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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 30 October 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hospitality Sector: Bicester and Woodstock

1. **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): What steps he is taking to support the hospitality sector in Bicester and Woodstock constituency. [906086]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): As this is my first time at the Dispatch Box, if I may I would like to thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders). It is an honour to build on his work, particularly on employment rights and championing fairness and dignity at work.

Hospitality businesses, including those in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), are vital to the UK economy, driving growth, creating jobs, and strengthening our communities. The Government are delivering targeted support under the small and medium-sized enterprises strategy to boost productivity, cut red tape and revitalise our high streets. Our £1.5 million hospitality scheme aims to help businesses boost productivity and adapt to local needs, while the licensing taskforce seeks to address unnecessary barriers that hospitality businesses face. Furthermore, we plan to permanently reduce business rates for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Just to help Members, this question is purely about Bicester and Woodstock.

Calum Miller: I wish all the questions were just about Bicester and Woodstock.

I welcome the Minister to her place. Becky, who runs the Red Lion in Eynsham, and Donna, who runs the Oxfordshire Yeoman in Freeland, tell me that they are working upwards of 80 hours a week just to keep their pubs open. Despite loyal customers and rising turnover, they are struggling to meet soaring bills from employment costs, food, energy, business rates and a tied tenancy, which means that prices are over £100 more per barrel. In small villages across my constituency, pubs are the

lifeblood and fabric of the community. Will the Minister meet Becky, Donna and me to discuss what more the Government can do to support the vital village pub?

Kate Dearden: I agree with the hon. Member that pubs are the lifeblood of our local communities. We recognise the challenges facing the hospitality sector, particularly our pubs. They play such an important role in our local communities as places where people can come together to celebrate, connect and build communities, and that is especially true of the pubs that he mentioned in his constituency. I would of course be happy to meet him and his pub managers to celebrate their contribution to his constituency. We continue to work closely with the Hospitality Sector Council and industry leaders across the country to understand the pressures facing pubs, and to co-create solutions for the long-term stability and local economic growth that are vital for our communities and our country.

Responsible Business Conduct Review

2. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): Whether his Department held discussions with experts from the global south as part of its review of the UK's approach to responsible business conduct. [906088]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): It is good to be before you in a new role, Mr Speaker. In fact, even though I might not look it, we have an entirely fresh ministerial team before the House today. With your forbearance, may I offer the House's congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) on becoming parliamentarian of the year at *The Spectator* awards yesterday. I reap the benefits of her as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, and I am very grateful for it.

This Government are committed to harnessing the insight of a range of stakeholders in delivering the review into responsible business conduct, announced in the trade strategy. That includes producer countries and experts from the global south. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Fairtrade, my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that my officials have already held discussions with Fairtrade tea experts from India and Kenya. The Minister for Trade is also engaging with businesses, civil society and trade unions.

Martin Rhodes: I recently met a campaigner from south-east Asia who is involved in freedom of association and independent trade union repression in the garment sector. With that in mind, and given that trade and business are facilitated through relationships, from national Governments to businesses to workers and their trade union representatives, does the Secretary of State agree that it is essential to involve stakeholders at every level of the supply chain, including those representing workers and unions in the global south, when informing the review of the UK and how we promote responsible business practices?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's work in this area, the conversations that he has and the insight that he shares with the House, as recently as today in his contribution. The responsible business conduct review will be critical to ensuring that businesses respect human rights, labour rights, the environment and anti-corruption

measures across their operations and supply chains. I reassure him that, in the conversations that I have already had with international counterparts in the few short weeks that I have been in this job, these issues, including forced labour situations and workers' rights, are raised. British values and the expectations we have as a country are raised with our international partners in trade talks.

Investment in Businesses

3. **Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage investment in businesses. [906089]

5. **Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to encourage investment in businesses. [906091]

7. **Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage investment in businesses. [906094]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): We are delivering bold action to drive investment and growth nationwide. Our modern industrial strategy is cutting red tape, saving businesses nearly £6 billion a year, and unlocking quicker, simpler ways to do business. We are investing £6.6 billion through the British Business Bank to help innovative firms scale, and we are rebuilding our infrastructure with a 10-year strategy, backed by at least £725 billion-worth of Government capital, providing the certainty needed to boost productivity, secure growth and jobs, and deliver sustainable growth right around the United Kingdom.

Terry Jermy: A report by the Rural Coalition highlights that with the right policy framework, the rural economy could increase productivity, leading to an additional £19 billion a year. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps the Department is taking to help to support businesses in rural areas, such as my constituency, to unlock that growth potential?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend not just for his contribution, but for his advocacy for the rural economy. This Government are committed to supporting businesses, including those in rural areas such as South West Norfolk, to thrive and grow. We know that rural areas offer significant growth potential, contributing £259 billion to England's gross value added in 2023. My Department provides support through the Help to Grow: Management business support service and the New Anglia Growth Hub. Our plan for small businesses will hardwire small business voices into Government to boost growth. On top of that and underpinning all of it is the modern industrial strategy, which provides stability into the long term—stability for which the business community right across the United Kingdom has been crying out for too long.

Sarah Hall: In Warrington, Platform is transforming the former Unilever site where Surf and Persil were once produced into a next-generation modular data centre that will provide the capacity, resilience and connectivity needed to power the UK's AI revolution. From Persil to pixels, Platform is taking a brownfield industrial site

with more than a century of manufacturing heritage and bringing it into the 21st-century economy. Will the Secretary of State set out what more the Department can do to support home-grown, local companies such as Platform to deliver projects of this kind, which combine cutting-edge AI infrastructure, data sovereignty, regional growth and high-value skills for the future workforce?

Peter Kyle: Warrington has been at the centre of previous industrial revolutions, and we are determined that it will be at the forefront of the industrial revolution that is unfolding, with a wave of digital technology and AI flowing across the world. We will use all the agency of this Government to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom benefit equally from that. My hon. Friend will know that work such as that by Platform on the transformation of the Unilever site in Warrington is exactly the kind of bold, future-facing investment that we want to enable. That is why we delivered the AI opportunities action plan so swiftly. We will create AI growth zones across the United Kingdom to create the infrastructure in which new businesses and businesses that are transforming places and communities such as Warrington will be at the forefront and able to grasp the very best of the global economy in the regions and nations of every part of the United Kingdom.

Dr Arthur: One of the great things about Edinburgh South West is that it has a flourishing renewables sector, which I think is reaching critical mass. A few weeks ago, I attended a fantastic roundtable that demonstrated the industry's desire to work with the UK Government to make their industrial strategy a complete success. Will the Secretary of State commit to meeting organisations in Edinburgh South West to discuss how we can ensure that our industrial strategy brings as many jobs as possible to Scotland's capital?

Peter Kyle: Again, my hon. Friend is a great advocate for the community that he represents in Parliament. I am very excited to meet the businesses that he references. We hit a milestone in the second quarter of this year, because the UK started to produce more than 50% of its energy using renewables. His community as well as other communities around the UK will benefit from the transition to renewables. This is an exciting time to do business, and this is an exciting sector of our economy; it is one of the fastest growing sectors in the global economy, and right here in the UK we are benefiting the most from it.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): A major lodge development at Irvine House near Canonbie, and the potential for a Center Parcs in the borders, show that there is still great potential for jobs in the tourism industry my constituency. Will the Secretary of State encourage the Chancellor to follow the advice of the Scottish Hospitality Group and give hospitality a fair deal in the Budget, rather than clobbering it as she did last time?

Peter Kyle: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that every sector of our economy is at the forefront of the Chancellor's mind as she stabilises and recovers our economy from the 14 years of chaos and confusion wrought by the Conservative party. I also assure him

that there will be no repeat of the mini-Budget that the Conservatives inflicted on our economy, the consequences of which we are still suffering today, which the right hon. Gentleman voted for and supported. We inherited a growth emergency because of the decisions taken by the Conservative party in government. We will recover from it; we will build back better; and we will make sure that every sector, including hospitality, benefits from the great economy we are moving towards.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): One change that would encourage significant investment is UK participation in the EU's internal electricity market. Energy trading with our closest neighbour is currently hugely inefficient, which only adds to the burden of energy costs that our businesses face. Will the Government put real pressure behind the negotiations that are ongoing with the EU to reinstate our internal energy trading with the EU?

Peter Kyle: As the hon. Lady knows, we have put a lot of effort into the reset with the EU. We have built new opportunities for British people and British business, and we will continue to do so.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Every Labour Government in history have ended their time in office with unemployment higher than when they started, and this Government have made a record-breaking start. Businesses large and small in West Suffolk are putting off investment decisions, freezing recruitment and laying off staff because of the burdens already imposed on them by this Government—business property relief, the family farms tax, national insurance contributions, and the employment rights legislation. After the last Budget, the Chancellor told the Confederation of British Industry that she was not going to “come back for more”, so will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to end the uncertainty and tell business very clearly that there are going to be no more tax rises on business in the Budget?

Peter Kyle: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the industrial strategy gives clarity on policy for 10 years into the future, which has been welcomed by businesses large and small. I also reassure him and the businesses in his community that there will be no repeat of the mini-Budget that the Conservatives inflicted on our country, for which we are still paying the price. Finally, I reassure him that we have a Chancellor who puts first and foremost the primary mission of this Government, which is economic growth—the kind of growth that is delivering record investment in our economy, from which every business, large and small, is benefiting equally right around the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the all-new ministerial team to their positions. They have inherited a crisis, because business confidence has plunged to a record low since the Chancellor's Halloween budget a year ago today. Will the Business Secretary assure this House that he will find and demonstrate his backbone, stand up to the Chancellor, and encourage business investment by following Conservative plans to reduce welfare spending so that we can scrap the family business tax and cut small business rates?

Peter Kyle: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming me to the Dispatch Box. We are very aware that we inherited a crisis—a crisis created by the Conservative party, including the state in which they left our global relations, the lack of growth in the economy and the effects of the mini-Budget. The reputation of our country was in tatters as a result and our public services were on their knees, but all of those things are being turned around because of the decisions taken by this Chancellor. The Conservatives should be celebrating the fact that we had the fastest growing economy in the G7 for the first six months of this year, because these are the kinds of actions that show we are getting growth and stability back into our economy, and give businesses the predictability upon which to build future success and prosperity and the creation of jobs. The Conservatives should be celebrating that, not talking our country down.

Industrial Strategy

4. Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on implementing the industrial strategy. [906090]

9. Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on implementing the industrial strategy. [906096]

14. Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on implementing the industrial strategy. [906104]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): The whole of Government are focused on delivering the industrial strategy, and significant progress has already been made. This month, we published our new quarterly update, which reports on the key economic indicators for growth-driving sectors, delivery milestones and major investments. With over £250 billion of investment committed and over 45,000 jobs supported since July, we are delivering on that vision.

Henry Tufnell: Mid and South Pembrokeshire plays a vital role in the UK's energy sector, supplying 20% of the UK's energy. This Government have recognised that the future of Britain's energy security depends on Pembrokeshire, identifying us as a key growth region and investing in our workforce with an £800,000 skills pilot. Will the Minister set out how the industrial strategy will help empower communities from Pembroke Dock to Milford Haven to continue to lead the way in our energy security and help generate local economic growth?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend has been a constant advocate for the energy potential of Pembrokeshire. That is why the industrial strategy supported south-west Wales's clean energy potential through targeted investment in infrastructure and workforce development. The strategy will build on that using the potential of the port of Milford Haven, floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea and carbon capture technologies. The £800,000 skills pilot that he refers to underpins that clean energy industries sector plan. The National Wealth Fund will also benefit Wales, as it will invest in the sectors he mentions that are prevalent in that area.

Noah Law: Cornwall has a huge role to play in making Britain a clean energy superpower. As Ministers will be aware, much thought has already gone into the making of an industrial strategy for Cornwall. The crucial piece now is to unlock the funding needed for industrial and economic development, particularly in the wake of the shared prosperity fund coming to an end. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the prospect of a set of investment measures to replace shared prosperity funding and ensure the realisation of Cornwall's unique industrial potential?

Blair McDougall: I know from holidaying in my hon. Friend's constituency that it is a place of incredible beauty, but I know from his constant advocacy that it is also a place of huge industrial potential. Cornwall will benefit from access to the £200 million investment fund, which provides debt and equity finance of up to £5 million for businesses in the south-west. That has already delivered £51.8 million of direct investment, leveraging an additional £48.1 million. I know he has big plans for industry in Cornwall, and we will work with him, especially on access to finance, to ensure that we can unlock that potential. We will of course work with our colleagues in MHCLG.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British buses. Our bus manufacturing industry supports thousands of jobs across the country, but faces an existential challenge from China. Market share has increased rapidly, and the Scottish National party's disastrous ScotZEB 2 scheme sent less than 20% of orders to Scotland's sole manufacturer, which directly jeopardised 400 jobs earlier this year. What urgent interventions are Ministers considering to contend with the rise in Chinese market share? Has the Minister discussed this issue with colleagues in the Department for Transport prior to the publication of the 10-year bus pipeline next month? Record bus funding should not be a shopping list for China.

Blair McDougall: I share my hon. Friend's frustration at the lack of an industrial strategy from the SNP Government in Edinburgh. It has meant that workers at Alexander Dennis in his constituency are on furlough rather than doing what they do best: making world-class buses for public transport. For our part, we are supporting combined mayoral authorities to co-ordinate the procurement of buses through a Crown Commercial Service commercial agreement, and we are publishing a 10-year pipeline of future bus orders to provide the much-needed certainty that the sector requires. That includes providing advice on using social value criteria that suppliers such as Alexander Dennis are well placed to meet when procuring new buses, such as creating and retaining jobs in a way that respects our legal obligations. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for keeping this issue on the agenda.

