently need to restore confidence and stability in our oil and gas sector, or we will be here again and again as more and more businesses suffer and more and more jobs are lost, whether in my constituency, across north-east Scotland, in Scotland as a whole or in the UK as a whole—there are oil and gas and energy jobs everywhere in the UK.

The future of Petrofac's 2,000 skilled and expert staff, as well as the indirect jobs that rely on them, are now at risk and reliant on Petrofac being able to find a buyer for its North sea assets. Does the Minister think that the job of finding a buyer has been made more or less likely, given that the Government have created, in the industry's words, "the most unstable fiscal" environment "in the world"?

Michael Shanks: I have enormous respect for the hon. Lady, but I have to say that this is not the day to be talking down this particular company. She can make the wider points about this Government's policy—I totally recognise that—but this is a hugely important moment in which not to undermine a successful and growing company. We need to ensure that the suppliers, related companies and customers of Petrofac continue to support that business, because as of today it is operating as normal. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that that continues to be the case. We are working closely with the company to ensure that that outcome is delivered—the hon. Lady is right to mention the wider impact—but those 2,000 jobs and the supply chain jobs that rely on them have continued as normal today, and any suggestion to the contrary is just not correct.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to speak responsibly, with care and accuracy, about the successful UK arm of Petrofac? To do otherwise will only serve to undermine the business and job security that we all want to see across the House. What steps is he taking to ensure that it has a long-term future in the UK?

Michael Shanks: I rightly expect to be challenged in the House on the Government's policies. A strong back-and-forth exchange is important. In this one instance, however, and separate from any view that Members might have on the wider policies of this Government, it is important that we come together where we can and say that this is a strong, successful, growing company. It is in all our interests across the House to talk up the importance of that company's continuing to be successful so that a buyer or another commercial resolution is found and those jobs can be maintained. That is surely in all our interests.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Every single one of us has been criticising Government policy, not criticising Petrofac, the expertise and workers at Petrofac, or any of the workers in our oil and gas industry. The Minister says that he has been spending time in Aberdeen. Does he have any idea how it feels to be in Aberdeen just now, with another hammer blow coming? And it is because of the Government's policies; it is because there is this massive gap. Skilled workers in the oil and gas industry will just go abroad; they will go elsewhere. It does not matter whether we retrain them; the jobs are not there for them right now. What is he going to do to plug that gap? What will he do to keep these skilled workers in Scotland, in Aberdeen and in these islands, and not drive them away?

Michael Shanks: I take the hon. Lady's first point with a pinch of salt, after her second point that this comes as a hammer blow to the community. There is no hammer blow; those jobs have been protected—today 2,000 workers are waking up and doing the same job they were doing last week.

I am often in Aberdeen but I do not pretend that I hear as much from people there as the hon. Lady does from her constituents. Although I have made an effort to be there as often as possible to hear the concerns, I recognise that we need to move further and faster than the previous Government did for 14 years, and the Scottish Government did for 18 years, to put a credible plan in place for the future of those jobs. That means not only investing in future jobs, but ensuring the processes are in place so that people can take advantage of those jobs much more easily. Passporting, which was stuck in the mud for years, is now being delivered because we helped to unlock it. There is a lot more to do, and we will say that in the coming weeks when we publish our future of the North sea plan, but we are the ones driving forward investment that creates the jobs of the future. I am afraid that other parties—I did not count the hon. Lady's party as one of those until today—are harking back to the past rather than recognising that the jobs of the future need to go hand in hand with good, well-paid oil and gas jobs in the short term.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and the confidence that he is showing in those workers. We have heard from the SNP. The difference between Labour and the SNP just now is that the SNP wants to scrap the energy profits levy but does not know what it will replace it with other than something that is fairer. Does the Minister think that is the kind of leadership we need in the oil and gas sector?

Michael Shanks: We recognise that the energy profits levy will come to an end and have consulted on what the future of that looks like with industry. It is a matter for the Chancellor to outline tax policy, as is standard practice in this House; it is not for me to comment on that. But there is a broader question about how we ensure that we drive forward investment. Talking down the investment in carbon capture, hydrogen, offshore wind and the supply chains is not the way to drive forward the jobs of the future, alongside the critical, important oil and gas jobs that will be with us for decades to come.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Why does the Minister refuse to issue new licences for the exploitation of new gas fields and new oil fields in the North sea? That is what the industry would like, and that is what the country would like, because we would like a stronger balance of payments, more tax revenues for the Exchequer, and a future for the North sea oil industry. What is the point of choking off our own North sea oil and gas industry when we have to import those fuels from other countries?

Michael Shanks: We will respond to the consultation on the future of licensing in due course. This Government were elected on the manifesto commitment to not issue new licences to explore new fields, but it remains our position that we will support existing licences and fields for their lifetime. We must manage the future of the basin, which has been in decline for 20-plus years—we hit peak oil in 1999 and peak oil in 2000, so we have been in transition for a long time—and that means investing in the industries that come next, alongside oil and gas.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am reassured that it is this Minister who is looking at the issue and fighting for those jobs in Aberdeen. I am acutely aware that the previous Government did not take full account of the impact of this situation. We now know that using Rosebank, which the shadow Minister raised, would create 50 times more climate-harming gases than the previous Government admitted, and that the climate crisis is one of the biggest drags on growth. I know that the Minister is committed, in common with all Labour Members, to protecting jobs and the planet, but what more can we do within our supply chains to support his work in getting growth and the just transition that this country desperately needs, without Rosebank?

Michael Shanks: The House will understand that I will not be drawn on applications that are currently awaiting decision, so I will not comment on that specific application. On my hon. Friend's broader point, as has already been said, the net zero economy is growing three times faster than the economy at large, and it is our economic future. I recently attended the G20 in South Africa, where Ministers from across the world were talking about the opportunities offered by the clean power transition in their own countries. It is the economic opportunity of the 21st century, as well as how we deliver on climate leadership: contrary to what Opposition Members might now think, that still matters. It is only right that we deliver a genuinely just transition for the workers who have powered our country for the past 60 years. We have seen where transitions have not been done well. The previous Government failed to put in place any kind of plan, but we will deliver a plan that delivers a just transition and our economic future.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I hear the Minister's reassuring words, but surely he can understand the worry of the workers waking up this morning to the news that they heard. It is not just warm words that are causing the problem: it is policy, the energy profits levy and the ban on exploration. It is not just me saying that: those who are concerned include the Port of Aberdeen, Robert Gordon University, the North Sea Transition Authority, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and the Scottish Affairs Committee. What will the Minister do to address these policy problems?

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his tone and I accept the point that he makes. As I have said, we can be clear that there is a viable future for those 2,000 workers and we should be positive about that—it is important that we talk up the future potential of the company—but I recognise that that does nothing for those who might be worrying. We accept that the EPL will come to an end. We have consulted with industry on what the future of that looks like. We want to ensure that the Treasury gains value from price spikes, a point on which his party and mine agree, and that is a matter for the Chancellor to take forward. If he is in favour of a tax cut for oil and gas, it is important that he says where that significant amount of revenue will come from to fund the public services on which he and I rely.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I welcome the Government's mention of tiebacks in a consultation earlier this year. The development of

[Mary Glindon]

tiebacks is important because it reduces costs and extends the life of existing critical infrastructure. However, many existing hubs are reaching the end of their life and we may miss the opportunities that are in front of us. Will the Minister look at tiebacks as a pragmatic step to help aid the transition?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is always a great champion for the industry. Although we often talk, quite rightly, about Aberdeen and north-east Scotland, she is right to champion her own community, where there are a significant number of oil and gas workers. I always welcome her straightforward challenge to me on many points. I will not get into the detail of the response to the consultation, which we will publish in due course, but we have been clear that we want a credible, long-term plan for the future of the North sea. That is why we consulted on a range of factors, not just the future licensing position, and we will come to a pragmatic position on what the future of the North sea looks like.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): For how many years, in the Government's estimation, will we have to keep importing foreign oil and gas, as a result of not being allowed fully to exploit our own supplies?

Michael Shanks: Perhaps I should switch the question back: for how many years have we already been importing oil and gas? That gets us to the fundamental point. The Conservatives want to pretend that in July last year, we switched to being a net importer of oil and gas. That is not what happened. The right hon. Gentleman's party oversaw that transition over many, many years. I recognise that, to some degree, given the geology of the basin, there would not have been different decisions taken if we had been in government, but what we could have done differently was ensure that the transition was happening, and delivered the economic opportunities that come along with what comes next, and that is what we will do.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): Does the Minister share my concerns about Reform and the Conservatives denying the reality of climate change, and denying that the best way to protect people's jobs, including energy jobs, is to follow the green jobs plan? Does he agree that nuclear, including as Heysham 1 and 2 in my constituency—and, if I get my way, new nuclear at Heysham—is vital to the clean energy jobs plan?

Michael Shanks: I was going to say that that might be a note of consensus across the House, but I remembered that the SNP has an ideological objection to nuclear in Scotland, so it will not benefit from the economic opportunities that come from thousands of well-paid, skilled and trade-unionised jobs in nuclear. We believe that there is a long-term future for nuclear, which is why we announced funding for Sizewell C, concluded the small modular reactor programme, and have been working with the US Government to bring forward private funding partnerships to build the latest technology in the UK. That comes with thousands of jobs, will help us to deliver on energy security long into the future, and helps to tackle the climate crisis. This party believes that the climate crisis is an existential threat, and we should do everything that we can to tackle it.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Thousands more jobs are at risk, alongside the thousands of families and jobs at risk at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire, all because of this Government's policies on net stupid zero, yet the Minister talks warmly about the growth prospects for Petrofac. To grow, we need an industry; to have an industry, we need more oil and gas licences. Will the Minister change course and allow exploration and more licences to produce oil and gas in the North sea?

Michael Shanks: I am not sure that there was a hugely coherent argument there. The hon. Gentleman seems to say that the future might be in clean energy jobs, but he says, "They might not be delivered fast enough, so we should not bother doing it." We think there is an important long-term future in delivering clean energy, including in his constituency, where many supply chain jobs will be delivered, and he is against that economic investment. He should explain to his constituents and to the wider country why Reform wants to make this country more energy-dependent, not less energy-dependent, and why it is against the economic opportunities that our proposals bring. Even if we disagree on the climate crisis—which I find staggering, given all the evidence; I accept that he might be burying his head in the sand—we should at least agree that there is a huge economic opportunity, and an opportunity to maintain our energy security.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I recently visited the Bacton gas terminal in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), which is on the North sea coast. It already provides up to one third of our nation's gas supply, and is ideally placed to be a carbon capture and hydrogen hub. The Minister has just talked about jobs; I want those jobs in my area. Will he recognise the vital role that the east of England plays, back Bacton's plans to ensure its low-carbon future, and help to secure good, local jobs?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that this is a huge opportunity, which the previous Government talked about a lot but did not actually move forward on delivering. In the spending review, there were significant amounts of investment to move forward with the carbon capture clusters, and we have followed that up with specific investments over the past few months. I have been privileged to visit some of the sites and see the potential for maintaining existing jobs in industry while building the jobs of the future in carbon capture. We are hugely positive about the future vision for carbon capture across the country, as a way to tackle our emissions, help us get to net zero, and create good industrial jobs.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I thank the Minister for the engagement we have had over the future of Lindsey oil refinery in my constituency. Can he give any indication of what support the Government might give, and when a final decision might be taken? Will he at least acknowledge that new licences in the North sea would offer job opportunities for those people whose jobs are at risk?

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the engagement we have had on this issue. Obviously, the failure of the company that was previously running

the Prax Lindsey oil refinery has had a really significant impact. We have been working to make sure that the process that the official receiver is going through is concluded as soon as possible. It is for the receiver to decide who the potential buyers are; it is looking at a shortlist of credible candidates, but given the nature of the insolvency, it is not for the Government to decide what is built next on that site.

Turning to the hon. Gentleman's second point, I genuinely do not think that the licensing question will decide the future of jobs for that site. We want to build up an industry for the future on that site, with long-term, sustainable jobs, and all the evidence we have seen about managing the future of the North sea basin suggests that that while oil and gas will be important for many years to come, that is not the long-term future for the North sea.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is very important to increase the number of skilled jobs in renewables and in hydrogen. I welcome the Minister's mention of the Government's clean jobs plan; can he say more about that plan, and in particular about training and development for younger staff, as well as retraining for existing staff?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and particularly for mentioning retraining. We see huge opportunities for people who are in the middle of careers to transfer into the energy system. Just in the past few weeks, we have been looking at a scheme to support veterans who are leaving the armed forces in getting jobs building infrastructure. There are huge opportunities in that sector if we can capitalise on the clean energy transition.

We also need to invest in the future of the next generation of workers. In England, we are looking at technical training colleges to make that happen. Funding goes to the Scottish Government to do that in Scotland and, of course, to the Welsh Government as well. The future of our energy system is clean energy; we want to make sure that we have the jobs and training opportunities that go with it, so that the people of our country get an economic advantage, as well as the country getting the energy security.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Today's Petrofac news has nothing to do with UK oil and gas policy. This is a company with a long history of financial challenges and mismanagement; it was fined millions for bribery, lost £6 billion in value since 2012, and has now lost a contract with the Netherlands. Does the Minister agree that any attempt to claim otherwise is blatant political point scoring by the Tories and others with a head-in-the-sand climate denial agenda, and is a distraction from what really matters, which is ensuring that every worker whose job is affected by today's news is properly supported?

Michael Shanks: I agree with the hon. Lady on the wider point, which is that—as I outlined in my opening answer—Petrofac has not had its troubles to seek. She has outlined a number of those troubles, but I reiterate that the UK arm of that business is successful and growing. We want to make sure that that continues—that there is a buyer, or another solution, so that it can continue long into the future. Others will seek to politicise this news for the sake of their own political narratives, but it is incumbent on all of us to send as positive a

message as we can to the workers, suppliers and customers of Petrofac—the message that the UK arm continues to operate as normal, and that we want that to continue.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Every month, 1,000-plus people lose their jobs in North sea oil and gas. Contrary to the case that the Minister presents, the industry says that this declining basin still has 4 billion additional barrels that could be extracted, if only there were new licences. He tells the House that that oil and gas will be needed for decades to come, yet he cuts off all new supply, mortally damaging the whole supply chain, of which Petrofac is part. The Minister cannot deny responsibility, and he needs to persuade the Chancellor—if not his Secretary of State, who is probably beyond persuasion—that we need to move to a practical policy that includes new licences. We need to optimise this, because green and fossil fuels do not need to be in tension; we want the transition, but we must keep those jobs for now.

Michael Shanks: First, I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's recognition—which we seldom hear from his party's Front Benchers these days—that this is a transition, and that we want the economic opportunities of oil and gas and those of renewables. It is a delight to hear him say that; his Front Benchers should say so more often and talk up the phenomenal renewables industry, which the Conservatives should take a bit of credit for. Over the past 14 years, they built up so much of that industry across the country, but they have turned away from that now.

Turning to the licensing point, I cannot remember at what stage the right hon. Gentleman was in the Government, but of course, the previous Government said that they would not issue new licences. Later, they briefly did; then they recognised that that was the wrong policy—I think it was the Liz Truss years in which they changed around. A tiny fraction of the licences that have been issued have ever resulted in extraction from the North sea. We will manage existing licences for their lifespan, and will take a pragmatic view on the future of the North sea, which we will announce in the coming weeks, but the long-term future of the North sea does not lie in oil and gas; it lies in renewables, carbon capture and hydrogen.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Does the Minister really consider this a just transition? We have thousands of contractors arriving in the highlands. They stay in workers' camps, and very few legacy houses are agreed. The companies are not employing local people, and this is all in an area with the greatest fuel poverty in Britain.

Michael Shanks: We know that winter has come when the hon. Gentleman turns up in his lovely knitted jumpers; it is a pleasure to see them back again. He and I have had a number of conversations on this issue, and I recognise how seriously he takes it. There have been some good moves recently to look at the legacy left behind, particularly housing. This is about building housing that suits the workforce, but can be left behind for communities afterwards. We need a lot of work in partnership with the Scottish Government, who have responsibility for housing policy, to make sure that the opportunities are taken forward. The Minister for energy consumers, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde

[Michael Shanks]

and Renfrewshire West (Martin McCluskey), will say much more in due course about our plan for warm homes. That will result in significant spending in Scotland, but that will be in the hands of the Scottish Government, who have cut this budget time and again. I hope that they will change their ways, and will help the hon. Gentleman's constituents to have warmer homes this winter.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has the Minister made any estimate of the likely impact on Petrofac and similar enterprises of the extension of the energy profits levy?

Michael Shanks: As I have said in a number of answers, the UK arm of Petrofac is a successful and growing business. Its holding company went into administration today due to a number of factors, including the loss of an international contract. It is nothing to do with our policy in the North sea.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I say to our colleagues on the Green Benches that of course climate change exists. We need green investment, green jobs and the green transition, but is there not a fundamental flaw at the heart of the Government's policy, which is that it is ideologically driven? Have we not learned anything from Russia's invasion of Ukraine about energy security, energy sovereignty and energy independence? I put it to the Minister, with the greatest respect, that in the medium to long term, if we continue down this track too quickly, without a stable transition for workers and the energy sector, the Government could end up undermining the UK's national security.

Michael Shanks: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for how he has put the question. Energy security is at the heart of what we are trying to do, because our exposure to fossil fuels is what led to some of the most significant price spikes in all our constituents' bills—spikes that they still face today. Our continued exposure to the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine—even though none of that Russian gas now reaches us—is because of the international markets; they drive this forward. The only way to take back control of our energy is by building the clean power system of the future, and the pace of that transition is absolutely right. We are driving forward momentum, to make sure that the investment comes forward to create jobs in the economy right now. That has been successful; there has been £50 billion of private investment just in the past year. My view is that 10 or 20 years ago, both under the previous Labour Government and under the Conservative Government, we should have recognised that a transition was under way and put in place a credible plan for protecting the jobs. That was not done, but we are determined to do it, so that the transition for oil and gas workers is into good, well-paid jobs in renewables, carbon capture, hydrogen and other technologies, and we have a genuinely just and prosperous transition.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Job losses in the North sea come from the lack of a strategic energy transition plan. The same applies to nuclear in Wales, where the lack of a plan for Wylfa has seen nuclear jobs

in Ynys Môn fall to a record low. Does the Minister agree that future-proofing our energy industries against job losses and rising costs requires a clear strategy and timely decisions from this Government?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady rightly takes every opportunity to ask me about the range of energy issues in her constituency, and I thank her for that. We have concluded the small modular reactor programme that we inherited from the previous Government, with Rolls-Royce winning that competition. The future of nuclear will be taken forward with Hinkley Point C, Sizewell C and the future of the SMR programme, but also with private sector investment in the US-UK partnership, which will build it. The decision on where the SMRs will be is under consideration by my noble Friend, the Minister for nuclear, and we will have more to say about that in due course.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): This Government like to tell people that growth is their first priority, but growth requires abundant and cheap energy. Does the Minister recognise that the only things they are growing by cutting the oil and gas industry are domestic prices, business prices and the number of job losses in the industry?

Michael Shanks: No, I do not. The clean power that we are trying to build will enable us to ensure that we remove gas as the price setter on our system. At present, gas sets the price 80% of the time, although it is often clean power that is powering the country. That is a problem that we have to end, so that all our constituents—but also businesses—benefit from cheaper power. The cheapest form of electricity that we can build at the moment is solar. I know that the hon. Lady objects to a number of those schemes in her own constituency, as she is perfectly entitled to do, but I would say to Conservative Members that if we want to build a power system that brings down bills, we have to support the infrastructure that goes with it.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Sadly, this is not an isolated case; regrettably, it is a pattern of decline that we are seeing under this Government. Can the Minister tell us how many companies must go under before the Government realise that Great Britain cannot build a resilient and secure energy system by shutting down the energy industry?

Michael Shanks: Let me just challenge the premise of that question once again. Petrofac's UK arm has not gone under; it is working today as it did yesterday and the day before and the day before that, and as it will the day after. It is a successful, growing business, and we have a responsibility to talk up the industry to ensure that it has a viable, long-term future. In the next few days we will continue to work intensively with the company to make that happen, but we do have a responsibility not to undermine a successful business, which is what the UK arm of Petrofac is. The company that went into administration today is the topco of Petrofac, which has no employees.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The United Kingdom's electricity price is set by gas 98% of the time. By contrast, the electricity price in the European

Union is set by gas less than 40% of the time. If the electricity price in the UK were set by the price of clean energy more often, would the UK not be a more attractive destination for investment in energy generation? *[Interruption.]*

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, although I think I heard a “no” from the Opposition Front Bench in response to his question. The only way in which we can deliver long-term energy security is to get off the rollercoaster of fossil fuels. The future is in clean energy: we see that across Europe, where nuclear and renewables are driving down the cost of electricity, but also insulating countries from the price spikes that we have seen as a result of, for instance, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We are too exposed to gas at the moment, which is why our electricity prices are high, even though for much of the day our power is being generated by clean energy, which is considerably cheaper. Clean energy is the economic opportunity of the 21st century. It is how we deliver our energy security, how we tackle the climate crisis, and how we bring down bills for people now and in the long term.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): While Labour continues down the path of net zero, the UK now imports more than 40% of its total energy needs from overseas. Given that the UK is the second most expensive country in the world for household electricity, will the Minister issue new oil and gas licences so that we can get oil and gas out of the North sea to support jobs and help energy companies to cut fuel costs for people right across these isles?

Michael Shanks: I do not know whether the footnote to the hon. Gentleman’s question says this, but even if we were to issue new licences, what we extracted from the North sea would be traded on the international market and we would pay the price that is traded on the international market. I would like to understand the hon. Gentleman’s logic in respect of how that would help us to bring down bills; it is not the case. Let me be clear about this: the long-term future of our energy system is a mix of nuclear and renewables. Removing ourselves from the volatility of fossil fuels is the only way forward, but it is also an economic opportunity for his constituents and those of Members on both sides of the House. We will build this infrastructure here with a proper industrial strategy to create the jobs of the future.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Can the Minister explain to my constituents how banning new drilling for oil and gas while importing gas

from other countries at a higher cost will bring their bills down by £300, and can he say when that will happen by?

Michael Shanks: Let me say to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, and indeed to anyone’s constituents, that over the past few years they have been paying the price for what happens as a result of our exposure to fossil fuels. The last Government had to spend tens of billions of pounds on reducing people’s bills because of that exposure. The hon. Gentleman may have forgotten about that, but I can tell him that his constituents will not have, because they are still paying the price for it. This Government are determined not to make the same mistake again. The Opposition are willing to go back to the fossil fuel casino again and again and hope that it gives them a better hand, but we are going to build the clean power system of the future and bring down bills for good.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have a number of constituents who depend on the North sea oil and gas industry for their employment. The Minister will be aware that if a buyer is not found, the knock-on effect will not be limited to those families facing redundancy, but will affect our nation’s energy security. Does the Minister accept that the uncertainty of Government support has had an effect on the future sustainability of the industry, and that we should be realistic and acknowledge that the Government need to continue to invest in the industry until we approach that far-off time when, just perhaps, we do not need oil and gas?

Michael Shanks: I always welcome the hon. Gentleman’s contributions in our many debates on energy, both here and in Westminster Hall. He is right that the impact of job losses goes well beyond the individuals, although I reiterate that in this case there have been no job losses in the UK; Petrofac continues to be successful, and it is in all our interests to make sure that remains the case.

On the hon. Gentleman’s wider question, I know that the impact is felt on supply chain jobs in his constituency and across the country. That is why we need to build up the new energy infrastructure here as well. For too long, all those offshore wind platforms that were towed into British waters gave jobs to other countries, instead of creating jobs here in the UK. We are determined to do something different. We are driving forward investment in the supply chains to make sure that there is a viable future for his constituents and for those across the country.

Prisoner Release Checks

4.36 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): I would like to make a statement on the release in error of Hadush Kebatu from HMP Chelmsford last Friday morning.

As the House will be aware, Mr Kebatu was apprehended by the Metropolitan police on Sunday morning in the Finsbury Park area of my constituency. He is back where he belongs: behind bars. I thank the Metropolitan police, Essex police and the British Transport police for their swift action to return him to custody, and the public who helped to locate Kebatu after the police appeal. I can tell the House that he will now be transported for deportation back to Ethiopia as quickly as possible. However, that does not change the fact that Mr Kebatu's victims are rightly outraged about what has happened. I am livid on their behalf, and on behalf of the public. This was a mistake that should not have happened. The victims expect better, the public expect better, and this Government expect better from a critical public service, which plays a vital role in our first duty: to keep the British people safe and free from harm.

On Friday 24 October, Mr Kebatu was scheduled to be transferred from HMP Chelmsford to an immigration removal centre, from which he was to be deported. Due to what appears to have been human error, he was instead released into the community at 10.25 am. Shortly after 12 pm, concerns were raised about the release to the duty governor, and, following checks, staff were dispatched to locate him. When it became clear that he was no longer in the vicinity of the prison, Essex police were notified and a manhunt began.

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service instigated an immediate investigation, and I have asked for the initial findings to be with me this week. The House will appreciate that, in the meantime, there is a limit on what I can say. Members will be aware that there are national security considerations within a case like this. I will update the House in the appropriate way as soon as I can. What I can say today is that there must be, and there will be, accountability for what has happened.

When I was first informed of the release in error, I spoke immediately to the duty governor at HMP Chelmsford and senior HMPPS leaders in order to understand what was known and to seek assurances about the immediate measures being taken. I tasked my officials with working through the night and co-ordinated a response with the Home Office and the police, and I put on the record my thanks to the Home Secretary for her engagement over the weekend. I also chaired three operational meetings with the police, and on Sunday I was able to travel to Wood Green police station, just outside my constituency, to personally thank the police officers who caught Kebatu.

I have been clear from the outset that a mistake of this nature is unacceptable. We must get to the bottom of what happened and take immediate action to try to prevent similar releases in error in order to protect the public from harm. First, on Friday I instructed the chief executive officer of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to carry out an urgent review to look at the checks that take place when a prisoner is released, and to identify immediate changes that could be made to the

process, in order to mitigate the risks of release in error. As a result, HMPPS has taken steps to make these processes more robust. There will now be more direct senior accountability for ensuring that protocols and checks are correctly applied, including a clear checklist for governors to determine that every step has been followed the evening before any release takes place. These are the strongest release checks that have ever been in place. They will apply to every release from custody and are effective immediately.

Secondly, any foreign national offender being removed through the early removal scheme—the scheme through which Kebatu was supposed to be removed from the country—can now be discharged only when the duty governor is physically present, and there will be no ERS removals from HMP Chelmsford for the rest of this week.

Thirdly, I am today announcing that there will be an independent investigation by Dame Lynne Owens—I spoke to her yesterday. She is a former deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan police and a former director general of the National Crime Agency. She will fully establish the facts of Kebatu's release and whether staff had sufficient experience, training and technology. She will also talk to the victims in this case to understand the effect that this incident had on them. Her report will highlight points of failure and make recommendations to help prevent further releases in error, which have been rising year on year since 2021—from an average of nine per month in 2023 to 17 per month in the period spanning January to June 2024.

I am clear that a single release in error is one too many, which is why we have launched this independent investigation. I can tell the House that it will have the same status as those into other prison incidents, including the awful attack on three prison officers at HMP Frankland in April and the escape of Daniel Khalife from HMP Wandsworth in 2023, under the last Government.

Releases in error are a symptom of the system that we inherited from the Conservative party. Jails were full—almost to breaking point—and there was the threat of a total collapse in law and order. The fact is that we were left with prisons reeling from historic funding reductions: a 24% real-terms cut between 2010 and 2015, and 30% cuts in staffing. Today, we have been left with over 50% of frontline prison officers having less than five years' experience. When the system has been brought to its knees, it is little wonder that errors like this happen.

We must also be honest about how the previous Government's approach to this crisis—piecemeal, complex emergency releases in the hope that the system would not collapse—has added a level of complexity and pressure that makes errors more likely. This Government have been transparent about the difficult decisions necessary to fix the mess for good so that prisons can keep us safe and future Governments need not find emergency solutions to free up capacity.

This Government have brought forward the Sentencing Bill, which is currently making its way through this House. It will ensure that we have a suitable criminal justice system, and one that can deliver punishment that works, cuts crime and keeps the public safe. This Government are also building 14,000 additional prison places, so that we have the capacity to lock up the most dangerous offenders. This is the largest prison expansion since the Victorian era, and let us be clear that there will

be more people in prison at the end of this Parliament than there ever have been before. We have already built 2,500 additional prison places in just over a year, compared with the 500 added overall to the prison estate under the Tories.

We are deporting more foreign criminals than the last Government. We changed the law last month to speed up the early removal scheme—which, to be fair, the shadow Justice Secretary called for—so that most foreign prisoners can now be deported after serving 30% of their custodial sentence, rather than the previous 50%. Through the Sentencing Bill, we will go even further to deport foreign criminals as soon as possible after sentencing. I can confirm that, in the year to July 2025, we sent 5,179 foreign national offenders back to their countries of origin, which is a 14% increase on the previous 12 months. This frees up desperately needed prison places and saves the taxpayer the £54,000 per year it costs to hold an individual offender.

This context sets out the scale of the challenge, but I am clear that releases in error are not simply a fact of life. The public will not accept that and neither do the Government. We will get to the bottom of what happened in this case, and we will take whatever steps necessary to tackle the spike in releases in error, so that we can uphold the first duty of every Government, which is to keep the public safe from harm. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.47 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Dear, oh dear, where to begin? This Justice Secretary could not deport the only small boat migrant who wanted—no, who tried—to be deported. Having been mistakenly released, Hadush Kebatu came back to prison asking to be deported not once, not twice, but five times, but he was turned away. The only illegal migrants this Government are stopping are those who actually want to leave the UK. His officials, briefing the press, called it “the mother of all—”. Yeah, they are not wrong, are they? Calamity Lammy strikes again. It is a national embarrassment.

Today the Justice Secretary feigns anger at what has happened. He says he is “livid” that Kebatu was mistakenly let out, but under his plans to abolish short prison sentences, which he forced through the Commons last week, Kebatu would never have even stepped foot in prison in the first place. Let us get it straight: we had the spectacle of the Metropolitan police scouring London to find a man the Justice Secretary is simultaneously legislating to avoid sending to prison. What an absolute farce! I must commend the Justice Secretary’s performance: it is truly BAFTA-worthy. He has perfected the art of performative outrage to a tee.

On Wednesday—[*Interruption.*] They may be laughing, but let me finish this point. On Wednesday, the Justice Secretary will force every one of his MPs to vote again on the Sentencing Bill, which will see hundreds of sex offenders just like Kebatu avoid prison altogether—sick men who destroy the lives of young girls, who steal their childhoods from them. They will be free to roam your communities to steal the childhoods of your constituents. I will tell you who will be livid then: the British public will be livid and they will know who is to blame.

The Justice Secretary says he has launched an inquiry into what has happened, but he should be able to provide some basic questions to the House now. With respect to the prison in question, HMP Chelmsford, there is clearly a very significant problem. In a previous internal audit at Chelmsford, officials had marked their own homework as “good”, yet inspectors rated it as of “serious concern”. What is the Justice Secretary going to do now to address the way in which problems in our prisons are covered up routinely or wished away?

On the inquiry itself, you will not be surprised to hear that I am—how shall I put this?—sceptical about this Government’s ability to conduct inquiries with any competence. Why are they limiting themselves to this particular security farce and not the other glaring errors, such as the doubling of drone sightings above prisons, the soaring assaults on prison officers or the rampant extremism we are now seeing in our jails?

Shocking as this accidental release is, it is not a one-off blunder. It has come to be the norm under this Government, as the number of prisoners mistakenly let out early has more than doubled. Will the Justice Secretary tell the House how many of the 262 prisoners let out mistakenly in the year to March were violent or sexual offenders? And how many are still at large? There are now record numbers of foreign nationals clogging up our prisons—more than under the last Government. How many of those 262 prisoners accidentally released are migrants, like Kebatu, who were awaiting deportation?

Can the Justice Secretary give the House his cast-iron assurance that this man will be deported from our country by the end of the week, as he promised on the news on Sunday? If he fails, will he take responsibility and resign? Lastly, on Tuesday the Justice Secretary blocked my amendment to release the migrant crime data. Does he now finally acknowledge that there is a link between the small boats and crime in this country? Will he call the small boats out for what they are: a national security emergency?

This man should never have been in our country in the first place. That is the truth. He should have been detained. He should have been deported. Instead, he was put up in a hotel in Epping and allowed to prey on schoolgirls. Now we learn that some Labour officials privately concede that they were wrong to scrap the Rwanda plan. Be in no doubt: from start to finish, the Kebatu fiasco was a creation entirely of Labour’s own making. So, I say to the Justice Secretary, there is no point coming to the House today professing to be livid at the consequences of your own policies. The British people, they can see straight through you.

Mr Lammy: This is a serious issue and that is why there will be a full independent investigation.

The shadow Justice Secretary—I will give him this—is smooth. But as my mother would have said, if he was chocolate he would lick himself. He should hang his head in shame. The crisis in our prisons that we face today is because of 14 years of failure under his Government. As they were packing their bags to leave office—he knows this—there were temporary release failures under his watch. They presided over 17 mistaken releases per month.

This did not happen overnight, and it was not inevitable; it was due to the choices made by the right hon. Gentleman’s party over 14 years of chaos. The Conservatives said

[Mr Lammy]

that they were the Government of security and safety, but again and again they oversaw rising instances of violent crime and crumbling courts and prisons. They promised 20,000 extra prison places, and they managed only an extra 500—500 in 14 years. They promised to remove more foreign national offenders from our prisons, and they failed. They promised investment and expansion in the prison system, but budgets stalled. They promised investment in the police, but we saw police numbers cut by 20,000. They promised increases in access to justice, but we did not see that; instead, we saw almost the collapse of legal aid. Under the right hon. Gentleman's watch, violence, self-harm and drug abuse went up in our prisons while prison officer numbers were cut, yet he has the brass neck to come here and give the impression that this problem started just 14 months ago.

Let me just pause there. William Fernandez, a sexual predator, was released in error in March 2021. After he was let out of prison, he raped a 16-year-old and sexually assaulted another young woman. Was there an independent investigation? No, not from the Conservatives. When Rayon Newby, another man who was mistakenly released from a category B prison, was released in error in March 2023, was there an independent investigation under the right hon. Gentleman's watch? No, there was not. When Luras Matiusovas was released in error in December 2021, was there any independent investigation? There was none at all. The right hon. Gentleman has some brass neck.

I have asked Lynne Owens to look at this incident and to do so in eight weeks, and we will of course come back to the House when that is done. All of what the right hon. Gentleman has said—looking at what happened over this period of time—will be subject to that review.

The right hon. Gentleman also says that the sentencing review will let out more foreign nationals, but he is wrong. We have actually brought down the threshold, so that someone can now be deported with just a suspended sentence. He knows that. If he reads clause 42 of the Sentencing Bill, he will understand that properly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Given the pressure on prison front desks and the complexity of rules for release, this was an accident waiting to happen. One thing that might bring down the number of releases in error is the digitising of prisoner records. On visits to prisons, Justice Committee members are often horrified to find staff relying on handwritten files. While some parts of the justice system are entertaining artificial intelligence, why are our prisons still run on pen and paper systems?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As he knows, there is to this day largely no wi-fi or anything like that available on our prison sites, in part because of concerns over the use of technology by prisoners. For that reason, prisons use a paper-based system, which will always be subject to some human error. In the context of this continued early release scheme being done on the quiet under the previous Government, and indeed because of the changes that

we are making in the Sentencing Bill, it is right that we have a proper look at this. I discussed this matter with Lynne Owens when we spoke yesterday.

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

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): We Liberal Democrats are relieved that Kebatu has been recaptured after what must have been a terrifying few days for his victims, and we echo the Justice Secretary's remarks thanking Essex police, the Metropolitan police and British Transport police. However, Kebatu's recapture does not excuse the serious mistakes that caused his release to happen in the first place—it is totally unacceptable that the safety of the public was ever put at risk.

HMP Chelmsford is a remand prison that regularly deals with prisoners coming and going, and it should therefore be highly capable of handling situations like this. Yet we know from His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons that there are deep-seated inadequacies at Chelmsford, including inexperienced staff and a lack of adequate training, identified especially in pre-release documents. At the same time, we have seen worrying trends nationally in mistaken prisoner releases, with 262 prisoners released by accident in 2025, up from 115 the previous year.

We Liberal Democrats recognise that the Government inherited a mess when it comes to prisons, but they should have taken serious steps to address the shortfalls and staffing issues in prisons, which are now clearly putting the public at risk. What steps are the Secretary of State's Government taking to address work culture and training issues in our prisons, especially prisons such as HMP Chelmsford where concerns had already been raised?

I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of an independent investigation, following repeated calls by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), whose constituents were put at risk, but will he confirm what consequences those found at fault will face? Also, pending the outcome of the investigation, does he agree that anyone responsible should face the sack? Does he believe that the new safeguards he is putting in place will prevent this from ever happening again?

Finally, Kebatu's victims will have spent the weekend incredibly distressed. What support was provided to those victims and their families over the weekend when they were aware of the perpetrator being at large, and will that support continue?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for the tone of her remarks. She is right that what happened was entirely unacceptable, and understandably the victims of Kebatu's crimes and their families would have been very anxious over the course of the weekend. The public at large would also have been very anxious, particularly women and children. She is right that there are issues in our prisons; 50% of our prison staff are effectively new on the job as a result of what we inherited from the Conservatives. It is important that we give them the appropriate support and training over this period.

The hon. Lady knows, because I have said it from the Dispatch Box, that it is our intention to grow the number of prison places—14,000 places by 2031—and build

new prisons. In that context, it is also important that we grow the number of officers and support them. The hon. Lady knows too the importance of probation in this context, and the £700 million we have allocated to support our Probation Service at this time is really important. She will recognise that, in a system that releases 57,000 prisoners every year, many prisoners are released appropriately under licence. Some of them are reporting to probation or at home or for tags, and many of them—a proportion that has gone up—are reporting for early removal. For all those reasons it is important that Lynne Owens gets to the bottom of what happened in this circumstance.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): On the weekend we heard Conservative Members talking about the Labour party releasing this prisoner early. That is a rather silly comment, as the Labour party did not release anybody. Does the Secretary of State agree that what has caused, created and contributed to the problems that have enabled these mistakes to happen has not come from the 14 months we have been in power but from the 14 years of austerity and cuts that the Conservatives oversaw?

Mr Lammy: As a statement of fact, the Conservatives recognise that the inheritance we had in this context was poor. The public want to ensure that whoever is in government keeps them safe and that people are not being released from prison in the wrong way. That is why it is important that there is a full and independent investigation into this incident and that the system learns lessons from it. I listed previous cases where there was no full or independent investigation. We could have learned from these cases earlier if the Conservatives had acted.

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

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The crisis of small boats crossing the channel is utterly debilitating and is alienating millions of people from the whole political process. Imagine how the whole atmosphere would have lightened if the Government had come here today and said, “This sort of farce cannot continue. We will get out of any convention, and from midnight tonight if you land illegally on these shores, you will be detained and deported immediately back to where you have come from.”

I want to ask about a particular constituency point. Such is the crisis around how to house these people that there are reports today in *The Times* and other newspapers that the Government are thinking of opening disused military sites and are looking at two or three in particular. The Government gave a solemn promise that they would not use RAF Scampton to house illegal migrants. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that solemn promise still stands?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman will have heard the Housing Secretary this morning talking about how we are looking at military sites. We are looking at a number of them intently. I am afraid that I am unable to give him reassurance in relation to his constituency because I have not got the list in front of me, but I will ensure that the appropriate Minister makes contact with him.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is deeply concerning that a dangerous criminal was released on to the streets—that should not have happened—but I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his honest assessment of what happened and for acknowledging that it was wrong. Does he agree that we are dealing with 14 years of Tory neglect with overcrowded and understaffed prisons, and that when things go wrong—as they have done—it is essential that we take swift and decisive action so that the public’s trust in the justice system is maintained, and that that is exactly what we are doing now?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The truth is that, under this Government in our first year in office, more than 5,100 foreign national offenders were removed from this country. We have removed 2,500 more from prison than in recent times. Under the last Government, there were 800 releases in error and no full independent investigation. That is the truth. It is on this watch that we are going to change that.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The trial, sentencing and mistaken release of Hadush Kebatu all took place in the heart of my constituency, and it is entirely unacceptable. First, I thank Essex police, British Transport police and the Metropolitan police, as well as the public for their vigilance, for ensuring that he was apprehended and will now be deported. I welcome the announcement of an independent investigation, but the Government must ensure that any recommendations are implemented in full without delay and not just left to gather dust on a bookshelf. On prison leadership, does the Justice Secretary agree that scapegoating a single prison officer for systemic failure is unacceptable and that if leaders—including prison governors—are found to be at fault, they should resign?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I know that this case has been shocking for her constituents and that the reports and scenes of this prisoner wandering around Chelmsford will have been incredibly disturbing; particularly so for the victims of the crime. I know that she has spoken to the Prisons Minister—I am grateful that she reached out as she did—and I think that she has spoken to the governor as well.

We have suspended the officer involved pending an investigation—that must be right and proper—but I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that, having asked Dame Lynne Owens to look at this case closely, we will of course take seriously her recommendations. I will ensure that the House can fully scrutinise those recommendations when they come forward.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The case of Kebatu has exposed deep failings in our prison system as a result—as we have heard—of 14 years of failure by the previous Tory Government. Those failings were made worse by chronic staff shortages.

The immediate, reckless skilled visa rule change risks forcing hundreds of experienced overseas officers out of the service overnight. At HMP Liverpool, 40% of staff could be affected. Will the Secretary of State explain how stripping our prisons of trained staff will make them safer or help prevent further failures like those seen in Mr Kebatu’s case?

Mr Lammy: I want to reassure my hon. Friend that the Prisons Minister is talking to Home Office colleagues about these very issues at this time.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): My thoughts are with the victims of this sex offender's crimes, including the 14-year-old Epping schoolgirl. They and their families want answers as to how this major breach could have happened. The Prime Minister and the Justice Secretary have said that they were "appalled" and "livid". Well, that is great—so is everyone—but Ministers are not commentators; they are in charge and ultimately they are accountable. This issue has not gone away for the people of Epping. The twice-weekly protests continue. No one wants our town to be repeatedly the lead story in the news, but the events of recent days have again raised community anxiety and distress. Will the Government now get a grip on this issue, address the illegal immigration crisis that has spun out of control on their watch, and do the right and safe thing and close the Bell hotel immediately?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman was right, at the beginning of his question, to centre the victims of these crimes and their anxiety, and to hold that dear. That is why the first thing I said to Lynne Owens was that she should reach out to those victims and hear from them as she went about her work. I know Epping very well, and I am quite sure that the hon. Gentleman's constituents know that the crisis that we inherited began under the last Government. Their discontent with asylum and immigration—the inability of the last Government to deal with the gangs and the collapse of the Rwanda scheme—and the outrage of asylum hotels all began under the last Government, and he knows that as well as I do.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to the House today to address this serious issue. Many of my constituents raised it with me over the weekend. I notice that not a single Member from Reform is here, especially not the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin). I am assuming that she is still running scared after her horrific racist remarks over the weekend. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the deportation of Kebatu will proceed unhindered and without delay—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman to ponder his words. I suggest that he withdraws the remark that he has just made about another hon. Member.

Chris Webb: On your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, I withdraw that remark. To finish my question, will the Secretary of State ensure that there is a swift plan, so that when mistakes are made we can ensure that public trust in the justice system is retained?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right, and it is hugely important to put this in the context not only of the victims, who will have been anxious, but of the inheritance of the backlog in our courts that is preventing people from getting justice. He is also right to reference the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby, who I see is not in her seat despite her very inflammatory statements over the weekend.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is outrageous that Kebatu was not deported at the end of his sentence. What is worse is that the number of prisoners released by mistake has more than doubled under this Government. If the Justice Secretary is determined to release thousands more prisoners early, how confident is he that this mistake will not be repeated again and again on his watch?

Mr Lammy: There is actually a point of agreement between the two main parties: that foreign national offenders who commit crimes should be deported as quickly as possible. We are attempting to do that with the Sentencing Bill. The shadow Justice Secretary has raised that matter, and it is one point, at least, of agreement. I am serious about getting to grips with the early release issue and am serious when I say, and the hon. Member knows this, that this story began before we came to office. It is why one of our most senior police officers will be looking at this issue and, of course, we will take all her recommendations seriously. It is hugely important that the public sees the system working and that they feel safe.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Hadush Kebatu is clearly a depraved individual and a dangerous pervert who should be booted out of the country without delay. But my constituents are sick and tired of having to foot the bill for the cost of housing foreign national offenders in British jails. Will the Home Secretary therefore reassure them that the Sentencing Bill will make it much easier to deport those individuals and ensure that they are in foreign jails where they belong, rather than clogging up our prisons?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It costs £54,000 a year to have any individual in prison in our country—that is a lot of money. That is why it is important that we reduce the period that they are in our country, and that once they have been convicted and served 30% of their time, we can deport them back to where they come from. That is, of course, where Kebatu should be and what he should experience over the course of the next few days.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The breakout from prison of Hadush Kebatu sounds less like "The Great Escape" and more like "Fawlty Towers". It has helped bring to light that 262 prisoners were released by mistake last year and 115 the year before. On mistaken releases, what assurance can the Justice Secretary offer that the responsible contractors or subcontractors will be subject to the sort of financial penalties that motivate them to prevent further mistakes from happening?

Mr Lammy: I am not sure in this circumstance that this was subcontracted. The hon. Member will understand that when we look at the 56,000 or so prisoners who are released from prison, many are being released into the hands of probation and asked to report to a probation office. Some are released for time served. There are housing and employment assessment needs. Many are tagged at home. He is right on what is behind his question. For some reason, Kebatu found himself in the wrong stream because for foreign national offenders, it is an immigration removal centre and it is off on a plane, and that is what should have happened.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I welcome the fact that Dame Lynne Owens will be speaking to the victims of Kebatu to understand the impact on them, but will the Deputy Prime Minister confirm whether the previous Government made any steps to speak with victims affected by prison release errors that happened on their watch due to the system being starved of funding?

Mr Lammy: There were many cases of early prisoner release. As I said before, whether it was William Fernandez in March 2021, Rayon Newby in March 2023 or Lauras Matiusovas in December 2021, there were no independent investigations under the last Government. Very little was said or, it would seem, learned even though 800 prisoners were released early. This story goes back a long way. It is in part because of the scheme set up under the last Government, which was revised four times in the run-up to the general election, and it is why we must take a thorough look and reassure the public.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Justice Secretary will know that police operational independence, free from political interference, is crucial and is enshrined in the police protocol. Yet, on page three of the statement which the Secretary of State just gave, he told us—I checked against delivery—that over the weekend he “chaired three operational meetings with the police”.

What has changed?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman has tremendous experience in this Chamber, and I think he would think it was extremely lackadaisical if the Justice Secretary did not seek an operational update from the police over the course of the weekend, when this was at the top of the news cycle and of huge anxiety. Of course, operational matters are for the police, but I am hugely grateful, as I said to Mark Rowley this morning, and I was very pleased that local officers in the London borough of Haringey were able to detain Kebatu, which is why I went up to Wood Green to thank them personally for what they had done.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The erroneous release of this individual was an appalling error. I am grateful that he has been caught and that the Justice Secretary will take steps to get to the bottom of what went wrong in this case. I will be grateful if he comes back to the House in due course to report on his findings.

When they started last year, this Government inherited an appalling situation in respect of the prison estate, with prisons fit to bursting and short of staff. Perhaps that is why the general election came when it did, rather than in the autumn, because there would have had to have been a prisoner release scheme under the previous Government later that year.

I am sick of people coming to my constituency surgeries who have been victims of crime but feel that justice is not being done. I urge my right hon. Friend to redouble his efforts to build up the number of prison places, but also to take steps to ensure that, certainly at lower levels of crime, people do not get into crime in the first place, because that is how we will save money in the long run.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to mention the end of the early supervised licence scheme that was set up by the last Government and revised four times, and under which 10,000 people were released. It was effectively done on the quiet, in a chaotic way, and that is when we began to see the spike. It is not about making partisan or political points, but the truth is that we all know that the prison system that we inherited was in a dire situation. We now need to get a grip where mistakes are being made, which is why the officer involved has been suspended under investigation, the checks and balances in place are now the toughest we have had, we are asking duty governors to look at cases the night before, particularly in relation to foreign national offenders, and we have Dame Lynne Owens doing a further investigation.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I put on the record my role as the co-chair of the justice unions parliamentary group. Everyone here will want to make sure that this kind of outrageous error never happens again. The chief inspector of prisons warned today of a “systematic problem” of increased releases in error, citing “very busy people, often quite inexperienced, with huge caseloads”. He also warned that prisons are dependent on west African officers whom we might now lose thanks to the changes to visa thresholds that are expected to cause “an enormously damaging effect” on some prisons. With that in mind—because the Government have control over it—will the Justice Secretary press the Home Office to look again at how changes to the skilled workers visa are directly causing prison staff shortages and worsening prison performance?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for putting on the record the challenge we have with junior staff. I am very grateful for the work in our prison system of those staff, who are much beloved, who have come from west Africa, largely Nigeria, to support the system for a period of time. I recognise the challenges that the right hon. Lady articulates and, of course, as she would expect, all such matters are under discussion.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I thank the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) for starting his question with a recognition that the situation really affects the victims of this terrible crime. We all need to recognise the devastating effect on the families and those who are victims of crime when the person who committed those crimes is released in this way. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give to residents in my constituency that this Government will finally get on the front foot when it comes to this issue and tackle it?

Mr Lammy: I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend; he has just returned from paternity leave. I know his constituency of Harlow very well—I think it has one of the highest proportions of Spurs supporters in the country—and I know that folk will have taken this very seriously. I want to reassure them that we have asked one of our best senior police officers to lead the review, and we have put in place immediate checks in the system that are the toughest that have ever been in place for release. Of course the officer involved has had to be suspended pending that full investigation, and the Prison Service itself has immediately begun its own investigation and will report to me later this week.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Mr Kebatu came to this country by small boat, allegedly because he was seeking asylum against oppression in Ethiopia. At his trial, however, he changed his mind and decided he would rather be back in Ethiopia. What bothers me about the state of our immigration system is that if, after he has been punished in Ethiopia, he hops on another small boat and comes back again and says that he is seeking asylum because, as a result of his conviction for sexual crimes, he faces disapproval and possibly persecution in Ethiopia, we would have to go through this farce all over again, wouldn't we?

Mr Lammy: I recognise the concern that may well be on the minds of the right hon. Gentleman's constituents, and indeed mine, but the biometric system that we have in place should alleviate that of course. The right hon. Gentleman is right that Mr Kebatu said in the trial that he wanted to go back to Ethiopia, and that is where he now belongs.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State rightly talks about prisons reeling from historic funding and staffing cuts, yet he admits that other current Ministers have added to this problem by changing the visa rules in July, which will force many overseas prison officers out of the country. He just called them "much beloved" staff and just said that he recognises the challenges, so will he confirm that he has asked the Home Secretary to look again at her visa changes for these prison officers?

Mr Lammy: It is my job to ensure that we have the right amount of prison officers in the system and that they are supported to do their job. Of course the hon. Lady would expect that that is a No. 1 priority for the Department: the right number of prison officers to do the job, recognising that many of them now have little experience as a result of the changes that were made under the last Government, but also the right number of probation staff, and we are doing both.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Kebatu's accidental release is beyond belief; it is a national embarrassment. But what I have found really disturbing has been sitting here on the Back Benches watching the Justice Secretary laugh at some of the responses. I find that wholly unpalatable and am left wondering what the victims must be thinking. When will he resign?

Mr Lammy: I have a lot of respect for the right hon. Lady. I just remind her that I am not sure that the shadow Justice Secretary mentioned the victims once in his contribution this afternoon.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I think we all know that it is the notoriety of the Kebatu case which has brought the Justice Secretary to the House today, but we also know that there were 262 such wrongful releases in 2024-25. How many independent investigations were held into any of those and with what result, and how have we got to the point where, on average, we have five wrongful releases per week? Shouldn't action have been taken long ago?

Mr Lammy: I agree that action should have been taken long ago when this story began under the last Government. That action is beginning now.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): The fundamental responsibility of any Government is to keep their citizens safe, but—from the mistaken release of a dangerous foreign sex offender to scrapping future prison sentences for over half of offenders—which side is Labour on? Is it on the side of the hard-working, law-abiding British public, or the criminals who target and exploit them?

Mr Lammy: After the horrific legacy left by the last Government, I think that the hon. Gentleman's constituents will be pleased that we are increasing the number of prison places, that we are reversing some of the cuts made under last Government, that the Sentencing Bill is passing through Parliament and that we have come forward with a courts Bill. Those measures are all to deal with the chaos that we inherited in our justice system. I have got to tell the hon. Gentleman: his question is really rich when it was his party that cut 20,000 police officers in our country.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I say to the Justice Secretary that referring to the last Government's record is wearing a bit thin? This Government have been in power for over 12 months, so what he says is not going to wash with the British public. May I also say to him that I think he does his calm better than he does his livid?

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), I think he paraphrased his own statement, but his statement clearly says:

"Over the weekend, I chaired three operational meetings with the police."

Hon. Members will know that we can attend strategy meetings, but we never interfere with operational matters. The House, members of the public and police officers deserve clarity about that. He also said:

"Members will be aware that there are national security considerations within a case like this."

We are talking about a criminal conviction made in open court, so what are those national security implications?

Finally—so he knows that I have not been too tough on him today—I commend his decision to appoint Dame Lynne Owens; she is a first-class public servant.

Mr Lammy: Despite the nature of the right hon. Gentleman's questioning, he and I are actually friends. I think it was important that the police were able to give me an operational update, and I thank the Metropolitan police, Essex police and the British Transport police for their work, which I am sure his constituents value. I am sorry that he does not want me to mention the record of the last Government, but I have a feeling that when he was sitting on the Government Benches, he was hugely disappointed with their record on crime and on the justice system.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As the House will be aware, I was once an Epping Forest district councillor and an Essex county councillor, so I know both Epping and Chelmsford. Given the high-profile nature of this case, public confidence is at an all-time low. Did the Justice Secretary consider his position? If not, why not?

Mr Lammy: I really think that is a ridiculous question. The hon. Gentleman knows that the answer is no. What I considered carefully was what my predecessors were

up to in the last Government to allow the spike and do nothing about it. When I looked at the cases—particularly the case involving someone who was let out and went on to commit a sexual assault—I wondered why no independent investigations were set up then.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): As the Justice Secretary admits, there is a staffing crisis in our prisons that his Government inherited from the brass-necked Tories. Over a third of prison officers now have less than two years' experience. With too many officers leaving the profession and too few joining, is it any wonder that mistakes like this happen increasingly frequently? While the Ministry of Justice has sought to address the prison officer shortfall by recruiting overseas, the Home Office, as we have heard, is undermining those actions by raising the payment threshold for the skilled worker visa. I have a simple question. Is the Justice Secretary asking the Home Office to add prison officers to the skills shortage list—yes or no?

Mr Lammy: As I have said, it is right and proper that the Home Office has a thorough regime for skilled workers, and I support it in that endeavour. It is also important that we have the bank of prison officers that we need, and it is my job to ensure that we have that, whether they are able to come from abroad or—as the vast majority do—from our own country.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): There are almost a dozen pages in the statement and the Secretary of State has taken questions for almost an hour, but there is one word that I have not heard: "sorry". That is really important, particularly for the 14-year-old victim and her father. The Justice Secretary has said a number of times that he has personally reached out and thanked the police. Has he personally reached out to the victims? Has he tried to speak to them? Has he tried to say sorry?

Mr Lammy: Of course I am sorry—sorry that any victim of crime had the anxious weekend that they had. It was important for me to ensure that police liaison

were in touch with them, and I am grateful to Essex police for doing that. It is also important to me that Lynne Owens is able to speak to them so that their concerns are reflected in her full and final report.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): How many of those released in error under this Labour Government are still at large?

Mr Lammy: As the hon. Lady would expect, a number of people are released under different regimes: some will be released at home and will, hopefully, lead productive lives; others will be back in prison; and some are recalled under licence. All that will be examined by the independent, full investigation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The fact of the matter is that some 262 prisoners were freed in error in the year to March, which is almost an epidemic. That is compared with 115 in the previous year—a increase of 128%, according to data from the Ministry of Justice. The Justice Secretary knows that I have absolute respect for him, but does he accept that this is absolutely shameful? It exemplifies the changes needed in our justice system: to restore justice, and to remind people that the penalty for crime is to lose their way of life and their rights. Those who commit crime should not simply to be placed in a holding cell to tap their fingers and wait while serving a fraction of their sentence, hoping that they are one of the growing number simply to be sent home without being rehabilitated; rather, they should be detained in the system.

Mr Lammy: I associate myself with all the remarks made by the hon. Gentleman. He is completely right; this is totally, totally unacceptable. People who commit crimes deserve to be punished. I think the public also want them to be rehabilitated—it has got to be punishment that works—and to be released in an appropriate fashion into the community or sent back to their country in the appropriate way. We have to ensure that the system gets that right every single time.

Points of Order

5.37 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Saturday, the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) said:

“It drives me mad when I see adverts full of black people, full of Asian people”.

The hon. Member also said:

“It doesn’t reflect our society”.

As the MP for Brent East, one of the most diverse constituencies in the UK, let me say that you can be black or brown and be British, so I am completely offended by that comment. It is a racist comment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, can you imagine the constituents of that MP going to see her, knowing that she is a racist? These comments appear to be in breach of the MPs’ code of conduct, in particular the seven principles of public life—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Can the hon. Lady please reflect on her language and withdraw the remark about another hon. Member in this place?

Dawn Butler: Madam Deputy Speaker, the comment that I referred to is absolutely a racist comment. Can we not call out that comment in this House? It is in breach of the Nolan principles for MPs. I want to know if you can help me in ensuring that—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. For clarity’s sake, the issue is the calling of a Member of this House a racist.

Dawn Butler: Madam Deputy Speaker, let me just quote again what the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby said:

“It drives me mad when I see adverts full of black people, full of Asian people...It doesn’t reflect our society”.

Madam Deputy Speaker, that is a racist comment, and it is against the Nolan principles. How can we ensure that Members of Parliament—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not about the comment that the hon. Member is referring to; it is the fact that she called the Member in question a racist that is an issue. Can she please reflect on her remarks, in which she has called a Member of this House a racist, and stick to the comments being racist instead? It may be that the hon. Member considers that to be dancing on the head of a pin, but it is important that we all act with respect and set an example to the country.

Dawn Butler: This is giving me déjà vu. I appreciate that in this House, we are not supposed to be disrespectful and call Members of Parliament what they actually are. Ultimately, the comment is a racist comment. It is quite strange that I am unable to call out the Member for being a racist, after she has made a racist comment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am having to say this time and again—can you please consider withdrawing the comment about a Member of this House being a racist?

Dawn Butler: Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not want to be thrown out of Parliament—again—so I will withdraw the fact that I am referring to the Member of Parliament as a racist because of her racist comments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Has the hon. Member informed the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby that she intended to refer to her in the Chamber?

Dawn Butler: I have.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Chair is not responsible for comments made by individual Members outside of this place. If the hon. Member considers that there has been a breach of the code of conduct, the proper procedure is to complain to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My point of order relates to the same person, but it is a different point.

I rise to raise a matter of both parliamentary courtesy and political accountability. I have been informed that last week, the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) held a political meeting in my constituency without giving me any prior notification. I have informed the hon. Member that I would be raising this as a point of order. Although there is no formal rule preventing Members from visiting other constituencies, it is a fundamental convention of this House that MPs respect the local representation of their colleagues and notify them before seeking to engage with their constituents.

They know that they are not welcome—coming into my constituency, stirring up hate and division. To ignore this convention of the House is discourteous; to do so in a city like mine, with a very long and proud history of diversity, is politically provocative. I call on the House to recognise that such actions undermine the norms of mutual respect between Members and disregard the right of constituents to be represented by their elected MP. The people of Liverpool Riverside do not welcome this opportunistic political activity. Madam Deputy Speaker, do you agree that this matter requires urgent attention, and can you reaffirm the principle that parliamentary conventions and respect for local representation must be upheld by all Members?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for her point of order, and for confirming that she notified the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby in advance of making it. Mr Speaker has always been clear that Members intending to visit a colleague’s constituency, except for purely private purposes, must inform that colleague in advance.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) is absolutely right to draw the attention of the House to the Nolan principles of public life. Keeping a weather eye on those principles falls within the auspices of my Select Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and of course this year is an important anniversary of the Nolan principles.

Given the fact that it is an important anniversary, and given that the Government have pulled together a whole variety of propriety and ethics under one body, might it now be appropriate for the authorities of this

place to reissue those principles to all Members, and to re-emphasise that they are as enduring and relevant today as they were when Lord Nolan first penned them and that if we all abided by them fully all the time, political and public life might be a little better?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. It is a very interesting idea. The principles are set out in the code of conduct, but I will ensure that Mr Speaker is aware of his comments.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Bus Services Act 2025

Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect during Appeal) Act 2025

Renters' Rights Act 2025

Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill 2025

General Cemetery Act 2025.

Victims and Courts Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 13

VICTIMS' RIGHTS TO MAKE DISCLOSURES RELATING TO CRIMINAL CONDUCT

"For section 17 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (disclosures by victims that cannot be precluded by agreement) substitute—

"17 Disclosures by victims that cannot be precluded by agreement

- (1) Any provision in an agreement is void in so far as it purports to preclude a victim, or a person who reasonably believes they are a victim, from making—
 - (a) an allegation of, or a disclosure of information relating to, relevant criminal conduct, or
 - (b) an allegation, or a disclosure of information, relating to the response of any other party to the agreement to—
 - (i) relevant criminal conduct, or
 - (ii) the making of an allegation or disclosure within paragraph (a).
- (2) Subsection (1) does not apply to provision in an agreement (an "excepted agreement") that satisfies such conditions as the Secretary of State may specify by regulations.
- (3) But the Secretary of State may by regulations provide that any provision in an excepted agreement is void in so far as it purports to preclude the victim, or the person who reasonably believes they are a victim, from making an allegation or disclosure within subsection (1)(a) or (b)—
 - (a) to a specified description of person;
 - (b) for a specified purpose;
 - (c) in specified circumstances.
- (4) Nothing in this section affects the operation of any other enactment or rule of law by virtue of which provision in an agreement may be void.
- (5) Subject to subsections (6), (7) and (8), this section binds the Crown.
- (6) This section does not apply to provision in an agreement entered into by His Majesty in his private capacity (within the meaning of the Crown Proceedings Act 1947).
- (7) This section does not apply to provision in an agreement entered into by the Crown for the purposes of—
 - (a) the Security Service;
 - (b) the Secret Intelligence Service;
 - (c) the Government Communications Headquarters.
- (8) This section does not apply to provision in an agreement which—
 - (a) is between the Crown and a member or former member of the special forces, and
 - (b) governs the disclosure by the member or former member of any information relating to the work of the special forces.
- (9) In this section—

"relevant criminal conduct" means conduct by virtue of which the person making the allegation or disclosure is, or reasonably believes they are, a victim (see section 1(1) and (2) of this Act);

"special forces" means those units of the armed forces of the Crown the maintenance of whose capabilities is the responsibility of the Director of Special Forces or which are for the time being subject to the operational command of that Director;

"specified" means specified in the regulations."

(Alex Davies-Jones.)

This new clause substitutes section 17 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, which allows victims of criminal conduct to make disclosures in connection with that conduct. Under the new section 17, there will be no requirement that disclosure be made to certain persons in order to be permitted.

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

Government new clause 14—*Restriction of parental responsibility for child conceived as a result of rape.*

New clause 1—*Child sexual abuse victims and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme—*

(1) The Secretary of State must amend the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme to—

- (a) widen eligibility for compensation to all victims of child sexual abuse, including online-facilitated sexual abuse;
- (b) ensure applicants with unspent convictions are not automatically excluded where offences are linked to the circumstances of their sexual abuse as a child; and
- (c) increase the time limit for applications for compensation from victims of child sexual abuse to seven years from—
 - (i) the date the offence was reported to the police; or
 - (ii) the age of 18, where the offence was reported while the victim was a child.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a new draft of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme within six months of this section coming into force.”

This new clause would widen eligibility for compensation to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme to all victims of child sexual abuse.

New clause 2—*Sentencing: duty when giving custodial sentence to offender who has a child—*

(1) At the time of passing a custodial sentence by a judge or magistrate the relevant court must instruct HM Courts and Tribunals Service (“HMCTS”) to determine whether an offender has—

- (a) a dependent child,
- (b) parental responsibility for a child, or
- (c) a child living in their household.

(2) As soon as reasonably practicable after establishing whether an offender has responsibility for or contact with a child as under subsection (1), HMCTS must notify the relevant local authority and relevant agencies where a child lives with such information about the sentenced individual as the Secretary of State sees fit, which must include—

- (a) offence type,
- (b) sentence length, and
- (c) the offender’s registered home address and date of birth.

(3) In this Section—

“local authority” has the same meaning as in the Children Act 2004 (see section 65);

“relevant agency” in relation to a local authority area in England, means a person who exercises functions in that area in relation to children.”

This new clause would introduce a duty on courts to ascertain whether an offender has responsibility for, or contact with a child at the time of passing a custodial sentence and for the courts to notify relevant local safeguarding teams details of the sentence passed by a judge or magistrate.

New clause 4—*Victim personal statements—*

(1) The Secretary of State shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, issue revised guidance on the content of victim personal statements.

(2) The revised guidance issued under subsection (1) must stipulate that when making a victim personal statement, a victim shall be able to say anything they wish about the defendant, provided it is not contrary to any statutory limitations on free speech, makes allegations of untried criminal conduct or is disorderly language.

(3) The court must disregard any prejudicial comments made during a victim personal statement.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review how to make victim personal statements less restrictive and clarify what can be included.

New clause 5—*Duty to collect and publish data upon sentencing—*

(1) At the time of passing a sentence by a judge or magistrate the relevant court must provide to HM Courts and Tribunals Service (“HMCTS”) the following information regarding the sentence passed—

- (a) offence type,
- (b) sentence length,
- (c) such information about the sentenced individual as the Secretary of State sees fit, which must include—
 - (i) nationality,
 - (ii) method of entry to the United Kingdom,
 - (iii) visa route,
 - (iv) visa status,
 - (v) asylum status,
 - (vi) country of birth, and
 - (vii) biological sex.

(2) HMCTS must collect and collate the information on the basis set out in subsection (1) on sentences passed in the courts.

(3) Once every three months, the Secretary of State must publish statistics based on the information collected by HMCTS under subsection (2).”

New clause 6—*Court transcripts of sentencing remarks—*

(1) All sentencing remarks made in the Crown Court must be published within two sitting days of being delivered.

(2) All publications must be freely available to all members of the public.”

New clause 7—*Extension of Victim Contact Scheme—*

(1) The Secretary of State must ensure that the Victim Contact Scheme is made available to—

- (a) victims of offenders sentenced to less than 12 months for violent and sexual offences,
- (b) victims in cases involving coercive or controlling behaviour, stalking, or harassment, and
- (c) bereaved families in manslaughter or death by dangerous driving cases.

(2) The Secretary of State must ensure that information under the Victim Contact Scheme is communicated in a timely and trauma-informed manner.

(3) The Secretary of State must publish data each year on uptake and accessibility of the Victim Contact Scheme.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to extend the Victim Contact Scheme to certain categories of victim. It would also ensure information is provided in a timely, trauma-informed way and require annual reporting on the Scheme’s uptake and accessibility.

New clause 8—*Access to free court transcripts for victims—*

(1) Victims of criminal offences shall be entitled to receive, without charge, court transcripts of—

- (a) sentencing remarks,

- (b) judicial summings-up,
- (c) bail decisions and conditions relevant to their case.

(2) The Secretary of State must ensure that such transcripts are provided within 14 days of a request.

(3) The duty under subsection (1) shall apply irrespective of whether the victim gave evidence in the case.”

This new clause would give victims a right to receive, free of charge, court transcripts of sentencing remarks, judicial summings-up, and bail decisions relevant to their case. It requires that transcripts be provided within 14 days of a request and clarifies that this right applies whether or not the victim gave evidence in the case.

New clause 9—Victims of online and technology-enabled crimes—

(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, commission the Victims’ Commissioner to undertake a review of the support provided to victims of online or technology-enabled offences including, but not limited to—

- (a) harassment and threats;
- (b) deepfake image generation; and
- (c) the premeditated filming and online sharing of violent attacks where the intent is to humiliate or cause distress.

(2) The review should consider the effectiveness of—

- (a) the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales;
- (b) any guidance on the treatment of victims in the criminal justice system; and
- (c) support provided to victims by the criminal justice agencies.

(3) The Victims’ Commissioner must publish a report making recommendations to the Secretary of State within 12 months of the start of the review.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake and publish a review of the support provided to victims of online or technology-enabled offences.

New clause 10—Duty to commission support services for victims of abuse and exploitation—

(1) This section applies in respect of victims of offences relating to—

- (a) domestic abuse,
- (b) sexual violence, or
- (c) child criminal exploitation.

(2) It is the duty of relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific services for victims under subsection (1) in accordance with the Victims Code of Practice for England and Wales.

(3) Victim is defined as outlined in Section 1 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.

(4) The services commissioned and provided for under subsection (2) must include, but are not limited to—

- (a) specialist services for adult victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence,
- (b) specialist services for child victims of exploitation, sexual abuse and domestic abuse,
- (c) specialist advocacy and community-based services for victims with specific needs including (but not limited to)—
 - (i) child victims,
 - (ii) Deaf and disabled victims,
 - (iii) Black and minoritised victims, and
 - (iv) LGBTQ+ victims,

in compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

(5) In this section—

“child criminal exploitation” has the meaning given in the Crime and Policing Act 2025;

“relevant authorities” has the meaning given in section 13 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2025.”

New clause 11—Duty to commission support services for caregivers of victims of abuse and exploitation—

(1) This section applies in respect of victims of offences relating to—

- (a) domestic abuse,
- (b) sexual violence, or
- (c) child criminal exploitation,

where the victim—

- (i) at the time of the offence, was under the age of 18, or
- (ii) is an adult at risk of harm.

(2) It is the duty of relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific services for the parent, guardian or person who has responsibility for the victim under subsection (1) for the purpose of securing the rights of the victim under the Victims Code of Practice for England and Wales.

(3) Victim is defined as outlined in Section 1 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.

(4) The services commissioned and provided under subsection (2) must be—

- (a) appropriate to the needs of the caregiver in supporting the victim,
- (b) trauma-informed and culturally competent, and
- (c) accessible without unreasonable delay or procedural burden.

(5) In exercising their duty under this section, relevant authorities must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

(6) The Secretary of State must publish such guidance within six months of the passing of this Act, following consultation with relevant stakeholders including—

- (a) victim support organisations,
- (b) organisations representing children and vulnerable adults, and
- (c) persons with lived-experience of the effects of sexual or violent offences.

(7) In this section—

“child criminal exploitation” has the meaning given in the Crime and Policing Act 2025,

“adult at risk of harm” means a person aged 18 or over who—

- (a) has needs for care and support,
- (b) is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect, and
- (c) as a result of those needs is unable to protect themselves against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it, and

“relevant authorities” has the meaning given in section 13 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2025.”

New clause 12—Application of the Victims’ Code in respect of victims of murder, manslaughter or infanticide abroad—

(1) The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 2, insert—

“2A Application of the victims’ code in respect of victims of murder, manslaughter or infanticide abroad

(1) This section applies in respect of victims as defined under section 1(2)(c) who are a close relative of a British National resident in England and Wales, who was the victim of—

- (a) murder;
- (b) manslaughter; or
- (c) infanticide,

committed outside the UK.

(2) The Secretary of State must by regulations issue an appendix to the victims’ code, setting out how the code applies to victims in the circumstances set out in subsection (1).

- (3) The appendix must set out the services to be provided to victims as defined under subsection (1) by those persons based in England and Wales appearing to the Secretary of State to have functions of a public nature relating to—
 - (a) victims, or
 - (b) any aspect of the criminal justice system.
- (4) The appendix must make provision for services based in England and Wales which reflect the principles that victims require—
 - (a) information to help them understand the criminal justice process;
 - (b) access to services within England and Wales which provide them with emotional and practical support (including, where appropriate, specialist services);
 - (c) in circumstances where the criminal justice process is engaged in England and Wales, the opportunity to make their views heard in the criminal justice process; and
 - (d) the ability to challenge decisions which have a direct impact on them.
- (5) In setting out the services to be provided to victims under this section, the Secretary of State must specify the following:
 - (a) how such services will be provided with accessible information;
 - (b) how they access emotional and practical support.””

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to create an appendix to the Victims' Code which outlines how the code applies to victims whose close relative was the victim of murder, manslaughter or infanticide outside the UK.

New clause 15—Right to referral to restorative justice services—

- (1) A victim of an offence has the right, at any stage following the commission of the offence, to receive from a relevant criminal justice body—
 - (a) information about the availability and purpose of restorative justice services; and
 - (b) a meaningful referral to restorative justice services, where those services are available.
- (2) A referral under subsection (1) must be made—
 - (a) as soon as is reasonably practicable after the offender is identified; and
 - (b) at subsequent appropriate stages of the criminal justice process (including pre-charge, post-charge, and post-conviction) or if requested by the victim.
- (3) In exercising the right under this section, a victim must at all times give informed consent, and participation in any restorative justice process shall be voluntary.
- (4) A relevant criminal justice body must maintain a record (in such form as may be prescribed by regulations) of—
 - (a) the times when referrals under subsection (1) are made; and
 - (b) statistical information on how many victims accept, decline, or do not respond to referrals.
- (5) For the purposes of this section, “relevant criminal justice body” includes (but is not limited to) the—
 - (a) police;
 - (b) Crown Prosecution Service;
 - (c) His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service;
 - (d) courts; and
 - (e) Commissioned victim service providers.
- (6) The victims’ code must include provision consistent with this section for—
 - (a) the form, timing, and content of information to be given to victims about restorative justice;
 - (b) mechanisms and standards for referral and re-referral; and
 - (c) oversight and review of compliance with this section.

(7) In this section “restorative justice services” means services facilitating a process through which a victim and offender (or their representatives) may, with appropriate support, voluntarily engage to deal with the harm arising from the offence by means of a facilitated dialogue or meeting such as conferencing, or indirect exchanges of communication via trained practitioners.”

This new clause seeks to strengthen victims’ statutory rights to access restorative justice services.

New clause 16—Duty to report on the use of restorative justice services—

- (1) The Secretary of State must, within a year of the passing of this Act, undertake an assessment of the use of restorative justice services by victims in England and Wales.
- (2) The assessment under subsection (1) must consider—
 - (a) the level of use of restorative justice services;
 - (b) recommendations for increasing the use of restorative justice services; and
 - (c) any other matters that the Secretary of State deems appropriate.
- (3) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the assessment before Parliament.

(4) In this section “restorative justice services” means services facilitating a process through which a victim and offender (or their representatives) may, with appropriate support, voluntarily engage to deal with the harm arising from the offence by means such as mediation, conferencing, or reparation, under standards of safety and fairness.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to carry out an assessment of the level of use of restorative justice services, and make recommendations for increasing their use.

New clause 17—The Victims’ Code: right to veto licence conditions relating to an offender’s release—

The Secretary of State must, within 3 months of the passing of this Act, revise the Victims’ Code to ensure that a victim of a serious or violent offence has a right of veto over licence conditions relating to the release of an offender from prison, including temporary release, which fails to reasonably prevent an offender travelling to specific locations and provide adequate protections to the victim.”

This new clause gives victims of a serious or violent offence a right of veto over licence conditions relating to the release of an offender from prison.

New clause 18—Victim navigators—

- (1) The Secretary of State must, with six months of the passing of this Act, make provision for each police force in England and Wales to have access to one or more independent victim navigators.
 - (2) The purpose of an independent victim navigator under subsection (1) is to—
 - (a) liaise between the police force and potential victims of offences relating to slavery or human trafficking; and
 - (b) assist in the provision of specialist advice for either the police force or the potential victims.
 - (3) The Secretary of State may by regulations provide further guidance on the functions of independent victim navigators.
 - (4) Regulations under this section shall be made by statutory instrument, and may not be made unless a draft has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”
- This new clause seeks to introduce provisions for Independent Victim Navigators to be in operation on a national level in England and Wales, acting as a liaison between the police and potential victim of slavery or human trafficking in accessing the appropriate support.*

New clause 19—Requirement for Strategic Planning and Funding of Victim Support Services—

- (1) Each local authority and relevant authority must prepare and maintain a victim support strategy setting out how they will meet the needs of individuals affected by—

- (a) offences related to domestic or family-related abuse,
 - (b) sexual offences, and
 - (c) offences related to child criminal exploitation,
- in accordance with their rights under the victims' code.
- (2) Strategies prepared under subsection (1) must include—
- (a) identification of gaps in existing services,
 - (b) specific plans to fund and deliver services for adults and children,
 - (c) measures to ensure accessibility for victims with particular needs, including (but not limited to) those who are disabled, deaf, from racially minoritised communities, or LGBTQ+.
- (3) Any body subject to a duty under subsection (1) must report annually to the Secretary of State on progress in implementing their victim support strategy, including outcomes for service users.
- (4) For the purposes of this section—
- “victim” has the meaning given in section 1 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024;
- “child criminal exploitation” has the meaning given in the Crime and Policing Act 2025; and
- “relevant authority” has the meaning given in section 13 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2025.”

This new clause would require local authorities and other relevant bodies to prepare victim support strategies for meeting the needs of victims of offences relating to domestic or family-related abuse, sexual offences, or child criminal exploitation.

New clause 20—Duty to report on availability of support services for carers of victims—

(1) Relevant authorities must prepare an annual report on the availability, accessibility, and adequacy of support services for carers of victims affected by—

- (a) offences related to domestic or family-related abuse,
- (b) sexual offences, and
- (c) offences related to child criminal exploitation,

provided for the purpose of securing the rights of the victim under the victims' code.

- (2) A report produced under subsection (1) must include—
- (a) an assessment of gaps in existing services for carers,
 - (b) the types of support available, including emotional, practical, and advocacy services,
 - (c) measures in place to ensure accessibility for carers with specific needs, including those who are disabled, blind, deaf, from racially minoritised communities, or LGBTQ+, and
 - (d) planned actions to improve service provision where gaps are identified.

(3) Relevant authorities with a duty under subsection (1) must publish the report and submit a copy to the Secretary of State no later than six months after the end of each financial year.

- (4) For the purposes of this section—
- “carer” means any individual providing unpaid support to a victim as defined in section 1 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024,
- “child criminal exploitation” has the meaning given in the Crime and Policing Act 2025, and
- “relevant authority” has the meaning given in section 13 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2025.”

This new clause would require relevant authorities to prepare an annual report on the availability, accessibility, and adequacy of support services for carers of individuals victims affected by offences relating to domestic or family-related abuse, sexual offences, or child criminal exploitation.

New clause 21—Duty of the Secretary of State to make a statement following publication of reviews or reports relating to the experience of victims in the criminal justice system—

- (1) This section applies where any review, report, or inquiry—
- (a) is commissioned, conducted, or sponsored (in whole or in part) by the Secretary of State or the Victims' Commissioner, and
 - (b) relates to the experience of victims in the criminal justice system.
- (2) Within two weeks of the date of publication, the Secretary of State must make a statement to both Houses of Parliament setting out—
- (a) the principal findings and recommendations of the review, report, or inquiry, and
 - (b) the Government's initial response, including any intended actions or further consideration to be undertaken.
- (3) The statement under subsection (2) must be made by oral statement unless exceptional circumstances make a written ministerial statement more appropriate.
- (4) For the purposes of this section a review, report, or inquiry may be statutory or non-statutory.
- (5) The Secretary of State must publish guidance on the operation of this section within three months of the passing of this Act.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State for Justice to make a statement to Parliament within two weeks of the publication of any review, report, or inquiry relating to the experience of victims in the criminal justice system, including those commissioned or conducted by the Victims' Commissioner. The statement must summarise the findings and set out the Government's initial response.

Amendment 8, in clause 3, page 6, leave out lines 1 and 2 and insert

“for a serious sexual offence committed against a child.”

This amendment would extend the provision of restricting parental responsibility where a parent is sentenced for a serious sexual offence committed against a child, regardless of whether it is their child or on the length of sentence handed down.

Amendment 1, page 6, line 1, leave out

“of 4 years or more”.

This amendment would ensure that where a person is sent to prison because of a sexual offence the court would be under a duty to make a prohibited steps order.

Government amendment 10.

Amendment 2, page 6, line 2, leave out

“for whom the offender has parental responsibility.”

This amendment would ensure the court was under a duty to make a prohibited steps order where anyone is sent to prison because of a sexual offence against a child, whether or not that child was one for which they had parental responsibility.

Amendment 3, page 6, line 20, leave out from “section” to end of line 25 and insert—

“ceases to have effect if the offender is acquitted of the offence on appeal.

- (5A) A prohibited steps order made under this section does not cease to have effect if the sentence is reduced, on appeal, so that it is no longer a life sentence or a term of imprisonment or detention of 4 years or more.”

This amendment would ensure that a prohibited steps order would cease to have effect if the offender is acquitted of the offence on appeal. It would also require that a prohibited steps order remain in effect where a sentence is reduced on appeal so that it is no longer a life sentence or a term of imprisonment or detention of four years or more.

Government amendments 11 to 21.

Amendment 4, in clause 11, page 12, line 21, at end insert—

“(aa) in that sub-paragraph omit “28” and insert “56””

This amendment increases the window for applying to the Unduly Lenient Sentences Scheme from 28 days to 56 days.

Amendment 5, page 12, line 23, after “(2)” insert—

“unless an application is made by a victim, or their deceased victim’s next of kin, in which case notice of an application shall be given within one year.”

This amendment increases the window for applying to the Unduly Lenient Sentences Scheme to one year for a victim of a crime or a deceased victim’s next of kin.

Amendment 6, page 12, line 29, leave out “28” and insert “56”.

This amendment is contingent on Amendment 4.

Amendment 7, page 12, line 39, at end insert—

“(5) In accordance with the provision under sub-paragraph (1) the Crown Prosecution Service must write to the victim, or a deceased victim’s next of kin, within 10 working days of the sentence being delivered to make them aware of their ability to apply for a review of sentencing.”

This amendment is contingent on Amendment 5. It would require the CPS to write to a victim, or a deceased victim’s next of kin, within 10 working days of a sentence being delivered to make them aware of their ability to apply for a review.

Alex Davies-Jones: It is truly an honour to open this debate and to bring the Victims and Courts Bill before the House. This Bill is about people—victims who have suffered unimaginable trauma and their families—and ensuring that they receive justice. It is about restoring faith in a justice system that can often feel cold and confusing, and it delivers on this Government’s driving mission for safer streets, making sure that victims are supported, that offenders are held to account, and that justice is delivered swiftly and fairly.

The deep-rooted issues in our criminal justice system need no repeating here. The House knows that the system requires large-scale reform after years of neglect. There is a long road ahead, but this Bill takes an important step forward. At its core are victims’ experiences. This Government are bringing forward real, tangible measures to ensure that victims’ voices are heard, their needs are recognised, and their rights are respected. The Bill will strengthen our courts, improving efficiency and fairness across the system. These are much-needed changes, and I am deeply grateful to hon. and right hon. Members from all parts of the House for their time and their insight in considering the measures, and to all the organisations, advocates and survivors who have shared their experiences and helped us shape this legislation.

I am sure that the House will therefore join me in paying tribute to the families of Jan Mustafa, Olivia Pratt-Korbel, Zara Aleena and Sabina Nessa, and I welcome to this place Ayse Hussein, Cheryl Korbel and Antonia Elverson, who are in the Public Gallery today. I also thank Jebina Islam, Farah Naz, the Justice for Victims group—which includes Susan and Jeremy Everard, Glenn and Becky Youens, Katie Brett, Paula Hudgell and Ayse Hussein—and the Bethan family for their courage and strength in campaigning amid immense grief for their loved ones.

Three Government amendments on Report will further strengthen the Bill, delivering clearer, stronger protection for victims, and I will turn to them briefly now. I again thank all those who have worked so constructively with me and officials in the Ministry of Justice to discuss their issues and concerns.

New clause 14 and amendments 12 to 21 restrict the exercise of parental responsibility for perpetrators of rape, where their crime has resulted in the birth of a child.

These amendments will protect children, but will also help shield the victim from their perpetrator interfering in their lives, because those who commit this horrific crime should clearly never be able to use parental rights to control or torment their victim. I take a moment to pay tribute to a woman who I am proud to call my colleague and even prouder to call my friend. Many in this House will already have deep admiration for my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), and I place on record that this change is hers. It is for her, her children and those just like them up and down the country—the people to whom she has dedicated her life to fighting tirelessly for.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I add my personal admiration for my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), who has been a fantastic champion for this new clause. Her predecessor in the House was called the beast of Bolsover, but I think she is the brave of Bolsover, because every time she speaks in this House she is incredibly brave, and I pay tribute to her.

Alex Davies-Jones: I echo those sentiments entirely. It has genuinely been my privilege to hear her story, and to work with her to ensure that this measure stops rapists taking an active role in a child’s life when that child was conceived as a result of rape. I cannot imagine the enormous complexity that mothers such as her face in this situation, and I am in awe of her bravery and that of so many others. This measure will ensure that rapists cannot take active steps in a child’s life when that child has been conceived as a result of the crime for which they have been convicted.

In order to protect as many children as possible, our measure features a two-track process. When the Crown court is satisfied that a child was conceived as a result of rape, it must make a prohibited steps order restricting the offender’s parental responsibility, unless it is not in the interests of justice to do so. We recognise that rape can occur within an abusive relationship, and that this may make it difficult to prove at a criminal trial that it led to the child’s conception. When that is the case, but the court considers that the rape may have led to the conception of the child, it will refer the matter to the family court via the local authority. This two-track process sends a clear message that we will protect all children born of rape, no matter what the circumstances.

The Government recognise the clear risk that serious child sex offenders pose to their children, which is why we tabled amendment 10, which will expand clause 3 of the Bill. It means that when someone is sentenced to four or more years for serious child sexual abuse, against any child, the courts will automatically restrict their parental responsibility. The process will remain the same: at the point when an offender is sentenced, the Crown court will be required to make a prohibited steps order restricting the offender’s exercise of parental responsibility for all children for whom they hold it. For offenders to be in scope of the amendment, they will have demonstrated that they are unable to protect children and to consider their welfare. That is why it includes all serious child sexual abuse offences against all children. Unlike the last Government’s plans in the Criminal Justice Bill, this proposal is not limited to offences of child rape. What is more, unlike the last Government, this Government will actually deliver on it. We are taking

this important step today to protect even more children by preventing these individuals from taking active steps in their children's lives.