Mr Speaker: It is no use the Secretary State looking at me with a grin as though I am out of order. We are still only on the second question and I have to get some other Members in—that is all I am bothered about. It will get worse shortly—I have got Jim to come! I call Robin Swann.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I will not take the dig about being short personally, Mr Speaker.

The industrial strategy and the strategic defence review both offer great opportunities to the entire United Kingdom. Can I seek reassurances from the Minister that he will work with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland businesses get benefit out of both?

Blair McDougall: I can absolutely give the hon. Member that reassurance. I have already met with my opposite number in the Northern Ireland Executive. The hon. Member mentions defence industries in particular, and it feels like every single month there is a significant defence order as part of the industrial strategy. It shows that these are not just words on paper, but that we are delivering within the real economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister and, indeed, the whole Front-Bench team to their places—well done!

On the industrial strategy, what steps have been taken to fund high-quality workforce apprenticeships in sectors such as technology, manufacturing and hospitality, to provide young people with opportunities for employment and lives in those industries? Will the Minister undertake to discuss these matters with the relevant Minister at the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Blair McDougall: As I said to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) a moment ago, we have already met with the Northern Ireland Executive on these issues. Skills are an essential part of the industrial strategy because we see, again and again, industries around the country that are desperate to grow, and have the orders, but are unable to create the high-paying jobs that we need. That is an absolute priority for us as we implement the industrial strategy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): Labour's industrial strategy recognises that housing and infrastructure are vital to driving regional investment. But as I hope the Minister will know, across the road, the Treasury has been quietly consulting on changes to the landfill tax, ending the decades-long exemption for quarries. That change would add millions of pounds on to infrastructure projects and increase tax costs for construction businesses across the country. How would such a move help grow our economy and build the homes and infrastructure that we need?

Blair McDougall: We are fast approaching the time of year when I have to tell my children that they will have to wait until Christmas to find out what their presents are. The hon. Gentleman knows that he has to wait until the Budget to find out what is in the Budget. He mentioned planning. We have made huge changes to planning rules, which have resulted in a saving of about £272 million in red-tape costs for business, so we are ensuring that that sector, in particular, has the environment it needs to contribute to growth.

Gareth Davies: I am afraid that is not good enough. The industry is facing deep uncertainty around the kite flying going on across the road at the Treasury. I realise that he is not responsible for that, but he needs a better answer for the construction industry. The Construction

Products Association has just cut its growth forecast for the sector to barely 1% next year, warning that the uncertainty over new taxes is choking investment. I will ask the Minister again: how on earth will adding £28,000 to the cost of a new home, or 25% to road construction costs, through a new builders tax do anything other than cement the slowdown that Labour is overseeing in our economy?

Blair McDougall: To stand up and raise uncertainty, and then complain about it, is quite something. The shadow Minister said that we are slowing growth; we were the fastest-growing economy in the G7 in the first half of 2025. We are now the fourth-largest exporter in the world, and we have had five interest-rate cuts in a row—

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Do you even know what the question was?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Timothy, you used to be an adviser who specialised in not answering questions; we do not need any help! [*Laughter.*]

Hon. Members: More!

Blair McDougall: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am glad that those on the Opposition Benches recognise excellence when they see it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I also welcome the ministerial Front Benchers to their new roles. The Liberal Democrats have long championed an industrial strategy. In government, we created the Green Investment Bank, the British Business Bank and the regional growth fund, and we opposed the Conservative Government's damaging decision to scrap the industrial plan. We welcome the industrial strategy's return, especially its focus on investing in skills.

However, businesses know that the apprenticeship levy does not work: funding is hard to access and millions go unspent. We welcomed the pledge in June to replace it with a more flexible growth and skills levy, but firms and young people are still awaiting details. Will the Minister provide details of what training this will fund, so that businesses and young people can plan ahead with certainty?

Blair McDougall: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words on my new appointment. I will not get ahead of announcements on that, but given the importance of skills to the industrial strategy, we are not waiting for those announcements. We have had TechFirst, a £187 million investment in secondary school pupils, undergraduates, PhD students, entrepreneurs and businesses, to help them get ahead on that. We have the engineering package of over £100 million, and the defence package of £182 million. We are making those investments now to ensure that the pipeline is there for those industries, which are the priority within the industrial strategy.

Small and Medium-sized Businesses

6. **Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help support business growth through his Department's plan for small and medium-sized businesses. [906093]

11. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help support business growth through his Department's plan for small and medium-sized businesses. [906098]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): The Government have launched our small business plan, which my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), did so much great work on. "Backing your Business" outlines how we will make thriving small and medium-sized businesses a reality across the UK. We are unlocking billions of pounds in finance to support businesses, including through the most significant reforms to tackle late payments in 25 years. We will support businesses further by revitalising high streets and delivering growth-boosting support for digital adoption through a new online business growth service.

Sally Jameson: For British Beauty Week last week, I visited the award-winning Doncaster salon Beauty Lounge in Armthorpe. The British beauty industry is a massive success story for business. What will the Minister do in his new role to support the industry and salons across the country?

Blair McDougall: As ever, my hon. Friend is a great advocate for all things Doncaster. The beauty sector is a vital driver of innovation, sustainability and wellbeing across the economy, but also locally, through businesses like the Beauty Lounge. That is why we are backing small businesses through the small business plan, as I just set out, but we are also reforming business rates and have increased the employment allowance, enabling employers to hire up to four full-time workers without paying national insurance contributions. I am always told on social media that I am in need of a glow-up—perhaps the next time I am in Doncaster, the Beauty Lounge can help me out.

Jo Platt: Leigh and Atherton has many exceptional SMEs that are driving local growth, particularly in manufacturing, engineering and construction. What steps is the Minister taking to make sure that SMEs in areas like mine receive targeted support as part of efforts to address regional imbalance and reduce reliance on our major metropolitan centres?

Blair McDougall: I know my hon. Friend is a great believer in Leigh and Atherton's untapped potential, and so are we. We have launched the small business strategy, with action on late payments, action to unlock access to finance, and better, simpler support through the business growth hub. In addition to that, Leigh will receive £20 million through the pride in place programme. I know my hon. Friend fought hard for that on her community's behalf.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): My constituency has nearly 5,000 SMEs, all of which are facing increasing business rates and taxes, threatening jobs and growth. Will the Minister signal his support for SMEs by following the Conservative party's lead and completely abolishing business rates for pubs and restaurants on the high street?

Blair McDougall: I gently say to the hon. Member that he did not do that in 14 years in government. Indeed, the Conservatives were set to remove the reliefs on small businesses. Rather than repeating the mistakes of the Liz Truss Budget with unfunded tax commitments, we are giving real support to businesses now, including by increasing the employment allowance so that more and more of the small businesses that he describes do not pay national insurance contributions at all.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I recently met with Discover Adventure, a small business in Coombe Bissett which is genuinely struggling to engage with Government over the recent package travel regulations. It sits ambiguously between DBT, the Department for Transport and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; indeed, a question was thrown back today, having been tabled in the Table Office. May I sincerely ask the Minister to help me locate the correct Minister to deal with the Association of Independent Tour Operators? This is a vital small business sector in this country, and it needs someone to engage with in Government over these regulations.

Blair McDougall: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his constructive question; I am very happy to pursue that within Government. The wider point is that both the small business strategy and the industrial strategy are important because they are cross-Government strategies, as lots of sectors and individual businesses are facing challenges that are not just the responsibility of one Minister. I will certainly follow up on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks about British Beauty Week. In addition to beauty businesses, one of the key ingredients for growth on our high streets is having a post office in the mix. As Post Office Minister, he has inherited a network of 11,500 post offices across the country and a consultation on the size of that network. Can he echo what his predecessor said at the Dispatch Box, and commit to supporting our high streets by maintaining the scale of the post office network throughout this Parliament?

Blair McDougall: I thank the shadow Minister for her welcome. She is absolutely right about the anchoring effect of post offices on high streets all over the country. We know not just that, as we mentioned in the Green Paper, if people go to their post office they are likely to spend money in local shops, but that post offices are essential—as I found out during a visit to one the day before yesterday—in giving small businesses somewhere to take their takings. The Green Paper set out the options for maintenance of the post office network, and it is certainly our intention to maintain it.

Motability Operations

8. **Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op):** Whether he has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on increasing the use of British-built cars by Motability Operations. [906095]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): I regularly engage with my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary, as my hon. Friend would expect. We share the importance of increasing the uptake of the excellent cars built across the United Kingdom. The Motability scheme supports those in receipt of a qualifying mobility allowance, and the Government will continue to work with Motability to ensure that the scheme meets the transport needs of disabled people.

Alex Sobel: One in five new cars is now purchased through the Motability Scheme. This presents an unprecedented opportunity for the British car industry, as the scheme stipulates what cars its users can buy. Has the Secretary of State considered that we could hugely increase the sales of British cars by stipulating that only British-built cars can be bought—and this is public money—by Motability users, which would not just safeguard thousands of British jobs, but create a world-leading industry in accessible vehicles?

Peter Kyle: That was a very thoughtful contribution, and I am very grateful for it. The Motability Foundation is an independent charity and is regulated by the Charity Commission, but it does engage fully with the Government in the most respectful way. As my hon. Friend would imagine, I have instructed my officials to work with those in the Department for Work and Pensions to see how we can make recommendations and certainly to support the take-up of British cars as much as possible. This Government are of course committed to the growth of the automotive sector. We are providing support through programmes such as DRIVE35, the electric car grant, which will invest up to £2.5 billion of support into zero emission manufacturing across the UK.

Fair Pay Agreements

10. **Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential merits of implementing fair pay agreements in a range of business sectors. [906097]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I thank my hon. Friend for his long-standing advocacy in this area. We want to work constructively with unions, employers and stakeholders to build on the Employment Rights Bill. Our first priority for a fair pay agreement is adult social care, a large and complex sector with over 19,000 providers and 1.5 million dedicated workers. As such, our priority is ensuring that this process works effectively, which is why I am delighted that the Government have announced a £500 million investment in the first ever fair pay agreement in the social care sector. We will use what we learn to consider where fair pay agreements can offer similar benefits across other sectors.

Andy McDonald: I thank the Minister for her response, but with the cost of living pressures continuing, it is clear that delivering increased real incomes and better living standards is our No. 1 priority. Can the Minister say a little more about which further sectors are most ready for fair pay agreements, and what steps the Department is taking to meet the UK's obligations, as a member of the International Labour Organisation, to extend sectoral collective bargaining as a means to raise pay and improve living standards?

Kate Dearden: I welcome my hon. Friend's support for sectoral collective bargaining and collective agreements as a key steer for improving living standards across workplaces in the country. As he knows, we are demonstrating our commitment to sectoral collective bargaining with the social care and school support staff sectors. The UK is committed to working internationally to strengthen workers' rights and enhance Labour standards globally. We fully support the work of the International Labour Organisation and will continue to meet our obligations under the ILO.

Trading Relationships

12. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the UK's trading relationships with other countries. [906102]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): This Government wasted no time when it came to trade deals—not just talking about them, but delivering them. We have already secured trade deals with the biggest economy in the world, one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and our biggest trading market. The Government's clear principle is to deliver for British businesses and the British people. That is why in the first month of my new role I travelled to three continents to further strengthen UK trade and investment.

Torcuil Crichton: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and invite him to Benbecula Distillery in my place. It is a dramatic lighthouse distillery, and a great addition to the landscape. It recently secured £1.5 million from the British Business Bank's investment fund. Benbecula's distillery is one of a chain of small distilleries across the Western Isles and other islands. I had a wee dram in Raasay, where that distillery has revived the island as much as its product revived me. What is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that this new wave of small Scottish distilleries will be part of the next round of trade deals?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful for the invitation. I can reassure my hon. Friend that when we have the opportunity to take delegations abroad, the Scotch Whisky Association and representatives of those distilleries are always with us. We fight hard for the Scotch whisky business. We know how important it is right across the United Kingdom and to the UK's economy overall. The week before last I was in India with the Prime Minister where we were furthering the trade deal we have secured and making sure that we exploit all the opportunities that these trade deals present. It is important to not only secure trade deals but make sure that we exploit all the opportunities right across the economy. That deal alone will unleash over £1 billion-worth of opportunities for the Scotch whisky industry, and that is something we should all celebrate.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): In taking steps to improve our trading relationship with other countries, I welcome the new sanctions announced by the UK and the US targeting Russia's two largest oil companies: Rosneft and Lukoil. However, despite pointing out to Ministers on several occasions that hundreds of billions of pounds have been generated for Russia as a result of

oil and gas being shipped under British companies with British insurance, no action has been taken to stop this. Given that every vessel transporting Russian liquefied natural gas is financing the destruction of Ukrainian villages, towns and cities and the deaths of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, when will this Government act to end the complicity of UK companies in this?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Member will know that the Prime Minister and this Government stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine, and we have since the moment we came into office. We are highly aware of the risks that Russia poses, not just to Ukraine but to the continent of Europe. We are also aware of the constant attacks this country undergoes from cyber-security threats via Russia and Russia-sponsored activity. I can assure the hon. Member, from conversations I constantly have across Government and the forums across Government I am part of, that we are very aware of this threat and act constantly against it.