We have recognised the strength of feeling on this issue, and I am grateful to Members—especially my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover, whom I have already mentioned, but also my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and Baroness Harman. They have been unwavering in their advocacy for the protection of children. Safeguarding children is of the utmost importance to this Government, and amendment 10 ensures that we are doing just that.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend has just mentioned some pioneering women in the House who have campaigned on this very issue for a number of years, but today's amendment stands on the shoulders of the brave victims and survivors who have spoken out for so long. It will correct a historic injustice whereby, while children are protected from convicted sex offenders and paedophiles, their own children are not, through no fault of their own. This Government are now taking steps to ensure that children and their parents are protected from these vile sex offenders.

Alex Davies-Jones: My right hon. Friend is right. The Bill is a testament to those brave victims and survivors who have spoken out about this injustice, and it is this Government who are correcting that. My right hon. Friend also said that the amendment stands on the shoulders of brave, brilliant women in this place who have come before us and are still here, and it is apt for me to pay tribute to her as well, because new clause 13, concerning the misuse of nondisclosure agreements, is a testament to her brilliant campaigning.

The Government are very clear about the fact that NDAs must not be used to silence victims or witnesses of crime. Victims must be free to tell their truth, to seek help, and to warn others. New clause 13 will void NDAs to the extent that they seek to prevent a victim or a direct witness from speaking about criminal conduct to anyone, and for any purpose. It will also protect disclosures about how the other party responded to the conduct or allegation, so that victims are not prevented from sharing the full context of their experience. It builds on the Employment Rights Bill, which addresses the use of NDAs in cases of workplace harassment and discrimination. It will bind the Crown, but will not apply to a narrow cohort of specified agreements for national security reasons. It includes regulation-making powers to define "excepted NDAs", where both parties genuinely wish to retain confidentiality, and to ensure that certain disclosures will always be permitted. Once commenced, this measure will replace section 17 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, which allows limited disclosures to certain bodies. Together with the Employment Rights Bill, we are taking the necessary steps to ensure that NDAs cannot be misused to silence victims or obstruct justice.

Let me now briefly address a number of other concerns that have been raised and led to the tabling of amendments. I will not pre-empt what will be said later today, and I will give Members the time to make their cases. However, I again thank those in all parts of the House for engaging with me and setting out their concerns.

New clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), would place a statutory duty on the Crown court and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service to determine whether an offender has parental responsibility for a child following sentencing. The new clause is well intentioned, but it risks creating practical difficulties. Determining whether a person holds parental responsibility, has dependent children or has children living in their household may require interpretation of family court orders, birth records or informal care-giving arrangements. These are matters for the family court; imposing such a duty on the Crown court risks delaying sentencing. This Government gave a manifesto commitment to identify and provide support for children affected by parental imprisonment, and the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Education are working together to determine the best way to deliver on that commitment and ensure that every child gets the support that it needs.

The right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) have tabled amendments to remove the four-year custodial threshold that applies to clause 3, and to expand the number of cases in which the clause will apply. This is not simply about when parental responsibility should be restricted; it is about when that restriction should happen automatically. We need to be mindful that this is a very novel proposal. Removing the threshold would add a very large number of cases to what is an untested approach. More cases will also mean more applications to the family court, and it is important we do not overwhelm the court and create delays that would put the vulnerable children already in the system at further risk.

We want to be sure that there are no adverse consequences for those children and their families who are already in the family court. That is why we have sought to keep these measures narrow, so that we can understand exactly how they are working in practice and what the impacts are. As I said on Second Reading and in Committee, this is just the beginning. As part of the implementation of these measures, we will seek to understand how they operate in practice and ensure that there are clear routes through the family court for the restriction of the parental responsibility of any perpetrator who does not fall into this category.

The right hon. Member for Newark has tabled amendments on the unduly lenient sentencing scheme. Parliament intended the scheme to be an exceptional power, and I recognise the importance of finality in sentencing to avoid ongoing uncertainty for victims, those convicted, and society more broadly about the sentence to be served. However, I also recognise the exceptionally difficult circumstances for victims and their families in making a referral to the Attorney General within the 28-day limit.

The Law Commission is carrying out a review of criminal appeals, and held a public consultation that sought views from a range of individuals on reforms to the ULS scheme, including extending the time limit and offences in scope. The Government will, of course, carefully consider the review's final recommendations, but I can assure Members on both sides of the House that I have heard the strength of feeling on the ULS scheme. The amendments that have been tabled on the matter raise important issues, and I will continue to look at the issue carefully as the Bill progresses towards the other place. On that, I make a commitment.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

The right hon. Member for Newark has also tabled an amendment on victim personal statements, a topic on which I must pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop) for his dedicated campaigning. Victim personal statements can be an incredibly powerful way for victims and their families to tell the court how the crime has impacted them, and for the court to directly hear evidence about the harm caused when considering its sentencing of the offender. This is the victim's voice in the courtroom.

It is important to understand that these statements are evidence submitted to the court to assist it in determining sentences. As evidence they are subject to strict rules, which the court applies to ensure that the criminal justice process works fairly and effectively. That is why the content is limited to explaining the impact of the crime.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): This takes me back to speaking with the family and father of young Violet-Grace, who was killed in 2017, at four years old, by someone who was going 80 mph in a 30 mph zone and then went missing. During the court case some years later, the family wanted to read out their victim statement fully in court. The defendant's barrister objected, and the judge accepted that objection.

6 pm

The Crown Prosecution Service barrister gave the parents a copy of their victim statement, highlighted with everything they could not say. They went out of the courtroom to alter their statement. This was a young couple with a younger child. What happened to Violet-Grace, and the impact on her mother's life, was just horrendous. The parents went into that court and were made to feel like the criminals. They felt like the defendants. They felt that they were doing wrong. They were asking, "What can we say? What can we not say?"

The father texted me this morning and said, "Thank you, Marie. After all these years, I can see some light in the future. We don't want other people to suffer this." I do hope that this measure goes through, and that we can get something for this family, who now have another little girl. I thank this Government for getting round to it, because Bills and Acts have been going through, and it has been so terribly traumatic. The whole town feels for the parents. On behalf of Violet-Grace's parents, thank you so much.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the case of Violet-Grace. She has been a tireless campaigner and supporter of the family for many years. I have had the privilege of meeting the Youens family several times and hearing directly how they were affected by their experience with their victim impact statement and the limitations placed on them as to what they could say in court. It essentially silenced them, and meant that their pain was not heard by the perpetrator. I am committed to working with them and the other Families for Justice campaigners. I have had extensive conversations with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and with many other hon. Members across this House, on looking for a way forward to ensure that victims' voices are best represented in sentencing.

We do not need legislation for that. In fact, legislation could potentially make things worse through retraumatising victims by making them give two separate statements or by limiting—even further—in statute the parameters of what can be said. I do not want to limit or silence any victims; I want to work with them to ensure that there is universality, that there is support for them when completing their victim impact statements, and that the guidance is there so that everyone knows exactly what can be said in that impact statement. It is vital that we give victims a voice, and I am determined to achieve that.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft will speak to her amendment on placing a duty on certain authorities to commission specific support services for victims—and caregivers of victims—of abuse and exploitation. Again, this measure is well intentioned, but we do not agree that it is helpful to place a statutory obligation on certain authorities to commission certain support services.

The Ministry of Justice already provides grant funding to police and crime commissioners that is used to commission support services for victims of abuse and exploitation. That includes ringfenced funding for sexual violence and domestic abuse services. It is for the PCCs to determine what support is best for their local areas. However, I remain committed to working with my hon. Friend and others to ensure that victims get the best support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has tabled an amendment that seeks to reform the criminal injuries compensation scheme in relation to compensating victims of child sexual abuse. This Government are, of course, absolutely committed to supporting victims. However, we believe that reforming the scheme in a way that benefits only victims of child sexual abuse—or any other single crime type—would undermine its principle of universality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham—as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), and all those who attended the Westminster Hall debate earlier this year—will know the strength of feeling about the criminal injuries compensation scheme: it is not working, and it needs reform. I am committed to working with them and others, including victims and survivors, to ensure that that reform is not piecemeal and to look at how we can make it the most effective and sustainable scheme, to provide compensation to victims.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) will no doubt speak to his amendment on support for families bereaved by homicide abroad. Bereaved families will, in many instances, need support tailored to their cases. We have heard that these families need more clarity about that offer from UK agencies, what the homicide service even is, and how to access it. That is why we are working with Departments across Government, agencies, and the Victims' Commissioner to produce a clear, accessible guide to support families bereaved by homicide abroad. I am grateful to the charity Murdered Abroad for working alongside us to ensure that that guidance delivers on its aims, and that we help those families who are stuck in limbo.

I will close by emphasising again the importance of this Bill. It is a foundation for a better justice system—one that provides even greater protection for victims and that delivers swifter and more efficient justice. It will not

solve every issue we face overnight, but it is a strong, determined step forward: a signal that this Government stand shoulder to shoulder with victims.

Again, I sincerely thank Members on all sides of the House for their engagement with this Bill. We work together in this place, and it is at its best when we come together for the sake of victims and survivors. I look forward to hearing the debate and responding to all of the views—I am looking forward to a really healthy debate. For now, I commend the Government amendments and new clauses to the House.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The cornerstone of our justice system should always be the support and protection of victims and survivors—ensuring that those who have suffered at the hands of others can go on to live a life without fear, and not be defined by the actions of those who harmed them. That is achieved by putting victims' and survivors' needs at the heart of the justice process, and ensuring that justice is served—and seen to be served—swiftly, through properly funded support. Both protection and rehabilitation must also be robust and effective.

All of that has underpinned many of the issues that victims and survivors currently face—the things that fill our local surgery appointments and our inboxes, often with harrowing accounts of system failures that continue to compound their trauma. We recognise that this Labour Government is having to untangle that mess: the court backlogs that delay justice; prison overcrowding; criminals released on to the streets without warning; and the hollowing out of support services that victims rely on.

We in the Liberal Democrats therefore welcome the intention of this Bill, and its many measures aimed at ensuring that victims are listened to and that their experiences in the system improve. In particular, we welcome the measures compelling offenders to attend their sentencing hearings. For many victims, that is seeing justice done—an important aspect of the process—a moment of closure or, for some, the beginning of their recovery. It is something that, more often than not, they have waited far too long to see. Offenders being seen to face the consequences of their actions is vital for many victims' journeys.

We also welcome the provisions, both in the Bill and in the Government's amendments, to restrict parental responsibility in instances of rape or sexual assault against a child, including when a child is conceived after a rape and when an offender has parental responsibility for any child. I give credit to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) for being a tireless advocate for this and for being so brave in sharing her personal story.

That change is something that my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) and for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) also called for in Committee, and it has been a long-standing campaign for families and victims across the country. It is reassuring that the Justice Secretary and the Minister for Victims have heard their calls, picked this up and made it an important part of the Bill.

We are also really pleased to hear about the victims helpline, which could provide valuable support for so many, although we remain concerned about the sufficiency of the resources behind that to make the service genuinely effective. I would appreciate further clarity from the Minister on the resources being made available for the helpline.

Likewise, the extension of the Victims' Commissioner's powers is a constructive move. Empowering them to work on behalf of victims when a case is in the public interest is important for improving the experiences of victims and witnesses and, most importantly, for learning lessons for the future, which successive Governments have not been very good at doing.

We also believe that there are gaps in the provisions of this Bill that could be improved on. These have formed the bases for our amendments, but I am pleased to hear the Minister say that this is not the end of the journey, and we are laying out where we would like to see the Bill go. To that end, new clause 7 seeks to extend the victim contact scheme to repair some of the gaps in provision. Ensuring that victims have information about offenders, and about how they can apply for licence conditions, provide statements to parole hearings and appeal decisions, is vital for many victims' journeys after a crime and for their feeling of safety. We therefore believe that the scheme should be extended to victims of offenders serving less than 12 months for violent or sexual offences, to victims in cases involving coercive or controlling behaviour, stalking or harassment, and to bereaved families in cases of manslaughter or death by dangerous driving.

New clause 8 would ensure that victims of criminal offences are entitled to free court transcripts, which should be universal to ensure transparency and an accessible method of processing court cases for all those involved in the criminal justice system, given that so much that happens in a court trial feels like a foreign language to so many accessing it, who need to process it afterwards. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) has done exemplary work on this topic and that the issue has support across the House, notably in an amendment tabled by the Conservatives, despite their decision to ignore it during the decade in which they were in charge of the Ministry of Justice. The roll-out of free court transcripts for victims of rape is a welcome step, but it should not be the end of our ambition to ensure that all victims can have this important document following a trial.

New clause 21 would require the Secretary of State for Justice to make a statement to the House within two weeks of the publication of any review, report or inquiry into the experiences of victims, including those produced by the Victims' Commissioner. When things go wrong in serious national cases where hundreds, or perhaps thousands, have been let down by the justice system, it is vital that the country sees acknowledgment, apology and action from the relevant authorities, including the Government. This new clause would give hon. Members from across the country the opportunity to scrutinise the Government's response in all instances.

New clause 19 would specifically mandate local authorities to prepare strategies for victim support, to ensure that there are no postcode lotteries in support services relating to domestic abuse, sexual offences and child exploitation. New clause 20 would require relevant authorities to prepare an annual report on the availability and adequacy of support services for carers of victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault. These services are essential for victims finding pathways to moving on from horrific crimes.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): This Bill's support for domestic abuse survivors is very welcome, but it is only half the story. In Horsham, one of my constituents

[John Milne]

arrived at court to see her abuser stand trial, only to be told at the courthouse door that the case had been pulled due to a lack of capacity. That trial was delayed for two years, by which time her abuser had breached two restraining orders. Does my hon. Friend agree that unless we see concrete measures to improve capacity above and beyond the recent increase in sitting days, this Bill cannot fulfil its promise to the public?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the impact that court delays have on victims. I think it is an opinion shared across the House that it is totally unacceptable when a victim arrives to have their day in court and then gets sent away. The reason that we have a lot of legislation coming through at the moment is because the Government are trying to address the issue from multiple different angles, and I hope to see ambition in this area.

I will briefly highlight the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), who tabled new clause 12. It would require necessary updates to the victims code for relatives of victims of murder or manslaughter abroad, who currently sit outside the victims code. Although this affects around 80 families annually, the toll on them from falling out of scope and receiving little to no support, or from not knowing where to go to get support, is unacceptable.

As has been outlined, we Liberal Democrats are concerned about gaps in this Bill and believe that more can be done to support victims and survivors, but we recognise the ambition behind it. We urge the Government to take on board our amendments to better protect victims and survivors.

6.15 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the interests of time, I will focus only on new clause 2, which stands in my name, though I also support new clauses 1, 10 and 11, and I very much welcome Government new clause 14. I thank the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) for originally tabling new clause 2. His subsequent elevation to the shadow Cabinet means that he has had to withdraw his name.

On 21 May 2024, I introduced the Children (Parental Imprisonment) Bill—with immaculate timing, as it turned out, as the general election was called the next day. I was delighted that despite the lateness of the hour I managed to have a quick word with somebody from the Leader of the Opposition's office, and a commitment to identify and support such children made it into the Labour election manifesto. I would rather the commitment in the manifesto had not quite been framed in the way it was, which was about breaking the cycle of reoffending. That is certainly one factor, but to focus solely on it risks adding to the stigma and shame that is often felt by children in this situation. However, the important thing was that the commitment was there.

At the time, we did not know how many children had a parent in prison, as most figures were based on out-of-date research or unreliable estimates, but we saw the publication of an official estimate 13 days after Labour were elected. I know that we were quick off the mark as a new Government, but that work was the result of lots of lobbying and campaigning that we had managed

to get the previous Government to agree to. They set up something called the Better Outcomes through Linked Data project. Through that, we now know that around 190,000 children are affected by parental imprisonment each year—a huge number—but that is still only a ballpark figure. It does not tell us where in the country these children are, who is looking after them, whether they are getting support, what trauma they are going through and, in far too many cases, how long they have been coping completely on their own.

My Bill called on the Government to set up a statutory mechanism so that at the point when an adult is sentenced to imprisonment, efforts are made to find out whether they have any children at home, and if so, whether those children are being taken care of. That is what new clause 2 also seeks to achieve. I have to say that I was a little disappointed by the Minister's reply, because it rather misses the point of what we are trying to do with this new clause. It has nothing to do with making a judgment about who has parental responsibility or not. The new clause says that the court should look at whether the offender has a dependent child, parental responsibility or a child living in their household. It talks about

“responsibility for or contact with”,

so there is no legal decision that needs to be made as to whether that parent is the sole carer or responsible for the child; it is about whether there is a child in the picture.

I very much believe that the Minister is passionate about this issue, and I know she has met representatives of the excellent charity Children Heard and Seen. I know she wants to act, but 16 months on from the general election, there are still no timelines for when identification and support will be brought forward for these invisible children. I want to make it very clear that this is about the welfare of children; it is not about prisoners. There is important work to be done on the rehabilitation of prisoners, and we are fortunate to have an excellent Prisons Minister who totally gets that. Research has shown that maintaining family ties for prisoners is very much part of that rehabilitation, but that is not what we are talking about today. I am concerned with the welfare of the children and specific child-focused support for those with a family member in prison, regardless of whether they have contact with that parent or not. We should not conflate the two, and I am concerned that the MOJ does so, which is in part because its responsibilities and funding streams are all focused on prisons and prisoners, whereas in the Department for Education there is a risk that these children get lost in the mix among other children who are suffering adverse childhood experiences.

In their responses to me, Ministers have highlighted the “Working Together to Safeguard Children” multi-agency working statutory guidance, published under the last Government in 2023. This guidance says that prisons need arrangements in place that take prisoners' children's needs into account. It recommends that on the first night of a prisoner's sentence, they are to be

“supported to make suitable care arrangements for any dependent children”,

with the involvement of children's social care services where needed. It advises the Prison Service to ask all prisoners during their custody screening whether they have caring responsibilities for children under the age of 18.

The inclusion of that in the guidance was positive, but it does not address the fact that some prisoners deliberately avoid revealing that they have children at home. Children Heard and Seen, the charity I mentioned, reports that some parents are scared of their children being taken away by social services, so much so that they do not tell anyone about their children. Furthermore, the prisoner in question might not have caring responsibilities. They might not even any longer have contact with the child. They might have been convicted of domestic violence against the child's mother, or convicted of sexual abuse or offences against the child themselves, but their imprisonment is still important in terms of the trauma, stigma and shame that the child will be going through. I have heard of so many cases where children of sex offenders have had their homes targeted. They have been driven out of where they live, they have been humiliated at school, and they have had to move town and change their names because of what their imprisoned parent—usually the father—has done.

The Government's "Keeping children safe in education" statutory guidance for schools and colleges, which was published in September, rightly notes that children with family members in prison are at a higher

"risk of poor outcomes including poverty, stigma, isolation and poor mental health."

It signposts to the National Information Centre on Children of Offenders as a source of support for school staff helping children with a parent in prison, but the guidance has not been properly maintained for years. Many of the resources it redirects to no longer work, but families and professionals are still being referred there. On the MOJ side, the Government published a multidisciplinary training offer tender for professionals on the impact of parental imprisonment, but this tender was taken down and the Department will not clarify why or when it will go back up. In the meantime, children are still being left without support.

Given that all prisoners have contacts with His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, there is a missed opportunity for early identification of such children. This new clause would not necessarily pick up all of them, but it would be a really good step forward. New clause 2 would go further than current guidance by instructing courts to determine whether prisoners have children, to ensure they are protected. This could include using official data and working more closely with councils or local authorities, as well as speaking to the offender directly about how a child will be looked after. It could also involve working with schools.

The new clause would present another opportunity for prisoners, before they enter the prison estate, to report that there are children at home. The more opportunities that prisoners are given to do that, the more likely they are to tell officials. I was particularly struck by one of the accounts I heard, in which a woman had been in prison for about four months before revealing—she was having a counselling session or something—that she had children of school age who were left behind at home by themselves. The new clause could also bring forward a structure and process for having those conversations to reassure prisoners that informing the authorities about any child at home is the right thing to do for their children. Statutory guidance is non-binding official advice and cannot carry the force of the law, but the new clause would instruct the relevant agencies to

go further in their legal duty to protect children. As I have said, it will not catch all children, but it would be a major step forward. Will the Minister say in her response how, if we are not going to do it this way, we are going to do it?

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): I wish to speak to my new clause 12. Each year hundreds of families get a knock on the door from the police who must deliver the worst news that a family can ever hear: the news that one of their closest relatives has been murdered. However, about 80 families each year receive the news that a family member has been murdered while abroad. That can be via a police officer, but the news often comes from a newspaper, or from a journalist who has found out and has reached out to the family directly. In many cases when British citizens are murdered abroad their families are left to deal with unimaginable grief for their loved one, all while facing the full weight of an unfamiliar, bureaucratic and different system, and they do that alone. They have to navigate foreign legal procedures, untranslated documents and distant court proceedings with patchy, inconsistent support from their Government, all at a time of trauma, vulnerability and mourning.

This is where new clause 12 come in. It seeks to add an appendix to the victims code so that this group of bereaved families, who currently fall through the cracks in our system, will no longer do so. The principle underpinning this Bill is clear: victims deserve to be at the heart of our criminal justice system. They deserve information, support and the opportunity to be heard. These are not privileges; they are fundamental rights. Yet there is a cruel anomaly: if a British citizen is murdered on British soil, their family receives structured statutory support through victim liaison officers, aid, court procedures and counselling services, but if the same British citizen is murdered abroad—while on holiday, working away or studying in another country—their family is so often left to navigate an overwhelming maze of foreign bureaucracy, often in a language they do not speak, with inconsistent and inadequate information from the Government, who should be standing behind them.

Ruth's sister Faye was killed in 2019 while in Nigeria, where she was working for a non-governmental organisation. She was shot alongside her boyfriend in a double homicide. Ruth and her family were left to deal with an overwhelming number of agencies without proper support to understand who had responsibility for what, with limited communication and poor casework consistency from the British authorities. Vital information, such as the arrest and subsequent death of a suspect in custody, which the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office knew about, took years to reach Ruth and her family. They have still not obtained a full and accurate account of what occurred on the night of Faye's murder.

Alison and Paul's son Danny was murdered in Amsterdam in 2022, aged just 22. Alison and Paul have explained how navigating the lengthy and complex Dutch judicial procedures in a foreign language, while having to arrange matters such as repatriation without any support, was an immense challenge. They have described being in a state of turmoil and trauma, and are uncertain how they managed to endure the circumstances. They have outlined how the stress took a significant toll on both them and their daughter.

[Mr Joshua Reynolds]

Theresa's husband Stephen was killed in a violent attack by a gang while on holiday in Spain in 2009. His two teenage sons sustained permanent injuries in the attack. Stephen's body was repatriated to the UK and was held by the coroner in a mortuary for eight years before the inquest was held. The inquest concluded with a verdict of unlawful killing, at which time the body was released to his wife and children—eight years after his death. Stephen's family received no support from the UK for repatriation, travel and understanding the trial in a foreign country and in a foreign language. Stephen's wife, Theresa, recounted how she and her family had been living through a nightmare—not only of having to navigate the complex judicial system in Spain, but of feeling retraumatised by the lack of support they received.

Andrew's son was murdered abroad when he was 18 years old. He says that, despite the FCDO having a duty to care for UK citizens, the family received minimal support. The FCDO provided poor and inconsistent communication, leaving the family without clear updates at critical stages. The family was forced to navigate a foreign judicial system with no help in understanding procedures, local laws or rights, which added to their distress and confusion. They received no structured aftercare or follow-up support, despite the psychological impact of such cases.

These horrible incidents are not isolated. They show a broken system that fails British families at their most vulnerable moments. New clause 12 aims to address this by adding an appendix to the victims code setting out how the code applies to close relatives of British citizens murdered abroad. It states that the appendix must provide specific guidance explaining how families affected by murders abroad can access support, including clear information about foreign justice processes, which are often complex and distressing for bereaved families, in unfamiliar legal systems. This can include dedicated liaison officers, translation services and guidance on how to deal with foreign authorities. I have spoken to far too many families who were pointed to Google Translate for death certificates and descriptions of judicial processes in foreign languages. That is simply not good enough in our country. Under the new clause, families would also be entitled to emotional and practical support, including specialist bereavement counselling. Some police services across the country do this really well, but others do not do it at all.

Let me be clear about what this amendment does not do. It does not seek to interfere with foreign judicial systems, and it does not place unrealistic expectations on the FCDO. What it does is establish as a baseline a statutory framework that ensures bereaved families have access to the same quality of support and information here at home as any other victim of homicide would receive. The Murdered Abroad campaign is made up of bereaved families who have turned their grief into a really powerful call for change. They are not asking for any special treatment. They are asking for the same structured statutory support that families would receive if tragedy strikes on British soil. The families who suffer these specific horrors should not be forgotten because the crime goes beyond our shores; a British life lost is a British life no matter where in the world it happens. Compassion in the face of tragedy is not optional but a duty, and new

clause 12 provides a way to fulfil that duty. I thank right hon. and hon. Members who have supported it, and I ask everybody to vote for it this evening.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): I will speak to Government new clause 14. It means that rapists will no longer have access to children conceived by their crime. It puts the right of survivors above the rights of criminals. It protects mummies and their precious babies. It is not okay that it took so long for the law to change—to keep up with common sense—but to get this change the Government fought to get us on these Benches and into government, bringing with us our real-life experience and that of our community, supported by Ministers, right up to the Prime Minister, determined to tackle violence against women and girls.

6.30 pm

Ten babies are born every day in the UK as a result of rape. For too long, we have told ourselves that rape only happens in faraway countries, that it is a recent crime that arrives on boats. Before that, rapes only happened when a woman was dragged down an alley by a stranger, or when a vulnerable girl was targeted by a gang. No, rape is happening here and now, just as much as it always has. It is in our communities. It is happening to our women, by our men.

If a quarter of women are raped or sexually assaulted most of the time by men they know, this means that women we know are being raped by men we know. Some of these rapes will result in pregnancy. Until we start to believe that and accept that, nothing will change. Women will continue to live in fear of not being believed, so scared that instead of being able to speak up they hide their trauma in plain sight. That has to stop now and we all have a role to play, but it starts with politicians no longer failing women by, at best, not using their power to protect them, or, at worst, seeking to weaponise their trauma.

Regardless of our class, age or background, rape has always been part of our story as women. It is a part the Government are hearing, not shying away from and not ignoring because it is too difficult. Instead, the Government are choosing to use the law to acknowledge that this is happening: protecting victims without retraumatising; automatically removing parental responsibility where there is a conviction of rape; and also saying that we believe you, even without conviction, giving a court the power to take action where it sees that this is a child probably conceived from rape.

Laws like this do not change without a fight. This law is changing because we have a Prime Minister who took time to sit with me and listen to the voices of victims, and vowed to do something about it. It is because of people like Baroness Harman, the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence against Women and Girls, the Home Secretary, the Justice Secretary, the Minister for Courts and Legal Services, and Members from all across the House listening and helping me navigate to find a solution, with the Minister for Victims leading the change.

As the 690th woman MP, statistically the 172nd to be raped and one of the few to use this Chamber to speak out, my message is to victims and survivors everywhere: I know that speaking out is tough. Until you find your

voice I will keep telling your stories, because sharing our truth is the only way that we will ever see change like this and force shame to change sides. So,

“Courage calls to courage everywhere”.

If you are one of the women affected by this law change, I ask that you to tell somebody you love and trust. I want you to give them the opportunity to readily believe you and embrace their chance to support you.

I want to end with the words of a brave mummy, who remains anonymous to keep herself and her child safe. She said:

“They won’t do it. They will let me down. They won’t believe me. They’ll see that what happened was my fault, that I asked for it, that it was my behaviour that caused this. That the worst thing imaginable happened and I only have myself to blame. That the rape grew inside me until I had to part with it by giving birth, a birth I have repeated nightmares about. It’s been so tough raising my child as a loving mother, even though I struggle with the fact that that child exists. If you change the law today, that will be incredible. It means I can use the law to keep me and my baby safe. It might even mean I can finally report it.”

I will be thinking of her—her incredible bravery and her wonderful child—as I walk through the Lobby to vote for this Bill tonight.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): My new clauses 15 and 16 concern restorative justice. They are supported by the charities Why Me?, for whom I am an ambassador, and Calm Mediation, as well as the Restorative Justice Council and others who work every day with victims and offenders. I thank hon. Members from my own party and from the Labour and Conservative Benches, who asked me to add their names in support.

The need for these clauses could not be clearer. After years of Conservative failure, our justice system stands at breaking point, with unacceptable delays. Our courts are clogged, witnesses drift away or begin to forget, and our prisons are stretched beyond breaking point. The Tories have left us with a legacy of neglect, and the people who suffer most are the victims, whose voices are too frequently ignored. We must do more to put the victim at the heart of the criminal justice process, rather than simply as one of the pieces of evidence to be heard in court. Victims are more than just witnesses to the crime, but too often that is their only role in court proceedings.

Increasingly, when we talk about justice for victims, the debate collapses into retributive justice, as if all victims want is to lock the door and throw away the key. Even David Gauke, the most liberal Lord Chancellor in my political lifetime, in his recent and mostly excellent sentencing review falls into this error with a chapter on victims focusing keeping them better informed about their sometimes unrealistic expectations concerning the severity of punishment. His review, like today’s Bill, makes no mention of restorative justice, which should be at the heart of giving victims access to justice. Victims of crime do not want retribution but closure, and giving them the opportunity to enter into a process that allows them to share their feelings concerning the crime with others, often culminating in a meeting with the perpetrator, has repeatedly been shown to achieve just that.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Does the hon. Member accept that, actually, there are some victims of very, very serious crimes who do not want a meeting and a resolution, but want to see a very serious offender spend a long time in prison?

Mr Kohler: Well, of course, restorative justice is not right for every victim. I have said to the hon. Member that it is right for many victims, including myself. I do not begin to understand why he finds that a difficult point to understand.

As I know from personal experience, when my wife, eldest daughter and I met one of the attackers who subjected me to a murderous attack in my home and terrorised my family, restorative justice is not about forgiveness, although that often happens as a by-product, but in giving the victim time and space to move on from the crime. My daughter, who moved out of the family home following the attack, moved back in after the restorative justice meeting. It allowed her to demythologise the perpetrator: no longer a monster, but a deeply flawed human being who she could look straight in the eye and cast from her nightmares.

That meeting transformed our family and her life. Yet for far too many victims, restorative justice remains out of reach. Sadly, only one in 20 adult victims with a known offender are routinely told about it. That is why new clause 15 is so crucial: it would create a statutory right to a meaningful referral to restorative justice services; not a token leaflet or tick-box exercise, but a proper referral made as soon as reasonably practicable once the offender is identified, and offered subsequently at appropriate times during the criminal justice process. I emphasise again that participation would always be voluntary, but every victim would have the right to be informed and supported to decide for themselves—what is wrong with that?

The Government may argue that they are considering strengthening the victims code; indeed, clause 8 enhances the Victims’ Commissioner’s reporting. That is welcome, but not enough. The commissioner can report only on what exists. New clause 15 would ensure that there is something meaningful to measure: a statutory right to referral. Without it, access to restorative justice will remain inconsistent and uncertain.

While new clause 15 would establish a meaningful statutory right, new clause 16 would ensure a meaningful review process by requiring the Secretary of State to report on the uptake of restorative justice and to make recommendations to improve access. If the Government truly value restorative justice, let them prove it with evidence—let Parliament see the data and the plan to expand its use. The reporting duty would complement the commissioner’s powers while they review compliance with the code. The new clause goes further, reporting on usage, barriers and ways to increase participation. Together, they create both the right and the oversight that victims deserve.

These new clauses carry no cost implications. It is about co-ordination, not cash. The infrastructure already exists; what it is missing is the statutory backbone to ensure that every victim, wherever they live, has equal access to restorative justice.

Let us not forget that while restorative justice is all about putting the victims at the heart of the criminal justice process, it also has the proven added advantage

[Mr Kohler]

of cutting rates of recidivism. The Government often speak about tackling the causes of reoffending—employment, housing, addiction—but restorative justice tackles the psychology of criminality. It changes behaviour by confronting offenders with the human consequences of their actions—not every offender, of course, but a significant number.

If the Government truly stand with victims and want to cut reoffending, they must not simply make meek promises to review the code or commission another pilot; they must make access to restorative justice meaningful and real. They must support new clauses 15 and 16—if not today, then in the other place—and allow restorative justice to do what punishment alone cannot: heal the victim, reform the offender and mend the system on which we all depend.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Before I begin, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) for her bravery and for the remarkable work she has done in her short time in this place, including on this Bill with new clause 14. I am so proud to be on these Benches with her.

I am going to speak to a measure at the heart of the Bill today. Attendance at sentencing hearings will compel convicted criminals to attend those hearings and provide the strongest of consequences when they refuse. This law is for Olivia Pratt-Korbel and other victims.

In August 2024, two of the most remarkable women I have ever met walked into my first MP surgery. They were my constituents Cheryl Korbel and Antonia Elverson, who are with us in the Gallery today. Cheryl is Olivia's mum, and Antonia is Cheryl's cousin. On 22 August 2022, Olivia, a little girl—just nine years old—was murdered by a stranger in her own home. The murderer, Thomas Cashman, fired a bullet through the door of Olivia's home, which passed through the wrist of her mum, Cheryl, before hitting Olivia in the chest and ending her life. Cheryl fought with her heart and soul to save her baby.

No mother should have to go through such unimaginable pain. While nothing in this world can bring Olivia back and nothing can hold back a grief so great, looking the person responsible in the eye and telling them to their face the cost of their crime, and the effect it has had on the lives of their loved ones, can give victims just a small semblance of justice and closure. But Cheryl never had that chance. Under our current justice system, the ball is in the criminal's court—criminals can choose to opt out of attending their sentencing, which is exactly what Olivia's murderer did. Cashman chose to remain in his cell, refusing to face the court to hear Cheryl's words or look her in the eye. It was the act of a coward.

However, instead of collapsing under this weight, Cheryl fought back. She and her family have campaigned with their all so that no other family will suffer what they have suffered. That is why I read out Cheryl's victim impact statement in full on Second Reading. They were the words that the murderer and coward Thomas Cashman refused to hear. I wanted the words of Cheryl Korbel committed to this House so that they would be on the record in this place forever. I wanted her words to ring out in this Chamber for all the world to hear, as they should have done in Cashman's ears that day.

6.45 pm

Cashman's refusal to turn up shone a spotlight on what is wrong with this system, and I want to thank the Government, the Minister for Victims, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), the former Justice Secretary, and the Prime Minister for listening and acting on Cheryl and Antonia's wishes. They have put victims where they belong: in the driving seat of our justice system. This injustice has gone on for far too long, and that stops now. That is down to them.

This is a law for Olivia; it is her legacy. It is Cheryl's legacy, too. It is a law and a legacy for all the families who have campaigned. I am delighted that these provisions have united support across this House, and I am confident that they will do so in the other place. Let us back this Bill, pass it and make it law at speed so that no victim's voice is ever shut out of justice again.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): What a privilege it is to follow those powerful speeches from the hon. Members for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) and for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet). They are clearly two very formidable parliamentarians, and it is a privilege to be in the same debate as them.

I stand today to speak on behalf of my constituent Bethan and her parents, who are in the Gallery today. I am going to do that rare thing on the Opposition Benches of thanking the Government for making changes to restrict the parental responsibility of convicted sexual offenders. It is hugely important and clearly the right thing to do. When Bethan, whose story was covered by the BBC, learned that her ex-husband had been convicted of some of the most serious child sex offences imaginable, she also learned that he retained access to her child. I am sure it is not lost on parliamentarians across this House that in those instances, for those paedophiles and sexual offenders, that access is the last bit of coercive and toxic control that they retain.

In the previous Parliament, when Baroness Harman and the Minister for Violence Against Women and Girls, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), pushed for a new clause on this matter in the Criminal Justice Bill, I had the privilege of watching with my constituents from up in the Gallery. Sadly, that Bill did not make it through the parliamentary wash-up, so the work was not completed at that time.

Bethan's family had to spend £30,000—not a resource accessible to all—of their own money to get their case through the family courts. They have gone on this journey so that more victims—parents and mothers—can take advantage of this legislation and be protected even if they do not have that resource. I speak to be the voice of Bethan and her family. Although I will not take up much of the House's time, they wanted me to place on the record their gratitude to Baroness Harman and to Alex Chalk, the former Secretary of State for Justice, who stayed in touch with them while there was work to be done. I am pleased we have got to Report stage. They also wanted me to place on the record their thanks to Laura Farris, to both Ministers present, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley, and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and to the Justice Secretary, because they really have protected vulnerable mothers and innocent children and spared them from excruciating distress.

While I do place on record my gratitude, it would be remiss of me not to ask a couple of questions on behalf of Bethan and her parents. They have queried the restriction to four-year sentences and the sexual harm prevention orders, which kick in with a two-and-a-half-year sentence. Could the Minister provide clarity on that? The measure refers to the children of sex offenders and the restriction of parental rights, but I do not think it refers to future children. *[Interruption.]* I see the Minister nodding her head. Perhaps she will state that on record for clarity.

Today I have the very easy task of being the voice of Bethan and her parents in saying thank you. This Bill is a really important measure to pass.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): I really welcome this Bill, which delivers long-overdue reforms to protect victims and goes a long way to rebuilding confidence in our judicial system. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) and for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for their powerful contributions to the debate.

I also thank the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) for tabling new clause 12, relating to UK citizens who are murdered abroad. The previous Conservative Government failed to address this issue in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, so I thank him for raising this important issue once again. As he has explained, the lack of any statutory support for the families of British nationals murdered abroad is a glaring gap in our legal system. Families who find themselves in this deeply distressing circumstance must deal not only with their immense grief but with difficult practical issues, such as navigating a foreign legal system—often with language barriers—and unfamiliar police forces and judiciaries.

New clause 12 would address that anomaly by creating an appendix to the victims code that sets out how it applies to close relatives of British nationals resident in England and Wales who are the victims of murder, manslaughter or infanticide committed abroad. The hon. Member for Maidenhead is right that families in those awful circumstances need more support and are being failed by the current system. At the very minimum, they deserve the same recognition and support under the law as those whose tragedies occur within the UK. Currently they are only able to access discretionary support that may be given by local chief constables, Government Departments and national services, such as the National Homicide Service and the victim contact scheme.

That is not good enough. We need statutory rights for families in these circumstances to be treated and supported as victims themselves. Rather than just an appendix to the victims code, we need a framework that is more bespoke, offering tailored help to families who need to navigate a particularly difficult set of circumstances. That could include help with the repatriation of their loved one or keeping them informed about the police investigation or court process that may be happening on the other side of the world, often in a different language.

Although I wholeheartedly agree with the principle behind new clause 12, I cannot support it. I think we need to go further, with both Justice Ministers and Foreign Office Ministers working together on a specific framework to support UK families who have lost loved

ones while abroad. I am afraid I also cannot support the new clause because, by my reading, subsection (1) to proposed new section 2A is too narrowly drawn. I am currently supporting the family of a constituent from Strood who has died in suspicious circumstances abroad in India. They have struggled to get the right support from the Foreign Office and came to me in desperation as they did not know where else to go for help. Kent police has been helping them through its missing persons unit, as distressingly the first they knew of anything having happened to their father was when they were sent a video of his cremation, received at 3 am UK time. However, there are obvious limits to what Kent police can do in this situation.

As there is currently not even a murder or manslaughter investigation, since it is unclear what happened, the family would not be covered under subsection (1) to proposed new section 2A, despite needing the same support as families in those situations who the hon. Member for Maidenhead is nobly trying to help. Rather than pushing new clause 12 to a vote, I urge the hon. Member to join me in welcoming the Minister's opening comments about action in this space and calling for her to commit to working with her Foreign Office equivalent to design a specific framework that will give statutory rights not only to the families of UK residents who are the victim of murder, manslaughter or infanticide but to the families of those who have died in suspicious circumstances. That way, everyone who is facing this difficult set of circumstances can get the support that they need.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I congratulate the Minister on bringing forward this raft of very important changes. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards). I would ask my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) to address the points raised—I am not qualified—but I imagine that the purpose of new clause 12 is to make technical changes so that the measures are even more effective, which, clearly, we would all support. In any case, my understanding is that it would require the Secretary of State to bring forward such changes rather than stipulating what those changes are in detail.

Like others, I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) on a very impressive and powerful speech. I know that the Minister congratulated her in advance on the campaign she has run. Equally, the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) made a very powerful speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead made strong cases as well.

I repeat the reminder of my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) that the primary purpose—this is certainly what I have always said—of custodial sentences must be public protection. It is on that issue that I wish to concentrate. My remarks are entirely informed by a case I have been pursuing on behalf of my constituent Tina Nash. The Minister is aware of this, because I have corresponded with her on the subject. Tina was horrifically attacked by her former partner in 2011 for a 12-hour period until she managed to escape. In that time she was battered and had her eyes gouged out and her jaw and nose broken. It was an appalling beating that she was lucky to survive—and a survivor she is.

[Andrew George]

The following year her former partner was jailed for life with a minimum term of six years. However, earlier this year he was moved to a category D prison, with open conditions. My constituent was not consulted about this and was only informed about it after the decision had been taken. Bearing in mind that she is blind, it is understandable that she fears that, if she went out shopping, he could be in her company without her knowledge. She is incredibly scared as a result of the decision. She had no say in it, and nor was she consulted.

I tabled new clause 17 to urge the Government to accept that victims have a right to a veto in reasonable circumstances for their own protection—not in all circumstances and not in every condition, but we should certainly ensure that they are properly consulted. As a result of this experience, I think there are a number of other failings in the system that require the Government to ensure belt-and-braces support for victims throughout the process.

Tina wanted to pursue this matter with the Parole Board, but it did not respond to her until my intervention, and then there was an offer of a meeting. That is not good enough. It should not be down to a Member of Parliament to force a response. She was given the support of the victim contact scheme, which I will come to in a moment.

My constituent was given the opportunity to complain—the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman provided her with a complaint form—but months after she had completed the complaint, she was informed that the ombudsman had assumed she was the prisoner, not the victim. Can that level of incompetence or her treatment throughout the process be believed? She was treated appallingly, while the process wasted her time and stressed her out. Her complaint was rejected as outside the PPO's remit—that fact was not initially communicated to her—which caused her enormous distress and confusion. Despite circumstances in which she was blinded by her perpetrator, she still somehow has to navigate and overcome all these processes and problems. Of course, the PPO apologised for its error, but with a lack of empathy for my constituent in an officious response that directed her to the Victims' Commissioner.

7 pm

I turn to Tina's interfacing with the victim liaison officer and the victim contact scheme. This week, I received further communication from her in which she said that she has been attempting to seek support from the service and made inquiries about the restorative options that might be available, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon. I thought it was incredibly brave of her even to consider that in such circumstances, but she was prepared at least to explore what that would mean, how she would go about it and so on.

Tina got a response from her victim contact officer. In her message to me, she said: "He shouted at me that [the perpetrator] is scared of me. So they are now trying to make me feel like I am the perpetrator and [the perpetrator] is the victim...and they have to protect him."

That is from the victim contact scheme, which is there to support the victim, not to defend the perpetrator—what is going on? She continued:

"So I have removed myself from the victim contact scheme. I do not trust them...I am not being supported."

That simply is not good enough. What is happening to the system to allow such circumstances to arise?

Hon. Members might think that my new clause, which would entitle victims to a veto, is an unreasonable request, but something has to be done. Tina has been appallingly let down by the system. If a victim who has gone through all that is treated in such a manner, we really do need to strengthen the system and not allow it to continue as it is. She has been told that her perpetrator is now remorseful and contrite about the whole thing, but I wonder whether psychopathy of people of that nature is fully understood. They can be as violent as that, and they can also act up and persuade professionals that they are remorseful. I think it is theatrical contrition and insincere repentance, and I worry that the system is vulnerable to such people. I urge the Minister to look again at this area and ensure that victims and survivors are properly supported.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): When I served in the police force, my work often ended when we put perpetrators behind bars, or sometimes when I stood in court to give evidence, but the victims' ordeals do not end there. Many reached out to me long after my role was done to tell me they still felt unheard and unprotected, and that justice for them was never truly served.

Too many survivors live in fear, with victims checking over their shoulders and altering their routines, wondering when the person who hurt them might walk free and attack them again. That is no way for anybody to live in society, and that is precisely why I welcome provisions in the Bill such as expanding the victim contact scheme, which will give victims vital reassurances, protecting them from being blindsided by their offender's release and helping them reclaim a sense of safety.

I am particularly pleased about Government new clause 14—many hon. Members have spoken about it passionately—which would see the presumption of parental access suspended for parents who commit crimes against children, because one child lost due to a criminal parent being granted unsupervised contact is one child too many. No one should ever have to risk their child's safety because of a system that puts rights before reason.

Ordering offenders to attend their sentences is another critical step in that process and the next process as part of the Bill. Victims deserve the chance to look those responsible in the eye, to be heard and to begin their healing. Perpetrators must face the full weight and impact of their crimes. There must be no more hiding from the consequences of what they have done.

On that point, I must highlight the work of the Justice for Victims group: an organisation of families who have turned their pain into purpose. I have had the privilege of meeting them on several occasions. Sasha Marsden was 16 when she was raped and stabbed more than 100 times by her killer. Tony Hudgell lost his lower legs as a result of child cruelty by his own parents. Sarah Everard was abducted by a serving police officer while walking home, raped and murdered, and her body was disposed of. At just four years old, Violet-Grace Youens

was killed by a dangerous driver in a stolen car driving at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone. The perpetrator spent barely more time in prison than Violet was alive. Last, but not least, of this group, Jan Mustafa was killed by a serial sex offender who stored her body in a freezer alongside another murder victim, Henriett.

The families of those victims are just a few of many who have been let down by the justice system's treatment of victims in one way or another over time. One victim told me that their victim impact statement was so heavily edited by defence lawyers that they barely recognised their own words. How can anyone find closure when their voice is silenced in that way? It is not right. That is why I have spoken about this in depth several times to my hon. Friend the Minister, and why I welcome the outcomes that she has brought forward.

It is also why I have campaigned so much to see real reform of victim personal statements. No family should ever have to water down their grief or pain just to spare the feelings of the person who caused it. Victims deserve to be heard in their own words honestly and fully. Offenders must also be made to hear every word to confront the true devastation they have caused. That principle ties in directly with the provisions of the Bill. Yes, offenders should be compelled to attend their sentencing, but they should also be compelled to listen to how their crimes have impacted victims and their families. There should be no place to hide for perpetrators and no reason for victims to edit or soften their voices to fit the comfort of those who harmed them.

Justice for Victims is also calling for clarity on terminology. Life sentences do not mean life, so we should stop pretending that they do. Justice for Victims is also right to call for clarity in life sentences, with life meaning behind bars for life. Yes, we have whole-life sentences, but it does no favours when life sentences—not whole-life sentences—can be equivalent to, I think, 12 years. The public deserve honesty and victims deserve truth.

Additionally, there must be changes to the time limit for victims' families to appeal offenders' sentences. Katie Brett, who is Sasha's sister, said that victims and families currently have only "28 days to appeal" unduly lenient sentences, normally at a time when they are

"grieving and traumatised. But criminals are allowed to appeal after this in 'exceptional circumstances.' Why don't victims and their families get this right?"

That question cuts to the heart of this debate. Victims and families deserve fairness and they deserve to be heard.

These are not radical reforms. They are small, practical, compassionate steps that will make a profound difference to people's lives. I wholeheartedly support the Bill and the progress it represents, but I urge the Government to go even further to deliver real justice for victims and survivors, and to ensure that no one who has already suffered once is ever failed by this system ever again.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I want to start by thanking the Minister for accepting the principle behind amendment 9, which I have now withdrawn, and for introducing a new amendment to restrict parental responsibility for serious child sexual abusers who offend against children who are not their own, building on the Government's welcome step of restricting it for those who do. This represents a real step forward for child

safety, and I pay tribute to the collaborative spirit of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and to the many Members across the House who supported the amendment, alongside Fair Hearing and the many victims who have fought so hard for this change. I also want to put on the record my support for new clauses 1, 2 and 18, and to give my heartfelt love to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) and her eloquent bravery.

I would like to speak to new clauses 10 and 11, which stand in my name, although I will not be pushing them to a vote. These twin new clauses seek to place statutory duties on the relevant authorities to commission specialist services for victims of abuse and exploitation and those who care for them. The Government have already committed, in their tackling child sexual abuse progress update earlier this year, to increase access to support for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, and the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which reported three years ago last week, recommended a national guarantee of support for victims of sexual abuse.

New clause 10, which is supported by Women's Aid, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo's, Action for Children, Catch 22, the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, SafeLives, Respect and the Independent Domestic Abuse Services, as well as 49 of my colleagues across the parties, seeks to make this a reality by ending the postcode lottery that victims face and ensuring that we have adequately funded specialist services for whoever might need them.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that community-based services supporting the victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, such as Next Chapter, the Centre of Action on Rape and Abuse—CARA—and Restitute in Essex, do vital work that should be backed by multi-year settlements and enhanced commissioning arrangements in the east of England and beyond?

Jess Asato: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and pay tribute to the services in her local area. We all have many such specialist services, and I am sure that we will want to pay tribute to them this evening.

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse estimates that there are 55,000 adults and children in England and Wales on waiting lists for support following child sexual abuse, and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has found that over a quarter of domestic abuse services are having to turn away children who are victims of abuse. It is a stain on this country that fewer than half of domestic abuse victims are able to access the community-based support that they deserve. I expect that the public would be astonished to know that there is no automatic right to specialist support after a terrible, traumatic crime such as rape or domestic abuse. Even though the victims code specifies that people have a right as a victim to be referred to specialist services, this is not an actionable right. Victims cannot sue anyone if it is not upheld.

The sad reality is that specialist services are on their knees. Twenty-three child sexual abuse support services have closed in the past 18 months due to financial pressures. Just the week before last, Jewish Sexual Abuse Support was forced to close due to cuts, which have had

[*Jess Asato*]

a particular impact on small by-and-for organisations. Its chief executive, Erica Marks, gave the stark warning that we could

“expect to see more community sexual violence organisations fail”.

That is unacceptable if we want to halve violence against women and girls. By-and-for services such as hers are the backbone of our response to victims of abuse. They help to reach some of the most excluded in our society. Losing the vital, lifesaving support provided by organisations such as JSAS and others will not make victims safer.

7.15 pm

We know that there are many pressures on the public purse, but there is a financial case to be made for investing in these support services. A 2021 report for the Home Office estimated that the economic and social cost of contact child sexual abuse alone was £10.1 billion. That is money that we lose in economic output and in huge costs to the NHS, the police and the criminal justice system. The cost of domestic abuse, which affects 2.4 million adults a year and accounts for one in five homicides, is estimated by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to cost £85 billion per year. That is £47 billion more than the budgets of the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice combined. To do nothing will not save us money. It will only ensure that costs spiral, loading pressure on all our public services and reducing our economic productivity.

We know that, without support, victims are less likely to stay the course of a criminal justice process, less likely to recover from the trauma of their experience, less likely to be able to go back into work, and more likely to remain vulnerable to future exploitation and abuse. Specialist services are those that employ dedicated workers who are trained to understand, for example, the dynamics of coercive and controlling behaviour. They are those that recognise that rape and domestic abuse are largely gendered crimes. They recognise that children are not just an adjunct to adults and that, just as they have paediatricians, children need their own child-centred response. By-and-for services also go further. They are experts in honour-based abuse and the weaponisation of immigration status, the needs of disabled or older victims and the dynamics of same-sex relationships. Crucially, they are independent from the statutory sector. They champion the victim first and advocate for the support they need without fear or favour.

In the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, a statutory duty was placed on commissioners to secure accommodation-based support, such as refuges for domestic abuse victims. While the roll-out has not been perfect in practice, it has at least placed a duty on local authorities to maintain provision at local level. No such duty exists for community-based support for domestic abuse victims, despite the community being where nearly 70% of victims access support. In a concession at the end of consideration of the Domestic Abuse Bill, the previous Government promised a consultation on a statutory duty for community-based provision. That never happened. It was a casualty of the changing list of Justice Secretaries who did not keep their promises. It falls to this Labour Government to resurrect that promise.

We must also recognise those who pick up the pieces after the unimaginable happens to their loved ones, such as someone discovering that their partner has abused their child, or grandparents stepping in to care for children after perpetrators of domestic abuse drive their partner to destitution. One in 20 adults are closely related to a victim of serious assault. According to analysis from researchers at the Violence and Society Centre, people related to victims of violence are four times more likely to feel unsafe in their neighbourhood and twice as likely to have depression or an anxiety disorder than people not related to victims of violence. They themselves face unique challenges, including stress, guilt, trauma and depression. These are all things that parents and carers must balance while dealing with the practical, everyday challenges they face while navigating the legal system, co-ordinating with agencies, understanding safeguarding procedures and trying to access therapy for those they care for.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (*Jess Asato*) for her fantastic speech. I recently met some kinship carers who with very little support often take on family members who have suffered terrible trauma and abuse. They do not understand the child's trauma and they do not understand how best to support them. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to get the best results for child victims, we need to think about how we extend support to kinship carers, so that they can support those children who have been through the worst of times?

Jess Asato: I absolutely agree that kinship carers, parents and partners are different from those of the primary victim, and they need support in their own right. When we fail those third-party victims, we fail the primary victim, too. We allow them to disengage from the legal process, and we deprive them of the wraparound support they need when they are at their most vulnerable.

New clause 11 is supported by the organisations Restitute, We Stand, Acts Fast and Ivison Trust, and a version of it was first laid by Baroness Sal Brinton in the other place in a Bill last year. It would place a statutory duty on commissioners to ensure that appropriate independent services are available for the parent, guardian or person responsible for the care of a victim who is under 18 at the time of the offence, or who is an adult at risk of harm. Once again, that should already be happening—it is supposedly a right in the victims code. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse recommended that support for non-abusing parents and carers should be statutory. New clause 11 would bring that crucial recommendation to fruition. Families should not have to wait years; they want action now. As with victim services, severe funding shortages fail to make the ambition set out in the code a reality.

Together, new clauses 10 and 11 would ensure that if any one of us here, or someone we cared for, were abused or exploited, we or they would be supported. It is an ambition long supported that must now be met with action. I look forward to working with the Minister and colleagues across the House on saving our specialist services and saving victims and their families, and I will be pleased to vote for the Bill tonight.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I rise to speak to new clause 1 in my name. It would ensure the implementation of recommendation 18 from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. Survivors of child sexual abuse have been let down for years by a national compensation scheme. Too often their applications are delayed or denied, not because the legitimacy of their abuse is in any question, but because of loopholes set by the very organisation that was established to support them: the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority.

The many limitations of the scheme were considered during IICSA, which resulted in a clear recommendation to remove the unfair barriers set by CICA, but in April Ministers rejected that recommendation. My new clause 1 would overturn that decision. It has commanded the support of 27 Members from across the House and the backing of 29 charities and experts. They include the Marie Collins Foundation and the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, which have campaigned passionately on this issue. In opening, the Minister said that she wants a universal scheme without hierarchy, but unfortunately that is not the case at the moment.

My amendment would widen the eligibility of the scheme to include those who have been victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse. The recent Casey audit found that 40% of the 100,000 recorded child sexual abuse offences last year took place online, so that is around 40,000 children who will struggle to access compensation because their abuse is not considered by CICA “violent” enough to qualify. As IICSA rightly concluded, that rule

“does not take account of the extent of the harm and damage”

of online abuse, such as the ongoing fear that images of sexual abuse will remain available online indefinitely. By continuing to leave online abuse out of scope, CICA reinforces the risk that online sexual abuse is perceived somehow as less serious or less deserving of redress, but nothing could be further from the truth.

New clause 1 also seeks to increase the time limit for applications so that survivors have seven years from the date the offence was reported to the police, or from the age of 18 if the offence was reported while they were a child. The scheme currently has just a two-year time limit, but the average time it takes for a survivor of child abuse to come forward is 24 years to 27 years. There are many reasons for that, and we have heard some in the Chamber today: trauma, fear and shame, not to mention the length of time to go through the court process. The Minister knows this, which is why she and the other Justice Ministers rightly abolished the three-year time limit for civil claims by survivors of child sexual abuse, in line with IICSA recommendation 15.

However, the decision means that survivors face a strange paradox: no time limit for them to take legal action against their abusers, but tight restrictions if they wish to seek compensation for that same abuse. The Government have argued that there is discretion in the scheme to allow applications after the time limit has expired. That is indeed true. However, the proportion of resolved cases accepted after the time limit has fallen each year between 2020 and 2024. In 2020, 87.3% of applications received outside the time limit were resolved. By 2024, that was down to 66.9%. By contrast, the compensation model in Quebec allows seven years for all

types of crime except for domestic abuse, child sexual abuse and sexual violence, which have no time limit at all. Surely that is the model we should be following.

Finally, new clause 1 would prevent survivors of child abuse from being affected by a rule that blocks or reduces compensation for victims with unspent convictions. APIL shared with me the case of a woman who was sexually abused by her father. She had suffered with her mental health as a consequence and was hospitalised. While in hospital, she threatened to kill herself with a letter opener. The hospital called the police, and she was convicted of possessing a knife. Because of that conviction, she was then refused the compensation by CICA that had been originally offered to her. That is why new clause 1 would ensure applicants with unspent convictions are not automatically excluded where offences are linked to circumstances of their sexual abuse as a child.

Anti-slavery charities have also been in touch to explain how this particular rule impacts on victims of trafficking who try to access the compensation scheme. It is not unusual for victims of slavery or, indeed, child or criminal exploitation to be forced into criminality by their exploiters. Those convictions, however, commonly lead to immense difficulty for those victims to then access compensation—something that victims of modern slavery, for example, ought to be entitled to under article 15 of the European convention on action against trafficking.

The criminal injuries compensation scheme is supposed to be a support scheme of last resort. Sadly, for many survivors, it is not even that. In the long term, CICA needs a complete overhaul. In the short term, however, survivors are keen to see the swift implementation of recommendation 18, because in doing so this House and this Government can send a powerful message that their abuse is recognised, that their future is prioritised and that meaningful change is under way.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I want to speak in support of new clauses 10 and 11, which would place a duty on authorities to guarantee support for victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence and child criminal exploitation, as well as their care-givers. I am proud to support a Government who are committed to halving violence against women and girls and who just last week announced some of the most significant steps towards supporting victims of abuse, including denying rapists access to children born of rape and an end to the presumption of contact in the family courts—not just words but action. I support calls for meaningful action today.

Victims are not only dealing with the trauma of what has happened to them. For many, the thought of the court case risks retraumatizing them. Given the backlog in our courts—a backlog left by previous Governments—victims are waiting months and sometimes years before cases are heard. That wait takes a huge emotional toll. We have to address the fear of the process if we are to meet our target of halving violence against women and girls. We have to support victims throughout the process. I urge the Government to build a system that gives victims the confidence to come forward knowing that they will not be left to cope alone.

7.30 pm

Children who experience abuse face unique and lasting harms. Without the right specialist support, the devastating impact of childhood trauma can echo through a lifetime. Additionally, caregivers are often also traumatised. Without further support, they not only do not get the support they need but are not as able to provide the love and stability that the child they are helping needs.

I am proud of the Government's work so far to strengthen the victims code and improve how the victims of these horrendous crimes are treated. But we can build on that by making sure that, wherever someone lives, they can rely on the right specialist services to help them to cope with the trauma, manage the emotional strain of the trial and rebuild their lives after it. Together, the measures in the Bill recognise that victims and their families need wraparound support, not piecemeal provision.

Calder Valley is fortunate to have deputy mayor for policing Alison Lowe, who puts violence against women and girls at the centre of her work. Organisations such as Staying Safe and Victim Support West Yorkshire provide lifelines to victims of domestic abuse and crime, and Calderdale WomenCentre offers holistic support. But too often these services are stretched and reliant on short-term grants and support, wounded by a decade of austerity, and without the statutory footing that guarantees their future.

There is a postcode lottery. We must deliver change by placing a duty on authorities to commission specialist services everywhere, so that victims and their caregivers can rely on consistent support across the board. The victims of these crimes deserve more than just words and sympathy: they deserve a system that stands with them and provides the support they need. I hope this Government will deliver practical steps that will deliver the changes we need.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Being a parent is a privilege, not a right. I rise to speak to Government new clause 14, on the restriction of parental responsibility for a child conceived as a result of rape. It will appear on the face of this Bill because of the fierce campaigning force of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet)—my friend and my hero. Her law change, to be engraved in the Government's Bill, puts the needs of survivors above the needs of rapists, casting in law a shield for women who have had a child as a result of rape, and for their babies. Those rapists will no longer be able to retraumatise the mothers, nor to demand access to or endanger the children.

If anyone says politics does not make a difference, I say, "Look at my hon. Friend, who shared her own experience of being groomed and abused and having a child as a result." Her extraordinary strength raised that beautiful baby girl. That strength meant that she did so alongside becoming a Member of this House and, within her first year as a parliamentarian, will today change the law to protect a generation of women, girls and children. This is the difference that politics in the hands of Members like my hon. Friend makes for our communities and our country: protecting women and children from vile sex offenders. It is a non-negotiable priority, central to our Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade.

This matters. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover said, 10 babies a day are currently born as a result of rape. Yet we still do not know the true scale of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of known domestically abusive parents. We do know that 60% of cases in the family courts involve domestic abuse, and that 40,000 children will have experienced domestic abuse in the private law Children Act cases that were received by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service in the nine months from April 2024.

My formidable constituent, Claire Throssell MBE, lost her two beautiful boys 11 years ago, at the hands of her known domestically abusive ex-husband, while they were on a five-hour court-permitted contact visit. He lured them into the attic of their home with the promise of a train set, and set fires around their house. Claire promised her boys that she would ensure their voices were heard by campaigning to repeal the presumption of contact, the legal principle brought about by the Children and Families Act 2014, amending the Children Act 1989. The principle means that the courts always prioritise having both parents in a child's life over the child's safety, including when there is a known history of domestic abuse.

There have been 67 deaths at the hands of known domestic abusers since Women's Aid started to report on this issue just 30 years ago. Five previous Conservative Governments—look at the empty Benches opposite—did nothing, despite the Conservative Government in 2020 leading the harm panel report, an expert review of domestic abuse and the family courts; despite that report recommending that the presumption of contact should be urgently reviewed; and despite Women's Aid research finding there have been 19 more child deaths at the hands of known domestic abusers since Jack and Paul died. No response was published for four years under those Conservative Governments. Where are Conservative Members today?

I first met Claire at a remembrance event at my old school—the same school that her eldest son Jack went to. I knew of the tragic deaths of her sons, but hearing from her what happened was heartbreaking. I promised her that if I was elected as her Member of Parliament, I would help to fulfil her promise to her boys. Last week, I took Claire to No. 10 Downing Street to meet the Prime Minister—the sixth Prime Minister since her beautiful boys died, but the first to promise Claire that he will deliver Jack and Paul's law. Last week, on the 11th anniversary of the boys' deaths, he announced in this Chamber that our Government will repeal the presumption of contact.

The Prime Minister's promise made it clear that the repeal of the presumption of contact will form part of a broader package of family court reforms aimed at better protecting children involved in private law proceedings. That is truly decisive action by our Government to change the law to protect generations of children where the Conservatives failed to do so. The reforms will ensure that decisions about child arrangements put the child at the centre of decision making and are based on a robust assessment of the potential risks, particularly when domestic abuse is present.

Our message is clear: the safety of children is paramount. We will stop at nothing to make sure that they are protected in our courts, prioritising children's safety and wellbeing and their right to grow up free from harm.

The changes will reinforce new clause 14 and the exceptional work set out in the Bill by putting children at the centre of the family courts.

I am proud that our Labour Government is packed full of brilliant women who stood behind Claire Throssell, Natalie Fleet and I to ensure that our Government fulfil her promise to her boys. Those women include the Minister of State for Courts and Legal Services, the Minister for Victims, the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, and my hon. Friends the Members for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) and for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle). I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) for his work and allyship.

Repealing the presumption of contact is urgent. Will the Minister confirm that it will be repealed as soon as the parliamentary time allows, thereby fulfilling the promise that the Prime Minister made to Claire Throssell last week? Expediting the repeal of the provision in the statute book will ensure that no more towns like mine will grieve, and it will ensure that Jack and Paul's law is at the heart of our family justice system, where it belongs. I commend the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am very conscious that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) made an impassioned and moving speech, but I remind Members that we must refer to her as the hon. Member for Bolsover.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I will speak in favour of new clauses 13 and 14 and the expansion to clause 3. I served with some colleagues in Committee, but may I begin by thanking all Members who have contributed tonight? We have had a series of impassioned speeches from across the House, and I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) for their powerful contributions.

The amendments we are discussing this evening are a significant step forward in protecting victims of serious violence and they will help thousands of people. They will help to ensure the safety of victims of serious sexual abuse and victims of crime who have signed a non-disclosure agreement, and, crucially, these amendments will also protect children.

New clause 14 will ensure the protection of children born of rape. On Second Reading, I spoke of a constituent who had had a child as a result of an abusive relationship. She told me of the extreme difficulties she had been facing as she had passed through a long and complex custody battle. She asked me if we, as politicians, could look again at parental rights in the context of abusive relationships. I am very pleased that new clause 14 will protect children born in such circumstances. No longer will children born of rape, or their mothers, be forced to have a relationship with a rapist. Currently, mothers in some cases must co-parent with a rapist. Women should not be forced to include their rapist in decisions on their child's healthcare, schooling, or any other aspects of a child's life. Children should not have to be raised by rapists.

Mothers who have a child born of rape should be safe in the knowledge that having a child will not tie them to their rapist. Automatic restriction of parental responsibility will ensure that mothers and children are safer. Rapists should not have the automatic right to interfere with their victims' lives. This clause frees families from the stress and pain of applying to court by ensuring that this restriction is immediate.

The expansion to clause 3 similarly ensures that any person convicted of serious sex offences against any child has their parental rights removed. The safety of children is the utmost priority, and expanding this measure from those who have abused their own child to those who have seriously abused any child will ensure the safety of the children the perpetrator is closest to. Paedophiles should have no right to look after any child.

I am also pleased to see that new clause 13 will allow us to clamp down on the misuse of non-disclosure agreements, which are used to hide instances where a crime has occurred. Victims of crime should not have to worry about who they speak to regarding the crime of which they are a victim, and non-disclosure agreements should not be used to silence victims of crimes, nor should they stop witnesses coming forward. This change will mean that victims and direct witnesses of crime can speak to their friends, their family and their support system, but they can also speak to their employers and, if necessary, to journalists. I very much welcome the closing of this loophole, which allows criminals to scare victims into not sharing their experiences. The law must not protect those who seek to silence victims.

These amendments will allow us to take significant steps towards the Government's aim of halving violence towards women and girls. But more than that, these amendments serve to give victims of serious violent crime justice.

Dr Mullan: I rise to speak in support of new clause 4 and the other amendments in my name and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and other members of the His Majesty's Opposition.

I know the Minister will join me in beginning by thanking all the witnesses who came and gave evidence to us in Committee on the behalf of victims, including Dame Nicole Jacobs, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner; Baroness Newlove, the Victims' Commissioner; Katie Kempen from Victim Support; Rebecca Bryant from Resolve; Suky Baker from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust; Andrea Simon from the End Violence Against Women coalition; Farah Nazeer from Women's Aid; Glenn Youens and Paula Hudgell from Justice for Victims; and Mark Brooks OBE from the ManKind Initiative. We all benefited greatly from their evidence and the victims' perspective they gave.

7.45 pm

It was clear that many of the witnesses and Members from both sides of the House were of one view about many of the positive aspects of this Bill. For example, the improved powers for the Victims' Commissioner are welcome and they will give new strength to their arm in raising issues and securing change on behalf of victims. The streamlining and expansion of the victim contact scheme will help victims be better informed about key information about their offender post-conviction.

Other important measures were considered in Committee, and I am pleased to say that, while at the time the Government were committed to their approach, they have since shifted to some degree, which I will go on to cover.

We welcome the Government's new clause 14 on parental responsibility for a child conceived of rape, creating a duty on the court to make a prohibited steps order restricting the parental responsibility of a person convicted of rape where a child has been conceived as a result of that offence. This is an important measure that strengthens the protection available to victims and ensures that offenders cannot continue to wield control over their victims through their children. I join Members on both sides of the House in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), who spoke very powerfully in relation to that and has been a committed campaigner, and other Members have been mentioned who have supported her in securing that change. For too long, victims of rape have faced the unthinkable prospect of having to engage with their attacker over matters concerning their child's wellbeing.

On the changing Government position on clause 3 on parental responsibility, witnesses and others in Committee made it clear that the initial proposal fell far short of what was required, so we welcome Government amendment 10 widening the duty on the Crown court to make an order restricting parental responsibility where a person is sentenced to four years or more for a serious sexual offence against a child—in relation to all children rather than just a child of their own. Several Members have worked towards this amendment, but I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), along with the previous Justice Secretary the right hon. Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) and—I do not expect they are still in the Gallery—the constituents of my hon. Friend who raised this case in such a high-profile way.

The Minister will know there have been different clauses: one that was first put forward by the Conservatives in government; the initial clause from the current Government; and this further clause. The Minister will also know that our further clause would remove the four-year requirement and have it apply more widely to any sexual offence. My hon. Friend put forward yet another way that we might better prescribe those subject to these measures beyond those convicted of offences with a sentence of four years or more. Although I appreciate that this is a novel measure, if it proves effective in practice we would welcome the opportunity to revisit it in future and see how we might better frame it to protect children.

On amendments 4 to 7 in relation to the unduly lenient sentence scheme, the current scheme allows certain sentences to be referred to the Attorney General's Office if they are thought to be too lenient. That is an important safeguard in our justice system. I have made use of it, as have other Members and members of the public as well, but too many victims and families simply do not know the scheme exists, and even when they do, the time limits are far too tight for it to work in practice. Currently, people only have 28 days from the date of a sentence to ask for review; that is four short weeks at what is often one of the most traumatic and confusing times in

their lives. For families who have just been through a difficult and emotional trial, 28 days is no time at all to understand the process, get advice and decide whether to ask for a review.

Our amendments would make a number of reasonable and practical changes to help fix that. They would extend the deadline from 28 to 56 days, giving the wider public the same time limit that the Government are giving themselves in this Bill; the Government are extending the length of appeal for themselves, but not for victims. We would also allow up to one year for the next of kin or a victim to apply in cases where they are affected or they have lost a loved one. It would also place a duty on the CPS to write to victims or their families after sentencing to tell them about the scheme and how it works. Far too often, families never hear about the scheme or hear about it after the deadline has passed.

In recent weeks, I met with Karen Garland from the Marie Collins Foundation, who has been supporting a lady called Lauren who lodged an application in time to the Government for the scheme, only to be barred from making use of it because the CPS made a mistake about the time she had to further appeal it. So on a purely technical basis, she was prevented from lodging a valid appeal and there was no way for her to get that looked at. There was an attempt to ask the sentencing judge to look at it again but, with respect to that sentencing judge, asking the same judge who had passed the sentence to look at that sentence again is not what the ULS is intended to achieve.

Campaigners have done incredible work to highlight the issue. They include Katie Brett, who others have mentioned, who launched a petition in memory of her sister, Sasha—I will not repeat the awful circumstances of her sister's death, which the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop) powerfully highlighted—and Ayse Hussein, who campaigns on behalf of her cousin Jan Mustafa. They are both part of Justice for Victims, and I also recently met Tracey Hanson, who founded the Josh Hanson Trust after the murder of her son. They have all shown courage and determination in calling for change, and they speak for many families who feel let down by the system.

The Government have said that they will wait for the outcome of a wider review of criminal appeals before taking action. However, I want Members to be clear that the provisional view of that review is that the ULS should not be changed and that it is fine as it is. We have no timetable for when that review will be published or when the Government will respond to it, but we have a Bill in front of us that would allow us to make such changes, so now is the time to do that.

The Minister talked about certainty in sentencing, but victims have to sit and wait knowing that the criminal can appeal at any time—in exceptional circumstances, criminals can appeal years later—so there is no certainty in the existing system. We want to even that out for the public. We should not forget that behind every case is a family who have been through unimaginable pain. The Minister must be sympathetic to our measured and proportionate proposals, and we should vote them through tonight.

Turning to new clause 4, victim impact statements, which are made by victims and sometimes their family members in court, allow victims and their families to explain in their own words how a crime has affected

their lives. They are an important part of the justice process and one of the few chances that victims have to be heard directly by the court. However, there are real concerns about the restrictions placed on what victims are allowed to say in these statements. Many victims and their family members have said that they were told to remove parts of their statements or to avoid expressing their true feelings. That is deeply unfair and undermines the purpose of the statement. I understand the formality of the proceedings, but the current approach often strips away the honesty and the points that victims would like to make.

We have heard about families who have been through this. As others have mentioned, Sarah Everard's parents, Susan and Jeremy, talked about their difficulties. While they understand the advice that they were given and thought that they were well supported in the court and by the court process, they think that the system did not allow them to say what they would have liked. Glenn and Becky Youens, who I have spoken to frequently, wanted to talk about the death of their daughter, Violet-Grace, at the hands of appalling criminals, but again they were restricted.

There will be things that the judge cannot take into consideration. However, we need to allow the judge to make clear what points of law will or will not be considered, and what things the victims may wish to say, in order to have their hearing and to get their say, that the judge will not technically take into account in sentencing, without putting it back on victims and saying that we cannot change the system because of the law. For example, if the victim wants to say what sentence the perpetrator should get, what is wrong with that? In these sorts of circumstance, it is perfectly reasonable that any person in court would want to be able to say that. Are we really saying that the judge cannot hear that and then set it aside?

Alex Davies-Jones: The shadow Minister is right that there are certain things that victims should be able to say in their victim impact statement—we agree on that—but there are things that are clearly not in the remit of what should be openly discussed in a sentencing hearing. They include information pertaining to the offender's family, for example. Victims may want to reference that in their victim impact statements, but for the safety of those other family members, they should not be mentioned. It is right that we have strict guidance, and I am willing to work with him and other hon. Members to ensure that the victims have a voice in this.

Dr Mullan: We have been clear that victims do not have carte blanche—they cannot say literally whatever they like—but our proposed new clause allows the Government to set what those things will or will not be more clearly in law. That puts the onus back on the judge to disregard things that will not be of relevance to the sentencing. I think that is a perfectly reasonable way to organise things.

Alex Davies-Jones: The shadow Minister has just outlined exactly why it would be wrong to put this into statute. The issue of victim impact statements is not black and white—there is a large grey area—which is why having a specific list of what can and cannot be put in place is not the right approach. We do not need legislation on this, but we do need proper guidance and training to support victims and families so they can have their say in a sentencing hearing.

Dr Mullan: With non-exhaustive lists, parts of which are in legislation and parts of which are not, we can agree the things that are vital for people to be able to say, while other things could be determined through guidance. However, legislation is needed because, as the Minister pointed out, there are fundamental things about the definition of a victim personal statement that we think are wrong. That will need to be changed in legislation to give people freedom to comment on those issues. We can go on to decide how the judge might handle that.

I commend my friend the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) for his work on new clause 4. I met Eve Henderson, from the charity Murdered Abroad, who has long campaigned for better recognition and support for the families of British nationals who have lost loved ones to murder, manslaughter and infanticide overseas. Far too often, those families find themselves in a position of deep grief, while also having to navigate complex and unfamiliar foreign legal systems with little or no support from home. They can be left without clear information, a voice in proceedings or access to the services that victims of crime in this country are entitled to expect. To correct that injustice, the new clause would set out explicitly how the victims code applies in such circumstances, guaranteeing access to practical and emotional support, clear information about processes and the ability to challenge decisions.

The contribution by the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards) was unusual. As the consistent Government message against the measure has been that the original proposals were too broad, the hon. Lady has thought carefully and brought forward proposals that are narrow, so disagreeing with the Government objection. I will assume that is her sincere reason for objecting to the measure, and that it is nothing to do with the fact that the Whips have told Labour Members they cannot vote for it.

To conclude, there are a range of measures that we support. We welcome their progress in the House, even when they are imperfect. However, the amendments we have proposed about the unduly lenient sentence scheme and victim impact statements are the right measures at the right time. I trust the Minister's sincerity when she says that she wants to work on those issues, but I do not trust her Government and their ability to deliver on what they say that they will. MPs have been asked by their constituents to back the amendments and I hope that they do—there is no reason not to. I ask all MPs to support our amendments tonight.

Alex Davies-Jones: I rise to close what has been an excellent debate on the Victims and Courts Bill. As I said in my opening remarks, this House is at its best when we come together and rise above party politics, to put the interests of our constituents first, and that is exactly what we have done. I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for the collaborative way in which they have engaged in the debate, as has been seen throughout the passage of the Bill. The Bill is about people: victims and survivors. The Bill has been created and drafted with them at its heart. It is about putting them back at the forefront of the justice system, where they belong, because without them we would have no justice system.

Turning to the amendments that have been proposed, I join the shadow Minister in thanking all the witnesses who gave evidence to the Bill Committee. They really

[Alex Davies-Jones]

helped to shape the Bill. It is because of their contribution and the strength of feeling of victims, as well as of right hon. and hon. Members in this place and the other place, that we have gone further in extending the measures in the Bill. When I and the Government hear the strength of feeling in the House, we are afraid to act. That is why I have committed at this Dispatch Box to going further again, looking at the unduly lenient sentence scheme and victim impact statements. It is right that the Law Commission is currently looking at the unduly lenient sentence scheme but, as I said in my opening remarks, I will be monitoring that closely as the Bill progresses in the other place. We are looking at how we can best support victims, so that they have representation when they feel that justice has not been fully served.

The shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti)—I had the pleasure of meeting with his constituent—raised the four-year time limit. This is a novel measure, and I am grateful to Opposition Front Benchers for their support and for recognising that this is just the beginning. We will not fail to go further, following how this is implemented and the potential consequences for the family courts. This is just the start and if it works, the Government will act and go further, but we need to test this properly.

The hon. Member also asked whether the Bill will capture future children. I can confirm from the Dispatch Box that it will cover all children who exist at the time of sentencing for whom the perpetrator has parental responsibility. We cannot bind future children or children yet to be born. However, necessary safeguards will be in place through the family courts. Should that perpetrator come out of prison and go on to have other children, and should they be at risk, the normal route to strip parental responsibility in the family courts will still exist. Unfortunately, we are unable to bind future, hypothetical children, but this Bill will cover any children who exist at the point of sentencing for whom the perpetrator has parental responsibility.

8 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I really welcome this Government's move to restrict the access of abusers to their children, in order to protect them. All too often, however, victims who are members of tightly knit, small religious groups are pressured to interact with their abuser when they get out of prison. Some religious leaders and organisations that I am aware of commonly tell victims that God has forgiven their abusers and they therefore need to do so as well. In some cases, I have seen those victims be ostracised or shunned if they refuse to engage. Does the Minister agree that the Government need to think about how we can seek to resolve that cultural problem in small religious groups?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that thoughtful intervention, and he is right. We need to get this right for all victims of all crimes—that includes intersectionality and vulnerable victims.

That point speaks to the heart of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) in relation to by-and-for services and specialist support services. She mentioned Jewish support charities, and I am meeting Jewish Women's Aid tomorrow to

talk about how we can better support them. She is right that this has to be holistic and comprehensive, because one size does not fit all when it comes to victims of these crimes.

Saqib Bhatti: I place on record once again my gratitude to the Minister for the time that she gave to meet with Bethan and her parents on this serious issue. The change that came about really does restore many people's faith in what we do.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his time and for his support in providing help to Bethan and her parents. Meeting them and hearing their story was a privilege, and it is in their name that we have gone further today in this Bill. It is for them and for all victims and survivors that we stand here to do more. As other Members have said this evening, the difference that being in government makes is that we can actually do those changes.

Let me come to some of the other amendments tabled. I welcome the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), to her place—this is the first time in the Chamber that we have had the opportunity to discuss issues of justice. I had a fantastic, collaborative relationship with her predecessor, and I look forward to continuing that as we work on these issues. She mentioned specifically the resource available for the helpline that will be set up to allow victims a direct route to provide information about their case, which is essential. We, too, are conscious of resources, and we will continue to monitor and refine the resource required for the helpline. Where possible, we will of course act if there is demand. We feel that currently resource there is needed, as is set out in the impact statement, but we will keep that under review and will not hesitate to act in the fiscal environment given.

The hon. Member for Chichester also mentioned new clause 7, about extending eligibility for the victim contact scheme. She will know that we have extended that eligibility in the Bill. Again, we will keep that under review if there is a need to expand it further and look at how we can best support victims.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) mentioned the right to know in relation to the victim contact scheme and the victims code. We will launch a consultation later this year on victim rights and the victims code, looking at exactly what should be in there and how best we can support victims. I encourage all victims, survivors and Members to feed into that. He knows that the door remains open for me to meet his constituent Tina Nash to discuss her issues at first hand and see how I can better support her and other vulnerable victims who are disabled throughout the process.

Andrew George: I have discussed this issue with the Minister, and she knows about it because we have also corresponded on it. I know that my constituent would be enormously grateful to have an opportunity to meet her, and I am very grateful for her response.

Alex Davies-Jones: I look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman and his constituent in due course to discuss the failings in the criminal justice system that led to her experience. No victim should go through what she did, and I stand ready to support her and improve the situation.

Let me turn to the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), which I touched on in my opening remarks. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards), the Opposition Front Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and others in this Chamber spoke to that amendment. I know that many Members will have had horrifying casework in which families are stuck trying to differentiate between a language barrier and a different jurisdiction or legal system, all while trying to get answers on what has happened to their loved one. That is unacceptable.

I remain of the view that the victims code is not the right place for these victims to have that framework, because the victims code is based on the justice system in England and Wales. It does not apply, and it is not right. However, I am committed, and I have already met with the Minister in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), to discuss the FCDO and the MOJ working together on how best we can support victims, and working with the Victims' Commissioner and the charity Murdered Abroad on creating the dedicated framework and guidance on what victims in this country can expect.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way in a crucial part of her speech. In the work that she is doing, I implore her to remember my constituent, whose sister Rita Roberts was brutally murdered in 1992 and not formally identified until 2023. Rita has still not had justice, as she was murdered abroad, and her family are desperate for any support that the Minister can give.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that case. It is a horrific case that I know all too well, because the previous Member for Cardiff West, who is now in the other place, raised it previously and sought to support Rita's family. I will seek to support them in any way I can and will work with the FCDO, because justice delayed is justice denied for anyone, regardless of where they are. I make the commitment to the hon. Member for Maidenhead that we will find the right way forward to support these families, but I do not believe that his amendment is the right one, so I implore him to withdraw it.

I turn to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who is right: these are invisible children and we must do more to protect them. This is not just about identifying them and their parents, who are the perpetrators; it is about supporting those children and better identifying them, and I make that commitment to her. She asked me directly about how we are going to do this. The Minister responsible for sentencing and the Children's Minister have met to discuss this issue and held a roundtable with organisations to look at the best way of doing this, and I will impress on them my hon. Friend's desire for them to move quickly and involve her in how best to bring this forward.

I will discuss the amendments on restorative justice tabled by the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler). I encourage all Members of this place to go and see the play "Punch", which is outstanding—it is probably the best example of restorative justice that anyone can see. Restorative justice is not right for every victim and will

not work for everyone; it needs consent from both the victim and the perpetrator. It will not be right for every crime, but in certain crimes it is appropriate and can provide better victim outcomes and lower reoffending rates. The Prisons Minister and the new Secretary of State are passionate believers in that. We are looking closely at this issue as a Department and will continue to work with the hon. Gentleman to see how best we can bring out restorative justice programmes across the Ministry of Justice.

I come to my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop). I think we have already discussed his commitment to these victims and families for justice, and I pay tribute to him. I am committed to working further on the unduly lenient sentencing scheme to ensure that victims have the right to redress and to complain in an appropriate time, and that the victim impact statements are fit for purpose and represent that victim's voice. For Katie Brett, the Youens family and all those who feel that they have been silenced, I make that commitment today. We also need that clarity in sentencing and transparency on what a sentence actually is, and I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friends the Members for Lowestoft and for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) talked about the need for vital support services, and they are right. Without the vital support services that support victims and survivors, we do not have victims and survivors engaged in a criminal justice system. There needs to be a multi-year settlement—my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft mentioned that as well—to ensure that they are sustainable, effective and there to support victims.

Those organisations know that we are currently going through the financial allocations process in the Ministry of Justice. We are due to complete that process very soon, because I know that these vital organisations need certainty as to the sustainability of their future, and I have committed to them that I will provide it soon. I also hear their calls for more support for child victims. Again, that is something I will be looking at as part of the consultation on the victims code later this year, because although we have identified that children can be victims in their own right, there is little to support them, and they deserve support too. I am committed to working with my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft and other hon. Members to get this right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and I have spoken many times about the efficiency and effectiveness of the criminal injuries compensation scheme. Change in this area cannot be piecemeal; we need proper change if victims are to be supported, if they are to have redress, and if they are to have the recognition that they so vitally need—that something has happened to them, and that they are a victim. As my hon. Friend mentioned, there is discretion in the scheme. There are many reasons for that, but she is right that the scheme does not work. We have heard that time and again, and I am committed to working with her to determine what scheme should be in place to support victims and survivors. I want to hear from them directly, and I am also keen to hear from Quebec—which my hon. Friend mentioned—about how the scheme there operates. If we can learn about best practice internationally, we should do so. But most importantly, we need an effective and sustainable redress scheme for victims of violent crime.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

Finally, I wish to pay tribute, as others have done, to my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball), for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) and for Lowestoft, and to every single Member in this place who has stood up and discussed the need for change through this Bill. They have spoken from their hearts. They have spoken with bravery and with lived experience about what is needed to support victims and survivors. Never let anyone tell you that having a Labour Government does not make a difference. What is the difference? It is delivering for victims—deeds, not words. That is what we are doing in this Chamber this evening. We are making that difference, delivering for Claire Throssell, Jan Mustafa, Sabina Nessa, Olivia Pratt-Korbel, and the countless other victims who have been failed by the criminal justice system. That is the difference a Labour Government makes. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 13 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 14

RESTRICTION OF PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILD CONCEIVED AS A RESULT OF RAPE

“After section 10D of the Children Act 1989 (review of orders made under section 10C) (inserted by section 3) insert—

“10E Duty to make prohibited steps order following rape

- (1) This section applies where the Crown Court—
 - (a) sentences a person (‘the offender’) for an offence under section 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (rape), and
 - (b) is satisfied that a child (‘the child’) for whom the offender has parental responsibility was conceived as a result of the rape.
- (2) The Crown Court must make a prohibited steps order when sentencing the offender.
- (3) The order must—
 - (a) specify that no step of any kind which could be taken by a parent in meeting their parental responsibility for a child may be taken by the offender with respect to the child without the consent of the High Court or the family court, and
 - (b) be made to have effect until the order is varied or discharged by the High Court or the family court.
- (4) But the Crown Court must not make a prohibited steps order under this section if—
 - (a) making the order is prohibited by section 29(3) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002,
 - (b) a prohibited steps order is already in force that meets the requirements in subsection (3), or
 - (c) it appears to the Crown Court that it would not be in the interests of justice to do so.
- (5) A prohibited steps order made under this section does not cease to have effect if the offender is acquitted of the offence on appeal, but see section 10G.
- (6) Sections 1, 7 and 11 do not apply where the Crown Court proceeds under this section.
- (7) A prohibited steps order made under this section is to be treated for the purposes of section 31F(6) of the Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 (proceedings and decisions) as if it were made by the family court.
- (8) The Crown Court does not have jurisdiction to entertain any proceedings in connection with the enforcement of a prohibited steps order made under this section.