Farming Sector: US Trading Relationship

13. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the potential impact of the trading relationship with the US on the farming sector. [906103]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his question. The UK was the first country to secure such an agreement with the US—one which will save thousands of jobs, protect key British industries and farmers, and drive economic growth. People said that it would be impossible to deliver such a deal without compromising on food standards, but we have proven them wrong. This Government have delivered a deal that protects our high food standards while giving British farmers access to a market of 340 million people where they can sell their high-quality beef.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State is right that any threat of an imminent increase in US beef imports in particular is clearly not the problem, but it has not gone away either. The US Department of Agriculture has a foreign agricultural service with 100 different offices, embassies and trade missions. They work with US farming groups around the world to promote their product, and they are not spending that money just to stand still. What will the Secretary of State be doing to ensure that our farmers have the same opportunities, so that they can see free trade agreements not just as threats but opportunities too?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the right hon. Member's insightful and thoughtful contribution. As I said, striking trade deals is vital. That is why we put so much energy into it and have had so much success, and there will be more to come. It is very important that the whole British economy and Government make sure that we exploit the full opportunities that all these agreements offer. The Department for Business and Trade has embedded highly talented trade experts right across the world, and they are trying to do just that on the frontline of all the economic opportunities we perceive around the world, and that includes agriculture. If there are

specific areas where the right hon. Member perceives that the agricultural sector, either in his patch or across the United Kingdom, has an opportunity that is not yet being exploited, I want to hear from and work with him to make sure that British farmers benefit.

Jaguar Land Rover: Cyber-attack

15. Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses in the Jaguar Land Rover supply chain affected by the recent cyber-attack. [906105]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): All Jaguar Land Rover's UK factories have restarted and the company is offering a financing scheme to qualifying suppliers. UK Export Finance has also provided a partial guarantee for a £1.5 billion loan from commercial lenders to help JLR manage its businesses and pay its suppliers. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's continued advocacy for the Jaguar Land Rover supply chain, in particular small businesses in the Burnley constituency. I understand that small businesses are now receiving support through the scheme, although more work needs to be done.

Oliver Ryan: I thank the Minister for that answer, for his work thus far, and for his extensive correspondence with me and the industry during this crisis. Local suppliers, such as the brilliant BCW in Burnley, have told me that the finance just is not getting to suppliers and that some of them are going to the wall or cutting jobs. JLR is not doing enough to avoid widespread supply chain job losses. This is affecting the entire British car industry through contagion effects, and suppliers are telling me that they are not out of the woods yet. What more can he do to get more support for our suppliers, such as BCW?

Chris McDonald: BCW in my hon. Friend's constituency is an extremely important engineering firm not only for Jaguar Land Rover, but for our manufacturing supply chains. The concerns he has raised about access to finance for companies lower down in the supply chain are ones that I have raised with both Jaguar Land Rover and banks—I had with a meeting with most of the lenders. However, I commend the work of the Confederation of British Metalforming, which works with the supply chain. I understand that it had positive meetings with Jaguar Land Rover recently, although of course there is a cash financing issue as factories come up to speed. I will be paying close attention to that in the coming weeks.

Topical Questions

T1. [906111] Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): The growth emergency we inherited from the previous Government demands a proportionate response. That means an unrelenting focus on pro-business policies. It means harnessing investment in our high growth sectors and tirelessly implementing our modern industrial strategy. It means shaking up our entire regulatory system. The Department for Business and Trade is stripping out the rules, regulations and red tape that are

holding business back. We are helping reduce the regulatory burden by 25%, cutting out 200 hours of needless paperwork for companies so far. We are simplifying rules around company reporting, saving firms £230 million. We are bringing in a strengthened growth duty for regulators and launching a new performance dashboard, injecting agility into our regulatory regime. Where regulators are doubling up, we are streamlining them. We are abolishing the British Hallmarking Council, transferring functions to the Department. This is a new ministerial team acting with urgency. We are using every lever we have to grow the economy and to deliver for this Government's plan for change.

Ben Obese-Jecty: On Tuesday, the Ministry of Defence announced the launch of Project Fairfax, which will see a defence technology cluster established on surplus MOD land at RAF Wyton in Huntingdon. This is a hugely exciting opportunity for both Huntingdon and the MOD, as we seek to create a defence ecosystem in sites we have identified across Huntingdonshire. With a decision yet to be made about identifying investible sites, and regarding the £600 million fund available through the strategic sites accelerator programme, will the Secretary of State meet me and the chief executive of my local council to discuss the inclusion of potential defence sites in Huntingdon?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question, and I know that his community will be grateful for his question, too. I can assure him that we are working to mobilise the strategic sites accelerator, which will operate across the nation. We expect to communicate how and when the programme will deploy in the coming period into spring. As he knows, RAF Wyton is a key site for cyber and specialist operations command. It is an important asset for our nation. I, or the relevant Minister, will of course meet him to discuss how we can better support that site going forward, but already within Government it is a very highly valued asset.

T3. [906114] Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): Luxfer Gas Cylinders in my constituency employs more than 200 people and is a key supplier to hydrogen allocation round 1 projects. It wants to expand to become the UK's only manufacturer of high pressure hydrogen cylinders for hydrogen tube trailers and hydrogen vehicle fuel systems, which are currently imported. Will the Minister meet me and other MPs who have significant hydrogen and fuel cell manufacturers in their constituencies to discuss how existing Government support for hydrogen can best drive UK growth and jobs?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): I was pleased to address a meeting of Hydrogen UK just last week, where I reaffirmed Government support for the sector, which we have recognised through our industrial strategy and the clean energy industries sector plan. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss in particular Luxfer's ambitions to invest more in the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome the team to their significant roles for the United Kingdom.

This week, the other place voted for five reasonable amendments to the Employment Rights Bill, representing a meaningful compromise with cross-party support to mitigate some of the worst of the damage caused by the Bill. As the Office for Budget Responsibility now scores the impact of that legislation, this is one of the last chances to avoid the costs, taxes and spending cuts that will result from it. Will the Secretary of State now put country before party, do the right thing by British business and accept those compromise amendments?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the shadow Secretary of State's warm words. He shadowed me when I first went into my role at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology; he was then moved here before me, so I have followed him to this role. I watch with trepidation the next reshuffle on his Benches.

The shadow Secretary of State mentions the workers' rights Bill, which is still between the two Houses; I hope we will be reconciled as soon as possible so that it can get Royal Assent and benefit workers and businesses right across the nation. Once the Bill passes, we will, of course, undertake a period of implementation. My predecessor and the previous Deputy Prime Minister, who championed this legislation, were clear from the outset that the Bill will modernise the British workplace so that it is beneficial for businesses and for the people who work in them.

The modern economy has changed; it is different from 20 years ago. The Conservatives had the time to modernise the economy and the relationships within workplaces, and they chose not to take that—

Mr Speaker: Order. I don't want to do this, but this is topicals, and all these Members need to get in. We did not get through the list already. You have to help me to help them.

Andrew Griffith: I will save time, Mr Speaker, by not mentioning the 13 leading business organisations that have all called for certainty now—not well-intentioned future consultations on implementation, but certainty now, because jobs and the economy are bleeding out. The Secretary of State will know that even the Resolution Foundation—that wonderful finishing school for aspiring Labour Ministers—said this week that some of the measures in the Bill should not be proceeded with.

Peter Kyle: Again, the Conservatives had 14 years in which the economy was changing. They had the chance to tackle zero-hours contracts, and what did they do? Nothing. They had the chance to tackle fire and rehire, and they did nothing. They had the chance to tackle the challenges of being an app-based employee, and they chose to do nothing. We are acting to modernise the economy and the relationship out there between businesses and workers because that is what is needed. It is what workers and businesses need, and it is what this Government are delivering.

T4. [906115] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Last Friday, alongside my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, I attended the Get Britain Growing: South East conference, which discussed opportunities across advanced manufacturing, life sciences, digital innovation and beyond. Will the Minister set out how the industrial strategy will ensure that Bracknell and the wider south-east reaches its full potential?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): My hon. Friend is a dynamic advocate for a dynamic part of the country in the Thames valley. The industrial strategy and its sector plans highlight the strengths in his area, especially in tech and life sciences. Alongside the national package to grow the sector, specific interventions in the south-east include an AI growth zone in Culham, support for the Solent freeport, expanding the British Business Bank's nations and regions investment fund and major projects backing the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor. We will keep working with my hon. Friend to unlock the potential across the south-east.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Businesses across the country are struggling with unaffordable energy costs. The burden of this Government's national insurance contributions rise and uncertainty over the Employment Rights Bill are compounded by the immense struggle caused by sky-high energy bills. I urge the Government to act with more urgency in addressing energy costs for businesses, including through accelerating the launch of the industrial competitiveness scheme, the consultation for which is not even due to be launched until the end of the year. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to cut operating costs for businesses, and will the Government consider Liberal Democrat proposals to break the link between gas and energy prices, halving bills within a decade and easing pressures?

Peter Kyle: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are in constant contact with the Energy Secretary. When I was at DSIT, we co-chaired the AI energy council, and we are working together to get the transition to renewable power done as swiftly as possible, generating the wealth that our country needs from the transition period. Also, we are lowering bills and, through some targeted interventions, ensuring that those key businesses get the support they need on the challenges with energy prices and supply that we inherited when we came into office.

T6. [906119] **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): Horwich trailer manufacturer Indespension tells me that the post-Brexit regulatory system has significantly increased the approval cost for new trailer designs because of differing rules between GB, EU and Northern Irish markets. The business now spends more than £100,000 a year completing relevant paperwork. What measures is the Secretary of State taking to remove the administrative burden on firms so that instead of form filling, they can invest and create the well-paid jobs that I want to see in my local economy?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's passionate question. As he will know, we have struck a trade deal with the EU and reset the relationship with it. We will continue to build on that to deliver for all parts of our economy.

T2. [906112] **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Conservatives brought in a national guarantee of 11,500 post offices in the network. Labour has promised to scrap that. What assurances can Ministers give to people in Middleton, Lockington, Leconfield, Cherry Burton, Aldbrough, Walkington, Tickton, Hedon, Wawne,

Skirlaugh, Sproatley, Beverley, Roos, Ottringham, Keyingham, Withernsea, Easington and Thorngumbald that their post offices will be retained?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Stuart, please—we do not read out the phone directory, and trying to do so in a topical does not work for you or me.

Blair McDougall: As I said to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), we are committed to ensuring not just that we work to maintain the post office network, but that we deal with some of those long-standing issues about the viability of the business going forward—issues that the Conservatives had 14 years to fix and did not.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Workers at Tata's Trostre site in my constituency have been hard hit by the five-week annual stoppage, leaving them short of money over Christmas. Despite reassurances from Tata, the Minister will understand that they are worried that this is a sign of worse to come. What is he doing to bring down energy prices, negotiate preferential treatment for our products to access the EU, and ensure that we strengthen our protections against cheap imports—all vital to the future of our steel industry?

Chris McDonald: We recognise the importance of the steel industry in Wales and of Trostre in particular, which has more than 70 years of tinsplate production and is the only tinning line in the UK. I met the chief executive of Tata Steel this week to discuss this very issue. He referred to a softening in market demand, but fundamentally, this Government are committed to creating a better business environment for steel in the UK, so that it can compete with Europe, including on energy prices.

T5. [906116] **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency have told me about the impact that Trump's trade war is having on their ability to export to the United States. What is the Secretary of State doing to support these vital job creators and ensure that British goods can continue to be sold worldwide?

Blair McDougall: The hon. Member raises an important point, particularly for small businesses, which rely on those schemes. I pay tribute to the Royal Mail for the speed at which it reacted to those de minimis changes to ensure that businesses were able to continue. We keep working with Royal Mail as well to ensure that that is possible.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): In rural constituencies like South Norfolk, I can think of no better place for employment than our pubs. From the Wheel of Fortune in Alington to the Angel Inn in Loddon, these pubs are not just vital hubs of our communities but drivers of economic growth. In fact, Mr Speaker, you are more than welcome to join my Christmas pub team on 13 December. What support are the Government putting in place to help those businesses provide decent employment?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question—I am glad he got in today. I can assure him that we are working closely with pubs. We want pubs to be at the

beating heart of communities up and down the country. We know we have inherited a challenging environment for pubs. We listen to them and will be acting.

T7. [906120] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): Earlier, the Secretary of State said that he was committed to growing our car industry, but British car manufacturers face huge fines for selling cars that consumers actually want, while the Government use taxpayers' money to subsidise the purchase of foreign cars with Chinese batteries in them. What are the Government's plans to end the nonsensical zero emission vehicles mandate, and to restore a normal market, from which our car industry would benefit?

Peter Kyle: You would have thought, Mr Speaker, that the hon. Gentleman might say a good word about our British automotive sector. The trade deal that we struck with America—the first and the best such trade deal—protected 44,000 jobs from the tariff challenges being felt around the world. We are creating new opportunities and investing. As the House saw, the Government acted at speed to protect Jaguar Land Rover and its entire supply chain in its hour of need. This Government act when we need to and create opportunities wherever we can, and we will continue to do so.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): To make steel in this country, we need ceramics. To build houses in this country, we need ceramics. Five of the eight industrial strategy growth sectors require ceramics. Ahead of the launch of the British industrial competitiveness scheme, might there be any interim relief from energy prices for energy-intensive industries?

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for ceramics. This is only my second time at the Dispatch Box, but it is also the second time that he has asked me about this. He and I have already met to discuss it, and I am happy to have further conversations with him and industry about everything we can do, as soon as possible, to support the sector with its energy costs.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I launched my "Pub of the Year" award at the Goods Yard in Broadstone last week. Fifty-four pubs and two breweries in Mid Dorset and North Poole support 1,600 jobs and underpin the vibrancy of our towns and villages, but two thirds of them have had to cut jobs or hours since the damaging jobs tax. Hospitality venues typically operate seven days a week, and sometimes more than 12 hours a day, so they need many part-time workers. Will the Government consult on a new lower rate of employer national insurance for workers earning £5,000 to £9,100, to support the employment of part-time workers and drive growth?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I come from a small business family in the hospitality sector, so I completely understand how important the sector is for local economies and jobs—especially pubs, which are the backbone of our high streets and important for pride in our local economies and communities. We are helping pubs through our £1.5 million hospitality support scheme, and through brilliant initiatives such as Pub is The Hub, for which £440,000 was recently announced. More will be announced soon.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As of tomorrow, the Lending Standards Board will be no more, because its funders—the banks—have pulled out. Will Minister meet me urgently to take forward the good work that the board was doing, particularly on the ethnicity code? That work exposed the fact that only 19% of minority businesses achieve loans, whereas 58% of standard applications do.

Blair McDougall: Businesses led by entrepreneurs from ethnic minority backgrounds make a huge contribution to all our constituencies. Indeed, I met two such remarkable business people in Acton a couple of days ago. My hon. Friend is right to mention that finance is a barrier for under-represented groups, including ethnic minorities. Dealing with that is a key part of the small business strategy, and it is why we have put billions more into the British Business Bank. She has led on these issues, and I am of course happy to meet her to discuss the future of the programme that she mentions.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): To show his deregulatory zeal, the Business Secretary just boasted about scrapping the British Hallmarking Council, which has one part-time employee. Given that every £1 of regulatory costs has the same impact on investment as £1 taken in tax, why are the Government proceeding with their unemployment Bill and proposing a £5 billion a year tax on British businesses?

Peter Kyle: It is quite extraordinary; after just a couple of weeks in the job, I have announced £230 million of deregulation every year—£1 billion-worth between now and the next general election—and what do the Conservatives do? They say that we are not going far enough. They had 14 years; I have had a couple of weeks! It is about time they started coming up with better questions, and stopped criticising a Government who act where they failed to.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Spinning out of the industrial strategy is the eagerly awaited critical minerals strategy, the launch of which will happen in due course—or dreckly, as we say in Cornwall. It is of particular interest to my constituency. Canada, the US and Australia have already established new mineral exploration funds. Such funds support junior exploration companies in building up energy security and contributing to export-led growth. Is the Department considering such a fund as part of the critical minerals strategy?

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy for the Cornish critical minerals industry—in fact, I thank all our fantastic Cornish MPs. He knows that the critical minerals strategy is eagerly anticipated in Cornwall and across the UK. The minerals in Cornwall are crucial to the future of our critical minerals industry and the security of the UK. We have the largest lithium deposits in Europe; we need to take advantage of that. We will look at all options to ensure that we get the financing to exploit those minerals.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Many small businesses rely on Facebook advertising to reach customers, but too many find that if they get hacked, it takes too long for Meta to let them back into their account. That

has been the case for Andy Campbell, who runs ATR Carpet Cleaning. Will the Minister advise on how we can get the likes of Meta to reconnect these people with their accounts, because Meta is not doing that for us?

Blair McDougall: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. One of my constituents is in a similar case, and it is devastating. For a large business, fraud and economic crime is an inconvenience; for a small business, it can be existential. That is one of the reasons why, this week, we are communicating with small businesses to ensure that they up their cyber-security. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman on this issue.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): What steps is the Department taking to improve access to finance for UK start-ups seeking to scale up, given that only 1% of UK start-ups raise equity of more than £100 million? By comparison, in the US, 6% of start-ups do so. Furthermore, how can we ensure that women get a fair share of access to finance?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend asks exactly the right questions, which I am extremely grateful for, because they are central to the programme of economic reform that this Government are undertaking. She will know from the Mansion House reforms that we are unlocking capital into our economy via the pensions reforms being undertaken. We are making sure, right from the start, that women have a voice. I did the same in my role in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and in this role, I will continue to ensure that women are championed right across the economy, that we get capital where it needs to be, and that we accept that we have brilliant businesses that need targeted intervention, which we will provide to make sure that scale-ups happen.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Power Roll in my constituency has pioneered a world-beating, flexible, lightweight solar panel module. The next four weeks are a critical period for the company; a £5 million investment is needed to keep production and jobs in the north-east. Will my hon. and right hon. Friends on the Front Bench work with me to help secure this Great British innovation's future in east Durham?

Chris McDonald: I am familiar with Power Roll. I have met the chief executive, and my hon. Friend has advocated extremely well for the company. I have also met potential investors in the business. I am happy to discuss that further with him after questions today.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): In recent years, imported bricks have made up nearly 20% of the UK brick market, yet I know that organisations such as Ibstock Brick in North West Leicestershire can supply the bricks for the homes that we need. How do we make sure that UK brick manufacturers can maximise investment, employ local people and deliver the bricks that we need for the future?

Chris McDonald: I am determined that this Government's grand ambition for building will ensure that we supply more UK bricks, have fewer imports, and increase the productivity of our brick kilns around the country, including at Ibstock. The key is getting energy prices down, and that is what we are working on for our industrial strategy.

Sudan: Protection of Civilians

10.38 am

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the UK's activity to promote the protection of civilians, following a reported massacre at El Fasher's Saudi maternity hospital.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): With your permission, Mr Speaker, before answering my right hon. Friend's question, I will say a few words about Hurricane Melissa, which is currently a category 1 or 2 hurricane. It is passing through the Bahamas' outer islands and is impacting our British overseas territory, the Turks and Caicos Islands. I have been in touch with the Governor and Premier in the last day. We have deployed response teams to the region and mobilised £2.5 million in emergency humanitarian aid to help Jamaica rebuild in the wake of this disaster, the full scale of which is only now becoming clear. I am sure that the House will concur with the words of His Majesty the King and all those who have sent their support and solidarity to all those affected, and will be thinking of those who have lost their life, not just in Jamaica, but in Haiti and other countries across the region.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask this question. She will know of my keen interest in this issue over many years, including during the time in my career when I was working with Oxfam in her constituency on these issues, and with our late close friend, Jo Cox, on past atrocities and appalling situations in the conflict in Sudan. The reports of mass atrocities against civilians, and of the forced displacement caused by the Rapid Support Forces advances in El Fasher, are horrifying and deeply alarming. The scale of suffering is unconscionable. What is happening is often based on people's ethnicity. Women and girls face widespread sexual and gender-based violence, and there is evidence mounting of defenceless civilians being executed and tortured, with aid workers also being targeted as they try to reach the most vulnerable communities facing famine.

As the United Nations Security Council penholder, we have called an emergency council session later today to maintain the spotlight on this situation, and to build pressure on the RSF to de-escalate, in line with UN Security Council resolution 2736. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement condemning the killing of aid workers, including the executions reported in the Saudi maternity hospital, which was one of the last functioning facilities in El Fasher. That followed her statement on 27 October, which called on the RSF to protect civilians and urgently facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access.

As the third-largest donor, we are mobilising £23 million of the £120 million announced in April to support the emergency humanitarian response in North Darfur. That will support those facing sexual violence, and go towards the delivery of lifesaving food and health assistance by partners such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Sudan Humanitarian Fund and the Cash Consortium of Sudan.

As the Foreign Secretary said, the RSF leadership are responsible for the actions of their forces. All parties to the conflict must urgently act to protect civilians and facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access. I can confirm that our special representative has been in contact with the RSF and Tasis to press for restraint and respect for international humanitarian law, and they are pressing for a call with Hemedti now.

Anneliese Dodds: Mr Speaker, I am very grateful to you for granting this urgent question. The scale of suffering in Sudan's war on civilians is almost impossible to comprehend. A population the size of Australia's are living in acute hunger. A population the size of London's have been forced to flee their home. There are consistent reports of conflict-related sexual violence, and consistent warnings that if the international community do not act, we will effectively see a slow-motion Srebrenica. The Minister set out the reports of what may have happened at El Fasher's maternity hospital yesterday evening; 460 people could have been slaughtered in a maternity hospital—patients, their companions and medical staff. This surely must be a turning point in the war, and for the international community's focus on it.

The Minister talked about the special representative's contact, but what specific conversations have the Foreign Secretary and Ministers had with their counterparts, particularly in the Quad countries—the United States said it wanted to take a leadership position on these issues—but also in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates on the issue of civilian protection?

Secondly, I was pleased to hear that an emergency session of the Security Council has been called. What will the UK Government press other countries in the UN to commit to at that session? Thirdly, are the Government confident that the arms control export regime has been robust in this case, given recent reports?

What is the Government's assessment of claims that El Fasher appears to be at the start of a systematic and intentional process of ethnic cleansing of Fur, Zaghawa and Berti indigenous communities, through forced displacement and summary execution? Finally, what are the Government doing to prevent what is happening in El Fasher from also happening in Tawila, to which so many thousands of terrified civilians have fled?

Stephen Doughty: I share my right hon. Friend's outrage and horror at the reports we are receiving. We have made repeated calls for restraint on all sides in this conflict. We have shown leadership as the UN penholder, as one of the largest donors, through our work with partners, including those in the Quad, and through the work of our special representative. I know that she reflects the concerns of many Sudanese living in the United Kingdom, including in my constituency, about what is happening.

My right hon. Friend asked some specific questions. We are in regular contact with our partners in the Quad and engage with all the countries regularly at both ministerial and official level. Senior officials, including the special representative, are speaking on an ongoing basis and asking all parties to show restraint and to refrain from activity that prolongs the conflict.

My right hon. Friend asked about the situation in Tawila. We want to ensure that people are supported, particularly those who have fled. As I said, we have mobilised

£23 million to support the emergency humanitarian response. I am happy to come back to her with further details.

My right hon. Friend asked about the position that we will take at the Security Council. It will be very much in line with the position we have taken throughout, which is to call for an immediate end to the violence and to ensure that international humanitarian law is respected and upheld, that sexual violence is brought to an end and that we protect civilians in line with international law.

It is crucial that we continue to support accountability efforts for such atrocities, particularly as evidence emerges. We support the Centre for Information Resilience and non-governmental organisations looking to collect evidence of atrocities. We will not rest until all evidence has been collated and action is taken to hold people accountable.

We recently supported, for the third year running, lobbying efforts to secure the mandate renewal of the UN fact-finding mission at the UN Human Rights Council on 6 October. That is the only UN mechanism investigating human rights violations and abuse in Sudan. As hon. Members will be aware, it has not been allowed access by either side in the conflict, so it is incredibly difficult to establish what is happening, but we are looking carefully at all the evidence.

My right hon. Friend asked about the importance of our export control regime. I confirm that we continue to emphasise to all parties the importance of refraining from actions that prolong the conflict. Indeed, we want to see people come to the negotiating table to seek a political resolution. We take seriously any allegation that any equipment may have been transferred to Sudan in breach of any of our arms embargoes or conditions. I assure her that I am in contact with our officials on these matters. We must absolutely ensure that nothing is getting in that could facilitate these horrific scenes. We share my right hon. Friend's horror and will continue to play a leading role, including at the United Nations Security Council later today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): If I may, I will start by thanking the Minister for his update on Hurricane Melissa. On behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition, I add my thoughts and solidarity for all those affected at this time.

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question and to the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for raising the matter, because the reports of a massacre at the Saudi maternity hospital in El Fasher are appalling. The deliberate targeting of civilians, including women and newborns, is a disgrace. These latest atrocities underline the urgent need for renewed international resolve to protect civilians and ensure accountability for those responsible.

The Conservatives have consistently called for stronger, co-ordinated international action in Sudan. As the UN Security Council penholder, the UK has both the platform and the responsibility to lead. Will the Minister tell the House what concrete steps the Government will take next? Will there be further targeted sanctions? What diplomatic action is being taken to deter the entities whose support continues to sustain the conflict?

The Government hosted the international humanitarian conference on Sudan earlier this year. What has materialised from that? Has new funding been disbursed? What progress has been made since those pledges were announced?

The collection and preservation of evidence is vital if perpetrators of these terrible crimes are to face justice. Will the Minister tell us the latest developments in the UK's support for accountability mechanisms? Will the Government now redouble those efforts?

On humanitarian assistance, millions remain displaced, with aid routes under constant threat. Will the Minister update the House on whether British aid is reaching those most in need? What assessment has been made of its efficacy?

Sudan matters to its people, to regional stability and to our shared humanity. The UK must not shrink from its responsibilities to protect civilians, to pursue peace and to support the path to a democratic future.

Stephen Doughty: I associate myself with the shadow Minister's comments, and with her horror and concern about this situation, which I think is shared across the House.

The right hon. Member asked about our work at the United Nations. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East, we will be using the session today to call for all parties to adhere to their obligations under international law, and to say that the perpetrators of crimes must be held accountable. We need to see an end to this violence, and the latest reports are simply shocking and horrific.

The right hon. Member asked about diplomatic action. As I have said, we are in close contact with members of the Quad, and all others, given our role as the penholder at the Security Council, and I am happy to update her on that in due course. She asked about sanctions. She will know that we do not comment on future designations, but I assure her that we keep these matters under close review.

The right hon. Member asked about the humanitarian response, and our assistance is aimed at supporting 650,000 people. We are the third largest donor, and more than 2.5 million people in Sudan have benefited from UK aid since the outbreak of the conflict in 2023, due to actions taken by her Government and by ours since the election.

We continue to use every forum we can to act. During the United Nations General Assembly session Baroness Chapman, the Minister for International Development and Africa in the other place, co-hosted a high-level event with Liberia and the Netherlands on these issues, and condemned the parties' disregard for international law.