- (9) A reference in this Act to an order under this section includes, so far as the context permits, an order varying or discharging it.

10F Duty to apply to court where child may have been conceived as a result of rape

- (1) This section applies where—
 - (a) the Crown Court sentences a person (‘the offender’) for an offence under section 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (rape),
 - (b) the Crown Court is satisfied that there is a child (‘the child’) for whom the offender has parental responsibility,
 - (c) the Crown Court considers that the child may have been conceived as a result of the rape, and
 - (d) section 10E does not apply.
- (2) The Crown Court must notify the local authority that is the relevant local authority at the time the offender is sentenced (if any) of the matters set out in subsection (1).
- (3) The notification under subsection (2) must be given before the end of the period of 30 days beginning with the day after the day on which the offender is sentenced.
- (4) Before the end of the period of six months beginning with the day after the day on which the Crown Court notifies the local authority under subsection (2), the local authority must make enquiries into whether—
 - (a) the victim of the rape, or
 - (b) if the victim is deceased, any person with parental responsibility for the child other than the offender,
 consents to an application being made to the court (see section 92(7)) for the court to determine whether to make a section 8 order.
- (5) If consent is given, the local authority must make that application as soon as is reasonably practicable and in any event before the end of the period of 30 days beginning with the day after the day on which the consent is given.
- (6) Subsections (4) and (5) do not apply if the local authority is satisfied that the court would not have jurisdiction to make a section 8 order (see sections 2 and 3 of the Family Law Act 1986).
- (7) The Secretary of State may by regulations amend the periods specified in subsections (3), (4) and (5).
- (8) In this section, ‘relevant local authority’ means—
 - (a) where the child is ordinarily resident within the area of a local authority in England or Wales, that local authority;
 - (b) where the child does not fall within paragraph (a) but is present within the area of a local authority in England or Wales, that local authority.

10G Review of orders made under section 10E or following an application under section 10F

- (1) This section applies where—
 - (a) either—
 - (i) a prohibited steps order has been made under section 10E, or
 - (ii) an order under Part II has been made following an application under section 10F, and
 - (b) the offender is acquitted of the offence following an appeal.
- (2) The local authority that is the relevant local authority at the time the verdict of acquittal is entered (if any) must make an application to the court (see section 92(7)) to review the order.
- (3) An application under this section must be made as soon as is reasonably practicable and in any event before the end of the period of 30 days beginning with the day after the day on which the verdict of acquittal was entered.

- (4) The Secretary of State may by regulations amend the period specified in subsection (3).
- (5) In this section, 'relevant local authority' means—
- where the child with respect to whom the order was made is ordinarily resident within the area of a local authority in England or Wales, that local authority;
 - where the child with respect to whom the order was made does not fall within paragraph (a) but is present within the area of a local authority in England or Wales, that local authority.”—(*Alex Davies-Jones.*)

This new clause, to be inserted after clause 3, requires the Crown Court to restrict the parental responsibility of a person convicted of rape where a child was conceived as a result. If it is unclear whether the child was so conceived, the local authority must apply to the family court.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 4

VICTIM PERSONAL STATEMENTS

“(1) The Secretary of State shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, issue revised guidance on the content of victim personal statements.

(2) The revised guidance issued under subsection (1) must stipulate that when making a victim personal statement, a victim shall be able to say anything they wish about the defendant, provided it is not contrary to any statutory limitations on free speech, makes allegations of untried criminal conduct or is disorderly language.

(3) The court must disregard any prejudicial comments made during a victim personal statement.”—(*Dr Mullan.*)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review how to make victim personal statements less restrictive and clarify what can be included.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 152, Noes 337.

Division No. 325]

[8.12 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Chope, Sir Christopher
Amos, Gideon	Cleverly, rh Sir James
Anderson, Lee	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Aquarone, Steff	Cocking, Lewis
Argar, rh Edward	Collins, Victoria
Babarinde, Josh	Costa, Alberto
Bacon, Gareth	Coutinho, rh Claire
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Cross, Harriet
Bedford, Mr Peter	Dance, Adam
Bennett, Alison	Darling, Steve
Bhatti, Saqib	Davey, rh Ed
Blackman, Bob	Davies, Gareth
Bool, Sarah	Davies, Mims
Bowie, Andrew	Dean, Bobby
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Dillon, Mr Lee
Brandreth, Aphra	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Brewer, Alex	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Burghart, Alex	Dyke, Sarah
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Evans, Dr Luke
Cane, Charlotte	Farage, Nigel
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Farron, Tim
Cartlidge, James	Foord, Richard
Chadwick, David	Forster, Mr Will
Chamberlain, Wendy	Fortune, Peter
Chambers, Dr Danny	Franklin, Zöe

French, Mr Louie	Morton, rh Wendy
Fuller, Richard	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Mundell, rh David
Garnier, Mark	Munt, Tessa
George, Andrew	Norman, rh Jesse
Gibson, Sarah	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Gilmour, Rachel	O'Brien, Neil
Glen, rh John	Olney, Sarah
Glover, Olly	Patel, rh Priti
Goldman, Marie	Paul, Rebecca
Gordon, Tom	Perteghella, Manuela
Green, Sarah	Philp, rh Chris
Griffith, Andrew	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Harding, Monica	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Harris, Rebecca	Reed, David
Hayes, rh Sir John	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Heylings, Pippa	Robinson, rh Gavin
Hinds, rh Damian	Rosindell, Andrew
Hoare, Simon	Sabine, Anna
Hobhouse, Wera	Savage, Dr Roz
Hollinrake, Kevin	Shannon, Jim
Holmes, Paul	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Huddleston, Nigel	Simmonds, David
Hudson, Dr Neil	Slade, Vikki
Jardine, Christine	Smart, Lisa
Jarvis, Liz	Smith, Greg
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Smith, Rebecca
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Jones, Clive	Sollom, Ian
Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Spencer, Dr Ben
Kohler, Mr Paul	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Kruger, Danny	Stafford, Gregory
Lam, Katie	Swann, Robin
Lamont, John	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Taylor, Luke
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Thomas, Bradley
Lopez, Julia	Thomas, Cameron
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Vickers, Martin
Maguire, Ben	Voaden, Caroline
Maguire, Helen	Whately, Helen
Mak, Alan	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Martin, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean</i>)	Wild, James
Mayhew, Jerome	Wilkinson, Max
Maynard, Charlie	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
McMurdock, James	Wilson, Munira
Milne, John	Wood, Mike
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Wrigley, Martin
Moore, Robbie	Young, Claire
Moran, Layla	
Morello, Edward	
Morgan, Helen	
Morrissey, Joy	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Ashley Fox and
Nick Timothy

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Anderson, Callum
Abbott, Jack	Anderson, Fleur
Abrahams, Debbie	Antoniazzi, Tonia
Adam, Shockat	Arthur, Dr Scott
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Asato, Jess
Akehurst, Luke	Asser, James
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Athwal, Jas
Aldridge, Dan	Atkinson, Lewis
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Baines, David
Alexander, rh Heidi	Baker, Alex
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Baker, Richard
Ali, Rushanara	Ballinger, Alex
Ali, Tahir	Bance, Antonia
	Barker, Paula
	Barron, Lee

Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat

Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah

Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren

Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt

Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Ferguson and
Imogen Walker

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 7

EXTENSION OF VICTIM CONTACT SCHEME

“(1) The Secretary of State must ensure that the Victim Contact Scheme is made available to—

- (a) victims of offenders sentenced to less than 12 months for violent and sexual offences,
- (b) victims in cases involving coercive or controlling behaviour, stalking, or harassment, and
- (c) bereaved families in manslaughter or death by dangerous driving cases.

(2) The Secretary of State must ensure that information under the Victim Contact Scheme is communicated in a timely and trauma-informed manner.

(3) The Secretary of State must publish data each year on uptake and accessibility of the Victim Contact Scheme.”—
(*Jess Brown-Fuller.*)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to extend the Victim Contact Scheme to certain categories of victim. It would also ensure information is provided in a timely, trauma-informed way and require annual reporting on the Scheme's uptake and accessibility.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 165, Noes 323.

Division No. 326]

[8.27 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James

Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowens, Dr Ellie
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Collins, Victoria
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Dean, Bobby
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah

Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
Medi, Llinos
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie

Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrisey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stafford, Gregory
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Ayes:
Zöe Franklin and
Claire Young

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate

Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh

Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Streeter, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt

Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Imogen Walker and
Mark Ferguson

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 12

APPLICATION OF THE VICTIMS' CODE IN RESPECT OF VICTIMS OF MURDER, MANSLAUGHTER OR INFANTICIDE ABROAD

“(1) The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 2, insert—

‘2A Application of the victims’ code in respect of victims of murder, manslaughter or infanticide abroad

- (1) This section applies in respect of victims as defined under section 1(2)(c) who are a close relative of a British National resident in England and Wales, who was the victim of—
 - (a) murder;
 - (b) manslaughter; or
 - (c) infanticide,
 committed outside the UK.
- (2) The Secretary of State must by regulations issue an appendix to the victims’ code, setting out how the code applies to victims in the circumstances set out in subsection (1).
- (3) The appendix must set out the services to be provided to victims as defined under subsection (1) by those persons based in England and Wales appearing to the Secretary of State to have functions of a public nature relating to—
 - (a) victims, or
 - (b) any aspect of the criminal justice system.
- (4) The appendix must make provision for services based in England and Wales which reflect the principles that victims require—
 - (a) information to help them understand the criminal justice process;
 - (b) access to services within England and Wales which provide them with emotional and practical support (including, where appropriate, specialist services);
 - (c) in circumstances where the criminal justice process is engaged in England and Wales, the opportunity to make their views heard in the criminal justice process; and
 - (d) the ability to challenge decisions which have a direct impact on them.
- (5) In setting out the services to be provided to victims under this section, the Secretary of State must specify the following:
 - (a) how such services will be provided with accessible information;
 - (b) how they access emotional and practical support.”

—(*Mr Joshua Reynolds.*)

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to create an appendix to the Victims’ Code which outlines how the code applies to victims whose close relative was the victim of murder, manslaughter or infanticide outside the UK.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 166, Noes 322.

Division No. 327]

[8.39 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Collins, Victoria
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John

Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
Medi, Llinos
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al

Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Stafford, Gregory
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Ayes:
Zöe Franklin and
Claire Young

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David

Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat

Edwards, Lauren
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill

Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Haigh, rh Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne

Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Miliband, rh Ed
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David

Pitcher, Lee	Strathern, Alistair
Platt, Jo	Streeting, rh Wes
Pollard, Luke	Strickland, Alan
Powell, Joe	Stringer, Graham
Powell, rh Lucy	Sullivan, Kirsteen
Poynton, Gregor	Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Prinsley, Peter	Swallow, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard	Tami, rh Sir Mark
Qureshi, Yasmin	Tapp, Mike
Race, Steve	Taylor, David
Rand, Mr Connor	Taylor, Rachel
Ranger, Andrew	Thomas, Gareth
Rayner, rh Angela	Thompson, Adam
Reynolds, rh Emma	Thornberry, rh Emily
Reynolds, rh Jonathan	Tidball, Dr Marie
Rhodes, Martin	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell	Toale, Jessica
Richards, Jake	Trickett, Jon
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny	Tufnell, Henry
Rigby, Lucy	Turley, rh Anna
Rimmer, Ms Marie	Turner, Laurence
Robertson, Dave	Twist, Liz
Rodda, Matt	Vaughan, Tony
Rushworth, Sam	Vaz, rh Valerie
Russell, Sarah	Vince, Chris
Rutland, Tom	Wakeford, Christian
Ryan, Oliver	Waugh, Paul
Sackman, Sarah	Welsh, Michelle
Sandher, Dr Jeevun	West, Catherine
Sewards, Mark	Western, Andrew
Shah, Naz	Western, Matt
Shanker, Baggy	Wheeler, Michael
Shanks, Michael	Whitby, John
Siddiq, Tulip	White, Katie
Simons, Josh	Whittome, Nadia
Slaughter, Andy	Williams, David
Slinger, John	Witherden, Steve
Smith, Cat	Woodcock, Sean
Smith, Nick	Wrighting, Rosie
Smith, Sarah	Yang, Yuan
Smyth, Karin	Yasin, Mohammad
Snell, Gareth	Yemm, Steve
Sobel, Alex	Zeichner, Daniel
Stainbank, Euan	
Stevens, rh Jo	
Stevenson, Kenneth	
Stewart, Elaine	
Stone, Will	

Tellers for the Noes:
Imogen Walker and
Mark Ferguson

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 3

RESTRICTING PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY OF CERTAIN SEX OFFENDERS

Amendments made: 10, page 6, line 2, leave out “for whom the offender has parental responsibility” and insert “, and

(b) the offender has parental responsibility for at least one child.”

This would require the court to make an order restricting parental responsibility in all cases where an offender is sentenced to a relevant sentence for a serious sexual offence against a child. The duty would no longer be limited to cases where the offender had parental responsibility for the victim.

Amendment 11, page 7, line 11, after “reduced” insert “(if any)”.—(Alex Davies-Jones.)

This amendment clarifies that the obligation to apply for a review of a prohibited steps order under section 10D of the Children Act 1989 (inserted by clause 3) does not apply if there is no relevant local authority.

Clause 4

SECTION 3: CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: 12, page 7, line 33, leave out “(2)” and insert “(1A)”.

This amendment is consequential on NC14 and Amendment 13.

Amendment 13, page 7, line 33, at end insert—

“(1A) In section 8(3), after “10A” insert “, 10C or 10E”.

This amendment provides that proceedings in the Crown Court under sections 10C (inserted by clause 3) or 10E (inserted by amendment NC14) of the Children Act 1989 will not constitute “family proceedings” for the purposes of that Act.

Amendment 14, page 7, line 35, leave out “or 10C” and insert “, 10C or 10E”.

This amendment is consequential on NC14.

Amendment 15, page 8, line 4, at end insert—

“(3A) In section 10B, in subsection (2), after “made” insert “(if any)”.

This amendment clarifies that the obligation to apply for a review of a prohibited steps order under section 10B of the Children Act 1989 does not apply if there is no relevant local authority.

Amendment 16, page 8, line 7, leave out “or 10C” and insert “, 10C or 10E”.

This amendment is consequential on NC14.

Amendment 17, page 8, line 10, leave out “or 10C” and insert “, 10C or 10E”.

This amendment is consequential on NC14.

Amendment 18, page 8, line 10, at end insert—

“(b) after subsection (14) insert—

“(14A) The reference in subsection (14) and section 91A(5)(a)(iii) to the disposal of an application includes an application under the following provisions—

section 10B,

section 10D,

section 10F, or

section 10G.”

This amendment confirms that the family court has the power to make an order under section 91(14) of the Children Act 1989 restraining the making of further applications pursuant to an application under the listed provisions.

Amendment 19, page 8, line 12, leave out “after “10B(6)” insert “10C(11) or 10D(4)”” and insert “for “section 10B(6)” substitute “—

section 10B(6),

section 10C(11),

section 10D(4),

section 10F(7), or

section 10G(4).”

This amendment is consequential on NC14.

Amendment 20, page 8, line 14, leave out “or 10C” and insert “, 10C or 10E”.

This amendment is consequential on NC14.

Amendment 21, Clause 4, page 8, line 17, leave out “and 10C” and insert “, 10C and 10E”.—(Alex Davies-Jones.)

This amendment is consequential on NC14.

Clause 11

REVIEWS OF SENTENCING: TIME LIMITS

Amendment proposed: 5, page 12, line 23, after “(2)” insert “unless an application is made by a victim, or their deceased victim’s next of kin, in which case notice of an application shall be given within one year.”—(*Dr Mullan.*)

This amendment increases the window for applying to the Unduly Lenient Sentences Scheme to one year for a victim of a crime or a deceased victim’s next of kin.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 153, Noes 332.

Division No. 328]

[8.51 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Gilmour, Rachel
Amos, Gideon	Glen, rh John
Anderson, Lee	Glover, Olly
Aquarone, Steff	Goldman, Marie
Argar, rh Edward	Gordon, Tom
Babarinde, Josh	Green, Sarah
Bacon, Gareth	Griffith, Andrew
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Harding, Monica
Bedford, Mr Peter	Harris, Rebecca
Bennett, Alison	Hayes, rh Sir John
Bhatti, Saqib	Heylings, Pippa
Blackman, Bob	Hinds, rh Damian
Bool, Sarah	Hoare, Simon
Bowie, Andrew	Hobhouse, Wera
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Hollinrake, Kevin
Brandreth, Aphra	Holmes, Paul
Brewer, Alex	Huddleston, Nigel
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Hudson, Dr Neil
Burghart, Alex	Jardine, Christine
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Jarvis, Liz
Cane, Charlotte	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Cartlidge, James	Jones, Clive
Chadwick, David	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Chamberlain, Wendy	Kohler, Mr Paul
Chambers, Dr Danny	Kruger, Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher	Lake, Ben
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Lam, Katie
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Lamont, John
Cocking, Lewis	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Collins, Victoria	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Costa, Alberto	Lopez, Julia
Coutinho, rh Claire	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Cross, Harriet	Maguire, Ben
Dance, Adam	Maguire, Helen
Darling, Steve	Mak, Alan
Davies, Ann	Martin, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean</i>)
Davies, Gareth	Mayhew, Jerome
Davies, Mims	Maynard, Charlie
Dean, Bobby	Medi, Llinos
Dillon, Mr Lee	Milne, John
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Moore, Robbie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Moran, Layla
Dyke, Sarah	Morgan, Helen
Evans, Dr Luke	Morrissey, Joy
Farage, Nigel	Morton, rh Wendy
Farron, Tim	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Foord, Richard	Mundell, rh David
Forster, Mr Will	Munt, Tessa
Franklin, Zöe	Murray, Susan
French, Mr Louie	Norman, rh Jesse
Fuller, Richard	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Gale, rh Sir Roger	O'Brien, Neil
Garnier, Mark	
George, Andrew	

Olney, Sarah	Spencer, Dr Ben
Patel, rh Priti	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Paul, Rebecca	Stafford, Gregory
Perteghella, Manuela	Swann, Robin
Philp, rh Chris	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Taylor, Luke
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Thomas, Bradley
Reed, David	Thomas, Cameron
Reynolds, Mr Joshua	Vickers, Martin
Robinson, rh Gavin	Voaden, Caroline
Rosindell, Andrew	Whately, Helen
Savage, Dr Roz	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Saville Roberts, rh Liz	Wild, James
Shannon, Jim	Wilkinson, Max
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Simmonds, David	Wilson, Munira
Slade, Vikki	Wood, Mike
Smart, Lisa	Wrigley, Martin
Smith, Greg	Young, Claire
Smith, rh Sir Julian	
Smith, Rebecca	
Snowden, Mr Andrew	
Sollom, Ian	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Ashley Fox and
Nick Timothy

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Brickell, Phil
Abbott, Jack	Buckley, Julia
Abrahams, Debbie	Burke, Maureen
Adam, Shockat	Burton-Sampson, David
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Butler, Dawn
Akehurst, Luke	Cadbury, Ruth
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Aldridge, Dan	Campbell, Irene
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Alexander, rh Heidi	Carden, Dan
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Carling, Sam
Ali, Rushanara	Champion, Sarah
Ali, Tahir	Charalambous, Bambos
Anderson, Callum	Charters, Mr Luke
Anderson, Fleur	Chowns, Dr Ellie
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Clark, Feryal
Arthur, Dr Scott	Coleman, Ben
Asato, Jess	Collier, Jacob
Asser, James	Collinge, Lizzy
Athwal, Jas	Collins, Tom
Atkinson, Lewis	Conlon, Liam
Baines, David	Coombes, Sarah
Baker, Alex	Cooper, Andrew
Baker, Richard	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Ballinger, Alex	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bance, Antonia	Costigan, Deirdre
Barker, Paula	Cox, Pam
Barron, Lee	Coyle, Neil
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Craft, Jen
Baxter, Johanna	Creagh, Mary
Beales, Danny	Creasy, Ms Stella
Begum, Apsana	Crichton, Torcuil
Bell, Torsten	Curtis, Chris
Benn, rh Hilary	Daby, Janet
Berry, Siân	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Betts, Mr Clive	Dalton, Ashley (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Billington, Ms Polly	Darlington, Emily
Bishop, Matt	Davies, Jonathan
Blake, Rachel	Davies, Paul
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Davies-Jones, Alex
Bonavia, Kevin	De Cordova, Marsha
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Dean, Josh
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Dearden, Kate
	Dickson, Jim

Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirth
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh

Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi

Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Imogen Walker and
Mark Ferguson

Question accordingly negated.

Third Reading

9.3 pm

Alex Davies-Jones: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I begin by placing on the record my thanks to the Whips, the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee and all the brilliant, dedicated officials at the Ministry of Justice who have worked so hard to bring this legislation forward. Particular thanks go to Rachel Bennion, Hayley Newell and Cassie Blower. I also pay tribute to London Victims Commissioner Claire Waxman and Victims Commissioner Baroness Newlove in the other place, as well as Domestic Abuse

[Alex Davies-Jones]

Commissioner Dame Nicole Jacobs. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members across the House for their thoughtful contributions so far. They have all helped to shape this Bill, which will strengthen our justice system and make it one that is more responsive to victims, tackles delays in our criminal courts and delivers swifter and fairer justice.

When the Government took office in July last year, we inherited a justice system in utter crisis, with record and rising backlogs in the criminal courts delaying justice for too many people and victims more likely to be an afterthought than an important, integral part of the process. Reform of the system is essential, and this legislation will mark that significant step forward, but I have been clear that this is just the beginning.

The Bill at its core is about transforming the experience of victims throughout the criminal justice system. It will introduce measures to ensure that victims are heard, supported and treated with the dignity they deserve, and it will improve the efficiency and fairness of our courts.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on piloting the Bill through the House? It is an excellent piece of legislation that will make a real difference to victims. But, as she said, it is just a start. Will she and the Department rededicate themselves to bringing down that Crown court backlog? Speedy justice is what victims want.

Alex Davies-Jones: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee for holding our feet to the fire as a Government to ensure that we bear down on that backlog. The Minister of State, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), is ensuring that we deliver for victims by bringing down that backlog, with record investment in our court system, record sitting days and looking at the reforms brought forward and the recommendations of Sir Brian Leveson in his once-in-a-generation review. It is only when we get on top of that court backlog that justice can be delivered and victims will feel it has been done.

The Bill is a key part of the Government's plan for change. It will deliver on many of our manifesto commitments to support and protect victims, restore confidence in our justice system and implement that swifter and fairer justice. I urge all hon. Members on both sides of the House to support its passage into law. I proudly commend the Bill to the House.

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

9.6 pm

Dr Mullan: It is my pleasure to speak on Third Reading of the Victims and Courts Bill. Victims and their families should be at the heart of our justice system. The main goal of the justice system—as well as keeping the public safe—should be to deliver exactly that: justice for victims and their families. All too often, for many years, it has not done that as often as it could. The Bill has presented us with a number of ways in which we can at least improve how the system works by doing more to make life easier for victims and their families, helping to respond to their needs and doing more to give them a voice.

The Bill has brought forward measures to support families and children by restricting the responsibility of parents who are not fit to have a presumption of parental responsibility. It will also see an expanded role and powers for the Victims' Commissioner. I have seen at first hand the effectiveness of that office under Baroness Newlove and I am sure that her successor will make great use of those new tools. The new measures around the victim contact scheme will also help victims feel like they know what is happening with the criminals who have harmed them, with access to information they have a right to.

I am disappointed, however, that the Government and Labour MPs have refused to accept two clear routes forward to further weight the justice system towards victims and their families. The Opposition's proposed changes to the unduly lenient sentence scheme and the victim personal statement had widespread support from across victims' advocates, including Justice for Victims, the Victims' Commissioner, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victim Support. Hon. Members will know that had such a wide coalition come forward with proposals for sensible reform when Labour Members were in opposition, they would not have hesitated to back them. There is simply no good excuse for their having voted against them tonight.

The Bill is important and brings forward a range of important measures, so, as I am sure the Minister would expect, we will not oppose it. I pay tribute again to the victims and victims' organisations. Most of the measures in the Bill started with them. I hope that Labour MPs will reflect on the measures they are still resisting and, in future stages, reconsider their decisions to vote against them. Those measures would improve the Bill, improve our justice system and help future victims avoid some of the experiences that have forced victims and their families into being campaigners. They do not want to be campaigners; they feel that they have to be. The measures that the Opposition proposed with their support were aimed at stopping other people in future from having to be campaigners.

But let us be clear: these measures and the Bill do not sit in isolation. I said at the outset that victims want justice. For the worst offenders, that means being properly punished by being sent to prison for a long time. I suggest to the Minister and Labour MPs that all the victims these measures are aimed to help, and all the people and campaign groups they speak to in support of these measures, will be appalled that at the same time that the Government are giving this, they are taking away with the other hand in a truly appalling way. Many of the campaigns and measures relate to violence and sexual offences, yet this week the Government will ask MPs to vote through clauses that will allow thousands of violent and sexual offenders out of prison earlier—[*Interruption.*] The Minister says from a sedentary position that that is not true, but more than 60% of rapists sent to prison will get out of prison earlier. Today, we had a discussion of the appalling, mistaken release of Hadush Kebatu. He was convicted of sexual assault. More than 85% of offenders sent to prison—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Mullan, we have to make sure that your speech is in scope of this Bill. I assume that you are coming to a sharp conclusion.

Dr Mullan: It is in scope, Madam Deputy Speaker, because we are talking about measures that apply—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If I have confirmed that it is not in scope for Third Reading, then it is not in scope. Conclude swiftly!

Dr Mullan: As I have said, many of the measures in the Bill are welcome, but we have to be extremely mindful that what we are doing in other proceedings in this House do not fatally undermine them and end up leaving victims feeling worse off after the positive measures that the Bill has brought forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 2 to 5 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Companies (Directors' Report) (Payment Reporting) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 17 July, be approved.

TRANSPORT

That the draft Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 (Definition of Relevant Land) (Amendment) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 8 September, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES

That the draft Financial Services (Overseas Recognition Regime Designations) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 15 July, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Control of Mercury (Enforcement) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 17 July, be approved.—(*Deirdre Costigan.*)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We have a substantial number of motions to move so, with the leave of the House, I will take them collectively.

Ordered,

BUSINESS AND TRADE

That Gregor Poynton and Rosie Wrighting be discharged from the Business and Trade Committee and Daniel Aldridge and Justin Madders be added.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

That James Frith, Tom Rutland and Paul Waugh be discharged from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Vicky Foxcroft, Anneliese Midgley and Jeff Smith be added.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

That Andrew Pakes be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Terry Jermy be added.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

That Blair McDougall be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Fleur Anderson be added.

HOME AFFAIRS

That Jake Richards, Shaun Davies and Conor Rand be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Lewis Atkinson, Peter Prinsley and Jo White be added.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That Naushabah Khan and Joe Powell be discharged from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and Sean Woodcock and Andrew Cooper be added.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That Alice MacDonald be discharged from the International Development Committee and Janet Daby be added.

JUSTICE

That Mike Tapp be discharged from the Justice Committee and Tony Vaughan be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That Nesil Caliskan and Luke Charters be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Catherine McKinnell and Tristan Osborne be added.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

That Steve Race and Jon Pearce be discharged from the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and Samantha Niblett and Daniel Zeichner be added.

TRANSPORT

That Catherine Atkinson be discharged from the Transport Committee and Jacob Collier be added.

TREASURY

That Lola McEvoy, Jeevun Sandher and Rachel Blake be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Jim Dickson, Luke Murphy and Catherine West be added.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

That Kirith Entwistle, Natalie Fleet and Catherine Fookes be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Kevin McKenna, Kim Leadbeater and Nadia Whittome be added.

WORK AND PENSIONS

That David Pinto-Duschinsky, Gill German and Frank McNally be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Lee Barron, David Baines and Rushanara Ali be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Regulation and Inspection of Funeral Services

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

9.13 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): There are many issues that will divide this House and many issues that will divide society, but one thing that probably unites all of us, and indeed society, is that we have a legitimate expectation of decent and respectful treatment for our dead. I do not think that is asking too much. The vast majority of funeral directors, crematoria and hospital morgues treat the deceased with the decency and respect that we would expect and hope for ourselves.

Most of the apples operating in the funeral barrels, if I can put it like that, are good ones, but we all know that there are rotten apples in every barrel. It has long been recognised that this is a sector that operates in good faith and on a belief—often misplaced—that our expectations of the decency and respect to be shown to the deceased will prevail in all circumstances. I am not suggesting that Governments have shied away from this, pretending to turn a blind eye, as it were, but probably in the general scheme of things, until some recent high-profile incidents, they have not really thought to think about it, in the presumption that everything works well and as we would expect.

We will all remember the Fuller inquiry and the interim report that came out from that. When I was the Local Government Minister, the then junior Minister at the Ministry of Justice, Mike Freer, and I worked closely on this. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), with whom I worked closely some months back on a constituency case of hers. I am delighted to see her in her place, knowing the keen interest she has taken on behalf of her constituents.

I asked the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Ministry of Justice, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), on 22 January what changes were being proposed to licensing, or to bring in licensing, in the funeral home sector. The reply was—let me put it this way—benign. His written reply said it was a

“complex and sensitive matter that demands careful consideration to ensure a response that effectively safeguards the public.”

On the latter bit, we can all agree. It being a “complex and sensitive matter” is true. I would argue that it has already had that “careful consideration”. When one considers all the retail outlets and others—be they tattoo parlours, nail bars, cafés, burger bars, hairdressers, beauty salons and the like—that are regulated and inspected, it does seem strange that the funeral sector is effectively left to its own devices.

I know that sometimes Government and Members of Parliament press for licensing, regulation or binding codes of conduct very much against the will of the sector and find themselves in this great tussle. But the Association of Green Funeral Directors, the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors and the National Association of Funeral Directors—I just want to pause to pay warm and fulsome tribute to the latter two for how they helped Mike Freer and me when we were Ministers trying to grapple with this when the

situation was boiling up. Those three organisations, together with the Co-op, represent somewhere between 75% and 85% of funeral operators in this country. They are all desperate for either a licensing regime or an inspection regime.

Society is effectively saying to the trade bodies, which have a bit of muscle but no teeth, that they should impose standards of operation across the whole of the sector. I think the country at large would welcome regulation and inspection, and the trade bodies, which represent between three quarters and 85% of operators, are also clamouring for that.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The hon. Member sheds a light on an area that I have only just come to, and that was through a piece of casework. It was absolutely devastating to receive a piece of casework about abysmal funeral services, which included the mis-selling of a plot in a local cemetery, extortionate funeral costs and countless issues with a private funeral company. Does he agree that it is unacceptable that private cemeteries are almost entirely unregulated and are governed by burial Acts from the 1800s, which frankly are wildly out of date?

Simon Hoare: I do agree. In many respects, the only bit of legislation on which we can rest a serious prosecution is the Burial Act 1857, which deals with the corpse post internment. It is silent on the corpse’s treatment from the point of death through to the point of either internment or cremation. There is an enormous vacuum in the rules and regulations that I think most fair-minded people would say needs to be filled.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. This is the second Adjournment debate of his in which I have been involved in the last six months. He brings to the House subjects that are pertinent not just to North Dorset but to every constituency across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such an intimate and essential service for people at the most vulnerable times of their lives must be of the highest standard? We have wonderful funeral companies such as Clarke’s and Adair’s in my Strangford constituency, but we sometimes hear dreadful stories of horrific service. The fact that we regulate nail salons but not funeral services indicates that we need to consider ensuring a minimum level of service protection, and that the Government, and the Minister in particular, should at the very least instil some form of accountability into the process.

Simon Hoare: I fundamentally agree with what the hon. Gentleman said, as would the lion’s share of operators, because they are acutely aware of a crisis of public confidence in the sector’s ability to deliver.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech on an incredibly difficult topic. Next month, I am bringing two mums from Leeds down to meet the Victims Minister. They tragically lost their babies in different circumstances, but both went to the same funeral director, who did horrific things with their babies’ bodies. The police found nothing actionable because there is no regulation of the funeral industry. That needs to change. The hon. Gentleman talks about the public’s reaction, so does he

agree that the more cases that come to light, the more the public realise what is possible in the funeral sector right now and the louder their calls for regulation will grow? I urge the Minister to recognise the urgent need to address this issue.

Simon Hoare: I am very sorry to hear what the hon. Gentleman has relayed; I know that the whole House will send prayers, thoughts and sympathies to his constituents. What a terrible thing to be dealing with in what are already tragically sad circumstances. He is right to urge the Minister to give a turbocharged and energised response.

As a society, our relationship with funerals is changing. We have become, as we know, a more secular society, so we are looking for other ways to deal with funeral services, rather than the traditional church service and so on. The covid pandemic certainly expedited the—I do not necessarily use this term in a disparaging sense—cheaper, faster and more streamlined approach to dealing with the deceased.

Funerals have become very expensive, when done well, because funeral directors have costs that need to be met, which is why we have seen this great rash of adverts. Anyone who watches any daytime commercial television will know that those over 55 are well insured—I qualify by a year. I am told there are plenty of machines for those who have difficulty getting out of a chair or a bed, and they can press a button and spring up and out like Zebedee. And there are 101 different funeral plan providers who will meet people's needs very cheaply indeed.

There is little or no doubt that the lion's share of operators are legit, above board, doing their best and doing it well, but the absence of regulation means that, if we so wished, the Minister and I could set up a funeral directors. We do not need a licence.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: Let me just continue.

The Minister and I would not need a licence and we would not be inspected; all we would have to do is put up a sign saying "Funeral Directors" with the hours of operation on it. That cannot be right. It cannot be right that when a funeral director is running out of credit with their local crematorium they can transport a corpse from one end of the country to the other without any paperwork. If my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and others involved in livestock farming wanted to move one of their sheep from A to B, they know as well as I do about the vast amount of paperwork the Ministry requires to allow that to happen, and that is because we want traceability—that is what we need, and we need traceability in this sector as well.

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes the point that many of our constituents across the country do not realise that anybody could set up and run a funeral director service. Sam Gallagher, one of the directors of Gallagher Family Funeral Directors in Keighley, wrote to me to advocate, quite rightly, that the Government should look at bringing in regulation or, at the very least, requiring that funeral directors must be a member of a trade association in order to operate. Currently we

have neither, and I am sure that my hon. Friend, in summing up, will encourage the Minister to offer some warm words that we will be going in the direction of having that regulation put in place.

Simon Hoare: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is a great strength to be a member of the trade association, because it gives an imprimatur of quality to the families choosing a funeral director, just as customers would choose a CORGI-registered boiler fitter or FENSA for windows. As the trade associations themselves have made clear, however, they can only exhort. They can help people by advising on what best practice looks and feels like, what a good customer experience is and so forth, but people can still trade as a funeral director without being a member of the trade association, and if the trade association kicks them out, they can still trade as a funeral director, because being a funeral director is not concomitant on being a member of the trade association. So there is all this opt-in, opt-out, and of course the best will always join the professional bodies that give them the imprimatur of quality, whereas it is the dodgy geezers—the people trying to do it on the fly—who will not, and they will always be part of the bottom end of the market.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I have in my constituency a very well-established funeral director that operates in a large area and has been around since the Victorian era, and many other Members will have similar firms in their areas. The hon. Gentleman has talked about the trade bodies. Does he agree that such long-established family firms have a role to play in any future regulation as their experience and respect will add to the weight of the regulation?

Simon Hoare: I entirely agree, and I make this point again for the Minister's benefit: he will not be trying to push water uphill in pushing for a regulatory and/or licensing regime. The good guys and girls want it to happen because it would give certainty.

I can share with the House—I hope it is not breaching a confidence—that when I was dealing with a high-profile incident, which I cannot reference per se as it is sub judice, one of the concerns we wrestled with was what would happen if public confidence collapsed so much that our hospital morgues became effectively logjammed. People would not be prepared to release their loved one to a funeral director because they had lost all faith in the sector as a whole. That would be a deeply worrying situation for anybody, and that is why the trade bodies are pushing so hard and so energetically to deploy their expertise as best they can in the current circumstances, but also to push Government to agree.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC) *rose*—

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD) *rose*—

Simon Hoare: I want to draw my remarks to a close, but not before I have given way to the hon. Gentleman.

Ben Lake: I am grateful to my friend the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for bringing forward this important debate. I agree wholeheartedly with the arguments that he has made, as do many of the funeral directors in my constituency. I impress on him and the

[Ben Lake]

Minister that those funeral directors want a licensing regime. As the hon. Member has explained so eloquently, the trade bodies can only do so much, but a licensing regime would ensure a minimum standard, and we could all hope that the rest would try to excel and become members of the trade bodies in due course.

Simon Hoare: I agree fundamentally; it would be “the rising tide that floats all ships” argument. I will give way briefly to the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), and then I have a couple of suggestions for the Minister.

Tessa Munt: My constituents would be really shocked to discover the lack of clarity in this matter. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as part of the licensing regime, anyone undertaking a funeral service in the community should be clear about where bodies are kept and the various arrangements that are in play? I have heard some fairly dreadful things about arrangements for those who have passed away.

Simon Hoare: I agree. In so many choices that we make, the consumer now rightly demands the highest of standards. People want to ensure that the departure of their loved one from the world is as dignified, graceful, calm and respectful as it possibly can be.

Tessa Munt *rose*—

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady is scowling at me in such a friendly way that of course I will give way.

Tessa Munt: Funeral directors deal with people at the most vulnerable time in their lives. It is not the time when somebody asks, “What is happening? Where is my loved one’s body? What are you going to do next?” All of that detail is assumed. When people are so vulnerable, they are highly unlikely to ask the questions that they really should ask, and that they would certainly ask if they were buying any other product or service.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady has hit upon the key word—assumed. Why would people think to think anything else? Funeral directors have chosen their profession—it is not like there is a conscript army of funeral directors, press-ganged into dealing with the deceased—so people presume and assume that the highest standards and quality will be deployed.

The hon. Lady is right that most of our constituents would be shocked that it is only section 25 of the Burial Act 1857 that makes it an offence to remove buried remains without a licence from the Secretary of State or, in relation to consecrated ground, without the permission of the Church of England, according to the rites of the Church. There is, however, a common-law offence of preventing a lawful and decent burial, where a person conceals the death of another person. That is not the same as not giving somebody a dignified burial. The death has not been concealed, because it has been registered—they have a death certificate—but it is what is done to the deceased thereafter that is important.

Let me make some points to the Minister—he may well need to respond in writing, rather than give a detailed answer from the Dispatch Box. He will have heard from Members from across the House, and he

will know from conversations that he may have had with trade bodies and others, that there is a strong and growing appetite for licensing and inspection. The default position, as I understand it, is with the Human Tissue Authority, and some changes to its terms of reference would be required, which might be a good place to start.

There was a mixed reaction from across the local government family, but I still think that our local councils know the granularity of their jurisdictions. They will often be running the crematoria and the graveyards, and they will have official relationships with the funeral directors. They also have a long track record of inspection of premises. I am certain that when local government was given the duty to inspect licensed premises and facilities serving food, they said, “We have no experience in this”, but they very quickly picked it up.

I know that the trade bodies stand ready to work alongside and with local authorities, as they were going to do before the general election, to say, “This is what best practice looks like. Come and see our leading members and get a feel for this. We will then accompany you on inspection so that you get a feel about what to look for, the right questions to ask, and so on.” It was going to be an evolution in partnership between the quality operators and the Government. I think any and all of us would support anything—there is certainly a clear role for the Human Tissue Authority, but I urge the Minister not to rule out at this stage active and engaged involvement from the local government sector.

There is also a beefed-up supervisory role for the Financial Conduct Authority. We are all familiar with the TV advertising and other advertising, which I referenced, that says, “Pay a couple of quid a month and build up your funeral kitty. Your loved ones don’t have to worry about it.” I am aware of a few cases whereby people have gone in on a weekly or monthly basis with cash, paid it in good faith and been given a piece of paper. They have been given no receipt, the funeral director has not been registered, and the scheme has not been registered with the Financial Conduct Authority—the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy) will remember that she had that with a number of her constituents.

Let me share with the House that such people are not the wealthy or affluent, who can say, “I can afford to write off the £2,500 or £3,000 I have put in.” These are people on limited, low incomes and limited means who are trying to defray the costs for their family by doing the right thing. We then find that all they have is a piece of paper in their own bank book or ledger, in which they might write things saying, “This is what I have paid in. Go and talk to Mr Whoever—they are my funeral director of choice.” Guess what? That person has done a moonlight flit; they have disappeared, and there is no record. We have never heard of them. They say, “Oh no, your mother only paid in £4.20, then she did not make any payments.” Nobody stands as the guarantor of last resort. That money is just lost and written off.

If only frightfully well-to-do people were affected, we would be sympathetic with them, but I suggest that the people affected are being proactively preyed on in areas of the country where there is not a vast amount of cash to go around. People are trying to do their best to ensure that their funeral is as cost-effective and problem-free as possible for their surviving relatives, and that it gives them dignity in their choice of being cremated or interred.

The Treasury needs to step up to this issue as well. We know that the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 was amended by order in 2021, but it does not quite seem to be doing the trick. There is a problem when any issue requires interdepartmental solutions. We have the Treasury and financial regulation on one side, and there is the potential for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government involvement on the other. There is also the Ministry of Justice as the sponsoring Department for death—not necessarily the best thing to put on a ministerial strapline, but the Minister is the Minister for death, as far as the MOJ is concerned. Who takes the lead? Who pushes it forward? Who convenes? Who gets it right?

This issue cannot be ignored. I say with the greatest respect to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), who I am privileged enough to count as a friend, that this is a complex and sensitive issue, and we are going to need to take our time. The canon of evidence on the need for progress is very clear and compelling. I suggest that the time for consultation and consideration has passed. The time is now for joined-up Government, energetic thinking and speedy delivery, which will give comfort and confidence to each and every constituent.

Apart from taxes, we know that there is only one other certain thing in this life: we have a span on this Earth, and it is not an infinite resource. We are all going to have to use one of these services at some point, so it is in the interests of the whole country to get this right. The Minister is jolly lucky, because the trade bodies and others are willing him on. They want to see this happen and are ready to act in quick lockstep in order to deliver it.

As the House has reflected in this evening's debate, and as I hope the Minister will have picked up on, doing nothing and hoping for the best—hoping that somehow or another, by a process of osmosis, the bad actors disappear and the good actors rise to the fore and are the sole operators within this sphere—is, I am afraid, for the birds. I urge any right hon. or hon. Member to talk to any of their constituents, at a surgery or an event, and ask, "The funeral sector is regulated, isn't it?" They will answer, "Of course it is." "It's licensed, isn't it?" "Yes, of course it is." When you tell them it is not, there is a look of total and utter astonishment. That situation cannot continue.

I suggest that the Minister could bring forward whatever legislation he needs, and it would probably pass this House in a couple of weeks. As the Minister has heard from across the House, this is now an urgent and pressing issue. I look forward to his reply, but more importantly, I look forward to seeing any legislation that he brings forward in order to enact a remedy that is long overdue.

9.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): I thank the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for bringing forward this debate and for the manner in which he has done so, with just the right blend of humour and seriousness. In the spirit of humour, I thank him for his invitation to go into business with him as a funeral director. I think I must decline that invitation, on the basis that as a practising surgeon, it might raise some issues of conflict in my practice.

It really is an honour to respond to the hon. Gentleman on behalf of the Government. I completely understand his strength of feeling on this issue, and from all the contributions made by hon. Members from across this House, I know that he is not alone. Many colleagues and their constituents have written to the Government, rightly appalled by recent scandals that have shone a spotlight on the current arrangements and lack of regulation in the funeral sector. Many hon. Members' constituents have conducted themselves with great dignity at a time when that dignity was not afforded to their dearly departed loved ones. People deserve dignity in death, and families deserve the comfort of knowing that their loved ones have been safely laid to rest.

All of us know, or will come to know, bereavement. Everyone deals with grief in different ways, but for many people, funerals can be comforting as well as cathartic—an occasion to lay a loved one's remains to rest and celebrate the gift of their life. On these occasions, we put our trust in the commitment and professionalism of a funeral director. We trust them to not only support us through one of the most difficult and distressing times in our life, but treat our loved ones laid to rest with the utmost respect. Every deceased person deserves at least as much dignity in death as they had in life, and to receive the highest standard of care from those entrusted with looking after them. It is important to remember that, as the hon. Member for North Dorset mentioned, the vast majority of funeral directors operate with professionalism and integrity. As he has noted, though, there have recently been a number of distressing incidents in which the conduct of a small number of funeral directors and those involved in dealing with the deceased have fallen far, far short of the standards that we, as a respectable society, can tolerate.

Before I turn to the recommendations of phase 2 of the independent inquiry into the issues raised by the David Fuller case, I want to remind the House of the background to that case. As colleagues may remember, the unspeakable crimes of David Fuller took place in a hospital while he was a maintenance supervisor, first at Kent and Sussex hospital and later at Tunbridge Wells hospital. He was arrested in December 2020 for the 1987 murders of two women, Wendy Knell and Caroline Pierce. When police searched his house, they found images and videos of him committing unspeakable offences on a large number of deceased women and girls in hospital mortuary settings between 2005 and 2020.

In 2021, the previous Government established an independent inquiry to investigate how a member of staff was able to carry out such evil and unlawful acts at mortuaries in those hospitals, going unnoticed. Crimes such as these are rare, but that will come as little consolation to the victims. We owe it to the victims and their families to learn the lessons from the Fuller inquiry and to do everything we can to prevent other families from going through similar heartbreak. I take this opportunity to thank Sir Jonathan Michael and his whole inquiry team for their work. This is the first time that the security and dignity of people after death has been considered within all settings and on a major scale in England.

Turning to the inquiry findings, phase 1 of the inquiry focused on the crimes that Fuller committed in those mortuaries in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells. The report, published in 2023, identified failures of management,

[Dr Zubir Ahmed]

governance and regulation and a lack of curiosity, enabling Fuller's crimes to be repeated time and again. As a result of incidents in the funeral sector, the inquiry was asked by the previous Administration, as the hon. Member for North Dorset has already alluded to, to expedite its examination of the funeral sector.

On 15 October 2024, the inquiry published an interim report recommending regulation of that sector. On 15 July, the inquiry published its phase 2 final report, which looked at the care of the deceased in both hospital and, importantly, non-hospital settings. The report made 75 detailed recommendations in total, with the majority focusing on access, dignity, security and wider processes and procedures to protect deceased individuals. A smaller number of recommendations focused on independent hospitals, medical education, hospices, ambulance services, care homes, the funeral sector and, of course, faith organisations, making specific recommendations to improve the care of the deceased. The inquiry's overarching recommendation is that statutory regulation should be in place to protect the security and dignity of people after death, whichever setting or institution they are in. Sir Jonathan specifically recommended the introduction of an independent statutory regulatory regime for funeral directors.

There are currently specific issues in Hull, which are subject to court proceedings that have not completed, so I will not comment on them specifically, except to say that I am grateful for the support and work of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), who is sitting next to me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). I pay tribute to the Hessle Road community and to Tristan and Claire, constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice, for how they have campaigned. They have been dignified and campaigning so hard after the distressing incidents relating to their grandmother.

The Government have committed to providing an interim update before the end of this year, followed by a full response in summer 2026. I acknowledge the challenge

of the hon. Member for North Dorset that multiple trade bodies are willing to step up and work with the Government to find a workable framework that meets the needs of the mid-21st century, not the mid-19th.

The recommendations from phase 1 of the inquiry relating to the trust where Fuller committed his horrendous crimes sit largely within the remit of my Department. The trust set out its progress in February 2024 and has implemented all the inquiry's recommendations.

The phase 2 recommendations are more complex, and do not solely sit with the Department of Health and Social Care, as the levers of action sit across Government. The recommendations focus on service-level improvements and wider regulation, including of the funeral sector, as has been touched upon in today's debate. Those need a co-ordinated and urgent approach across Departments to determine which recommendations should be prioritised by which Department. The hon. Gentleman has my assurance of a collaborative, cross-departmental approach to get this right soon for the deceased and their loved ones.

The hon. Gentleman has put forward many proposals and challenges, including changing the Human Tissue Act 2004, which can be cumbersome. He has also put forward suggestions on the use of local government services to regulate the funeral sector, and I will make sure that the relevant Minister writes to him regarding the feasibility of that. He has similarly put forward proposals to use the Financial Conduct Authority to stop rogue funeral directors operating and exploiting vulnerable groups. It will be my pleasure to ask my colleagues in the Treasury to write to him regarding the feasibility of such interventions.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important debate forward this evening and for the views expressed by Members across this House as the Government continue to consider our response to the Fuller inquiry, including the issue of regulation. This House has my assurance that we will continue to try to work at pace and cross-departmentally to bring dignity to the deceased.

Question put and agreed to.

9.49 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 27 October 2025

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

Holidays During School Term Time

[*Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 22 July 2025, on school attendance, Session 2024-25, HC 1216.*]

4.30 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700047 relating to holidays during school term time.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I am privileged to open today's debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank not only Natalie Elliott, the creator of the petition, but the 181,598 signatories who have made today's debate possible. I also thank the Petitions Committee team for their work, including the comprehensive programme of engagement they organised in advance of today's debate. I launched my own public consultation on this issue and have received thousands of responses, and I will try to reflect the views of those I have been lucky enough to have interacted with in preparing for the debate.

Let me start by laying out the key frustration of the people who signed the petition. Holidays are expensive, and as we all know their price jumps hugely during typical holiday seasons. Unfortunately, market forces mean that many families simply cannot afford a holiday during school breaks. One parent from Keighley told me that she was quoted £1,000 more per person for a February half-term holiday than for one the following week, meaning an identical family holiday would cost thousands of pounds more simply because it was taken during school holidays. This view was reflected by so many families who feel they are being priced out by what is clearly predatory pricing from holiday companies.

It is worth pausing to seriously consider the value of a holiday. Holidays are not just frivolity; big or small, near or far, they provide a crucial few days for family members to breathe, spend time with one other and fortify themselves against the next 12 months of work and school. That is even more valuable now that many families have two working parents. Holidays are also a vital part of expanding a child's horizons. There is an important sentiment that we should go away from home not just to see how we might improve our wellbeing, but because, when we return, we will be able to cherish all the more those things we find good and familiar.

Holidays can provide educational and vocational experiences that are impossible to replicate in the classroom. Sarah, a parent from Haworth in my constituency, told me that holidays helped her children

"get out of their comfort zone, learn something new and experience new cultures".

Another parent, a dairy farmer from Skipton, said school holidays are the busiest time of the year on their farm, and that term-time breaks are the only opportunity to take time away as a family, reinforcing the balance between work, rest and family life.

It is not unreasonable that families should aspire to an annual family holiday, with all the benefits I just outlined, but parents are rightly concerned that the current system, which allows fines to be used for even a single unauthorised absence and requires that they be considered if a child is absent for five days in any 10-week period, criminalises them for simply wanting time with their children—not to mention the economic cost of the fines themselves. Jack, a young man from Keighley, shared that his single mother was repeatedly threatened with fines and even legal action for absences that they could not afford to avoid. He described the stress that that caused their family as "crushing".

The fundamental challenge is that those on both sides of this debate can claim to have the best interests of a child at heart. Attendance is, of course, important, but so are family time and the educational and recreational benefits of a good holiday. We should not be pursuing attendance for attendance's sake, or pursuing it solely because high attendance might look good in an Ofsted inspection. We need only look at the devastating effects of school closures during covid to see the catastrophic consequences of persistent absenteeism: learning is damaged, safeguarding signs are missed and children miss out on key opportunities to socialise into society. But when we consider just a few days a year for a family holiday for otherwise present children, are we really talking about the same issue? As one teacher who responded to my survey put it:

"Just because a child is physically in the building does not mean they are learning—a child who is burnt out or anxious may gain far more from a few days' respite with family."

It is surely true that the parents paying these fines and objecting to feelings of having broken the law are the same parents who are generally law abiding and value their children being in school. The fines are not successfully tackling the national scandal of persistent absenteeism in the wake of covid, and yet they are wreaking havoc for otherwise well-meaning families. Indeed, 487,300 penalty notices for unauthorised absences were issued in the 2023-24 academic year, an increase of 22% on 398,800 in the previous year.

At local level, many local authorities have attempted to adjust processes to improve attendance, with little to no positive impact. In Bradford, the council has issued 11,565 fixed penalty notices this year alone. Views on the issue are certainly not settled. As a serving headteacher who responded to my survey put it:

"There are only 190 school days per year and a huge amount of learning coverage to get through in the National Curriculum. A child taking 'just' 10 days leave each year of their statutory education would miss a staggering 25 full weeks of their education—that's well over half a year's lost learning time."

On one level, there is the challenge of how we tackle absenteeism effectively without punishing parents seeking to enrich the lives of their children, and on another there is the challenge of ensuring that that does not have an impact on a child's education.

Another hugely important area is children with special educational needs and disabilities. As we know, the SEND system is in crisis, for a whole range of reasons. For many SEND families, a family holiday is one of the key opportunities to decompress from the stress, but the busy holiday period is too much for many SEND children to handle. Natalie was very keen to put that point to me when we had our initial discussions before this debate.

[Robbie Moore]

For some SEND families, off-peak holidays are not a matter of money or convenience; they are a wellbeing requirement for their child. Why should a child struggling with SEND be denied the same access to a holiday as a non-SEND classmate by the threat of fines being issued to their parent? Sophie, the mother of a 10-year-old recently diagnosed with learning difficulties, told me that her daughter

“thrives and comes out of her shell”

when abroad, saying that the trips are about building confidence and life skills. Another parent, who cares for a child with autism, said that the crowded peak periods are simply impossible for their family to manage and that off-peak breaks are often the only realistic option. It is absolutely true that SEND children have some of the biggest challenges with absenteeism from the classroom, but in the grand scheme of things, are the few days of a family holiday for a child who is generally in school the days that schools and local authorities should be going after, or should other matters be considered?

It is clear that the existing model is broken on a purely practical level. For a parent with multiple children in different schools, the situation becomes even more complex. In my outreach, I heard from a number of families about the nightmare of getting permission for one child to be absent, but not getting it for the other. The parents are then left asking themselves whether to call the whole holiday off or take the financial hit. How do they make sure that one child is not blamed by another for the cancellation of their family holiday? The likelihood of getting permission can vary wildly between schools and local authorities. Government guidance has been issued, but it is clearly being treated as just that.

I want to finish with what I hope might be a solution to help us sidestep the issue that we are considering. Parents should not have to feel that they are battling the state to get the best for their child; they should be able to rely on the state to help them. Academies already possess the power to alter their term dates, provided that they meet the minimum requirement for annual teaching time. I know of a number of schools that have successfully used those powers to provide odd weeks within their school year outside term time. That slight change in term dates creates opportunities for many parents and cleanly sidesteps the whole issue, creating off-peak holiday time that is accessible to families who would otherwise feel that they had to take a term-time holiday. I stress that it does not reduce the overall hours of learning that a child undertakes annually; it merely redistributes them throughout the year. What is more, providing a clear, comprehensive week of holiday outside peak times empowers heads to remain strict about term-time holidays that are taken regardless.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The steps that the hon. Member is outlining seem clear and pragmatic. Local children used to take time off school to go to the Great Yorkshire Show. He talked about expanding horizons and the educational and vocational understanding of things. Does he agree that another pragmatic step would be allowing time off school for people to enjoy things like the Great Yorkshire Show?

Robbie Moore: As a fellow Yorkshire MP, I absolutely agree with allowing time out of the classroom for children to go to really good education settings like those provided by agricultural societies and others. That can absolutely be a way of enriching a child's experience and learning outcomes. If a school becomes an academy, the headteacher has the flexibility to make those decisions on behalf of their students. I would advocate for all schools' heads to consider that as part of enriched learning. Critics will be quick to point out that the solution that I have proposed is available only to academies, but I suggest that that is a reason to expand academies and expand the powers of local authority schools, and not to ignore what I believe is a sensible solution to a tricky issue.

I will close with a response that I received from the chair of governors of a local school in Yorkshire, who summed up the fundamental tension well and is against the objective of the petition. It states:

“Schools are challenged enough on attendance and ensuring children get a good education. More disadvantaged children are proportionally more affected by both sides of this argument.

The bigger question should be, what is the government doing to fund schools to allow children to get the broader experiences they are getting on these proposed days off?

How are they supporting education in different cultures, languages and travel?”

I hope that in opening the debate, I have adequately highlighted the pressures on the current, fine-based system and the many exacerbating factors, particularly for families with SEND children. I am sure that colleagues will have their own local stories and cases to share, and I hope that I have set the scene, on both sides of the argument, for a lively debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. Will Members please keep their contributions to five minutes, so that everyone can get in? I the Chair of the Education Committee.

4.43 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I start by recognising the strength of feeling on term-time absences from school, particularly among the almost 182,000 people who signed the petition. Family life is precious, and there are so many pressures bearing down on families that serve to make time spent together relaxing and enjoying one another's company all the more important. Going away on holiday; major family celebrations; religious holidays not currently reflected in our school calendar; caring responsibilities; parental separation—a whole range of circumstances can seem like more important priorities than being in school every single day of the school year, but I will set out three reasons why I do not agree that 10 days of permitted absence a year is the right way to address these concerns.

First, and most importantly, all the evidence indicates that it is in children's best interests to be in school with their peers as much as they possibly can. The link between attendance at school and attainment is strong: the Government's data shows that key stage 2 pupils in year 6 who attended almost every day were 1.3 times more likely to achieve the expected standard in reading,

writing and maths, compared with pupils who attended 90% to 95% of the time. Missing 10 days of school a year reduced the likelihood of achieving the expected standard by 25%.

For key stage 4 pupils in year 11, the situation is even starker. Missing 10 days of school reduces the chance of gaining a grade 5 in English or maths by 50%. That is because education builds from the foundations of a subject upwards. Missing days of education results in gaps in knowledge and understanding, which can affect a child's ability to grasp future concepts properly, meaning that they never fully catch up.

Secondly, a major concern of many petitioners is the excessive cost of holidays outside term time. Holidays are really important, and families should be able to go away. It is absolutely wrong for travel companies to exploit the constraints of families with children of school age by hiking up their prices during the school holidays. The practice is simply unfair—but the solution to the unfair pricing policies of travel companies is not to allow parents to remove their children from school to be able to afford a holiday; it is for travel companies to do the right thing and even out their pricing over the year, so that parents of school-age children are not penalised for doing the right thing and keeping their children in school.

Thirdly, I am concerned about the impact of a change in policy to allow authorised absence for some parents on the attendance of the most vulnerable pupils. We have an attendance crisis in our schools at present; more than 22% of children severely or persistently absent from school. My Committee has been doing some work on school attendance, and we know that persistent and severe absence is a complex problem with a number of contributory factors, including poverty, an increased level of social, emotional and mental health need following the covid-19 pandemic, and the crisis in the SEND system.

School leaders tell us that the pandemic broke the social contract between schools and parents, and that it has often been difficult to repair it. Introducing an entitlement to authorised absence would send entirely the wrong message to families at a time when the whole system should be pulling together to restore trust and confidence and to support children who are struggling to be in school to thrive.

For the most vulnerable children, school is a protective factor. It is where they can get a hot meal—thanks to this Government, they are able to get both a healthy and nutritious breakfast and a hot lunch—can forge positive relationships with trusted adults and can access not only education, but a wider range of enriching extracurricular activities. If we say it is fine for the children of parents who can afford a holiday to skip school for 10 days, what message are we sending about the importance of being in school to the families who may never have the opportunity to go on holiday, but who often encounter significant obstacles in getting their children to school, for a wide range of reasons?

The current challenges of severe and persistent absence demand multiple solutions. Schools must continue to rebuild relationships of trust with parents. The Government's reforms to SEND and to the curriculum and assessment framework must ensure that school is an exciting, inspiring and engaging place for all children

and young people. The child poverty strategy must remove the barriers to school attendance for the poorest pupils.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member's argument, but does she agree that slapping on fines will make the relationship between parents and schools more adversarial, creating more problems than it tries to solve?

Helen Hayes: I have not mentioned fines, but I agree that fining parents is a very flawed area of policy. I do not want to say it is always entirely the wrong thing to do, but fines are not a particularly effective mechanism for discouraging parents from removing their children from school for a holiday. The cost of a fine is almost always cheaper than the additional costs of a holiday outside term time. That is why I said that the solution to the imbalance in costs across term time is not to enable and authorise that absence, but to deal with the exploitative policies of travel companies. Fines, undoubtedly, are an imperfect mechanism.

Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My hon. Friend will recall that we in the Education Committee held an evidence session in July about school attendance. One of the witnesses stated that fines are “simultaneously too harsh and too soft”;

too harsh, because they damage the relationship between parents and schools, but too soft to move the dial substantially on school attendance. Although, as a former teacher, I agree with the main thrust of my hon. Friend's argument, does she have any further reflection on the need to look at the fines system again, to replace it or to come up with something more effective?

Helen Hayes: Fundamentally, we are talking about relationships in this debate, particularly between schools and parents. The best way to build strong relationships is not through punitive measures. We need to properly resource schools, through the wider policy work of Government, to rebuild the relationships that were so damaged by the pandemic, and to make progress in this area.

Finally, I come back to where I started. Family time matters, and family holidays are important periods of fun and restoration. I call on the Government to do more—to work with the travel industry to stop the exploitation of families with school-age children through unfair price hikes, perhaps by introducing a new family-friendly charter mark for companies that even out their pricing throughout the year—and to continue to ease the cost of living pressures that far too many families face, so that every child can thrive both in school and at play.

4.50 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell.

Parents bring their children into this world; they clothe them, feed them, love them, raise them and, yes, educate them. Schools should support families, not to replace them. Yet right now in Britain parents are being fined and threatened simply for taking their children

[*Rupert Lowe*]

out of school for a handful of days to spend meaningful time together as a family. Is that such an awful crime? I think not.

This is a society that treats the state, not the parent, as the ultimate authority. The Government claim that missing five days of school a year will somehow destroy a child's education. Really? If so, we have no confidence in our education system at all. Meanwhile, schools hold teacher training days in term time, or teachers strike and shut classrooms; yet somehow it is parents who are punished when learning is interrupted.

I say they should take the teacher training days in the school holidays—there are certainly plenty of those to choose from. The state must realise that parents are not the enemy. A short term-time family holiday is not an act of neglect; often, it is the only opportunity many families ever get for such an experience, because the travel industry hikes prices to astronomical levels outside term time.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): Would the hon. Member agree that, while price controls are a nice idea in theory, they are a terrible idea in practice? Supply and demand ultimately dictate the price of something so, while it is a nice suggestion, it would not work in real life. Does he agree?

Rupert Lowe: I agree with the hon. Member.

Why should working families be priced out of memories—particularly parents such as those in my Great Yarmouth constituency, who rely so heavily on the tourism trade during the school holidays for their careers or business activity? Parents know what is best for their children far better than a distant bureaucrat sitting in Westminster armed with a spreadsheet. Those are the same bureaucrats who thought it best to lock children away from school for months on end for what equated to a bad cold for the vast majority of them during lockdown. I think I will listen to the parents.

I suggest three basic reforms. Every family should have the right to a small number of authorised term-time absence days each year, at the family's discretion; there should be no fines for responsible parents; headteachers must be empowered to use their own judgment. Let us end the nonsense that Government officials somehow know our children better than we do.

Childhood is short. Parents should not need permission from the state to raise their own children. It is time to return authority to parents and to shrink the reach of this bloated and inefficient state into our family lives. Let us put families back at the top of the agenda, where they used to be.

4.54 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on holidays in school term time. This issue resonates deeply with families across the country, including in my own constituency of Hartlepool, where 530 residents signed the petition we are debating today.

Let us start with the reality that every parent recognises. They search for a family holiday in June and it costs a certain amount; they search for one in August and the

cost has exploded. For many families those price hikes make a break together completely unaffordable. I have taken to calling it the Center Parcs tax. This morning I searched the Center Parcs website for a short break next May. Four nights from 11 May is £599; from 18 May it is £599; but from 25 May it is £1,349—a £750 mark-up for the exact same trip, simply because it falls in half-term. It is cheaper to take the fine.

Of course, it is not just one company; the practice is rife across the entire holiday sector. Families are being priced out of spending time together, and the state's response is to fine them for trying. It is immoral. I say to the Minister, "Ban those practices by holiday companies and end the culture of fines." Parents should not have to choose between doing the right thing by their children's education and giving them a well-earned family break. Families already struggling with the cost of living should not be punished for trying to give their children the same experiences as everyone else.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Could the hon. Member explain how he would stop that practice by the holiday companies?

Mr Brash: There are a number of mechanisms. The Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), offered one solution. I am a believer in price controls in this area and that the state can intervene in the market here; it is basic fairness.

Of course attendance matters. As a former teacher, I have seen at first hand the link between attendance and attainment. Students with 100% attendance are nearly three times more likely to achieve five good GCSEs, including English and maths, compared with those whose attendance drops to 65% to 70%. But let us be honest with parents: the current system is not working. Expecting families to pay fines to prove a point about attendance does nothing to tackle the real problem.

Research shows that fining parents does not improve attendance. There is no statistically significant link between more fines and better attendance rates. Indeed, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report found the same internationally: fines do not work, but they do harm low-income families. Instead, punitive measures often make things worse, creating tension and mistrust between families and schools. We know many children with poor attendance have special educational needs, as has already been mentioned, or anxiety or mental health issues. Punishing their parents does not solve those challenges; it just adds financial and emotional pressure. The Centre for Mental Health has even warned that fines can exacerbate the very issues that keep children away from school.

I am proud that in Hartlepool we are trying to look at things differently. Alongside nine other local areas, we are part of a pilot programme run with the Department for Education and a social enterprise called Etio. I met Etio last week, and what it is doing is simple but powerful. When it comes to attendance, the focus is on support. Its teams sit down with families to understand what is really going on, whether it is anxiety, caring responsibilities, transport programmes or financial hardship, and offer practical help to get children back into the classroom. The results are encouraging. When families feel supported rather than criminalised, attendance improves

and relationships between schools and parents are strengthened. It is just common sense. If we fix the root cause, we fix the problem.

That is the approach we should champion nationally, replacing the blunt instrument of fines with early help, understanding and partnership, because the issue goes far deeper than holiday costs. It is about fairness, common sense and respect for families. Parents should not be treated as offenders for trying to spend time with their children and for giving them a holiday.

4.59 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening this important debate. The strength of feeling behind this petition is clear, with over 1,000 signatures in my constituency alone. It was raised by my constituent, Natalie Elliott, a formidable campaigner and a vital supporter to families facing fines, often in stressful and traumatic circumstances. The petition proposes that families should be permitted to take their children out of school for up to 10 days without facing fines. While I will not pre-empt the Minister's response, recent indications suggest that the Government are unlikely to support this proposal, given their stance that absence is one of the biggest barriers to success. However, despite differing views on the status quo, it is clear to me that both the petitioner and the Government share a common purpose: the wellbeing of our children.

I am a firm believer that a good education is one of the most powerful tools for social mobility. Coming from a working-class background, access to quality state education gave me opportunities that ultimately led me to serve in this House. However, under the current system, families face significant challenges. The national framework for penalty notices is applied inconsistently across England. Research by Confused.com found that Essex issued over 35,000 fines between 2022 and 2024, while Cornwall issued just 535. Even within local authority areas, there is a postcode lottery. Educators have told me that pressure to improve attendance can lead to overly rigid policies. Some schools mandate only four sick days per year, refuse to authorise any Friday absences and demand medical evidence for minor illnesses. That not only contradicts statutory guidance but adds pressure to an already overstretched NHS.

There is sometimes a lack of empathy for family circumstances. My constituent Chris faced court action because the local authority could not find a special school place for his child. Thankfully, the judge agreed that fining a parent because the local authority was not meeting their child's needs was inappropriate, and promptly kicked the case out. I have also heard of fines issued during bereavement. There is no appeals process—just pay the fine or risk criminal conviction. Will the Minister consider an appeals mechanism?

SEND families are particularly affected, and the system in Derbyshire is under immense strain. Children with autism or ADHD often cannot cope with busy holiday periods, yet their families are fined for going away when it is quieter. Those children have a right to family life and legal protections, but too often they are overlooked. If this Government are serious about reducing absenteeism, I urge them to include school attendance in the upcoming SEND White Paper.

I acknowledge the Government's efforts to ease the cost of family life, from expanding free school meals and nursery care, to breakfast clubs and cheaper uniforms. Those are important steps. But when families with the means to send their children to private schools are exempt from penalties, and those who can afford peak-season travel face no deterrent, yet others must choose between incurring a fine or forgoing a family holiday altogether, we are not dealing with a minor inconvenience but confronting a structural inequality. The injustice does not stop at the school gates. Holiday companies continue to exploit demand through dynamic pricing, pushing costs beyond reach for ordinary families. What action will the Government take to tackle this profiteering and ensure that family holidays are not a luxury for the few, but within the reach of all?

5.3 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for securing this debate, and for a remark that he made during his opening speech, which I think we can all thoroughly agree with: everyone in this debate, regardless of view, completely supports having children's welfare at the centre of this. I certainly champion that.

We are not debating the importance of education, because we all thoroughly agree on that. Regardless of our side of the debate, we also agree that some of the statistics relating to children's attainment depending on their attendance records are quite striking. There is clearly a correlation there. But correlation is not necessarily causation. We have heard today that people can be there in body but not in mind. There is definitely a difference between trustworthy, decent parents choosing to take their children out of school at an appropriate time for appropriate reasons, and truancy.

We are debating whether fines are appropriate for holidays. I do not think they are at all appropriate, but I agree with tackling the causes of truancy and supporting families so that children receive an education. I hope everyone believes me when I say I am a firm believer in education. However, it is not appropriate for the Government to fine families who are decent, thorough and good—as we should assume they are in the vast majority of cases—for choosing to take their children out when there are no opportunities for debate with the school, to make exceptions or to let reason speak for itself. It is thoroughly wrong, and we are doing a lot of decent families a disservice.

I am not for letting children and families just do whatever, because I appreciate that, on the other side of this debate, are the teachers who have to manage the additional challenge that that would bring. However, we are humans and this is a human world; ultimately, we should support, not penalise, decent and reasonable people making decent and reasonable decisions for themselves. On that basis, I support the cancelling of fines for parents taking their children out of school.

5.6 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): Like many constituencies across the country, Sherwood Forest sees stark evidence that educational inequalities are deeply

[Michelle Welsh]

entrenched. As someone who worked on the frontline in education, I know beyond any doubt that attendance is vital for achievement. The reality of how our education system works is that every missed school day means a gap in learning. For children already facing disadvantage, that gap can become a chasm.

When a child's family struggles, their education is the best route out of poverty and for the future—I have seen that personally. We must do everything to support their time in the classroom. However, we also stand on the shoulders of the generations who fought for the fundamental right to a break. That is not a new concept; it is woven into our social history. Let us think of the pioneering work of Cadbury, which a century ago revolutionised the idea of the workplace, recognising that employees were entitled to leisure time and a full, well-rounded life. Alternatively, there is the proud tradition of "Nottingham by the sea". For decades, factories and pits across Nottinghamshire would shut down simultaneously for wakes week. Families would flock to Skegness—a collective, essential journey for rest and recuperation. That was not a luxury; it was a societal commitment to the wellbeing of hard-working working-class people and their families.

The rights to a break, to a breath of fresh air and to simply spend time together as a family have long been recognised as an essential component of a healthy, productive society, so how did it become acceptable that companies raise their prices as they have?

Whether for a nostalgic caravan holiday in Skegness or Great Yarmouth, which many of us enjoyed as kids, or a much-needed trip to Spain, why are travel and holiday companies permitted to quadruple their prices the moment the school bell rings? That is not simple economics, but exploitation. It is an outrage and a stain on our society. Hard-working parents who keep our local economy moving are deliberately priced out of a basic, restorative family holiday.

Shockat Adam: In the absence of being able to change the minds of our tour operators, does the hon. Member agree that we may need to look at the whole timetable of our syllabuses and school terms? They date back to Victorian times 150 or 160 years ago. Perhaps we should have a five-term academic year and more frequent two-week breaks.

Michelle Welsh: I absolutely agree, especially as someone who has a five-year old and was trying to balance this during the recess.

Who pays the highest price for this? The children of the families who are already struggling. Those children often live in cramped housing, rely on school for hot meals and desperately need the stimulation, new experiences and simple joy of a family holiday. They are denied the chance to build memories and see the world beyond their postcode, which is vital. I have taken some of the most vulnerable children in the east midlands away on adventure holidays—they have an enormous impact on their education and wellbeing. We cannot stand by while a family's well-deserved rest is treated as a penalty to be charged. A break for a family is not a privilege to be rationed; it is a right that must be protected.

5.10 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) on leading this debate and making many a point that I am about to make and agree with.

I thank those who created and signed the petition, including 357 of my constituents. I have heard from many families who are deeply concerned about the current approach to school attendance and the impact of fines for term-time holidays. Those concerns are especially pressing for those facing challenging circumstances, including financial pressures and limited flexibility in their work schedules, along with those who have children with special educational needs and disabilities, for whom routine, flexibility and emotional wellbeing are often more complex and nuanced.

At the heart of this issue is a tension between two important priorities: ensuring that children benefit from consistent education, and recognising the value of quality time spent together as a family. There is no doubt that regular school attendance is vital. Department for Education research published in March showed a strong correlation between attendance and attainment, with just 10 days' absence in year 6 reducing the likelihood of achieving the expected standard by 25%, as has been mentioned. Persistent absenteeism can lead to gaps in learning, reduced engagement and difficulties reintegrating into the classroom, all of which can have long-term consequences and act as a significant barrier to opportunity.

We must also acknowledge that family time matters. Shared experiences strengthen family bonds, support emotional wellbeing and create lasting memories, which are vital for a child's overall development. Those moments are not just desirable; they are necessary. We also need to consider the needs of individual children, particularly those with SEND, including neurodivergent pupils. Any parent of a neurodivergent child—including myself—will say that busier environments, unfamiliar routines and crowded travel periods can be overwhelming and distressing. For some, taking a holiday during quieter times may be the only way a family can ensure their child feels safe, regulated and able to enjoy the experience. In those cases, flexibility around term-time absence is not just helpful; it is a matter of inclusion and wellbeing.

Being unable to choose when to take time off is another broader but related challenge that many families face. For some constituents who have contacted me—notably, an airline pilot—holiday periods are allocated or restricted by employers, limiting parents' ability to align their leave with school breaks. That lack of flexibility makes it difficult for families to spend meaningful time together, even when school holidays are available.

As we have heard a lot, the most common concern I hear—one that every person here with a child of school age will have experienced—is the inflated cost of holidays during school breaks. Those price hikes make holidays unaffordable for many, meaning that children miss out on valuable experiences, simply because their parents cannot afford to travel during peak times. For parents on lower incomes who decide to take their children on holiday during school term time, the financial challenges they face are often compounded by the imposition of a fine, which many families struggle to afford. That unfairness is exacerbated by a perception of inconsistency. Families

tell me that requests for authorised absence are handled differently from one school to another—in particular, between schools in the state sector and independent schools. That lack of uniformity creates confusion and frustration, and can feel unfair to parents trying to do the right thing.

There is no straightforward answer to any of these challenges, but I have long been an advocate of switching to the five-term school year. That model would offer more evenly distributed holidays throughout the year, reducing pressure on the summer break and giving families greater flexibility. It could also help ease the financial burden by spreading demand more evenly across the calendar, potentially lowering travel costs. For teachers, the benefits of a five-term year are equally compelling. Teaching is a demanding profession, and the current long stretches between holidays can lead to fatigue and burnout. More frequent, shorter breaks would allow teachers to recharge regularly, improving wellbeing and job satisfaction. It would also support better curriculum planning, reduce the pressure of end-of-term assessments and create a more sustainable rhythm for teaching and learning.

It is important to recognise that each family has its own unique circumstances, and there is not a one-size-fits-all rule for when spending time together is appropriate. While I agree that school attendance must remain a priority, we must recognise the realities that families face. A more compassionate, flexible and consistent approach that values both education and family life is not only possible but necessary. By rethinking the structure of the school year and advocating for greater flexibility in the workplace, I believe we can create a system that works better for everyone.

5.15 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) on introducing the petition, and I thank the petitioners themselves. I am also grateful to the 865 people in Stevenage who signed this petition, showing how strongly families feel about the issue.

I will shortly turn to some of the reasons why the petition really matters, but before I do, I must be clear that every day in school counts—and parents agree. In addition to the evidence that we have heard from the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), 78% of parents say that every school day matters, according to the charity Parentkind. The evidence backs them up: missing even a few days can have a big impact. Year 6 pupils with near perfect attendance are 30% more likely to meet expected standards. Secondary pupils with near perfect attendance are almost twice as likely to achieve a grade 5 in English and Maths. Persistently absent pupils could earn £10,000 less by the age of 28.

Normalising the taking of time off in term time would send the wrong message. It would undermine teachers' hard work and risks widening the attainment gap. Every missed day is not just a lost lesson, but a lost opportunity. I am sure that many of the parents who signed this petition would wholeheartedly agree with that, but, as the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley explained at the outset, it is simply the only way they can afford quality family time together.

Just last week, a constituent told me that the only way they can afford a holiday is to take their children out of school one or two days before the end of term, knowing they would not risk a fine but can still take advantage of cheaper prices. If parents have to play the system like that, we know that the system itself is broken. The real problem, which many Members have touched on, is that families are not breaking rules because they do not care; they are simply being priced out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) started with Center Parcs, so let me turn to Center Parcs. Four days at Center Parcs Woburn Forest, near me, in term time is £429. In February half-term, that goes up to £1,449—an increase of 238%. At Center Parcs in Longleat, four days in term time is £579, but in half-term it is £1,599—an increase of 176%.

A British Airways flight from Heathrow to Geneva costs £184 in term time, but in half-term that goes up to £3,072, which is a 1,570% increase—and it is outbound only. In May half-term, a TUI Tenerife package for seven days in term time costs £1,204, and in half-term it costs £2,384—an increase of 98%. A Jet2 flight to Bodrum in term time is £500, but in half-term it is £1,065, which is an increase of 113%. Then there are the summer holidays, which are much longer, but people still get hit. A Ryanair flight from Newcastle to Faro in term time is £140, but in the summer holidays, it is £340—an increase of 143%. With packages in Spain on Go.Compare, seven days in term time is £290 per person, but that goes up to £384 in the school holidays, meaning that a family would pay £760 more.

What can the Government do to stop the travel industry from exploiting families with outrageous price hikes during school holidays? Fines are simply not working. According to Parentkind, 61% of parents say that the risk of a fine makes no difference to them. Families feel trapped between unaffordable prices and rigid rules. Even when they want to play by the rules, they are still penalised. A single mum in Stevenage told me that she had been fined even though it had been her ex-husband who took their child out of school.

Let us not pit education against family time; let us ensure that both are respected and that no parent is forced to choose between their child's education and quality family time together.

5.20 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell.

In Mansfield, 850 people signed this petition because they believe that families deserve some fairness, freedom and a bit of common sense. I believe they also know that a rounded education is about a bit more than attendance and penalty notices. It is also about giving our children experiences, memories and time with their families—the sort of time that helps them to grow, to feel loved and to see the world beyond the classroom.

Let us be honest, for working families in towns such as mine, the idea of a week away in August has become a luxury that very few can afford. When prices triple the moment that schools break up, parents are faced with an impossible choice: break the rules or break the bank. These parents are decent, hard-working people, such as nurses, shop workers, delivery drivers and care assistants. They do everything right. They work all year and pay

[Steve Yemm]

their taxes, and then they are told that they cannot take their kids away for a few days because it is term time. Working people deserve a break and families deserve a choice, and the state should not be micro-managing family life to this extent.

Last week, I put out a social media post asking people for their comments on this issue ahead of our debate. I have had literally thousands of comments, replies and emails from constituents. The response has been completely overwhelming, and here are just a few of the comments. Katie says:

“There’s a cost of living crisis making it difficult to go on holiday during term time as it is more expensive, we are trying our hardest to ensure our children live a happy and fulfilling life and make sure they have many happy memories.”

Lauren says:

“For many of us, especially those of us who are working in the NHS and other key sectors, aligning leave with school holidays is often impossible. Families are left with that heartbreaking choice—miss out on precious time together or face financial penalties.”

Lisa, whose name I have changed, is a foster parent with disabled children who has also been fined. She said:

“Due to the age and disability of our children, we were very limited by when suitable accommodation was available. Our children’s attendance was otherwise excellent - their only absences were for hospital appointments, over which we have absolutely no control, and there are no concerns with their academic attainment.”

Holly, a constituent of mine who is awaiting a fine, wrote to me:

“School and education is a priority for my family, but to make parents feel like criminals is not acceptable. Let’s remember children get one childhood, and life is not always simple, with family illness, death and other issues that occur, not just holidays.”

That is what life looks like for real families in my constituency and across the UK. They are not asking for weeks and weeks off; they are asking for just a few days every year to make family memories without fear of being fined for it.

Of course children need the best possible education—every one of us wants that—but education is not just about exams and attainment. It is also about experience, balance and wellbeing. Right now, I believe that we have got the balance wrong. Let us trust parents a little more. Let us treat them like adults. Let us show a bit of compassion and common sense, because families in Mansfield and right across our country have made it clear to me—and to all of us, I believe—that they want the freedom to decide what is best for their own children.

5.24 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing this debate and setting out the issues, and I thank the more than 181,000 members of the public who signed the petition, 243 of whom are from my constituency.

We know that being in school is the best way for children to reach their potential. Absence from school, especially when persistent—I will come back to that later in my speech—can impact children both academically and socially. Yet for some children, our system is designed in such a way that school itself can impact on their wellbeing. The petition that has brought us here today

focuses specifically on absence due to holidays. It is clear that all Members here agree that downtime with family is important: a chance to rest, to spend time together without all the usual pressures, and just to be. I hope some lucky Members have fond memories of holiday trips to my constituency of South Devon.

Research from the Department for Education that was published earlier this year highlighted that a pupil who attends 95% to 100% of the time is twice as likely to achieve English and Maths grade 5 than a pupil who attends 90% to 95% of the time, and 23 times more likely to do so than a pupil who attends less than half the time. Missing even 10% of school time can influence the grades a child is likely to achieve at GCSE. The default position should be that children attend school every day unless exceptional circumstances prevent it, and we must use all available means to encourage that.

Deterrence through fines plays a role in that, but we are concerned about the current culture of reaching immediately for the fine lever. It has lost its impact, as many parents now factor fines into the cost of any term-time holiday they take, entrenching the divide between those who can afford it and those who cannot. Instead of using blanket fines, we would seek to reduce the pressure on local authorities and schools to issue fines for absence, and we would instead encourage a collaborative approach between schools and parents that builds trust and puts the child’s wider interests at the centre. That is key during times such as family illness or bereavement, as other Members have said.

Holidays allow children to learn beyond the classroom and discover new passions, abilities and interests through new experiences and simply being in a different environment. For many families, organising a holiday when schools are closed is not a problem. However, for others, a holiday outside term time is simply not affordable. They cannot pay the enormously hiked holiday prices during high-demand periods. One of my constituents wrote to me that he had to pay £3,000 more to take his grandchildren away during the school holidays than during term time. These extortionate price hikes mean that families cannot afford to go away outside term time, and that unfairly robs children—mainly the children who would benefit most—of new and enriching experiences.

Parents, carers and grandparents should not have to choose between shelling out thousands of pounds on the additional costs of a holiday outside term time and paying a fine. Instead, airlines and travel operators should stop taking advantage of families. Nearly doubling, or more, the price of the same holiday package from one day to the next is exploitative and completely out of line with any surge in demand, as the hon. Members for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) and for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) so perfectly illustrated. However, the question of when people can afford to go on holiday is indicative of the wider issue that school absence is closely tied to a family’s financial situation. In the 2024-25 school year, the absence rate for those who were eligible for free school meals was 10.3%. Those who were not eligible were absent nearly half as much, at 5.2%.

The Liberal Democrats are pleased that the Government have recognised that and are taking steps to resolve it. The roll-out of free breakfast clubs to every state primary school in England and the adoption of the much-loved Liberal Democrat policy of extending free school meal eligibility to children in England whose families claim

universal credit will help to address persistent absence. The Government's provision of those meals and the new breakfast clubs indicate that they acknowledge the correlation between a family's finances and a child's attendance. However, I ask the Minister what the Government have done to investigate and relieve holiday-related financial burdens for the children and families that need it most.

Aside from the financial concerns, we should acknowledge that term dates are decided in part by schools, which could therefore be encouraged to organise those dates so that the largest number of families in their communities can benefit from school holidays. For example, some schools might want to shorten the Christmas holiday so that they can offer other holidays for other religious festivals. That would mean that members of other communities would not face fines if they wanted to celebrate together as a family. Being flexible with inset and training days can also enable parents to spend time with children outside school at cheaper times of the year. In areas such as mine, more flexibility would enable families that run tourism and hospitality businesses to have a holiday, which they cannot take in peak seasons.

I turn to the more worrying situation with persistent absences. Since the pandemic, absence from school has become a national crisis, which does significant damage to children's development and impacts their life chances. The general absence rate in the last academic year was still 2% higher than the rates recorded during the six years before the pandemic, and persistent absence—defined as missing 10% of lessons or more in a year—remained well above the pre-pandemic rate of 10.5%, at a worrying 17.6% in the last academic year.