Urgent accountability was the last issue that the right hon. Member raised, and I assure her that that is central to what we are doing. The support that we provide to different organisations is clear, including our long-standing support for the International Criminal Court and other organisations bringing all those responsible for atrocities to justice. Indeed, the first convictions have taken place at the ICC in relation to activities in Darfur in earlier phases of this terrible conflict.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The massacre of civilians at El Fasher maternity hospital is just the latest in a series of atrocities in Sudan, and 1.2 million pregnant

[Sarah Owen]

and breastfeeding women face famine and malnutrition. Sexual violence is widespread, and the Rapid Support Forces are using rape as a weapon of war, in blatant violation of international law. What assurances can the Minister give that the UK is acting to alleviate this humanitarian disaster, and can he assure the House that there is no risk of UK-manufactured arms being used by the RSF?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend rightly raises the horrific reports of sexual and gender-based violence in this conflict. We are providing specific support on that through our women's integrated sexual health programme and the diplomatic action that I mentioned in relation to my colleague Baroness Chapman and others. We are also looking at new programmes where we can support women-led organisations in responding to the atrocities that have been going on. As I said, that accountability will be key. My hon. Friend asked about the arms control regime, and I assure her that we keep these matters under close review and take any allegations incredibly seriously.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I associate my party with the remarks about Hurricane Melissa, and wish those on the island of Jamaica all our best wishes at this difficult time.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for securing this urgent question, and to you for granting it, Mr Speaker. As everyone has stated, the reports of the massacre of civilians by the RSF in El Fasher are truly horrific, yet the tragedy is that the international community was warned, and there has been a pattern of these terrible atrocities by the RSF. The question for the Minister today is: has the UK done enough?

On 26 June, the Prime Minister said that we do not spend enough time on Sudan in this House. That might be because the Minister for Africa sits in the other place, but when Lord Purvis asked Baroness Chapman on 17 July about the UK's work to enforce UN Security Council resolution 2736 on the protection of civilians in El Fasher, she said:

"I often find myself asking what the point is of many of these declarations".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 July 2025; Vol. 847, c. 2000.]

Is the Minister equally defeatist about the UK's role as a penholder at the UN, or will the UK use its position today to press for a Sudan-wide arms embargo?

On the role of UK weapons in the conflict, which has been widely reported, will the Minister today ban arms sales to the UAE, until it is confirmed that the UAE is not using British weapons to arm the RSF?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman raises important issues. Given his previous career and having worked with him in the past, I know of his sincerity on these matters. Ultimately, the parties involved are responsible for the conflict. If the allegations turn out to be true, we are clear that anybody responsible must be held accountable and we will not rest until that is done, both through our role at the United Nations and in relation to supporting accountability for any atrocities that have been committed.

We of course engage on a very close basis. It is not just about statements; it is about direct contact by our special representative Richard Crowder and the team in Addis Ababa with the parties and other members of the Quad. It is also about our role in galvanising international attention on the issue. I agree that for a long time the conflict has not received the attention that it should have received, as I have always made clear. We are having a direct impact through the aid and support that we provide, particularly in relation to the horrific impact on women and girls.

The hon. Gentleman asked about arms exports. I can assure him that we have one of the tightest and most restrictive arms export control regimes in the world. We constantly keep these matters under review. I assure him that I am in regular contact with officials on these matters, and we will take any allegations that are made very seriously.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I would like to give the Minister the opportunity to be as robust as possible on the issue of arms exports. Do the Government consider the reports that UK military equipment exported to the UAE has been found on the battlefield to be credible? Has the UAE been challenged on that? Are the relevant export licences under review and, if needed, will we cancel them?

Stephen Doughty: I assure my hon. Friend that we take these issues very seriously. We take allegations that any UK-made equipment may have been transferred to Sudan in breach of the UK arms embargo very seriously. That reflects the point made by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson. The UK has one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world. We constantly assess our licences for the risk of diversion and we regularly prevent exports that might be diverted to an undesirable end user or end use. We are aware of reports of a small number of UK-made items having been found in Sudan, but there is no evidence in the recent reporting of UK weapons or ammunition being used in Sudan. I will keep these matters under close review.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, as you have done with a number of others, but this important issue should not have to come to the Floor of the House by way of an urgent question. The Government must be more proactive. The Minister for Africa gave a commitment to the International Development Committee that they would be more proactive during this Parliament, and I hope that that commitment will be honoured. Will the Minister set out more fully what discussions there have been with the UAE? Not only are there concerns about the use of weapons, but it is clear that the UAE has significant influence over the RSF and is a key player. It is stated by the Government that we have influence with the UAE, so are we using that influence to ensure that it uses its influence with the RSF?

Stephen Doughty: I note the right hon. Gentleman's comments and will ensure that my colleague in the other place is aware of them. We are actively engaged on this matter. Our teams, our officials and our special representative are working on this issue every day, so I do not want him to think that we do not take it serious—we absolutely do, particularly in light of the

new allegations that have been made in recent days. We are the third biggest donor and the penholder, and we have been showing leadership on the issue over the past year and before that, including under the Government in which he served, as he knows.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the Quad and the UAE. We welcome the efforts of the US-led Quad in seeking a resolution to the conflict. He will know that the Quad issued a statement on 12 September, which was a significant development, but we remain in close contact with all the relevant stakeholders and parties in pushing for a humanitarian pause, a wider ceasefire and a Sudanese-led political transition. We will continue to support Quad efforts in that regard, including through our role at the UN Security Council.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for securing this urgent question on this devastating topic. My constituents of Sudanese heritage, alongside the whole community of the Cities of London and Westminster, are appalled by these atrocities. Will the Minister update the House on the situation with consular access? What might UK citizens expect for their family and friends in the region, and what kind of support is this country providing to reach out to them?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully on behalf of her constituents, and I know that she is not the only one; as I mentioned, my own constituents have great concern about family, friends and others in Sudan and have done so for a long time. It is absolutely right that she puts their concerns on the record. If I may, I will get back to her on consular access. There are obviously extremely challenging circumstances on the ground—even humanitarian organisations and the United Nations are unable to access the region—but I will get back to her on what steps we can take through our consular services.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Minister explain to the House what is the attitude of other states in the region towards this conflict? Is there any prospect that they could unite and possibly make some form of physical intervention to separate the warring sides in Sudan?

Stephen Doughty: Obviously it is not for me to speak to the individual policies of countries in the region, but the right hon. Gentleman will know that, regrettably, to date it has not been possible to find a consensus in the United Nations Security Council on a way forward. We push for that and always attempt to do so in our engagement as the penholder—we will do so again today, particularly in the light of events—but ultimately it is the parties to the conflict that are responsible for what is happening. We are in direct contact and are urging restraint.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): We are all horrified by the attack on El Fasher maternity hospital overnight and the increasing death toll. The Minister has highlighted the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, with more than 13 million people displaced from their homes over the past two

years and, sadly, 3.5 million children under the age of 5 now suffering from acute malnutrition. We cannot allow that to go on. Can the Minister tell us what we are doing to get humanitarian aid to the millions who desperately need it, especially children?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and my noble Friend the Minister in the other place have made it clear that we will continue to play a key humanitarian role, and we have committed to protecting our funding to support people affected by this crisis over the next three years. We will provide in total £120 million this year, delivering aid to more than 650,000 people, which makes us the third-largest donor. My hon. Friend can be absolutely assured that this issue is at the top of our agenda, particularly the situation for children, as she rightly mentions.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): With so many conflicts around the world, I am sad to say that we have failed them as a House, as a country and as humanity, whether it be in Ukraine or in Gaza, but what we have not done is forget those other conflicts. This conflict is now in its third year, with more than 150,000 dead and the worst humanitarian crisis as we speak. We have not only failed them, but forgotten them. That is what the Sudanese diaspora in this country tell me all the time. Will the Minister agree to meet with the Darfur Diaspora Association UK and hear its concerns, because it feels unheard?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely recognise the concerns of the Sudanese diaspora in this country—indeed, I have many different members of the Sudanese diaspora in my constituency of Cardiff South and Penarth—and I absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that they have not been forgotten by this Government or by many Members of this House. Many of us have spoken on these issues over many years and have worked to try to find ways forward, to ensure that support is given and there is an end to this terrible conflict. He can be absolutely assured that we engage regularly with different groups. I will pass on his request to my colleague in the other place and hope to be able to get back to him in due course.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to my experienced right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for her urgent question. As the grandson of a proud Jamaican, I am grateful to the Minister for updating us on efforts to mitigate the impact of Hurricane Melissa.

The events in Sudan are inexplicably evil. The brutal murder of people at a hospital in recent days and over many months are frankly crimes against humanity, and I add my voice to urging the Minister to engage as much as he can with the Sudanese diaspora not just in Newcastle-under-Lyme, but up and down the country. The two words we have not yet heard are “African Union”. Can the Minister tell me what engagement has taken place with the African Union in recent days to ensure that the power of that body is exercised as quickly as possible?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We need much shorter questions, please.

Stephen Doughty: We engage across a whole range of diplomatic relations—our special representative and others do so, and we do so in the United Nations. I am happy to come back to my hon. Friend specifically on what contact we have had with African Union representatives in recent days.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): There are many displaced people in other countries in the region as a consequence of the violence in Sudan. What additional support are the UK Government giving to those countries to support those displaced people?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about displaced people—my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned Tawila. I can assure him that our humanitarian aid is targeted to have the biggest impact, and we look very closely at the situation of displaced people, particularly those who have also experienced atrocities, and especially women and girls who may have experienced sexual violence. That will remain at the top of our agenda.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement—it is good to have somebody at the Dispatch Box who both understands and cares about this issue. We have spent no shortage of time in this Chamber talking about the conflicts in the middle east and in Ukraine, but I think all of us are guilty of not talking enough about Sudan. The International Criminal Court is investigating some reports of atrocities in Sudan. Does the Minister feel that that investigation should extend to those who knowingly export weapons into the conflict?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of accountability. I have already referred to our support for the work of the International Criminal Court and, indeed, wider investigations into allegations of atrocities—we work to support non-governmental organisations and others. I must also highlight the work of the media in this space, particularly the investigations of the BBC and other media organisations. As I have said, we keep our export licences under close review, and we take allegations very seriously. I can assure him that I am speaking to officials about these matters.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Given that it has been widely reported in the press that the UAE is arming the RSF, does the Minister have a view on the following two points? First, if any party is exporting weapons to the RSF, we would be in breach of our export licence criteria if we are exporting weapons to that party. Secondly, it is irrelevant whether or not our weapons are being exported and end up in Sudan if that party is exporting weapons to the RSF.

Stephen Doughty: I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with further details of how our arms export licensing criteria operate, but I can assure him that we have one of the tightest and strictest export control regimes in the world. It is compliant with our international legal obligations, and all potential exports are assessed against the strategic export licensing criteria. Specific allegations have been made in this case, and

I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we will always look into allegations very seriously and consider them in the wider round.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I associate myself with colleagues' comments about the barbarity of the events we are seeing in Sudan. May I ask that in addition to providing support to ensure that civilians are protected, we provide support to ensure that any crimes being committed are properly memorialised, so that those responsible can be properly held to account in the future?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As I have said, we fund the Centre for Information Resilience, which is an NGO that collates evidence of these crimes, and we look at all the evidence that is provided. It is incredibly difficult. We play a leading role in the UN fact-finding mission, but of course that mission has not been allowed physical access to the region, which is one of the major challenges in assessing the allegations that have been made.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): In relation to the atrocities that have been committed by the RSF in Sudan, Amnesty International has said that

“the UK kept approving arms sales to the UAE, even when the risks were staring it in the face. This raises serious questions about the UK’s...complicity in mass atrocities.”

This is not the first time that the UK has sold weapons to those accused of genocide. Does the Minister agree that arms export licensing is broken, and that we need to immediately re-establish a stand-alone Committee on arms export controls, which was abolished here two years ago? Given the atrocious risks that the UK Government faced, why did they choose to ignore them?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman knows how seriously I take these issues, not least as a former member of that Committee. Obviously, though, it is for this House to determine its Committees, not me. I can assure him that we have one of the most robust and transparent export control regimes in the world. All licences are assessed for the risk of diversion, and we regularly prevent exports that might be diverted to an undesirable end user. I will keep these matters under very close review, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they will be considered fully, in line with our strategic export licensing criteria.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Grady, who is trying to confuse the Chair by sitting exactly opposite where he normally sits. I found you eventually.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I do apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are talking today about a massacre at a hospital where mums, dads and little babies should be safe and helped. With that in mind, those who commit war crimes should be held to account. Can the Minister please reassure me that the UK is doing everything possible to ensure that international criminal law is enforced, and that its application and enforcement are improved? Can he also reaffirm to me our Government's absolute support for the independence of the International Criminal Court?

Stephen Doughty: I can assure my hon. Friend of that. We support not only the work of the ICC, but those media organisations investigating these claims. I mentioned the UN fact-finding mission and the support we provide to specific NGOs on this matter. All parties must adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law, and perpetrators of crimes must be held accountable. I share his absolute horror at some of the allegations we have been hearing in the past few days.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The massacre at the El Fasher hospital by the RSF is utterly barbaric and marks a new low in what was already a horrific conflict. Where is the international community in all this? What has happened to our duty to protect civilians from such atrocities? When was the last time that the Government carried out a joint analysis of conflict and stability in relation to Sudan? In the light of these events, are there plans to undertake another JACS assessment? Are the Government, as they did with Gaza, undertaking an assessment of the risk of genocide in Sudan?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said, we keep all these matters under close assessment. We are leading international diplomatic efforts. Indeed, that is why we have called an urgent meeting of the Security Council today as the penholder. We continue to work with all parties to try to bring an end to this conflict. I will happily come back to the hon. Member on the specific assessment that he asked about.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is undeniable that what is happening in Sudan is a war on women, with the use of rape and brutal sexual violence. November marks the 25th anniversary of UN resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, through which member states committed to protect women from conflict-related violence. Can the Minister tell us how we are doing that, and how we will use this moment in November to ensure that we stand with women and girls in Sudan and beyond?

Stephen Doughty: I completely associate myself with my hon. Friend's comments and expectations. I assure her that this issue remains at the heart not only of our work on holding individuals responsible and on bringing this conflict to an end, but also of the specific support we are providing through our programming for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Some of the reports we have been receiving in recent days are horrific. These incidents must end.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his well-chosen words. I thank the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for securing this urgent question. Other MPs and I have long been highlighting the atrocities taking place in Sudan, including stomach-churning terrorist attacks, and rapes and murders taking place daily. It grieves me greatly, and I know it grieves this House greatly. I underline the issue for Christians in particular, who are particularly targeted in Sudan. The latest attack is yet another where the detail makes me feel sick to my stomach, yet it is simply an extension of the evil that the world has turned a blind eye to thus far. I know the Minister is

honest, so what more will the Government do to deliver the right help and to step up and step in for the people facing that devastation in Sudan?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member rightly raises the many atrocities that have taken place in Sudan on the basis of people's religion, ethnic grouping and other minority status. I share his absolute revulsion at some of the recent allegations. He can be assured that, whether it is through our work at the United Nations later today, our work in the programming that we provide or our support for holding the perpetrators to account, this issue will remain at the top of our agenda.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on securing this urgent question. The attack over the past few days is truly appalling, as colleagues have said, but it is not the first time such an attack has taken place. The World Health Organisation has verified 285 attacks on healthcare facilities, with at least 1,200 deaths and more than 400 injuries to health workers and patients. Can the Minister explain what more can be done to make sure that the RSF understands that hospitals and healthcare facilities should not be targeted in the way that it is doing and that the sanctity of life has to be considered when civilian populations are concerned?

Stephen Doughty: I have always been clear that aid workers must never be targets. The shocking deaths of aid volunteers and others in recent days have horrified the whole world. My hon. Friend can be assured that in our contact directly with the RSF and all the parties to the conflict, we regularly raise the protection of humanitarian workers and, most importantly, the need for an end to this horrific conflict.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the final Back Bencher contribution, I call Mark Swards.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Three days ago, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that

"Member States with influence must act urgently to prevent large-scale atrocities"

by the RSF and allied fighters. But atrocities have happened: 460 people have died in a maternity hospital. What has the UK done since that statement was made, in conjunction with the Quad and the African Union, to try to help those people trapped in El Fasher? While I know that the Minister cannot comment on future additional sanctions, will he at least consider additional sanctions or travel bans for RSF leaders and their regional backers?

Stephen Doughty: As my hon. Friend knows, we keep sanctions under regular review. He asked an important question about what we have been doing diplomatically. I have mentioned what we will do later today at the United Nations. I can also confirm that the Foreign Secretary has spoken with Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan in the UAE, and the National Security Adviser has spoken with the US special adviser on Africa, Massad Boulous. We are regularly in contact with other members of the Quad and speak to the African Union regularly, and indeed hosted an event with it at the United Nations.

[Stephen Doughty]

I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that we will use every diplomatic lever and every contact we can to try to bring an end to this terrible conflict—not just in the light of the atrocities of the past few days, but in the light of all the loss of life and violence that we have seen over the past years.

Business of the House

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): These questions will last around an hour. Members will have to police themselves over the length of the questions that they wish to deliver. I call the shadow Leader of the House.

11.16 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 3 November includes:

MONDAY 3 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 NOVEMBER—Opposition day (12th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 5 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords message to the Employment Rights Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

The House will rise for the November recess at the conclusion of business on Wednesday 5 November and return on Tuesday 11 November.

The provisional business for the week commencing 10 November includes:

TUESDAY 11 NOVEMBER—General debate on the contribution of the armed forces to mark Remembrance.

WEDNESDAY 12 NOVEMBER—Opposition day (13th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

FRIDAY 14 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 17 November includes:

MONDAY 17 NOVEMBER—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House for that update.

I know the whole House will want to join me in sending our very best wishes to the victims of the hurricane in Jamaica, and now also Cuba, Haiti and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

I want to pay a personal tribute to Prunella Scales, who died this week. She was a magnificent actress, the linchpin of a great acting dynasty and—as was her husband Timothy West—a wonderful reader of audiobooks.

Among the news this week have been the following items: the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), has been elected as deputy leader of the Labour party, and has vowed to work constructively with No. 10 Downing Street; the Director of Public Prosecutions has publicly contradicted the Prime Minister in relation to the collapsed China spying case; the Labour party has fallen in the polls to a record low for a recently elected Government;

and Irish citizens may now be forced to have digital identity cards to work in this country under the Government's new plans.

I would like to raise with the Leader of the House two important issues, one directly relating to the recent business of the House. As a former Chief Whip, he will know that the first question at Prime Minister's questions always follows a simple formula: the Prime Minister is asked to list their engagements; he or she typically presents public condolences or congratulations and comments on an issue—often an international issue—affecting the whole House; and then says, “This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others,” and so on.

Unfortunately, since taking office last year, the present Prime Minister has increasingly misused his first engagements question. Two weeks ago, he used it to avoid making a full statement to the House about China, which I do not think can have pleased the Speaker's Office. This week, he used it to try to score a series of partisan political points—by my counting, the eighth time he has tried to do this since taking office. This is an abuse of procedure, and it is a discourtesy to this House. Its effect is to turn an open question into a party political broadcast. It undermines a valuable opportunity to bring the House together every week on a matter of public importance before the usual knockabout of PMQs begins. It is unworthy of the Prime Minister's office and unworthy of the Prime Minister, who is a very decent human being. Therefore, may I politely invite the Leader of the House to ask the Prime Minister to desist? *[Interruption.]* And may I wish him good luck in doing so?

My second issue concerns the so-called graduate premium. The Government hold an extremely powerful set of data known as the longitudinal educational outcomes—or LEO data—which link people's school results, university records and later earnings. Many people in this House—including, perhaps more than any of us, the Leader of the House—will know that education can transform people's lives for the better. This dataset can show what happens and how it does so in detail, but most of the data remain entirely hidden. Only limited figures have been published, such as average graduate earnings five years after university. The Government also have information on what happens to those who do not go to university, but this too is withheld, so we still cannot answer questions that are crucial for many people. How financially worthwhile is a particular course or a particular institution? How effective are apprenticeships? What difference does university really make?

The secrecy weakens public trust and good public policy. Families and young people are being forced to make major life choices without clear facts, because no member of the public or, indeed, Member of this House can see which courses or institutions genuinely improve this kind of opportunity. It seems that the Government themselves will increasingly use the data to shape policy, but without making those data public. People go to university for many different reasons, and financial returns are only part of the story, but these data are gathered at public expense and describe public outcomes. With the right safeguards, they should be open for review and for public debate and discussion. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has explained exactly how, so will the Leader of the House ask his colleagues in the Department for Education to make the LEO data public soon?

Sir Alan Campbell: Let me begin by joining the shadow Leader of the House in his tribute to Prunella Scales, who was a fantastic actress, and in his remarks about the effects of Hurricane Melissa. The UK is offering full support to Jamaica and many Caribbean countries in the aftermath of the hurricane. The Foreign Office is delivering humanitarian assistance to affected areas, including through specialist rapid deployment teams in the region to provide consular assistance to British nationals. Our thoughts are obviously with the people of the affected area but they are also with those in this country of Caribbean heritage, who will be particularly worried at this time.

This week, the House marked 75 years since the House of Commons Chamber was rebuilt from ruins after it was bombed during the second world war, and I thank Mr Speaker for the events that he has organised this week to mark this important anniversary. As we approach Remembrance Sunday, I was pleased to announce the general debate on the contribution of our armed forces, which will take place on Armistice Day. At this time each year, our nations come together to give profound thanks to the men and women of our armed forces and veterans—heroes who sacrifice so much for our country.

I also thank Mr Speaker for the Speaker's Conference, which has brought forward its second report, with recommendations aimed at tackling abuse and intimidation towards MPs and candidates. I thank the conference for this important work. The Government will look closely at the recommendations, not least through my role on the defending democracy taskforce.

I would like to express my personal thanks to Mike McCarthy BEM, who is departing from the Government Whips Office this week, having served every Government since 1987. I hope the whole House will join me in wishing him well. *[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]*

On the shadow Leader of the House's remarks about the recent election of a new Labour deputy leader, I would gently point out that this was done by taking the matter to the members of the party, who made their choice—and a very good choice, indeed. That stands in stark contrast to what has happened on the Opposition Benches, where the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) has simply foisted himself on the Conservative party as the unofficial deputy leader.

On Prime Minister's questions, if what the Prime Minister is doing is not in order, I would expect whoever is in the Chair to point that out. However, to some extent my right hon. and learned Friend cannot win, because if he does not comment on the matter of the day or matters of urgency, people will ask him why, and if he does, he gets called out for it.

On the shadow Leader of the House's point about school results, I know he is a passionate advocate for education, including higher education. I absolutely agree that school results and education are transformational in people's lives. I will draw to the attention to the Secretary of State for Education, who shares our view on the transformation that education can bring, his point about what further data can be usefully made public.

Let me just add—and before the shadow Leader of the House calls me out for knockabout, this is not knockabout, but simply mentioning some of the things he might have added—that this week the Government

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

announced an £8 billion deal to supply Typhoon fighter jets to Turkey, supporting 20,000 jobs, with nearly 6,000 workers at Warton now knowing that their jobs are secure; Awaab's law has come into force, improving lives for tenants living in 4 million social rented homes across England; and today's announcement of 60,000 knives being taken off our streets is very good news, along with the news that knife crime is falling. I hope lives will be changed as a result. This is what the Government mean by our plan for change in action: making defence a driver of growth in the economy, and also driving renewal and opportunity up and down our country.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab): May I place on record my thanks to the Leader of the House for all his support? He was a brilliant Chief Whip, and at least now the nation gets to share his wit and wisdom.

May we have an urgent debate on the accountability of institutions for the use of public money? Walsall College and Walsall council are closing the iconic Leather Museum against the wishes of local people, but no financial information is available. Please could we have such a debate on financial information and accountability?

Sir Alan Campbell: My right hon. Friend is a great champion for her local community, and she is right that local people need to be involved in decisions that affect their local community. She has put on record her concerns, but I would encourage her to go even further on this matter, perhaps by applying for an Adjournment debate.

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

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I associate myself with the comments about hurricane victims and, indeed, with the comments about Prunella Scales.

Earlier this week, we were treated to the delight of a Conservative Opposition day, and the main thing we learned is that the Conservatives do enjoy being in opposition. We had the shadow Housing Secretary, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), decrying the housing crisis that their Government left behind, and the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), committing to reducing the welfare bill that went up on their watch.

We hear that we are to get yet another Conservative Opposition day next week. The Conservatives are set to get 17 days to the Liberal Democrats' three in this parliamentary Session. We would just gently suggest that, if we want to elevate the debate in this Chamber, we may want to redress that balance in the next Session.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): How many does Reform get?

Bobby Dean: Moving on to fraud—speaking of—I would like to focus on how fraud destroys lives. It eradicates people's savings, it plunges people into debt and it diminishes people's faith in human nature. Fraud is on the rise—it is up by almost a fifth—and it makes up nearly half of all crime in the UK.

I know that the Government are set to release a fraud strategy soon, but there are worrying reports that a key component is about to be ditched. British banks pick up the tab for fraud in this country. They are the ones who reimburse the victims, even though the vast majority of fraud these days happens on online platforms. The Prime Minister himself recognises this, saying before the election that tech companies have a clear obligation and should have a clear financial incentive to tackle fraud. That commitment is what we are worried about being dropped—apparently to appease American President Donald Trump.

The Government sent a gushing letter to big tech CEOs over the summer congratulating them on their efforts in tackling fraud, but UK Finance and the Financial Conduct Authority both disagree and say that big tech companies are not doing enough. Can the Government publish their fraud strategy and commit to holding big tech companies to account, ensuring that they are hit in the pocket for not tackling fraud?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will first respond hon. Member's point about Opposition days, as I have announced not just one but two of them. This might be a matter that he wishes to draw to the attention of the Modernisation Committee. I am going to defend the official Opposition here and say gently to the hon. Member that the official Opposition do have a particular role in the constitution, and we need to be very careful before we start changing that simply because an election can produce particular numbers of seats for other parties.

I thank the hon. Member for raising the fraud strategy. Fraud is a hugely important matter for many of our constituents, and it remains a huge challenge and one of the most commonly experienced crimes in our country. As he points out, we will bring forward a new strategy later this year to protect consumers and businesses. We need everyone to play their part in that, and we continue to urge tech and social media companies to take stronger action to stop consumers being defrauded when using their sites. Writing to and asking them to do that does not necessarily equate with ditching any pledge we have made.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Last week I had the honour of joining the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and Jan and Len—AKA Team Pritchard—in West Thurrock cemetery in my patch to learn more about their work. Thurrock has 82 Commonwealth war graves, and Jan and Len have volunteered to take care of them and make sure that all the names are visible so that the sacrifice of those men and women is properly remembered. As we come to the month of remembrance, will the Leader of the House join me in thanking volunteers like Jan and Len for all that they do to make sure that those who sacrificed so much for our country are properly acknowledged and that tributes are paid in the most appropriate way?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this, as she points out, very timely question. First, let me thank the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for all its fantastic work. There are not many, if any, constituencies around the country that are not affected by its work in one way or another. Let me also place on record my thanks and the House's thanks for the many, many volunteers across our country who

work with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and do excellent work to ensure that we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Colleagues can see that it will be impossible for me to get everybody in, particularly if you are 13 minutes late—Mr Grahame Morris, you will most definitely not be getting in. [*Laughter.*] I call Martin Vickers.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), sends his apologies, so I am standing in for him. It is unfortunate that we are going to miss an opportunity for Backbench Business time next Thursday, but could the Leader of the House reconsider the following Thursday? We will have Lords amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and that is likely to finish early, so perhaps there could be an hour or two at the end of the day for additional Backbench Business.

In Westminster Hall, there will be a debate next Tuesday on the impact of reductions in official development assistance on international development. On 11 November, there will be a debate on support for dyslexic pupils at school. On 13 November, there will be a debate on modern day slavery in Pakistan. On 18 November, there will be a debate to mark the 80th anniversary of UNESCO, and on 20 November, debates on inequalities faced by unpaid carers and World COPD Day.