In many cases, holidays and recreation are not the main reason for parents taking their children out of school; rather, children are forced out of the system by factors outside their control. We see persistent absence from pupils with SEND, young carers and those with mental health conditions. The situation with children with SEND is well illustrated in my constituency: across Devon, the rates of school absence for those with SEND support and those with education, health and care plans have nearly doubled, from 6% and 7.5% respectively in 2016-17 to 11.2% and 13.75% in the last academic year. Nationally, more than 72,000 children with SEND missed half their lessons in the last academic school year—an increase of nearly 9,000, compared with the previous year. That is a direct consequence of inadequate SEND provision and EHCP funding. After years of neglect under the Conservative Government, the system is failing to deliver the outcome that SEND children deserve, pushing them out of school.

We must address the underlying causes of absence constructively, not punitively. No parent should be fined if their child is unable to attend school because of inadequate SEND provision, and no child should be punished for being late because they have the responsibility of caring for a loved one at home. The Liberal Democrats have long called for measures that will help to encourage all those children back into the classroom, including having a qualified mental health professional in every primary and secondary school, and giving local authorities extra funding to reduce the amount that schools have to pay towards the cost of EHCPs.

The central point is that we must first understand why a child is not attending school, whether it is the unaffordability of holidays outside term time, SEND, young caring responsibilities, religious holidays, bereavement or other factors. That understanding must be the starting point before any further action is taken. The solution to this petition and to school absence more generally is not to compel children to attend school with the threat of punishment, but to ensure that they are genuinely able to attend. We should not force them to learn, but enable them, whether by tackling the exploitative pricing structures of travel companies and airlines or removing structural barriers to regular attendance for SEND children, disadvantaged students and carers. We must think in a much bigger way about how to tackle these issues. Fining parents should be a last resort, and should be only one of a suite of options for local authorities and schools to work with parents and encourage the best attendance possible for all our children.

5.33 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell, and to take part in this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his opening remarks on this important topic. He spoke eloquently on behalf of the 181,000 signatories of this petition, including the 208 in Meriden and Solihull East. He rightly pointed out that holidays are valuable: they provide not just rest and relaxation but the opportunity to experience new cultures and expand one's horizons. A number of Members made similar remarks, so holidays are clearly important.

Although I do not advocate price controls—I believe in the value of the market—I thought that the remarks of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about the family friendly charter were interesting. I hope that companies such as Jet2 and Center Parcs are listening to this debate and thinking about how they can be more family friendly.

School is vital for every child. It equips young people with the knowledge they need to go into the world of work, whatever it may be, and contribute to society. It also plays a pivotal role in teaching young people to socialise, form relationships, take personal responsibility for their actions and behave appropriately. Put simply, school is not just about getting good grades; it is there to prepare us for life. Every single school day missed is a lesson not learned, whether that is an academic lesson or a lesson about life itself.

Across the House, we want our constituents to be able to send their children to the very best schools. I firmly believe that part of that is about ensuring that headteachers create an environment where all children are keen to get into a classroom to learn. We can, however, be in no doubt that our education system is facing a major challenge in school attendance. Although it is welcome news that the overall absence rate has fallen slightly for the most recent academic year for which there is data, absence rates remain uncomfortably high compared with pre-pandemic levels. All of us in the House have an obligation to help reverse that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley rightly pointed out, we have only to look at the catastrophic effects of school closures during the covid-19 pandemic to see the consequences of persistent absenteeism.

[Saqib Bhatti]

The current picture of absenteeism in schools is certainly challenging. In England, the overall absence rate fell to an estimated 6.9% in 2024-25, down from 7.1% in 2023-24, although still above the pre-covid rate of 4.7%. Data for persistent absence also shows a downward trend, but remains high at 18.7% in 2024-25, compared with 21.2% in 2022-23. Any child who is persistently absent from school is one child too many, losing out on vital hours in the classroom that they cannot get back. It is in that context that we must address the petition, which seeks to allow parents to take their children out of school. Even more worrying than just those headline statistics is the fact that an increasing number of people now seem to believe that it does not matter if a child is absent from school. That is not all parents, but certainly some. The impression that time spent in the classroom does not equip students for their future stands in clear contrast to the wealth of evidence that shows that children who are absent from school experience worse outcomes later in life.

As the Department for Education's research on the link between attendance and attainment has shown, pupils who missed only 10 days of school in year 6, which the petition wants to allow, were 25% less likely to meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared with those who attended school nearly every day. At GCSE level, that trend is even more dramatic, with pupils who missed only 10 days of school in year 11 being 50% less likely to achieve a grade 5 in Maths and English than those who attended school nearly every day.

Those trends show just how damaging even marginally lower rates of school attendance can be for pupils. It should serve as a stark warning to those who would dismiss being absent from school for a few days as no major problem. It is not just grades that suffer as a result, either; children who start to fall behind in school find it difficult to make up for that lost time and catch up with what other pupils have already learned, only worsening a problem that starts with just a few days of being out of school. With that in mind, can the Minister provide an update on what the Government are doing to reverse the trend of school absences?

Attending school irregularly can lead to lower earnings later in life, a higher chance of unemployment and, in the most extreme circumstances, persistent offending in adulthood. That is why it must always be a problem when children are not in school when they need to be, no matter how innocent a few days off may seem. It is important that we make clear that persistent absence is not acceptable. We cannot create a world where absence is deemed as the norm, because that will likely lead to young people seeing it as acceptable in the workplace. Not only will it harm a young person's job prospects; it will lead to lower productivity, which harms our economy. Does the Minister therefore have any data that highlights the link between persistent absence and the nearly 1 million young people who are not in employment or education?

Wanting to work from home with the children or go on holiday may appear to be far less serious reasons for absence from school than social issues, but any day missed has the same effect on children: to deny them the education that leads to success later in life. There will, of course, always be instances where allowances need to

be made for children to be absent from school, particularly when bereavement is involved. I have had to deal with that as a constituency Member of Parliament, but headteachers already have discretion to grant leave in exceptional circumstances such as those. Both schools and the Government must always be clear that some issues cannot be deemed as an acceptable circumstance, and the headteacher should have the discretion to decide that. Although some fines for unauthorised absences may seem harsh, it is even harsher to deny families the truth about the effects of taking children out of school and setting their children up for failure later in life. Does the Minister have any evidence on whether fines work to improve absence rates?

Getting a grip on the problem of school attendance and returning rates to pre-pandemic levels require a concerted effort across the Government, schools and wider society, and I am proud of the work that the previous Government did to help achieve that important ambition. The previous Government recognised that improving attendance is essential for a variety of reasons, and that, for this to happen, we must ensure that school is somewhere every child wants to be, so they can feel safe and ready to learn in an orderly, calm and supportive environment.

The previous Government instigated a major national drive to improve school attendance through attendance hubs. Thanks to the Conservatives, there were 18 new attendance hubs across six regions, bringing the total to 32 and helping nearly 2,000 schools to tackle persistent absence. That included investment of up to £15 million over three years—providing direct, intensive support to more than 10,000 persistent and severely absent pupils and their families. There were 380,000 fewer pupils who were persistently absent or not attending school in '22-23 than there were in '21-22.

We were committed to working closely with schools and local authorities to drive up attendance rates, and we had a six-point plan to deal with some of the problems. That included requiring schools to have an attendance policy, appointing attendance champions and expecting local authorities to hold termly meetings with schools to agree individual plans for at-risk children. In addition, we attempted to tighten legislation, through the Schools Bill, to put pressure on local authorities to improve school attendance, requiring all schools to have attendance policies and extending the Secretary of State's powers to intervene. What consideration has the Minister given to reviving some of those policies to help bring down absence? Labour said that persistent absence is the first barrier it will seek to break, so can the Minister update us on the progress on that and how it is being measured?

The previous Government also made schools share attendance data to help to combat low attendance, including a national framework for parental fines. Statutory guidance from the Department for Education ensured that improving education was everybody's business, breaking down barriers to accessing education. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which has been heavily criticised by Opposition Members, contains a duty on local authorities to maintain registers of children who are not in school, as well as a duty on parents to provide certain information on those registered. Will the Minister update the House on the Bill's progress and on when we can expect to see the consultation on the register?

We cannot allow a culture of school absence to become acceptable, and Members across the Chamber, as well as people outside Parliament, have spoken about a number of ideas for dealing with the problem of persistent absence from school. Wider debate on this issue is obviously necessary. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

5.43 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould):

It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his thoughtful and nuanced introduction to the debate. It was brilliant to hear that he consulted a whole range of parents, headteachers and others. He set us up for what has been a very thoughtful discussion, with views from Members on all sides of the debate.

We have heard how passionately people feel about the importance of holidays to families. Many families, for a variety of reasons, wish to avoid busier and more expensive periods. I thank Natalie Elliott for her work on raising these issues and for ensuring that they could be debated here. A number of young people have joined us in the Public Gallery—during their half-term—and I commend them for being part of the discussion.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the blame should sit not with hard-working parents who just want affordable family time, or with school leaders who want pupils not to miss out on education, but with the predatory travel companies we have heard about, which jack up their prices when term time is finished?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point and all hon. Members who have done copious research on the various travel companies and prices at different times. I hope that those companies watch the debate and hear the strength of feeling. The Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), made a suggestion that I welcome and will explore further, because it is important that they hear about the impact on many families.

We have heard about not only the importance of family life, but how critical school attendance is for children and young people. Sadly, we still face an absence epidemic in this country. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), has been collegiate today, so I will point out only gently that had the Conservative Government listened to their education recovery commissioner and invested what was needed to support children post covid, we might not be in such a perilous position, with one in five children persistently absent, missing the equivalent of a day each fortnight.

We are committed to tackling the problem. As we have heard from many, absence is one of the biggest barriers to opportunity, damaging learning, health and wellbeing, future earnings and employment. Each day of lost learning can do serious harm. That is why we will not allow pupils to miss 10 days of school without good reason. However, that does not mean that we are not committed to working alongside families. This Government introduced the national framework for penalty notices, which defines a “support first” approach, working alongside families.

The shadow Minister asked what the Government have done to reduce absence. Thanks to hard work and partnership, there has been progress: more than 5 million more days were spent in school last year than the year before. That is the biggest improvement in a decade, but we remain a long way off pre-pandemic levels of attendance.

If children are not in school, it does not matter how effective or well supported teaching and learning are; they will not benefit. We are working hard to ensure that school is the best place to be for every child. We heard about some of the interventions on the cost of living crisis, free breakfast clubs, the extension of free school meals and the 30 hours of free childcare, which have made a meaningful difference for families. We are also supporting better mental health through access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, and inclusion for children with special educational needs and disabilities within mainstream settings right across age ranges.

We want to continue to work with families of children with special educational needs. We heard about how those families face some of the biggest issues with persistent absence and about how important that partnership is. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) and her constituent, whose petition led to this debate, to talk about that in more detail, given the importance of hearing from families as we think about support for young people with SEND.

I have to admit to being somewhat surprised to hear the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) championing the views of parents. I had wondered whether he agreed with the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) that SEND provision is “being hijacked by...parents who are abusing the system, taking it for a ride.”

I wholeheartedly disagree with that and want to work with parents.

Linsey Farnsworth: On that point, is the Minister also concerned about local authorities such as Derbyshire county council, whose leader is parroting the sentiments of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) about “overdiagnosis” of SEND? All the families in my constituency that face SEND issues are at their wits’ end trying to get the support that they need, against the backdrop of a council that, on the face of it, does not believe in their plight.

Georgia Gould: I am very concerned by that. I welcome the fact that so many more young people are being diagnosed and getting their needs met. In previous generations, they might never have received that support. I am very concerned about that language.

I also want to echo the points that have been made across the Chamber about the strength of the evidence on attendance. Recent research shows that just an extra 10 days out of school halves a pupil’s chance of getting a grade 5 in English and maths, compared with a similar child with strong attendance. We have also seen research showing that children who are persistently absent during their GCSEs earn £10,000 a year less by the age of 28. Based on the most recent census data, a child who misses 10 days of school each year for a two-week holiday, and also has the average number of days off for sickness and medical appointments, will have missed

[Georgia Gould]

the equivalent of a full year of school by the time they finish year 11 at age 16. That is worth repeating: a child who takes a fortnight's term-time holiday each year, and also has the average number of days off due to illness, will miss a full school year over the course of their education. We should be very concerned about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley also made a point about consistency of application. The national framework is designed to improve consistency. I hope that new data in January will tell us about our progress in removing the postcode lottery. In the year prior to the introduction of the framework, 26 out of 153 local authorities accounted for half of all penalty notices issued. Our work is intended to reduce that inconsistency.

There were a range of questions about flexibility in term time. Schools and local authorities have flexibility to plan term dates and to hold inset days and other occasional days at less busy times of the year, which can help families plan breaks at times that suit them. I know, for example, of councils that have trialled a two-week half-term in October or slightly shifted their summer holidays. Those flexibilities exist at the moment.

We also heard of concerns about the ability of young people with special educational needs to travel at busy periods. I am aware of steps taken by the travel industry to improve their experience, with airports and airlines increasing their autism awareness and producing procedures for affected families. That is an important area to explore further.

I thank all Members for their contributions, and I hope we can continue this conversation. I acknowledge the strength of feeling expressed during the debate. The Government are determined to support children to attend school. As we heard, lack of attendance is one of

the biggest barriers to supporting children to achieve and thrive, and it particularly impacts those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will continue to work with parents, teachers, schools and local authorities to raise attendance levels and support opportunity.

5.52 pm

Robbie Moore: On behalf of Natalie Elliott, the lead petitioner, I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate and the 181,000 people who signed the petition that led to it. It is clear that we all agree that good quality education is vital, but so too is family time. Good quality family time can be enriching, holistic and deeply important to a child's wellbeing and learning experiences.

It is clear that many decent, hard-working families are being penalised by the state through a system that has been widely recognised, including in many contributions to the debate, as ineffective. It simply relies on penalties imposed on incredibly hard-working parents. The system is not fit for purpose. I therefore advocate for the Government to look at how it can be adapted and to recognise, as contributors to the debate have, that SEND children are particularly impacted by the current system.

Let me say finally that academies have flexibility in setting their term dates. I advocate for the Government to consider how academies can be empowered to use the powers they already have, and how local authority schools can use those flexibilities too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 700047 relating to holidays during school term time.

5.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Statutory Maternity and Paternity Pay

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 715292 relating to statutory maternity and paternity pay.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and a privilege to open this very busy debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Calling for statutory maternity and paternity pay to match the national living wage, the petition before us has attracted a great deal of public support from families who want Parliament to look again at how we help parents in the first months of their child's life. I thank the creator of the petition, Grace Carter, and the thousands who signed it for prompting this important discussion.

The petition highlights a simple contrast that many parents experience. The national living wage is meant to ensure a basic standard of living for workers but, during maternity or paternity leave, state support falls well below that level. At present, statutory maternity pay after the first six weeks equates to just £4.99 an hour, compared with the national living wage of £12.21—55% lower than the income that the law defines as the minimum required to live on. It is hard to justify there being a minimum income for work but not for caring for newborns, and families really feel that gap in their pocket.

In response to the petition, the Government have stated that statutory payments are designed to provide “a measure of...security” rather than a full wage.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): A shocking 37% of children and young people in Greater Manchester live in poverty, yet maternity pay remains far below basic living standards, as my hon. Friend just said. Does he agree that raising statutory maternity pay to a liveable wage would help to tackle the crisis of child poverty in the UK and give children a better start in life?

Jacob Collier: I agree, and those are some of the themes that I will come on to. We know, from parents such as Grace and from the stories that we will hear throughout today's debate, that the current system leaves huge gaps and does not support families or children in the way it should.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My constituents Stacy, Caitlin, Julia and Alison maintain that the current rates of maternity and paternity pay are woefully inadequate. One advised me that they delayed having children until they were financially secure, and it is unlikely that they will consider having a second child. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that, while introducing parental leave as a day one right is a welcome first step, the review of parental leave should include a significant rise in the rates of statutory pay to at least the level of the national living wage, and six weeks for dads on 100% pay? Current pay is far below basic living standards, and families in my constituency cannot afford leave.

Jacob Collier: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituents. Many of the issues that he notes will come out in the debate today. He is right to say that the Government have begun the first ever full review of parental leave and pay, which is a serious and welcome step.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for leading this debate. Many of my constituents, including Helen, Lauren, Laura and Kayleigh, have written to me, and Helen asked me to raise this point in particular. When she went on maternity leave, she needed support from her partner. One in four women has a caesarean birth, and the physical recovery can often take six weeks, yet their partner must return to work after only two weeks' paternity pay. That is why we need the wide-ranging review. It is heartbreaking for mothers and fathers, who are left in a difficult position, with mothers sometimes unable even to lift and carry their young child.

Jacob Collier: I know that that is the experience of many parents, and I am sure that the Government will look at it as part of the review that they are undertaking.

Under the current arrangements, a mother or primary adopter can receive maternity pay for up to 39 weeks. For the first six weeks, that pay is 90% of average weekly earnings. For the following 33 weeks, it falls to a flat statutory rate, or 90% of earnings—whichever is lower. Statutory paternity pay lasts for two weeks at the same flat rate.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The current support for multiple birth families is inadequate. Samantha from Wincanton is a mother of twins, and after giving birth she received the same statutory maternity pay as a parent of one child, despite having to pay double for the cost of essential childcare equipment and so on. Does the hon. Member agree that there should be financial equality for parents of twins and that the Government's forthcoming parental leave review must address that disparity?

Jacob Collier: The hon. Lady has highlighted an area that needs to be addressed.

One of the starkest, most glaring inequalities in the system is that dads who are self-employed or freelance are not eligible for anything. That is something that the Government should look at.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): Another glaring missing piece is that, as well as supporting mothers and fathers, it is important that we support those who suffer the tragic loss of a baby. Will my hon. Friend therefore join me in welcoming our Government's commitment to introduce a right for workers, including those who experience pregnancy loss before 24 weeks, to take time away from work to grieve?

Jacob Collier: Yes, absolutely. My hon. Friend is a real champion of his constituents, and I too welcome the Government's commitment.

Shared parental leave was designed to bring flexibility, but in practice very few families can afford to take it at the current levels. The House of Commons Library notes that only 5% of eligible fathers take it up, with most saying that they cannot afford it. The United Kingdom offers one of the longest periods of maternity

[Jacob Collier]

leave in the developed world, yet one of the lowest payment rates. The outcome is predictable: mothers often return to work earlier than they would like, fathers and partners take little to no time off and the unequal division of care that begins at birth shapes the patterns of earnings and progression for the years afterwards.

Recent research by the University of Bath and its partners, Working Families and the Fatherhood Institute, tested the impact of a more generous and flexible leave offer for fathers and modelled what would happen if paternity leave were extended from two to six weeks, to be taken flexibly within the first year and paid at a meaningful rate. The findings were striking. Better pay produced much higher take-up by fathers, improved wellbeing for both parents, maintained a closer connection of women to the workforce and lowered staff turnover for employers. When only jobs and earnings were considered, the policy still brought a net gain to the economy; when wellbeing and family outcomes were added, those benefits rose sharply. In every scenario, families and employers were better off when parental leave was properly paid.

Those are not just numbers. They mean families spending real time together, children getting a better start and businesses keeping valued staff. The evidence is clear: when leave is paid at a level parents can afford, everyone benefits.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I have been contacted by a number of constituents concerned about the requirement to have worked continuously with the same employer to qualify for statutory maternity pay. Women who change jobs shortly before pregnancy are excluded from statutory maternity pay. They miss out on the six weeks at 90% of average weekly earnings and instead receive a lower maternity allowance. That creates a financial strain, forcing people to return to work early and harming the wellbeing of mothers and children. Does my hon. Friend agree that that issue must be addressed and that we need to provide fair support for all working mothers?

Jacob Collier: I agree. The day one rights that the Government will introduce will be helpful in the context that my hon. Friend sets out. Ministers have rightly said that they want to remove the barriers that discourage people from having the children that they would like to, and parental leave and pay are at the centre of that effort. If families feel that taking leave means that they cannot get by, they will delay decisions. We know that the support needs to be in place so that they can make those choices freely. Changing the system is therefore about supporting families and maternal health and sustaining a strong economy that is built on fairness and security.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This is a valuable and important debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as well as having new policies, we have to know that they are being implemented properly and fairly, and that therefore it will be necessary to require large employers to publish their policies and data in the same way that they have for gender pay? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Jacob Collier: The hon. Member can hear from the Chamber that there is support for that position. I am sure the Minister has heard that.

Trade unions have welcomed the Government's review—I declare an interest here, as a proud Unison and GMB member. The GMB says that it is pleased that the Government are listening, and calls for 12 months' maternity pay, stronger protection against discrimination and fairer rights for fathers and partners, including six weeks' paternity leave on equal pay. The union's model parental leave agreement also advocates paid emergency bereavement leave and carer's leave, recognising that decent parental pay and leave boosts retention and wellbeing. The Trades Union Congress, representing over 5 million workers, warns that the current system entrenches inequality by excluding many women, the self-employed and those in insecure work.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): My hon. Friend knows that under the current system far fewer dads take parental leave, which worsens the gender pay gap. In the five years after becoming mothers, many workers lose up to £65,000-worth of earnings. It is clear that better paid, longer and more usable partner leave is beneficial for all families. Does he agree that in their review, the Government should look at examples such as Spain, with its 16 weeks at 100% pay, to see what progress Britain could make?

Jacob Collier: I do agree. I think the Government will look at those international comparisons and where Britain is in the league tables.

The TUC seeks day one rights, individual entitlements to paid leave and higher pay rates so that all families can benefit, including single kinship, adoptive and surrogate parents and those in atypical roles.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that the Government's ongoing review into parental leave is a cracking opportunity for them to fill a gap that currently exists for those who are self-employed and seeking to grow their family by adoption? Currently they are not entitled to maternity allowance or maternity or paternity pay. Does he agree that that would be a very good thing to come out of the parental leave review?

Jacob Collier: Yes; the hon. Lady highlights a stark inequality that the Government need to address.

Behind every statistic is a story. The recent campaign by Pregnant Then Screwed gathered testimony from families across the UK who face the brutal consequences of the current, inadequate system. Laura from the west midlands had to return to work just 11 weeks after giving birth because she could not afford the mortgage repayments on her low maternity pay. She said that she had been

"overwhelmed with guilt over the limited bonding time"

that she had had in those early months due to returning to work, and it had greatly impacted her mental health.

Izzy from Chester, recovering from an emergency caesarean section, was left alone in pain, unable to feed herself and her baby. Her wound later ruptured and became infected. She believes that that would not have happened if her husband had been at home longer.

Neya from London told us about the aftermath of her traumatic birth and its impact. She slept on the floor for weeks and was unable to function. She said that she could barely think about how she would have coped if her husband had not been around. Another parent, who wanted to remain anonymous, shared a reflection that captures the long-term cost of the current system:

“I’m struggling to see how we can possibly have a second child because of all of this. I’m very happy, grateful and content with one but it feels like the choice is starting to be taken out of our hands.”

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that kinship carers, people who adopt children and foster carers should be included in any review? We can give those people—the heroes of our communities—as much time off as we want, but they need some financial stability during that period, and the £4.99 that he mentioned before quite simply is not enough.

Jacob Collier: I agree, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a long-time campaigner on these issues. I know that that is something that the Government have heard him say and will continue to hear him say.

We know there are huge costs involved. A nursery place for an older child at this time can cost up to £1,200 a month for three days a week, while the average mortgage is between £800 and £1,000 a month. Add in household bills, food bills and transport costs, and it becomes painfully clear how impossible it is to survive on the statutory maternity pay of £4.99 an hour.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): My hon. Friend has articulately laid out the reasons to reform the current system. Does he agree that the best way to do that would be for the Government to deliver the new deal for working people in full, including reforming parental leave? Families deserve fair pay and a real choice to care for their children, without financial strain.

Jacob Collier: I do agree, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in this area. Every change must be responsible with public money and it must be manageable for employers. The evidence suggests that that can be achieved. Changes can be phased in over time, so that payroll systems and budgets can adjust.

However, it is crucial that the cost of this reform is not simply passed on to employers, who are already facing rising costs. As the petitioner has argued, this change should be about Government investment, recognising the economic and social value of supporting families, just as we do with other forms of social security.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case for boosting maternity and paternity pay. Does he agree that if we are to give meaningful choice to families about whether they would like to spend more time at home in the early months of a child’s life—shown to have real developmental benefits for children—or go back into the workplace, we must address the fact that, as he has set out so clearly, maternity pay, paternity pay and shared parental leave pay is less than half the minimum wage? It is not excessive, as the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), has previously stated.

Jacob Collier: I agree. It is quite stark that lots of parties are represented here today, but apart from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), there is not one Member of the official Opposition here.

Ultimately, this issue is about the country that we choose to be. The first months of a child’s life are not a private indulgence; they are a public good. When parents are able to be present, children flourish, mothers recover, fathers bond and families become the firm foundation of a stronger, healthier society. When that support is absent, we all pay the price—not immediately, but inevitably. This issue is not merely a question of fairness; it is a matter of foresight and basic national good.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I am not quite sure how to contribute to this debate: I am married to a doctor who is an obstetrician and gynaecologist; I am a triplet; and I have an 18-month-old daughter, who was born just three weeks before the general election was called last year. I am never sure which way to pivot. I want to make the macro argument, which is that our birth rate as a country is between 1.41 and 1.56, depending on what is being looked at. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a pure and very simple economic argument to making sure that our country is growing its population from the grass roots? If we fail to do that, the cost in the long run will be considerable.

Jacob Collier: Absolutely. I know that my hon. Friend has a lot of experience in his own family to bring to this debate, and I wonder if his daughter is watching it. A parental leave system that works for every family, for employers and freelancers, and for single parents and kinship carers alike is not a cost to be endured but an investment in our shared future. It is in that spirit that I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate tonight.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. It is a very popular debate, for good reasons. I will impose an informal time limit of two minutes per speaker. I intend to call the Front Benchers at 6.58 pm, so you can make the calculations yourselves. As we get further into the debate, we will see how much time there is left at the end, to be fair to colleagues. Please keep any interventions as short as possible.

6.19 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse, and I congratulate the Petitions Committee and all the petitioners on bringing this issue forward for debate.

I will home in on the specific issue of self-employed adopters. There is real inequality built into the system, where self-employed adopters are not able to access the pay or even the allowances that parents can. When someone takes a new child into their home through adoption, there are significant challenges, and it is important that they can build stability, attachment and security for that child. But without the resources to do that, many adopters have made the positive choice not to adopt a second child, and others in the process are not able to embark further on the journey. That is denying children access to a family, when we have so

[*Rachael Maskell*]

many children—over 80,000—in care at the moment. It is absolutely vital that we change the system to ensure that we give those parents, at least, equivalent and sufficient adoption pay.

Therefore, I ask that the Government engage with and listen to the work done on this issue by organisations such as Adoption UK and Home for Good. They have identified that although there are voluntary arrangements at the moment, they are simply not working, and we need statutory arrangements for adopters. Only 10% of adopters had their social workers tell them about the voluntary arrangements to access resources from a local authority, which are given on a discretionary basis. In fact, we found that 34% of local authorities did not even have a policy for how they would give that pay to adoptive parents. It is not for local authorities; we need statutory provision in place, and I trust that the Minister will take on that cause.

6.21 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. When a child is born the world changes, not just for the parents but for the child, whose entire development begins right there in those first precious moments. The period from conception to age two—what we call the first 1,001 days—is the most critical window for brain development and emotional security. That profound scientific truth forms the ultimate moral argument for generous, equitable maternity and paternity pay. This is not a conversation about employment benefits; it is a conversation about human development and our country's future.

The foundation for a child's future health, wellbeing and capacity to learn is laid down in those first 1,001 days, and the very first days and weeks are perhaps the most vital. Why? Because that is the time when the baby's brain makes billions of connections, shaped by their environment. The primary input they need is secure attachment, which comes from a loving, available and responsive parent. Let me be clear: as many in this room will know, those first few days, weeks and months are hard. I am fed up with mothers being treated as second-class citizens.

For the mother, maternity pay is crucial for physical and mental recovery from childbirth, to allow for uninterrupted bonding and to establish feeding routines, which are the cornerstones of that secure attachment. It ensures that exhaustion and financial anxiety do not hijack this delicate foundational relationship. For the father or non-birthing parent, that early time is just as essential. Their presence facilitates critical family adjustment, supports the birthing parent's recovery and enables their own essential bonding—a key factor in reducing post-natal depression for both parents.

When parental pay is too low, parents are forced back to work too early. They are forced to prioritise their pay over their child's neurological and emotional development. Historically, our policies have had a clear gender bias. Maternity pay, perhaps somewhat improving, still often sees the mother bear the financial penalty of taking long leave. Paternity pay, however, is also often a token gesture—a week or two at statutory minimum—sending

a damaging message that the role of the father or birthing partner is secondary. The moral failure has consequences; it perpetuates gender inequality, penalises the mother's career, entrenches her as the default primary carer and contributes directly to the gender pay gap. It limits the father's role—it effectively blocks fathers who wish to be highly involved from the start, hindering their bond with the child.

The moral solution is equal, well-paid, non-transferable parental leave for both parents. We must elevate the financial value of the mother's or father's presence from a mere detriment to an essential contribution, thereby normalising co-parenting and supporting the mother. Parental pay is not a cost to the economy; it is a strategic investment in our human capital. When we support parents during that first 1,001 days, we are investing in our public health. Secure attachment leads to improved mental health outcomes for both parents and children, reducing the long-term strain on healthcare and social services. A stronger workforce in which parents feel supported would mean that they return to work more focused, loyal and productive. Generous parental leave is a key tool for talent attraction and retention.

6.25 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I commend the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for his eloquent and emotionally intelligent speech. Just over a year ago, the campaign group The Dad Shift came to the Parliament. I was grilled by teachers and students from Europa School in my Oxfordshire constituency about my support for better paternity leave and pay. They told me that, at two weeks off at less than half the minimum wage, the UK is among the worst in Europe for provision. That is unacceptable, so it is welcome that the Government's parental leave and pay review's objectives include ensuring

“sufficient resources and time away from work to support new and expectant parents' wellbeing”

and supporting

“parents to make balanced childcare choices that work for their family”.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I have heard from many parents in the South Cotswolds whose recent experiences do not fit neatly into the Government's model of pregnancy. Whether it is having twins, post-natal depression or managing debt, every family's situation is different. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's current system lacks the flexibility to accommodate these different circumstances, and that that needs to be addressed in the review?

Olly Glover: My hon. Friend makes the very liberal point that we should always remember that everyone's individual and family circumstances are different; it is important that the British state recognises that individuality, rather than expecting everyone to fit on a convenient spreadsheet.

To make some of the needed improvements, both the rate at which paternity pay is paid and the length of leave must be addressed. Currently, fathers and non-birthing parents are not supported to take time off from work because they cannot afford to do so. A large number of constituents have written to me on this topic. I am sure

that many more, who have not had the time to consider writing to me, are also deeply affected by this, as shown by the large number of signatories to the petition that has triggered this debate.

Let me repeat some of the points made to me by my constituents. The low rate of statutory pay for both parents has huge financial implications for new parents, especially those in single-income households. Living on so little during one of the most vulnerable periods of their lives is a significant issue.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Government's stated first objective in this review is to support the physical and mental health of women after they have given birth to a child. One cannot overestimate the amount of mental stress caused by living in poverty or without enough resources for one's family. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Liberal Democrat policy to double statutory shared parental pay to £350 a week is the right move?

Olly Glover: That is one of many excellent Liberal Democrat measures that we have proposed. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) will tell us more about that, and I do not want to steal too much more of her thunder.

Polling for The Dad Shift and Movember has found that the financial pressure is wrecking the health of new parents and their families, with more than half of new dads reporting mental and physical health consequences. Some 61% become less present with their families, and 57% are put off having more children. Although we in the Liberal Democrats may not be able to go quite as far as is asked for in this e-petition, we nevertheless support a number of significant changes. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park will say a lot more.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind Members to please stick to the informal time limit. If they do not, I will have to make it a formal time limit.

6.28 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank Grace and my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier).

I want to make a speech on behalf of every parent who is right now checking their bank balance, sitting in the back of a dingy soft-play centre, weeping silently. They are looking at us and wondering—screaming—"When will Parliament get it?" They will understand the irony that we are having this debate during half term. It sounds impossible when said out loud, but we in this country appear to think that when someone has a baby, they should live on less than the national minimum wage.

Of course this petition has merit—it speaks to the problems that begin at birth and lock in inequality throughout people's lives. If someone is on universal credit, working and pregnant, we will claw back some money just to make their life even more complicated. Meanwhile, those who are entrepreneurs or self-employed have no help at all. Little wonder that Maternity Action shows that motherhood is often associated with debt—and it

does not stop there. Let us be clear: this is not about taking time off, but about taking on another job with a very expensive clientele. It is estimated that it costs £406 a week to look after a newborn baby, and what if parents have another one? Do the maths, and realise why this place has to up its game.

This is not about counterproductive measures; it is about families. People attack breakfast clubs, but breakfast clubs are not about the state looking after people's kids; they help parents who would otherwise find it impossible to hold down a job where they are expected to be in a meeting at 9 o'clock.

Affordable childcare is not yet affordable. A constituent who is just about to have a second child wrote to me to say that even with the 30 hours and the tax-free allowance his family still has to find £3,000 a month. It does not stack up, and that is before we get to the cost of the half-term clubs. Parents are trying to find an extra 200 quid this week, while still dealing with the credit card bill from the summer holidays.

Above all, the way we do maternity leave locks in inequality for mums, who get written off by the motherhood penalty and get lumbered with the childcare, and locks out dads from the role of second parent. We do not have time to talk about issues affecting single parents, children with special educational needs and disabled parents.

The review is great, but we have the evidence. We do not need to wait to do something now to help all those people screaming in the soft play centre. We could bring in statutory pay changes or an equal six-week right at 90%. We had a chance to do that in the Lords in the Employment Rights Bill, and we lost it by seven votes. There are interim measures that we could take. I hope the Minister will hear this cry of pain, because this week of all weeks, parents are begging for pay day, worried that they are letting down their kid. Above all, they are asking us in politics to help them.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Jim Shannon will still have two minutes, and then I will impose a formal time limit of 90 seconds.

6.31 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You are very kind, Mrs Hobhouse; thank you very much. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) on setting the scene. This issue affects every single constituency in the United Kingdom.

When babies are born, it is a time of beauty. Learning to navigate a wee family is so precious, but the reality is that when parents cocoon their baby, the bills need to be paid, and they find themselves outlaying more money than ever. They have to buy nappies, new clothes, the pram, the crib, the car seat; it sets them back a substantial amount. Although it may seem that mum and dad being on 90% for the first weeks is okay, the fact is that they are under pressure. The mortgage, the rent obligation, the car insurance and the car payments all still need to be paid on time.

Little wonder that the 2025 Maternity Action survey revealed that 90% of respondents worried about money during their maternity leave. The financial strain has a significant negative impact on women's mental wellbeing.

[Jim Shannon]

A 2025 Unison survey found that 57% of respondents felt pressure to return to work earlier than they would have liked.

Some mums are told that the most important time of their lives are the early years with their baby, and yet there can be no doubt that mums are under financial strain right from the outset. That does worry me. Mum guilt is a real thing; it is not just something that people talk about, a thing in a paper or a motto. They worry about letting their child down.

In Northern Ireland, the DUP has recognised the need for childcare and has introduced a very successful scheme. I am sure the Minister is aware of it. It gives some help at a time when it is needed.

Twelve weeks of severely reduced pay will not enable the mum to get the baby into their own wee routine, and ensure her physical and emotional health is back at the level needed to return to work. I urge the Government and the Minister to work on this issue, and recognise that there cannot be stable homes if parents with newborns are wondering whether to turn the heat on or whether to just have vegetable soup for the fourth meal in a row. That should not be the case. Let us change that and give families the time they need to bond.

6.33 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): There is a certain irony in the fact that last year I was given a minute in this Chamber to speak about the inadequacy of paternity leave, and this year I have been given 90 seconds.

Two years ago today, I was beginning my journey as a first-time parent. That means that it is about two years since I last had a good night's sleep. If the Minister would like to give my little boy a birthday present today, on his second birthday, he could extend parental leave, and paternity leave in particular, so that if my son chooses to have children in the future, he can have some time with his child.

It is simply not right that fathers receive only two weeks' statutory leave. That denies fathers a chance to bond with their children and perpetuates the outdated stereotype that women are expected to be the primary caregiver. Importantly, the way that women give birth in this country has changed: about 40% of all births in England are now carried out by caesarean section, which has a recovery time of up to six weeks. Why is a father expected to return to work, leaving his partner with a newborn baby when she is still recovering from major surgery and is unable to drive or even lift her child safely? We should be encouraging fathers to spend time at home with their partner.

I was proud to sit on the Employment Rights Bill Committee earlier this year, and to play a role in extending paternity leave rights to more dads in my constituency. But we must go further. As a country, we are getting older; we need more people to have children. Will the Minister confirm that the review of parental leave and pay will, at the very least, consider increasing statutory paternity leave to six weeks, commit to reforming shared parental leave so that it is more attractive to parents, and deliver on our manifesto pledge to give every child in Gloucester the best start in life?

6.35 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. The UK's statutory paternity leave offer is one of the least generous and lowest in Europe, at £187 per week. In fact, the TUC reports that half of families struggle financially when a parent takes paternity leave—as does research from Pregnant Then Screwed. Research showed that 70% of fathers did not take their leave due to the cost. Statutory maternity pay is also provided at the same rate after the first six weeks, an amount significantly less than the national living wage of around £488 per week. If someone is self-employed and a man, they get nothing.

My constituent Tamara Morris is currently preparing to go off on maternity leave. The amount that Tamara expects to receive will not even cover her half of the household bills. She is really worried about how her family are going to cope. The UK Government could have rectified that during the Employment Rights Bill. I pay respect to my Plaid Cymru colleague, Baroness Smith of Llanfaes, for her efforts in the other place, pushing to increase the rate of statutory parental pay.

If child poverty is really a priority for this Government, then they must consider the impact of poor parental pay on the first few months of a child's life. I call on the UK Government to address the issues we have set out today, and finally put them right.

6.36 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for his introduction to this debate. I know from my own mailbag the importance of statutory maternity and paternity pay across Bexleyheath and Crayford. My constituents have pointed out to me that the evidence shows that the current situation with both leave and pay for new parents is bad for everyone—mums, dads, kids and society as a whole.

I will briefly say again what I said last year: I accept that we have moved forward since my twins were born 12 years ago, but my experience of my children being born nine weeks early, my wife having a C-section, one of my children being diagnosed with cerebral palsy at 12 days old, and me working through the whole six weeks of them being in special care because I was not entitled to a day of paternity pay, continues to live with me. We have seen neonatal care benefit and some benefit in paternity pay. But we must continue to battle for better rights for parents.

One in three dads do not take their paternity leave because they cannot afford to. The system is complicated and we do not always give people the support that they need. We must modernise to deliver for today's families. A survey undertaken by Maternity Action has shown that of 1,000 new mothers, the majority have had to resort to credit cards or loans to finance their maternity leave. Over half have said that they have had to return to work early, as it is impossible to support themselves and their new baby. It is therefore vital that we ensure that new mothers have access to the support they need. They should all be supported to focus on their own wellbeing and their baby's health, both during pregnancy and after birth.

6.38 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the petitioners for bringing this important issue before Parliament. Having a baby should never be what pushes a family into financial hardship. But for too many new parents, statutory maternity and paternity pay simply do not meet the basic cost of living.

In my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, many parents work in sectors such as hospitality, tourism and the creative industries, where income can be seasonal or irregular. I often hear from constituents who simply cannot afford to take the time they need to recover after childbirth or to bond with their baby. That is not only unfair, but shortsighted both socially and economically. Every parent should have genuine flexibility and choice in those first crucial months.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I will not be the only parent in this House who regrets every day that they are not going to spend with their children. One of my constituents is a PhD student studying paternity, and she has found that men's mental health is particularly vulnerable at the point of childbirth and the point of return to work. The two factors that can reduce that are time and control. Will my hon. Friend join in my call to the Government that men should have a statutory right to co-ordinate their return to the workplace with their employers?

Manuela Perteghella: I was a PhD student when I had my first child, so I understand the challenges that students face.

All forms of parental leave and pay, including for adoptive, foster and self-employed parents, should be available from day one. Statutory maternity and shared parental pay should be doubled and paternity leave increased. When parents and carers are supported to take time off, children benefit from early care and attention. It helps parents to return to work, reduces pressure on household finances and supports a more equal sharing of responsibilities at home. The Government's review of parental leave is an opportunity to act, and I hope that it looks seriously at the low statutory rates and creates a system that reflects the realities of modern family life. Families deserve the time, flexibility and security to give their children the best possible start in life.

6.40 pm

Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Working families form the backbone of this country. They go to work, increase our prosperity and raise the next generation at the same time. It is a hard job. It always will be, and it should be, but it should not be this hard. Statutory maternity pay in the UK is one of the lowest in Europe—less than half the minimum wage after six weeks. Maternity Action has reported that half of new mums cut their leave short, with 97% saying that money was a reason for their choice: no choice at all.

Dads are not exactly doing better. They get two weeks at the same maximum of £187 a week. One dad in Leeds South West and Morley, a median worker, told me that he would lose £103 a day on statutory paternity pay. If a median worker is forced to make that choice, can we even call it paternity leave, especially since it

does not encourage dads to take time with their children and support their partners? When my first child, Oscar, was born, he timed it perfectly. I was a teacher at the time and he arrived two weeks before half term, so I got three weeks with him, but even that was not enough. As we all know, babies do not stick to schedules and they certainly do not wait for Government reviews.

The Government's review of parental leave is welcome, but 18 months is a very long time. The Government can already consider Maternity Action's report, which asks for maternity and paternity pay to be increased in line with the living wage. They could also speak to The Dad Shift, which proposed increasing the length of paternity leave. They could speak with our trade union friends too, but whoever they speak to, it is clear to me and to everyone here that families need proper paternity and maternity pay, and they need it now.

6.42 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I congratulate all new parents, and especially my cousin Jake and Shannen on the arrival of baby Kai Burley last week. It is a reminder of the joy that new life brings and the responsibility we have to support families at that crucial time. This is not just about numbers; it is about real families. One Portsmouth father told me that he went back to work in bits and feeling useless three days after his son was born. His partner had undergone an emergency caesarean and could barely move, but he could not afford to lose another week's pay. Another father, whose daughter arrived prematurely, returned to his delivery driving job after just one week. He said:

"Every mile I drove, I felt I should be home."

Those are not isolated stories. They reflect what parents across the country are facing. When fathers cannot afford to take leave, the burden falls entirely on mothers. I have spoken to new mums recovering from major surgery alone while caring for newborns, and often other kids. The toll on their mental and physical health is profound.

This is also a workplace safety issue. I heard of tradespeople who supported my tool theft campaign returning to work on almost no sleep, operating heavy machinery, driving long distances and putting themselves at risk. One plainly told me:

"I was a danger to myself. But I couldn't afford to stop."

The petitioners are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for fairness. They are asking for statutory maternity and paternity pay to at least match the national living wage, for six weeks of ringfenced paternity leave, and for self-employed parents to be included. The status quo is failing. This is about fairness, family and the kind of country that we want to be.