Turning to my own question, I have raised on a number of occasions the impact on my local community of the possible closure of Lindsey oil refinery. There is growing concern among union representatives, the local community and possible investors in the refinery, that the Government do not favour a bid that takes in the entire site and continues refining products. Indeed, one potential investor is considering a judicial review of the process. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from the relevant Minister in the next few days?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am not sure I share the hon. Gentleman's confidence that the planning Bill amendments will be over as swiftly as he thinks. There is a question of the balance between the time the Government need in this House for legislation and proper scrutiny, and the rights of Backbench Business, of which he knows I am a proud defender, but I will look to see whether there are opportunities for slots that need to be filled. I should have said that he is an excellent stand-in for the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and I welcome him to his place.

I also commend the hon. Gentleman for his dedication to his constituency and for again raising this important matter. Our thoughts remain with the future of the Lindsey oil refinery workers at what we understand is a very difficult time for the community. I know he continues to raise this matter with Ministers. I will raise it with Ministers and ensure that he and, where appropriate, the House are updated on any developments.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): As we approach the end of World Menopause Month, yesterday saw the launch of the report by the all-party

parliamentary group on menopause into the experiences of those from historically marginalised communities. The Government are making huge progress on women's health, but we must ensure that no woman gets left behind. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking those who contributed to the report, and will he ask Cabinet colleagues to consider its recommendations so that we can improve outcomes for all women?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for her work as chair of the APPG on menopause and thank all those who worked on this important report. Women experiencing the symptoms of menopause have been failed for far too long. The Government are renewing the women's health strategy to tackle inequalities and improve access to healthcare for women across England. I will ensure that Ministers hear what she has to say, that they see the report, and that, if she wants one, she has a meeting with them to discuss it.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): May we have a debate on the regressive taxation of single parents? If we look at the costs for 2025-26 of employing a single parent on the national living wage for 30 hours a week, we find that the combination of the national insurance threshold going down 45%, a 6.7% increase in the cost of the national living wage and additional costs related to national insurance means that it is 11% more expensive to employ somebody who is working 30 hours a week on the national living wage. Surely that is not what a Labour Government should be standing up for?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Chancellor will bring forward her Budget at the end of next month. Some of those issues may or may not be addressed in that, but there certainly will be days of debate after the Budget in which such issues can be discussed. In the meantime, however, I will draw the Chancellor's attention to his points and, if we can, get a better answer than the one I can give him.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Ind): Neil Whitehouse, a loving father and grandfather who lived in my constituency, sadly lost his fight with cancer earlier this year. Neil was a lifelong advocate of the NHS, but tragically delays in communication between NHS departments may have prevented him receiving earlier, lifesaving treatment. We cannot give back to Neil's family the time they lost with him, but we can ensure that the NHS he loved learns the lessons from his case. May we have a debate on improving integration and communication within the NHS to honour Neil Whitehouse's memory?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our condolences to the family and friends of Neil Whitehouse. The 10-year health plan will deliver a single patient record that will, following consultation, go live from 2028. We expect that to go towards resolving some of the issues the hon. Gentleman describes, but he may wish to look towards the Backbench Business Committee or an Adjournment debate to raise them, because I am sure colleagues across the House share his concerns.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): At Prime Minister's questions yesterday, the Prime Minister offered scant reassurance to business

[Alison Griffiths]

owners trying to create jobs and growth in the face of higher taxes, costs and regulations. The Institute of Directors warns that:

“Business confidence has plumbed new depths”.

Ahead of Small Business Saturday on 6 December, will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate to celebrate and recognise the business owners working so hard and making great personal sacrifices to support jobs and services in our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: We certainly do recognise the importance of small businesses in our constituencies, across communities and to the economy in general. That is why, when we brought forward our small business strategy, it was welcomed by many small businesses. The hon. Lady will have the opportunity, not only around Small Business Saturday but as the Budget approaches, to make those points to see how those matters might be better addressed.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of visiting Arnold u3a, which is brilliantly chaired by Hazel Ward and provides excellent activities for more than 500 members. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all the u3a groups across Gedling, and will he make time for a debate on tackling social isolation and loneliness through lifelong learning?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising awareness of the work of Arnold u3a and Hazel Ward. Loneliness can have real consequences for individual health across our communities. The Government are committed to building on the work of our friend Jo Cox in supporting people to build the social connections they need. I am sure that many people across the House would support such a Backbench Business debate, should my hon. Friend request one.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Kelloholm is a former mining community in my constituency. Like the rest of Upper Nithsdale, it has few amenities, so it came as a complete shock to local people when, out of the blue, SNP-led Dumfries and Galloway council suggested closing the Hillview leisure centre as a possible budget-saving measure, despite the centre's pivotal role in the community for youth work, employment support programmes, children's parties and other social events, as well as gym, sport and recreation uses. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on the council to abandon this knee-jerk and ill-considered proposal, which would do real damage in and around Kelloholm, and will he spend more time calling out the Scottish Government's deliberate policy of starving local authorities of the resources they need?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am not sure it will do the right hon. Gentleman much good, but I find myself agreeing with him on most Thursdays. I thank him for his question. Of course, it is a matter for the local authority, but he has highlighted in his assiduous way the concerns of his constituents. The SNP Government have received a record funding settlement, and I agree it is such a shame to see vital assets underfunded and, therefore, under threat.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I am concerned about antisocial behaviour on Colonnade, Somerset, Parkwood, Gladstone, Shelley, Wolverton and Haviland Roads as well as others nearby. I welcome the Labour Government's roll-out of dedicated, visible and contactable officers and the requirement that police respond to all antisocial behaviour complaints within 72 hours. What more are the Labour Government doing to keep my constituents safe?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important issue that affects many of our constituents. Antisocial behaviour continues to be a blight on the communities we serve, but the Government are determined to bear down on it. Our Crime and Policing Bill will introduce respect orders and strengthen police powers to tackle antisocial behaviour. He may wish to raise these matters in person at the next Home Office questions.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): In Wokingham, there is a real issue with mainstream schools declaring that they cannot meet the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Specialist providers are also unavailable, which leaves children effectively out of formal education for many months, if not years. Can we have a debate in Government time on radically and rapidly expanding the availability of specialist provision for children with SEND to ensure that every child has a place at school?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises further evidence that the SEND system is broken. It does not work for parents or children, and it does not really work for the staff of our schools either. We have committed to investing an additional £1 billion in SEND funding, but there is a wider issue, as the Government have recognised, and we will therefore be bringing forward proposals to radically alter the system. The hon. Gentleman asks for a debate; should he secure a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate, I think that would actually help the wider debate.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Earlier this week, I was pleased to welcome health practitioners, charities and those with lived experience to the House when the all-party parliamentary group on spinal cord injury published its new report, “From Fragmented to Co-ordinated: Building a National Spinal Cord Injury Strategy”. The APPG officers look forward to the Government's considered response. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Public Health and Prevention to meet the APPG officers and the secretariat, and could we also have a statement in the House from the Department on the report's recommendations?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as the chair of the all-party group on spinal cord injury. He has worked tirelessly on this matter across the years; it is a good example of the campaigning work he does. I pay tribute to him and to the injuries unit at Middlesbrough James Cook university hospital, which is a good example but one that, unfortunately, is not always replicated across the country. I am sure that Health Ministers will have heard his concerns, and should he and the all-party group want a meeting, I am sure that Ministers will accommodate them.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): As chairman of the parliamentary support group for the victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism, I welcome the publication of the long overdue Shawcross report. Will the Leader of the House accept that the Government must now make a serious attempt to heal the wounds and deliver justice for the victims and their families, who have waited so long for compensation? With that in mind, will he find time for a debate on the report's recommendations, the handling of the issue by successive Governments and the prospect of delivering specific compensation for the victims of the atrocities of the Docklands, the Baltic Exchange and Harrods, among other tragic attacks, as called for by the families and specifically the Docklands Victims Association led by Jonathan Ganesh?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are absolutely committed to bringing closure to these matters in a fair way and to getting justice for people who have been affected in that way. The hon. Member may wish to look towards the Backbench Business Committee, or indeed apply for an Adjournment debate, so that he can raise these matters directly with and hear from the Minister.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): This week, over 100 business owners and trade unionists sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Business to ask him to form a working time council to review the benefits of moving to a four day week nationally, which research now shows improves both productivity in business and overall wellness in society. Would the Leader of the House grant time to debate the benefits of a four-day week, so we can ensure this important progressive idea can be discussed with the latest evidence and public opinion?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will ensure that the Department for Business and Trade have heard my hon. Friend's remarks. She may wish to seek a Backbench Business debate, or indeed an Adjournment debate, so that she can raise those matters, because of course they have been discussed for a long time and are topical, and I am sure will be of interest across the Chamber.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent John appealed his business rate demand 13 months ago as the rateable value on his office is incorrect. He tells me that the business rate appeal is taking between a year and 18 months. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Minister to improve the check and challenge system to support businesses through what can be a real barrier to survival, let alone the growth that the Government desire?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will draw that individual case to the attention of the relevant Minister. I remind the hon. Member that we are committed to wider business rate reform and will be pushing ahead with that.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Hot on the heels of Redditch Scare Fest put on by the excellent Redditch borough council, we are swapping masks and pumpkins for Christmas jumpers as Gareth Gates, "Pop Idol" runner-up and west end star, joins us to switch on the Christmas lights on 29 November. If the Leader of the House cannot join us himself, will he encourage Redditch residents to put the date in their diaries and join us?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is a very tempting offer, I have to say—albeit a festive but slightly premature message. I will check my diary. As ever, my hon. Friend is a positive advocate for Redditch, and I am sure that the people of Redditch will feel the "Spirit in the Sky" next month when Gareth Gates switches the lights on, and we thank him for that. We must "Say It Isn't So" that anyone in his constituency would miss such a brilliant event.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): The Mayor of London is making £260 million of cuts to the Metropolitan police, axing 1,700 police officers and staff, removing officers from schools and magistrates courts, and now closing Bromley police station's front counter overnight. That breaks his manifesto pledge to protect London's police stations. Given that the Government promised to strengthen neighbourhood policing, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the impact of Sadiq Khan's policy and police cuts in London?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman may wish to seek either an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate to raise those matters, so that colleagues across the House may have their say, including those who are able to point out the number of police officers to which we have committed in order to bear down on crime.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): When Lloyds closes in January, Mitcham will lose its last remaining bank, yet Link has refused a banking hub, claiming that the nearest branch in Tooting is just 14 minutes away. That figure comes from bus timetables, not real journeys by residents, many of whom have recorded it taking 20 minutes or longer. The whole dialogue risks becoming a dialogue of the death—a veil of respectability for decisions made in the interests of big banks, not the public. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on access to banking, so that common sense—not bus timetables—decides who gets a banking hub?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is, as ever, a strong advocate for her constituency. I agree with her absolutely that banks have a responsibility in these matters, but there have been closures in many constituencies. I have to say, having been present at the opening of the banking hub in Whitley Bay in my constituency last Friday, that it is a great relief when banking hubs are brought forward—including with the co-operation of banks, by the way—to ensure that people have that face-to-face contact. The Government are committed to 350 banking hubs, and that is not an upper limit but the current target. As well as ensuring that Lloyds comes to its senses, perhaps my hon. Friend will push for a banking hub.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Local newspapers and media outlets often break the most important stories for our constituents, but their ability to do so is increasingly at risk. In the last month alone, we have heard of a proposed restructure of Reach PLC that puts over 300 editorial jobs at risk, while STV has decided to close its Aberdeen office and axe its northern news offering, which includes coverage of my city of Dundee. May we have a debate on the future of local journalism and on job cuts in local media leaving communities without a trusted local voice?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Many of our constituents will agree with his concerns. He may wish to seek a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate to raise those matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call my parliamentary chess partner, Warinder Juss, who lost to Kazakhstan by six points.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Last week, I had the pleasure of attending the national curry awards here in Parliament. Penn Tandoori, which is just down the road from where I live in my constituency, was named Wolverhampton restaurant of the year. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Penn Tandoori for its well-deserved win, and does he agree that it is crucial that the Government invest in and support our local hospitality businesses so that they can continue to grow and thrive?

Sir Alan Campbell: I send my congratulations to Penn Tandoori on its win, and to restaurants across the country—including Shikara in Whitley Bay, which won the north-east award—on providing fantastic service to local communities. The Government are committed to supporting hospitality businesses to thrive, and to creating the right economy for them to do so.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Might we have a debate in Government time on mid-contract mobile phone bill increases, which is a concern I have been raising for a long time? I was pleased to welcome Ofcom's changes at the start of the year, but it seems that companies such as O2 are finding new ways around them and increasing bills by 40%. That is shocking when done mid-contract, as customers are not aware of the increases. People can cancel their contracts but are not aware of the problem. A debate would allow us to make the public aware that this is going on and look for solutions.