6.43 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for introducing this debate. Being a parent is the hardest job in the world, and I believe that the state has a duty to make it easier. With just 90 seconds, I want to focus on just one case study.

Blanche is a fantastic mum who lives in Edinburgh South West. She is self-employed, and she found herself in an even more precarious position when she had a child.

[Dr Scott Arthur]

As she works for herself, she was entitled to only a statutory allowance: a flat £187 per week with no six-week cushion, unlike the statutory maternity pay situation. As a result, she had to work right up until the morning she went into labour at 41 weeks, and she returned to work almost instantly after using up her “keeping in touch” days. To quote her directly, and I warn Members that this is a bit graphic,

“it was a shock to the system, her body was sore, her breasts were leaking, she was still bleeding”.

She had to do work in that condition. She highlights that alongside the physical and logistical difficulties, she felt stigmatised by medical staff and other parents who judged her for leaving her child to return to work so early, without understanding that her financial situation forced her to do so.

I spoke to Blanche at the weekend. She does plan to have another child—she is a fantastic mum, and I am sure that we all wish her well—but she hopes that by then, Minister, things will have changed. I know that we cannot do this overnight, but I hope that the Minister can signal the start of a transition.

6.45 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): I met Natalie from Raunds earlier this year, when she was seven months pregnant with her first child. She wants nothing more than to take time to care for her baby. When people are off work raising the next generation, the wages stop, but the rent and energy bills do not, and other costs go up.

This is not just about Natalie. It is about warehouse workers, firefighters, nurses and shop staff—working people who pay in their whole lives but feel abandoned when they need support the most. We want a system that respects work, family and parenthood, and that means maternity and paternity pay being raised to at least the national living wage—proper, fully paid leave, as the Fire Brigades Union is fighting for in its Fight for 52 campaign.

Parental leave is a day one right, not a privilege. I welcome the Government’s review of the parental leave system, and I welcome the fact that all current and upcoming parental leave and pay entitlements will be in scope. No parent should be pushed into debt for having a baby. No mum should feel guilty for taking time to heal. No dad should be told that two weeks is enough.

Natalie had the courage to speak up, but the petition proves that she is not alone. We are not asking for luxury. We are asking for fairness, dignity and the basic right to raise a child without being pushed into poverty.

6.46 pm

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Lots of people in the room will have heard me speak before about the fact that statutory paternity pay is so low that men commonly do not take it, and that shared parental leave is failing in that men do not take it up at all, particularly outside London. The result is that female work and participation in the workforce are massively hindered.

What I really want to talk about is the fact that £187 a week simply does not provide enough for people to live on, and that 70% of children in poverty in the UK have at least one working parent; that group has the highest

levels of poverty. We urgently need to look at what people actually need to live on when they have children, versus what we would like women to put up with. Women having been putting up with it for far too long.

The reality is that 30% of domestic abuse starts during pregnancy, and statutory maternity pay ensures that an extremely vulnerable group of women do not have enough money to live on should they choose to leave their partners. This is not about making sure that we can all have posh prams; it is fundamentally about women being able to make decisions about their safety and the safety of their children. I do not think that gets nearly enough airtime in this Chamber.

Finally, I draw attention to Maternity Action’s position on the treatment of maternity allowance for universal credit purposes. If someone receives statutory maternity pay, it is treated as pay and they get universal credit. If they receive statutory maternity allowance, it is not treated in the same way, and they are likely to be £6,000 a year worse off than they would be in an equivalent situation with SMP.

6.48 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): My son Jake and his partner Amber are about to have a child, and I am very proud, but he is taking out a loan so that he can have six weeks off work, because he believes it is important. In Spain, people get 17 weeks of fully paid leave, and in Denmark they get 24 weeks. What are we doing in this country?

As a practising GP, I have seen the cost of our policy. There are higher rates of post-natal depression in women, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) said, men have sleepless nights and higher rates of mental health issues. Much more importantly, the children suffer.

Parental leave is a form of preventive healthcare. We need to build a parental leave system that recognises that caring is an investment in healthier families, happier children and a fairer society. Every parent, whatever their income, should have the chance to bond with their child without fear of financial hardship.

6.49 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): When we talk about maternity and paternity pay, we are also talking about crucial economic infrastructure—the systems that underpin participation, equality, productivity and, crucially, growth. As my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) put it, it is a public good, not a private indulgence. Right now, our system is not delivering any of that. Analysis from the Office for National Statistics shows that mothers lose an average of £65,000 in earnings in the first five years after their first child. That is not only lost household income, but lost tax receipts, skills and human capital for our wider economy.

In theory, shared parental leave offers parents flexibility, but in practice, it remains inaccessible to most households. Data from His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shows that 17,000 claimants take it up per annum, but they are generally disproportionately higher-income families, and it is hardly a mass labour market instrument. Its design is complex, its rules are difficult to navigate and pay levels are too low to make genuine choice possible.

Put simply, it is a policy that works only on paper. The inequity is most evident for self-employed fathers, who are excluded entirely from the statutory framework. A self-employed mother can claim maternity allowance, but no equivalent exists for fathers. The evidence is clear: when fathers can afford to take that leave, mothers are better able to sustain labour market participation, the family income rises and the Exchequer gains through productivity and tax receipts.

6.51 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I welcome the Government's full review of parental leave as part of our promise to make work pay. It will reshape the vital support that new parents are offered in Britain, so that it can effectively and compassionately align with the changing demands of our modern world. It is vital that the review also looks at the support provided to bereaved parents, because it cannot be right that when mothers and fathers face the greatest tragedy that can affect any of us—the loss of a child—there are barriers to basic support. There is more we can do to support families at the point that their child is first diagnosed with a serious condition.

I recently met a constituent, Stephen, at a street surgery in Birch Hill, and we spoke about the challenges his family faced when supporting their daughter through her cancer treatment journey. Beyond the unimaginable emotional toll of caring for his daughter Edie, Stephen spoke to me about the often-overlooked practical difficulties that arose for his family. He told me about how the cost of fuel, hospital parking and food quickly pushed his family into debt. That is why Stephen is backing calls for Hugh's law, which would give the parents of critically ill children who are undergoing treatment job protection and entitlement to statutory paid leave from the first day of their child's diagnosis. Hugh's law is, of course, named after Hugh Menai-Davis, the six-year-old son of Ceri and Frances Menai-Davis.

Sarah Russell: I would like to add my voice to my hon. Friend's call for Hugh's law and ask him if Edie was okay.

Peter Swallow: When I met Stephen at my street surgery, I also got the chance to meet Edie, an energetic, enthusiastic young girl running around with her sister, recovering well from her terrible ordeal. She has been so brave, and I am so proud to stand here as her MP, sharing her and her family's story.

6.53 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for introducing this petition so thoughtfully, and I thank Grace Carter and the more than 100,000 signatories. For too many families, including in my constituency, our parental leave system simply does not work. In many households, especially in rural or more deprived areas, where wages are lower and transport costs are often higher, taking one's full entitlement of parental leave is unaffordable. It is little wonder that one in three dads take no leave at all when their baby arrives, and we know the consequences of that. Around two in five births are by caesarean section, a procedure

requiring considerable recovery time. In a constituency such as mine, that could mean being stuck at home without the support of family, friends or a partner. Those early weeks can be isolating, and that is before we add in the exhaustion and recovery from major surgery. That is the value of paternity leave to new mums.

On pay, so many young people are putting off starting a family because of the sheer cost of parenthood. When I speak to people my age, many women feel that they must return to work even before their nine months of maternity pay comes to an end. On the cost for employers, if we frame this in the context of staff morale, the conversation shifts to being about the cost of the system as it is now. What is it doing to fathers' mental health and productivity at work when they are not able to take time off with their children? As part of the ongoing review into parental leave, which I am so proud of, I urge the Minister to consider the arguments and evidence of campaigners such as the Dad Shift, Pregnant Then Screwed and thousands of families up and down this country. Paternity and maternity pay should not push families into poverty, but provide proper time for parents to be parents.

6.55 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Ind): Charting a path to national renewal means making decisions today, although the full benefits may not be felt for years to come. In the first few years of life, more than a million new neural connections are formed every second. During that time, more than any other, children must be nourished and supported by the scaffolding of happy, healthy lives. That means a decent, warm home, so that babies use their energy not to keep themselves warm, but to grow and develop. It means parents not being ground down by bills piling up; it means families being shielded from the impacts of poverty; and it means mothers not being rushed back to work before their bodies have even fully healed, as is too often the case.

We hear a lot about family values in this place. That has to mean taking real steps to make daily life easier and to make the sums add up at the end of the month. As a nation, we must improve maternity and paternity pay to genuinely provide all families with security and stability. We must build a country where children are nourished in their early years, parents are treated with dignity through life's challenges and people are not sneered at for receiving support. We must build a society that offers a helping hand, nurturing rather than sanctioning—one grounded in a belief in the value of every human life, where doing all we can to give a baby the best first steps is seen not as a cost on a Treasury spreadsheet, but as the duty of a decent society and an investment in a more prosperous country for us all.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, I thank you all for making sure that everyone got in. I hope you forgive me for being tough about it.

6.56 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) and the Petitions Committee for this debate. As a survivor of three maternity leaves—all on statutory pay—a c-section and a spell in

[Sarah Olney]

the neonatal unit, all the topics that have been raised are very close to my heart. I thank each and every hon. Member for their contributions and for representing their constituents so well.

This summer, the Government announced that they would undertake a parental leave and pay review, expecting it to conclude in 18 months' time. The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's commitment to that much-needed review of parental leave. Every child deserves the best possible start in life and the opportunity to flourish, no matter their background or personal circumstances. Too often, parents struggle on inadequate parental pay and without good enough access to shared leave. Childcare costs are eyewatering, and balance between family life and work has only become harder and harder to achieve. Not only is that unfair on families, but it weighs down our economy.

The Liberal Democrats have called for an overhaul of the parental leave system to give parents a genuine choice over how to manage their affairs in the first months of their child's life. The Liberal Democrats were proud to introduce shared parental leave when in government. Years later, however, millions of parents are still being denied the choice to spend more time at home, with about a quarter of fathers ineligible for paternity pay.

Meanwhile, the Government are introducing wide-ranging changes to employment law through the Employment Rights Bill. The Bill will introduce a suite of new protections and entitlements for working families, including enhanced rights on leave, protection from dismissal and bereavement support. Eligibility for paternity leave and unpaid parental leave requires employees to have a minimum length of service in order to qualify, but from April 2026 the qualifying service requirements will be removed. That means that paternity leave and unpaid parental leave will become entitlements from the first day of employment, as the Liberal Democrats called for in our 2024 general election manifesto.

Dr Arthur: The Lib Dems may well have called for that in their manifesto, but when it came to a vote, they abstained on that very right for mothers. Does the hon. Lady now regret that?

Sarah Olney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The Liberal Democrats support measures that work to strengthen employment rights. We welcome aspects of the Employment Rights Bill, such as boosting statutory sick pay, strengthening support for whistleblowers and increasing support for carers, all of which move us in the right direction. However, we remain concerned about the specific way in which many of the measures are to be implemented. We must ensure that the legislation strikes the right balance for employees and for business, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises.

I have spoken with businesses in my constituency that tell me that they are being left in limbo by the vague framing of the Bill, which leaves crucial detail to secondary legislation and Government reviews. That prevents long-term planning, and I am disappointed that the Government did not support the Liberal Democrat amendments, which would have created more certainty for businesses.

New measures to support workers must go hand in hand with much-needed reforms to support our small businesses and bring down their costs. We know that the Government inherited a mess. We know that the cause of the mess is the legacy of reckless economic mismanagement by the previous Government, whose record is a dispiriting picture of low growth, high interest rates and a record fall in living standards. But it is disappointing that the current Government have taken decisions that have compounded many of the challenges for communities, businesses and families, while presiding over very tight public finances and a stagnant economy.

That is why we urge the Government to put in place a range of measures that will bring down business costs, unleash the power of our SMEs and power economic growth—measures such as scrapping the unfair national insurance rise, fixing the broken business rates system, bringing down the cost of energy by decoupling electricity and gas prices, and finally repairing the economic damage caused by the previous Government's shambolic Brexit deal by cutting red tape and negotiating a new bespoke UK-EU customs union. Those actions could breathe new life into our economy and our small businesses and would go a long way towards facilitating improvements to parental leave and pay.

In our 2024 general election manifesto, we called for statutory maternity and shared parental pay to rise to £350 a week, for paternity pay to increase to 90% of earnings with a cap for high earners, and for the introduction of an extra "use it or lose it" month for fathers and partners, paid at 90% of earnings, again with a cap for high earners. Those policies would benefit not only families, but businesses and the economy, by encouraging workforce participation and making it easier for people to advance their career while starting a family.

We hope that the Government will look closely at those proposals, while introducing a robust plan to cut business costs, boost growth and empower our SMEs. More broadly, I urge them to look into the prevalent inequality in caring responsibility. What steps are they taking to support millions of family and kinship carers who have no paid leave at all? Will they commission a similar review into provision for unpaid carers and make carer's leave paid?

7.2 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for so competently introducing the debate, with an excellent speech, and I thank everyone else who has contributed to it.

I was particularly struck by the comments made by the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) about Hugh's law and the need for further work on bereavement support. That reminded me of one of my constituents, Clara Gilley, who has a very unusual brain cancer. The real-life issues that she faced, and which I was dealing with as her MP, were the travel costs to Bristol—that is a long way to go from Devon—and the costs of adaptations. I recognise the calls for us to consider how we can help parents whose children are sick and unwell with the costs of that, and I hope that the Minister heard them. I have seen it at first hand, and I am sure lots of other Members will have seen similar issues.

The Conservatives are proud to be the party that champions family life. We recognise that strong families are the bedrock of a healthy society—that is something else that has come up this afternoon. Britain is one of the best places to have a child and raise a family, following measures introduced by Conservative Governments to extend free childcare, support flexible working and enable shared parental leave.

Alex McIntyre: As the hon. Lady is so proudly championing her party's record, will she stand by the comments by the Leader of the Opposition, who said that maternity pay is "excessive", and by a donor to the Leader of the Opposition, Luke Johnson, who told the Employment Rights Bill Committee that the worst thing about the Bill is its further extension of paternity rights?

Rebecca Smith: On what the Leader of the Opposition said, I am not 100% sure of the quote, so I am not going to comment on that. I think it was taken quite significantly out of context. On the Bill Committee, I will continue saying it—*[Interruption.]* At the end of the day, I am the one here speaking this afternoon, so I am at least interested in this debate—let's keep talking.

We understand the challenges facing families, which is why we updated the system to enable greater flexibility in how parental leave is taken. We wanted to ensure that parents are supported to spend the precious first few weeks and months bonding with their newborn, promoting healthy attachment that sets their child up for a successful future.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Smith: I will keep making progress, if I may. *[Interruption.]* It is not because I do not want to take the intervention, but because I am on a time limit.

We introduced the biggest expansion of childcare in England's history—it is heartening to see that Labour has continued our roll-out, despite its criticisms at the time. We backed new legislation to provide additional paid leave to parents whose baby requires neonatal care, allowing them to spend more time with their baby in hospital instead of worrying about returning to work or having to take unpaid leave. We strengthened protections for pregnant women and new parents against redundancy, removing workplace discrimination and improving job security. We introduced shared parental leave for new parents, allowing parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay after the birth or adoption of a child.

However, more needs to be done to encourage uptake of shared parental leave. We know that of fathers who did not take shared parental leave, 45% were not even aware that it existed, according to a 2023 review under the previous Government. Awareness is particularly lacking among smaller businesses: 94% of managers in workplaces with 250 or more employees were aware of the provision; that dropped to 71% in workplaces with fewer than 50 employees.

Importantly, our Government brought statutory adoption leave and pay in line with statutory parental leave, ensuring that adoptive parents had the same rights as birth parents. Adoptive parents also became

eligible for paid time off for up to five adoption appointments—something that I personally think is entirely welcome.

Sarah Russell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rebecca Smith: I will keep going, because I have quite a lot to say.

Those measures rightly honour the contributions of parents who open their heart and home to children in need of a loving family; 4,500 people claimed statutory adoption pay in 2024-25. In England alone, 2,940 children were waiting for adoption as of September this year, so statutory adoption leave and pay are vital for increasing the number of adoptive parents.

As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) noted, we need to do more to support adoptive parents who are self-employed—that has come up loud and clear this afternoon. Statutory guidance allows local authorities to make discretionary means-tested payments, equivalent to statutory adoption pay. However, as we heard from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the charity Home for Good discovered that 34% of local authorities have no policy in place for those discretionary payments. Worse still, according to a 2022 survey by the all-party parliamentary group on adoption and permanence, 90% of self-employed adopters are not informed about them by their social worker.

Of course we acknowledge the calls to go further with parental leave, and I am sure that the Minister heard the pleas to include kinship carers in the review. We will scrutinise the Government's review of parental leave, launched in July this year, to ensure that it strikes an appropriate balance between supporting families and backing businesses. It is worth noting that the UK's parental leave policies rank comparatively well against countries around the world. The UK offers the fourth longest statutory maternity leave, topped only by Estonia, Croatia and Bulgaria, and it ranks 13th globally for length of statutory paternity leave; 90 countries have no statutory paternity leave at all.

However, there is a fine balance between supporting parents to spend precious time with their child and protecting businesses from burdensome regulations. In our current economic climate, increasing statutory maternity and paternity pay would be counterproductive for businesses—small and medium-sized enterprises especially—at a time when Labour is already saddling them with extra costs. Small business owners are facing enormous pressure: 17,000 high street businesses are expected to close this year alone, and retail businesses in my constituency tell me that they now face a doubling of their business rates. The Government's Employment Rights Bill as a whole is projected to cost businesses up to £4.5 billion annually and it could increase the number of strikes by 53%. Increased parental pay will be no help at all if people have lost their job. In this context, it is our view that significant increases in statutory maternity and paternity pay are simply unaffordable for businesses or the public sector right now. It is also not clear how the state itself would afford the change. I am sure that the Minister will address that.

We need to protect jobs for the long term. A stable household income is one of the most important factors in ensuring healthy, happy children who will grow into bold and ambitious adults. The Government's Employment

[Rebecca Smith]

Rights Bill stifles small businesses when they are already gasping for oxygen. It overreaches, snatching choice out of the hands of business owners, who are best placed to balance the interests of their staff members with the viability of their business overall.

When it is practical and affordable, many businesses already offer enhanced maternity and paternity pay in order to retain talent—something that has been stressed this afternoon. A survey of 460 organisations by Brightmine in June 2024 found that 75% of private sector organisations and 97% of public sector organisations already offer enhanced maternity pay. Any changes to statutory maternity and paternity pay must be done after consulting businesses. We must avoid saddling them with yet more unaffordable costs at a time when they are facing immense pressure. Flourishing businesses provide stable income for families, leading to a strong economy and a brighter future for the next generation. The Conservatives' record demonstrates our support for parents and families, but that must be done sustainably, in a way that backs businesses rather than stifling them.

7.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and to speak on an issue that is close to so many people's hearts, as the response to the petition shows. I am speaking for the Government this afternoon, but after the previous contribution I think it is important that I set out that this is a matter of importance to all Ministers. I thank all the Members who have taken part in this hugely important debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), who so eloquently set out on behalf of the Petitions Committee the various issues facing new parents.

We heard a number of excellent and thoughtful contributions. I had intended to attempt to run through all of them and respond individually, but what was most striking about the debate—until the closing contributions—was the significant unity in the room. Members have come together from across parties to speak with one voice. That shows why the Government's review is so important. The myriad issues that new parents face—with health, finances, spending time with their children and so on—are so complex and the need for change is not lost either on me or on the Government more widely.

I will respond to a handful of the contributions—and how could I not begin with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre)? I am afraid I am not going to give his son a birthday present today, but I send my very best wishes and congratulations. I know that my hon. Friend is a loving and caring parent and I am sure that he has something lovely planned once we get away from the votes this evening. He and several other hon. Members asked whether certain aspects of the complex web of parental pay are in scope of the review, so let me clarify the eight areas that are in scope: maternity leave and pay; paternity leave and pay; shared parental leave and pay; unpaid parental leave; adoption leave and pay; parental bereavement leave and pay; neonatal care leave and pay; and maternity allowance.

The point about discretionary payments by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was well made. I have responded to a Westminster Hall debate before on that specific issue. I undertook then to take it away and feed it into the review, which is being led predominantly by the Department for Business and Trade. I did that then, and I will do so again now.

I want to recognise the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh), who is a champion on maternity and maternity rights. She is entirely right to set out the importance of the first few weeks, months and years—the first 1,001 days. I also recognise the challenge set down by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy).

Let me say at the outset that I will be disappointing hon. Members, because I will be pointing to the importance of allowing the review to run its course. I do so because an incredibly complex web of support has evolved since 1948, with significant changes since then—the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), set out the many changes made just by her Government. We have one chance to get this right. We have waited a long time for this review. We want to take the time not only to undertake the call for evidence, which we have already done, but to consult trade unions, employers, and parents and families before we have a public consultation.¹

Ms Creasy: I agree that there is complexity that we must deal with. Will the Minister update us on his Department's view of the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry, which specifically took evidence about parental leave and six weeks at 90% of pay. Nobody is suggesting we can do everything overnight, but there are things that we could do now as a holding measure to start the change that everybody wants. Labour Members and those from other parties recognise the possible benefits to the economy and the country, so perhaps the Women and Equalities Committee offers an interim way forward.

Andrew Western: That is indeed one of a number of important pieces of work that we are feeding into the review. My hon. Friend tempts me to promise that we will go further immediately, but I am not able to do so today for the reason that I have set out: we want to get the review right and to take the time to bring forward changes and recommendations, and the pathway to change, in a measured way.

Andrew Cooper: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Western: I will, after which I hope that Members will accept that I need to make some progress.

Andrew Cooper: I am sure everybody recognises how important it is to do this once and do it right. Is the Minister able to commit to legislating in this Parliament?

Andrew Western: We will need to see what comes out of the review, but we are committed to setting out a roadmap to change as a result of the review. I understand my hon. Friend's point and note his desire, and that of other Members, for action to be taken as swiftly as possible.

I appreciate that parental leave and pay are vital to new mums and dads, giving them the space to spend time together as a new family. The first months and moments are critical in ensuring that a child is happy,

1.[Official Report, 3 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 7WC.](Correction)

healthy and well adjusted. It is something that runs deeper than pound signs and percentage points. Bringing a child into the world or into our home is a major event in anyone's life. It is one that parents should enjoy free from the stresses of the workplace. However, we know that the current system is not working for everyone.

It is almost 40 years since statutory maternity pay was introduced for working women in 1987. It is half a century since maternity leave was introduced in 1975, and almost 75 years since the start of maternity allowance in 1948. In the years since, the world of work and the world at large have changed beyond recognition. Gone are the age-old stereotypes about men belonging in the workplace and women in the home. The lines between home and work have never been more blurred. As times have changed, there have been tweaks and updates: paternity leave and adoption leave in 2003; shared parental leave and pay in 2014; and neonatal care leave just this year. But, like a road network that evolves over time, the process is no longer as simple to navigate. We need something that is purpose-built for people's journeys today.

In July, in partnership with the Department for Business and Trade, we launched the parental leave and pay review. It is time to go back to first principles, to work out exactly what the system needs to deliver and for whom—mums, dads and others—and to consider all the options before mapping out a new way forward. That starts with our remembering why maternity pay was introduced in the first place. It was primarily about the health and safety of women and their babies during pregnancy and in the months following childbirth. That is why, as the review progresses, the first objective that we have in mind for the parental leave and pay system, although not the only one, is ensuring that it supports maternal health by making sure women have enough money and time off work to stay healthy—physically and mentally—during the latter stages of their pregnancy and while recovering from birth.

Secondly, the approach needs to promote economic growth. When we give more new parents the freedom to stay and progress in work, it is not just mums, dads and kids who benefit; employers, too, benefit from keeping parents' skills and experience. At present, just over half of new mothers go back to their old job following the birth of their child. We want to build a system in which every mother feels supported if they make that choice. New figures show that five years after a first birth, the average mother's earnings will have dropped by more than £1,000 a month. Mothers deserve better.

Our third objective is to help children to get the best start in life by giving new parents the resources and space to give the care and attention their new arrivals need. Fourthly, we need to support parents' childcare choices so that parents can balance care and work in a way that works for them, enabling co-parenting and reflecting the realities of modern work. Ultimately, we want a system that is fairer and easier to use, and that works better for parents and employers.

Rachael Maskell: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for his speech. Will he ensure that there is a matrix over the Government's objective that measures inequality in family life and ensures that we close the inequality gap so that parents experiencing the greatest deprivation benefit the most from the policy?

Andrew Western: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. That is one of many really useful suggestions that have been made today, which I undertake to feed into the review for consideration.

Let me return to what I was saying about the requirement for a fairer system. We should not pretend that there will be easy answers as we go through this work—some difficult balances will need to be struck. The benefits of allowing parents flexibility must be weighed against the direct costs to employers and the public purse.

The petition asks us to increase the rate of statutory maternity and paternity pay to match the national living wage. We should note that maternity pay has never been intended to fully replace a mother's earnings, and any moves in that direction should not be made lightly. The costs of statutory parental pay are largely paid by the taxpayer, with employers able to reclaim at least 92% of the cost from HMRC.

Lola McEvoy: I have raised many times in this Chamber the inequality of paternity rights when it comes to unfair dismissal. Addressing that would not cost the taxpayer or businesses anything, because protection is already in place for those who take shared parental leave, maternity leave and adoption leave. Will the Minister reflect that point in the review as well? He did not mention paternity when he gave us his overview of the review's purpose, but I think that all Members here agree about the importance that dads feel they can take time off, especially when they are eligible to do so.

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If I did not refer to that issue, it was because I was trying to respond to an intervention and it was an oversight on my part. It is incredibly important and I will ensure that it is considered as part of the review.

I return to the petition's specific ask of matching parental pay with the national living wage. The Government currently spend about £3 billion a year on statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance alone. This petition asks us to more than double the rate of maternity and paternity pay—in fact, it seeks a 144% increase. That would be far from a trivial expense at a time of difficult fiscal choices. I am not saying that that will not happen at this point in time—I do not know; we need to go through the process of the review—but we have to take the time to carefully consider such questions, given the significant financial implications, before any decisions are made.

I am cognisant of the time, so I will skip forward by reminding Members that maternity and paternity leave are just one part of the wider picture of financial support for parents. Maternity allowance is available for self-employed women and employed women who do not already qualify for statutory maternity pay. Child benefit is available from the date of a child's birth, and the Sure Start maternity grant offers a £500 lump sum to mothers receiving one of a range of qualifying benefits.

Sarah Russell: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Hinchliff: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Western: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) and then take one more intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), but then I will really need to move on.

Sarah Russell: The interrelationship between maternity allowance, which I made a point about earlier in the debate, and the £500 Sure Start grant is a problem, because if someone is self-employed, they are not eligible for that grant.

Andrew Western: I absolutely agree. That is one of the things that I want the review to capture. A particular range of issues is specific to self-employed people. We have already heard about that in the context of adoption, and my hon. Friend raises another example. She is entirely right to champion the rights of self-employed people in this space.¹

Chris Hinchliff: Several colleagues have mentioned Hugh's law today. As the Member of Parliament for Hugh's parents, Ceri and Frances, may I welcome the fact that the Government have committed to a consultation on the introduction of Hugh's law? I urge the Minister to speak to his ministerial colleagues to see whether we can get Hugh's law in the next King's Speech so that it is delivered for families who desperately need support.

Andrew Western: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I gave way because I expected him to raise that issue, given that it pertains to his constituents.

This is probably the most powerful debate that I have attended in Westminster Hall. I will certainly ensure that all the points that have been raised with me are fed back. This is a particularly important issue not just for my hon. Friend and his constituents, but more widely.

Moving through a child's life, starting from this year, working parents—including those on maternity, paternity, adoption or shared parental leave—can now claim up to 30 hours of free childcare for children between the ages of nine months and four years. Tax-free childcare can also help parents to save up to £2,000 a year on the cost of childminders, play schemes, after-school clubs, nurseries and nannies. All infant pupils in Government-funded schools are eligible for free school meals, as are older children whose parents receive certain benefits. Our child poverty taskforce has been looking at what else we can do to drive down family costs, raise family incomes and give every child the best start in life. Our strategy will be published later in the year.

Work will be at the heart of our approach. Good work is vital to achieve lasting change and to our central mission of growth. That is why our review of parental leave and pay is a key part of our plan to make work pay. It will build on the progress we are already making through our work to tackle low pay, poor working conditions and job security. We are breaking down barriers for parents so that we can raise living standards, and so that they can raise the next generation.

7.26 pm

Jacob Collier: I start by wishing a very happy second birthday to William, the son of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre). Perhaps he is at a soft play centre in Walthamstow.

I thank hon. Members for sharing their experiences and those of their constituents, which has powerfully showed the need for change in this area. I also thank the Minister for setting out the criteria of the review. I know that he cares passionately about these issues. Despite what the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) said, there is a real need for change, as we have heard throughout the debate. The Government's parental review is the very first of its kind, and while it shows that the Minister and the Department are willing to listen, it must lead to real action with clear milestones for reform so that we do not see millions of families falling into poverty.

I welcome the Minister saying that he will draw on the evidence he heard today, as well as submissions from unions, employers and families. No parent should have to face poverty in bringing up their newborn. If we get this right, we can strengthen family life, improve equity and give every child a fairer start.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 715292 relating to statutory maternity and paternity pay.

7.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

1.[Official Report, 3 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

Written Statements

Monday 27 October 2025

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Football Governance Act 2025: Statutory Guidance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Today I am updating the House to confirm that, following Royal Assent of the Football Governance Act 2025 in July, the Government have laid before Parliament a draft of the statutory guidance on the meaning of “Significant Influence or Control” under schedule 1 to the Act. As per the Act, the draft guidance is laid in Parliament for 40 days, during which either House may resolve not to approve it. If no such resolution is made, the Secretary of State may publish the guidance.

As set out in the Act, the independent football regulator will operate a new suitability and approval regime for owners, directors and senior executives of regulated clubs. The guidance supports the schedule 1 definition of an “owner” by providing interpretative detail on “significant influence and control.” Its purpose is to help ensure that fans can identify the real persons exercising control of their clubs, notwithstanding any opaque or complex ownership structures. This will give fans the much-needed transparency they deserve.

In developing the draft, we have drawn on the approach used in the Companies Act “Persons with Significant Control” regime, to ensure that we are aligned with current precedent. We have included industry-specific examples, which have been tested with the football industry to make the concept more tangible for all who will have to interpret it, especially clubs, and to ensure that the guidance is suited to the regulated industry.

In both Houses, we committed to laying this draft guidance before clubs are required to identify their owners in their personnel statements. Laying the draft now delivers on that commitment and provides clarity for clubs in advance of the regime for testing owners commencing.

The laying of this draft guidance is a key step in implementing the Football Governance Act 2025. This delivers the Government’s election promises to combat poor governance and financial mismanagement of football clubs in this country, and to put fans back at the heart of English football.

[HCWS996]

TREASURY

UK-Portugal Double Taxation Convention

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): A double taxation convention with Portugal was signed in London on 15 September 2025. The text of the

convention is available on the HM Revenue and Customs pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text of the convention will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS993]

Post Office Capture Redress Scheme: Tax Exemptions

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): On 19 June 2025, the Department for Business and Trade announced a new compensation scheme that offers redress to postmasters affected by errors in the Capture software, which predates the use of the Horizon software. DBT has set up the capture redress scheme to compensate postmasters.

The Government are committed to ensuring that postmasters are treated fairly and will legislate to formalise tax exemptions shortly, ensuring that no income tax, national insurance contributions, capital gains tax, corporation tax, where applicable, or inheritance tax will be payable for redress received under this scheme.

[HCWS994]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Improvements to Windrush Compensation Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): Last year, the Government committed to resetting its response to the Home Office Windrush scandal, with a renewed focus on ensuring that members of the Windrush generation receive the support they deserve, delivered swiftly, fairly, and with dignity. Since that time, we have taken forward several actions to honour that commitment.

We have appointed Rev. Clive Foster MBE as the first UK Windrush commissioner on 18 June 2025, fulfilling a manifesto commitment. His crucial role provides independent oversight of the Government’s ongoing commitment to address the impact of the Home Office Windrush scandal and ensure that the voices of those affected remain at the heart of efforts to deliver justice and lasting change.

Through the work of the re-established Windrush unit, this Government have sought to strengthen engagement with victims, their families, communities and stakeholder organisations. This is enabling us to hear at first hand the impact that the Home Office Windrush scandal had and continues to have on individuals and communities, and to make sure there is a real appreciation of the impact that policies and decisions have on people’s lives.

We remain resolute in our determination to ensure that the Windrush compensation scheme reflects lived experiences and delivers compensation in a manner that is both just and prompt. We have listened carefully to urgent recommendations from the Windrush commissioner and feedback from community representatives, stakeholders and claimants. In response, I am announcing significant changes to the scheme.

For the first time, the scheme will compensate for the financial impact of lost occupational and personal pension contributions where individuals were unable to work due to being unable to demonstrate their lawful status in the UK. Compensation will also be available to those who had to withdraw funds from existing pension pots to support themselves and their families. This is in addition to existing provisions to ensure individuals' state pensions are not affected by time spent unable to access employment.

The scope of compensation for employment-related losses will be expanded to reflect wage growth and account for the challenges of returning to work following a long period of unemployment.

The immigration fees category will be broadened to cover any application fees incurred due to uncertainty about lawful status. This includes both successful and unsuccessful applications, ensuring that no one is left out of pocket by needing to prove their status.

And lastly, we have heard the concerns from communities about individuals passing away before receiving the compensation they are entitled to, as well as the financial hardships some are suffering. In response, people will now be offered an advance payment when seeking a review of their final compensation decision. Under this provision, individuals may receive up to 75% of their total compensation before the review process is fully concluded. We will also prioritise allocation of claims for individuals aged 75 and over, alongside existing measures for those with critical or life-shortening illnesses. These changes will be applied retrospectively, and updated rules and guidance will be published in due course.

We recognise that no amount of money can undo the pain, disruption and loss experienced by members of the Windrush generation and their families, but through meaningful action, we are determined to acknowledge that harm, provide redress, and rebuild the trust that was so profoundly damaged.

[HCWS992]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Implementing Awaab's Law

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): Tenants must feel protected and safe in their homes, which is why Awaab's law is crucial legislation, and I am pleased to announce that it is coming into force today for all emergency hazards and damp and mould hazards. These regulations represent a landmark step forward in ensuring that every resident of social housing lives in a safe, decent home, and that swift, responsible action is taken by landlords when hazards are identified.

The tragic death of Awaab Ishak, aged just two, in December 2020, due to prolonged exposure to mould in his family's social home, shocked the nation. His parents, Faisal and Aisha, have shown extraordinary courage and determination in campaigning to ensure that no other family suffers such a preventable loss.

Early last year, the previous Government ran a consultation on Awaab's law, publishing the Government response in June 2024. On 25 June 2025, regulations for phase 1 of Awaab's law were laid in Parliament, and they are now in force. The regulations prescribe requirements that every social landlord in England must comply with. Failure to do so will constitute a breach of contract, and tenants will rightly be able to take legal action through the courts, or take action through the housing ombudsman, ensuring that tenants can hold landlords fully accountable if they fail to meet the required standards and timescales. These new requirements do not replace or lessen existing duties.

Social landlords already have clear legal obligations to keep homes fit for human habitation, free from category 1 hazards, and to remedy disrepair. Many landlords go beyond these obligations to provide their residents with a quality service. Awaab's law strengthens these obligations by introducing clear, time-bound requirements and a robust route to enforcement.

From today all social landlords must:

- Investigate emergency hazards and make them safe within 24 hours;
- Investigate significant hazards, including damp and mould, within 10 working days;
- Provide a written summary of findings to tenants within three working days of the investigation concluding;
- Take action to make the home safe within five working days of the investigation concluding;
- Begin further works to prevent recurrence within 12 weeks;
- Complete repairs within a reasonable timeframe; and
- Offer suitable alternative accommodation if the home cannot be made safe within the required timescales.

These measures mean that no tenant will have to live in unsafe conditions without a route to take action. Landlords must act swiftly to fix dangerous hazards and dangerous damp and mould. I am determined to extend these protections to all hazards and have committed to apply Awaab's law to hazards such as excess cold and heat, falls, structural collapse, fire, electrical hazards, explosions and hygiene risks in 2026, and to all remaining hazards under the housing health and safety rating system in 2027. By taking a phased, test-and-learn approach, I am clear that transformational change will be delivered effectively, proportionately and sustainably across the sector—ensuring consistent application of the law and full preparedness to deliver these new duties.

Implementing Awaab's law represents a significant change. To support this cultural shift in the way tenants and landlords will engage in tackling safety issues in their homes, the Department has published guidance to aid implementation. Tenant-facing materials will be made available through the "Make things right" campaign, explaining how Awaab's law will protect tenants and how tenants can raise concerns. Additional guidance for tenants will be published explaining how tenants can use Awaab's law, and the Government will continue to work closely with the regulator of social housing and the housing ombudsman to ensure clear, consistent implementation.

Awaab's law is a critical part of the Government's broader programme to raise the standard and safety of social housing and to strengthen tenants' voices. While many landlords already provide good-quality homes

and responsive services, too many tenants still live in homes that are unsafe or poorly maintained. This must change. As well as Awaab's law, we have also introduced new regulations that mean social landlords must have the electrics in their homes inspected and tested at least every five years.

We have also launched a £1 million social housing innovation fund to fund innovative projects that improve tenants' engagement with their landlords and ensure that they have influence over decisions affecting their homes.

Awaab's law is not about creating unnecessary burden; it is about ensuring that tenants' voices are heard, that action is taken responsibly, and that homes are safe and decent. It represents the change that social housing residents have long deserved and is central to restoring trust, fairness and accountability in the sector.

Delivering the transformational change that Awaab Ishak's family fought for is essential—and every tenant has the right to expect nothing less.

[HCWS995]

Petition

Monday 27 October 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

GP practice in Burton, Dorset

The petition of residents of the village of Burton in the constituency of Christchurch,

Declares that the petitioners and other residents of the village of Burton in the constituency of Christchurch had the benefit of a local accessible GP practice on Burton Green for over 40 years prior to its closure in August 2024; are delighted that earlier this year South Coast Medical acquired the premises for the purpose of opening a new branch of the Grove Practice following a welcome refusal by the local planning authority to permit a change of use on the grounds of loss of community benefit; and are outraged that the Dorset integrated care board has since refused permission for the re-opening of the surgery.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to overrule the Dorset integrated care board's decision to refuse permission for the re-opening of a GP surgery in Burton, which ignores, inter alia, the needs and wishes of the people of Burton and the fact that new housing already in receipt of planning permission will generate demand from an additional 2,000 patients for local GP services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Christopher Chope, Official Report, 2 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 261.]

[P003107]

Observations from the Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock):

NHS Dorset integrated care board is responsible for planning and commissioning services to meet the reasonable needs of people in the locality and managing costs within its allocated budget.

This practice site closed in August 2024 due to the owners selling the property. No patients were displaced following the closure; patients remained registered with Christchurch medical practice and can attend the main GP practice site, 1.7 miles away via road, or can choose to register with another practice.

Two applications to reopen Burton surgery were received and considered by NHS Dorset integrated care board. On 3 April 2025, the ICB made the decision not to support the reopening of the site.

The ICB's review of the applications indicated that there was sufficient GP practice capacity in the local area, and that reopening Burton surgery could significantly destabilise other local practices and would incur additional expenditure that would not bring clear benefits to the local community. In the context of managing competing financial pressures for services, NHS Dorset does not consider the proposal to open a new branch of the Grove practice to be a priority.

On 17 July 2025 after an appeal, NHS Dorset concluded that the decision not to reopen the site should be upheld. This was based on ensuring the sustainability of current GP practice services within the locality, availability of patient choice, and the impact on NHS finances.

Written Corrections

Monday 27 October 2025

Ministerial Corrections

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pension Schemes Bill Committee

The following extracts are from the Pension Schemes Bill Committee on 11 September 2025.

Torsten Bell: The clause amends the onboarding conditions in these instances, to allow trustees of a scheme in PPF assessment to seek to secure their liabilities with a superfund at less than full benefits, but more than would otherwise have been secured through a buy-out that was available, given the level of their assets at that point. Based on the evidence from the PPF's purple book, we anticipate that, on average, five in 10 so-called PPF-plus schemes could benefit each year.

[Official Report, Pension Schemes Public Bill Committee, 11 September 2025; c. 282.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell):

Torsten Bell: Based on the evidence from the PPF's purple book, we anticipate that **five to 10 so-called PPF-plus schemes on average each year could benefit**.

Torsten Bell: Several hon. Members have said, absolutely rightly, that access to financial advice fell in the aftermath of the reforms over a decade ago, but there is some better news on Pension Wise. The 2024 Financial Lives survey showed that of those who accessed a defined-contribution pot within the last four years, 40% had accessed Pension Wise. I think that is probably more than most hon. Members in this debate would expect, though it may not be enough. However, those people had used Pension Wise when heading towards access; they had not used it as a mid-life MOT product, which is a different thing. That 40% was up from 34% in 2020, so some things have gone in the right direction. I am gently noting that, not claiming any credit for it because it predates the election. There is a lot of overlap between what those systems of advice are providing and the measures in new clause 1.

[Official Report, Pension Schemes Public Bill Committee, 11 September 2025; c. 323.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell):

Torsten Bell: There is a lot of overlap between what those systems of **guidance** are providing and the measures in new clause 1.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 27 October 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
WORK AND PENSIONS	2	WORK AND PENSIONS—continued	
Access to Work Scheme	3	Post-16 Education: Skills Needed in the	
Benefit Sanctions: Neurodiverse Claimants	16	Economy	5
Carer's Allowance	9	Topical Questions	17
Child Poverty	11	Workforce Skills	13
Child Poverty: Cornwall	15	Young People: Employment, Education and	
Employment: People with Health Conditions	7	Training	9
Indexation of Pension Rights	13	Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Scheme	15
Pension Age Increase: Institute for Fiscal Studies			
Report	2		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 27 October 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	1WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
Football Governance Act 2025: Statutory		LOCAL GOVERNMENT	3WS
Guidance	1WS	Implementing Awaab's Law	3WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	2WS	TREASURY	1WS
Improvements to Windrush Compensation		Post Office Capture Redress Scheme:	
Scheme	2WS	Tax Exemptions	2WS
		UK-Portugal Double Taxation Convention	1WS

PETITION

Monday 27 October 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1P	
GP practice in Burton, Dorset	1P	

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Monday 27 October 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS	1WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS—continued	
Work and Pensions	1WC	Pension Schemes Bill Committee	1WC

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**not later than
Monday 3 November 2025**

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CONTENTS

Monday 27 October 2025

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House [Col. 1]

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 2] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

North Sea Oil and Gas Industry [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(Michael Shanks)

Prisoner Release Checks [Col. 43]
Statement—(Mr David Lammy)

Royal Assent to Acts passed [Col. 61]

Victims and Courts Bill [Col. 62]
As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Regulation and Inspection of Funeral Services [Col. 135]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Holidays During School Term Time [Col. 1WH]
Statutory Maternity and Paternity Pay [Col. 25WH]
E-petition debates

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations

Written Corrections [Col. 1WC]
Ministerial corrections