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises pertinent issues on behalf of many of our constituents. A Backbench Business or Adjournment debate would allow Members to air those concerns, which I will also draw to the attention of the relevant Department.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): This evening, I will join Long Eaton's Men Walking and Talking group, who meet every Thursday to go for a walk in the park and discuss life and their mental health. The group gives men a safe space to open up about their mental health and provide each other with judgment-free support. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating that group on everything that they do to support my Erewash community?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Long Eaton Men Walking and Talking group on its work. May I also say what a fantastic campaigner he is for men's mental health? Our forthcoming men's health strategy will set out how we can find the right ways to promote healthy behaviour and improve outcomes for the conditions that hit men harder.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Many residents are writing to me to share their frustrations with long delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency following medical disclosures, describing it as not fit for purpose. I am particularly concerned for young people such as Maisie from Shapwick and Alfie from Canford Heath, who cannot use the section 88 clause to keep driving as they are waiting for provisional licences, and those such as Joseph, who face disputes over who will pay for the medical reports needed. May we have a debate in Government time on modernising the DVLA so that we can keep people driving and give young people their independence?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady raises issues about DVLA, some of which I am sure are shared across the House. She may wish to seek a Backbench Business debate or, indeed, an Adjournment debate, so that Ministers not only hear her concerns but see what improvements can be made.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): At a time when communities already feel divided, the leader of the Conservative group on Bolton council recently branded a motion on the horrific suffering in Gaza "sectarian" and suggested that Muslim councillors cared only out of prejudice against Israel. Such language not only threatens and undermines local councillors and groups such as the Bolton Council of Mosques, who have worked tirelessly for community cohesion, but legitimises a divisive climate that goes against our British values. Does the Leader of the House agree that this behaviour is symptomatic of Bolton Conservatives' complete disregard for the value of community cohesion?

Sir Alan Campbell: Social cohesion is so important, particularly at this time, and I agree with my hon. Friend that this matter should be taken seriously. I hope the shadow Leader of the House, who is a decent man, will have heard my hon. Friend's questions and will see what can be done in response. I want to make it clear once again from this Dispatch Box that all of us in public life have a responsibility to conduct debate without recourse to division or offensive language.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It would not be business questions if I did not raise a certain topic, but I have let the newly appointed Leader of the House settle into his role before I raise the issue of Aldridge train station. In 2021, the Conservative mayor committed £30 million to build a new station in Aldridge and we were absolutely delighted about that. However, that risks being undermined by the Labour mayor of the combined authority in the west midlands, who has diverted the funding elsewhere. Will the Leader of the House put some pressure on the Mayor of the West Midlands to respond to my letter of many, many months ago and look at ways to reinstate that funding?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that the Mayor of the West Midlands will have heard the right hon. Lady's comments today and in the past. I gently point out that whatever commitments were made around transport infrastructure in the run-up to a general election, the money was probably not there in the first place. It is

important that the new Government go back and have a look at what money is available and make sure that it is spent appropriately.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Amazing community groups such as The Pickle Palace, Leadgate Salvation Army, Gateshead Youth Initiative and Building Self-Belief have all been nominated by residents in my constituency to receive one of my red kite awards, created to celebrate all the work that our incredible volunteers do across the constituency to ensure that our communities are vibrant and full of support. May we have a debate in Government time on how we can support the voluntary sector at the heart of our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: I congratulate every one of the groups nominated for the red kite awards, including my hon. Friend's constituency Salvation Army. She will know as well as I do that her constituency produced the world's first ever Salvation Army brass band. I think the red kite awards are a fantastic way to recognise the importance of volunteers and I thank her for that. Should she wish to apply for a debate on supporting them, I am sure it would be well attended.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Given the Government's difficulties and delays in establishing a public inquiry into the grooming gangs scandal, will the Leader of the House and the Government consider establishing a Joint Committee of both Houses to look into it, with parliamentary powers to summon people and papers, to arrive at answers and the truth faster and more effectively?

Sir Alan Campbell: I like to think that I am across what is happening in the House and, obviously, in politics, but I am losing count of what the hon. Gentleman's party wants when it comes to a grooming gangs inquiry. It wants one, and then it does not; and when one is granted, it is not the right one. There is a simple fact in all this: this Government are absolutely determined that there will be an inquiry, that it will get to the truth, that victims will be at the centre of it—

Richard Tice: How long?

Sir Alan Campbell: Victims will be at the centre of it, and we will deliver the recommendations of that inquiry and improve the situation that the hon. Gentleman's party is at risk of playing politics with.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): My eight-year-old constituent, Phoebe, is bravely battling cancer. Both her parents and her oncologists believe that a liver transplant offers her the best hope of recovery, but that has been refused by the NHS trusts overseeing her treatment. Having been told that there is no right of appeal, her parents are now crowdfunding for a transplant abroad. I have already written to the Health Secretary on this issue, but could we have a debate in Government time about child cancer treatments and support for both parents and children going through this horrific ordeal?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sincerely sorry to hear about Phoebe's situation; it must be very painful and worrying for her and her family. I will follow up with the Health Secretary, but I know that Ministers have received his

letter, and he will get a response shortly. He may also wish to apply for a debate, but I will ensure that the House is updated when the comprehensive national cancer plan is published in the new year.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Liberal Democrat-chaired Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes fire authority has cooked up a dangerous plan to remove nearly a third of the fire engines from the area, including Haddenham. They are also fully closing Stokenchurch and Great Missenden fire stations in my constituency. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of not just local fire services but joined-up thinking, given that this Government wish to massively increase the number of homes built in Buckinghamshire and plaster our countryside with dangerous things like battery energy storage systems, which pose a huge fire risk?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman will know that where housing is built, infrastructure is important, and we will want to make sure that it is included in any proposals. He is at liberty to apply for a debate in which to raise these matters. I gently point out that it is for the local authority and the local fire service to decide how they deploy their resources, but we are in this situation because his party left public services on their knees.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): The Leader of the House may have heard my question earlier today to the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), regarding the financing of Cornwall's industrial potential. Will he meet me and Cornish MPs to discuss how we can bring such issues together in a wider devolution package that finally gets Cornwall the powers and investment that we need?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am always willing to meet my colleagues from Cornwall, so the answer is yes.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I have previously raised the case of a young constituent with an inoperable brain tumour. He has since been granted named patient access to a drug that is being trialled, and he is responding well. Unfortunately, however, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recently decided not to allow the drug to be used in the NHS in England yet, and the decision will be considered by a second committee in November. My constituent and his family are concerned about the wider issue of access to these drugs, and particularly the relationship between NICE and the Scottish Medicines Consortium. Would it be possible to have a meeting with Ministers to clarify the situation and see what next steps could be taken?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will draw the hon. Lady's comments to Ministers' attention and ask that they arrange a meeting as soon as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): A tip for Members: look at your question, cross out half of it, and speak for half the length of time.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): We are delighted in Luton to have been granted £1.5 million from the pride in place impact fund. My hon.

[Rachel Hopkins]

Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and I have launched a survey to get views from local residents about how we can use that funding to improve our neighbourhoods. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the important role of local communities and grassroots organisations in shaping their places and improving them?

Sir Alan Campbell: We will be investing £5 billion through our new flagship pride in place programme, to support the 244 places that need it most. I am sure that a Backbench Business debate on the subject would be well attended, in which Members could further discuss not just the issue of resources, but the need for communities to be at the heart of decision making.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May we have a statement from a local government Minister about calculated abuse of the planning system—cases in which people knowingly proceed with projects without planning permission, and then apply for retrospective permission? Cash-strapped councils feel, on the advice of their officers, that they should grant that permission, as otherwise they might have to fight a legal case. Should there not be a presumption against granting retrospective planning permission when the offence has been deliberate?

Sir Alan Campbell: I invite the right hon. Gentleman to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate, or indeed with the Backbench Business Committee—it has been raised by colleagues from across the Chamber—so that Ministers can not only hear what he says but respond.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Yesterday, after a sewage pipe burst, excrement flowed into Hayle harbour. That followed the cancellation of the national inter-club surfing championships due to sewage pollution at Porthtowan, and the total and persistent loss of mains water in the village of Chiverton, and comes on the back of rising water bills. The people of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle are fed up with the lame excuses from South West Water's management. Will the Leader of the House please help me secure a meeting with Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss the performance of South West Water's management?

Sir Alan Campbell: We inherited a broken water system. We passed the landmark Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 and are giving the Environment Agency the ability to tackle all rule breaking. I will draw this unfortunate case to the Department's attention, and hopefully my hon. Friend will get the meeting that he seeks.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): My constituent Nicola is from one of 29 families who lost loved ones in the Chinook helicopter crash. Many documents have not been released, and the families have been denied truth and justice. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the matter? In the meantime, will he arrange for the Secretary of State for Defence to meet the families, and the cross-party group of MPs supporting them?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I said earlier, for the sake of truth and justice, it is important that people get access to the information that they need when tragedies like these unfortunately happen. We understand the lack of certainty in the situation. We have only just got the Chinook justice campaigners' formal claim for a judicial review, so I will not comment on it, but I am sure that the Secretary of State will have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): The Metropolitan police have decided not to close a small section of the eastbound A12 during the annual remembrance service at Ilford war memorial, although it has done so for decades. That choice diminishes the solemnity of the occasion and the memory of those who gave their life for our freedom. In comparison, the community across Europe honour their fallen at Menin gate without hesitation every single day. Simply pausing traffic once a year for two minutes for the parade to pass is surely not beyond us. Will the Leader of the House assist me in urging the Metropolitan police to think again and reverse this deeply regrettable decision?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend will recognise that this is an operational matter for the Met police, but in this case, I hope that local councils and the police will work together to ensure that people can come together to remember in safety.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): In a week when the Home Affairs Committee has highlighted the mismanagement and costs associated with asylum hotels, I am deeply concerned about the management of the contract for the Campsfield House immigration removal centre in my constituency. The previous Home Secretary announced that it would be built in August 2024, and we recently discovered at a public meeting that the contract has not yet been tendered. Will the Leader of the House make time for the Home Secretary to give a statement to the House about the management of procurement and contracts in the Home Office, specifically with regard to immigration removal centres?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman rightly raises local concerns. The Government share his concern about the absolute chaos that inherited regarding asylum hotels. I do not have time to go into the details of what we will do about them, but I will ensure that Home Office Ministers are made aware of this case. He may wish to meet them and make those points himself.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): According to NHS data, while the number of people waiting for an autism assessment is levelling out, the time they are waiting is rocketing; the average wait time is 200 days more than it was a year ago. In order to reduce waiting times, integrated care boards should follow the NHS England national framework and operational guidance, and provide a standardised autism assessment process, but in many cases that clearly is not happening. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Health Minister to arrange a meeting with me to discuss which ICBs are struggling to implement the framework, and the action being taken to support them to ensure that they have the resources needed to follow the framework?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I will.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): This Government came to power on a promise to restore confidence in government, and ensure that Ministers are held to the highest standards. In the light of growing public concern about standards in public life, and with senior Government figures making headlines for all the wrong reasons almost weekly, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the Nolan principles?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Prime Minister is very clear about the importance of Ministers operating to the highest standards. The hon. Gentleman may wish to secure a debate on the subject himself, because I am sure we will be able to give a response. If he is alluding to recent events and issues, I gently point out that the people concerned reported themselves and have been investigated in an independent way. We need faith when it comes to these matters. It is right that people be independently investigated, and that we abide by whatever decision comes at the end of it all.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): My constituent Brian is suffering from cancer and is unable to work. He has been unable to alter his child maintenance payments, despite persistently making contact with those concerned over a number of months, and has been paying over half his income. When will the Government react to the inquiry by the Work and Pensions Committee into the quality and pace of the communication that people receive from the Child Maintenance Service?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that is a distressing situation for Brian, and I know that my hon. Friend has already reached out to the Department for Work and Pensions about this case. I will ensure that he gets a ministerial response, in the hope that this issue can be resolved.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Constituents in Pilning are outraged that a stadium-sized warehouse is being built next to the village under a 1957 consent, which means that modern conditions are avoided. Another warehouse is planned that is twice the size. Will the Leader of the House enable a debate in Government time on tackling outdated interim development order consents that lack modern conditions?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady will know that we are seeking to change planning law, and if there is a debate on these matters, I am sure that she will want to raise that point. If that is not appropriate, she might want to secure an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate to raise the concerns of her constituents.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Last month, I raised the case of my constituents in ex-Ministry of Defence housing in Wittering, who face huge backdated gas bills because their supplier will not take them off a Ministry of Defence contract. Things have escalated; TotalEnergies will not engage, and sends only stock replies, telling residents to fill in a transfer form. When they do, they are sent further debt collection notices, demanding that they cough up a sum of up to £8,000 or be disconnected within a week. Will the Leader of the House advise on how the House can hold such private energy companies to account for making our constituents' lives a misery?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is right that my hon. Friend continues to pursue this matter on behalf of his constituents, and I hope that TotalEnergies will have heard his comments today. I also encourage his constituents, if they have not already done so, to contact the energy ombudsman to see whether their case is suitable for investigation. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a full response from the relevant Department.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I have had the pleasure today of hosting the Royal Welsh show rural leadership participants in Parliament; they are in the Gallery. We met in Committee Room 12, which, for those who do not know, was the very place where the Royal Welsh show was formed in February 1904, 121 years ago. Will the Leader of the House congratulate the Royal Welsh show on its continued success, and wish its participants from all over Wales well in their endeavours to keep rural Wales the vibrant food-producing community that we all want it to continue to be? I thank them all for their work—*diolch yn fawr iawn i chi gyd*.

Sir Alan Campbell: I have been here quite a while, and you learn something every day; I did not know that about Committee Room 12. I welcome people from the Royal Welsh show to the Gallery, and I congratulate them on the fantastic work they do.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Cumbernauld theatre in my constituency is a modern, thriving community venue, but it faces closure after Creative Scotland refused it multi-year funding. The trust is fundraising for the £300,000 needed by mid-December to keep the venue open, but the Scottish Government could still step in and save it. Community theatres matter for inclusion; theatre is not just about cities. May we have a debate on the importance of local theatre, and the need for investment in the arts?

Sir Alan Campbell: Local theatres are a very important part of the UK's creative industries and play a vital role in our local communities. In England, our Arts Everywhere fund will include support for local arts and music venues. As I have already said today, the SNP Government have received a record funding settlement, and it is a shame that assets are being underfunded. Should my hon. Friend seek a debate to highlight this case, I am sure it will be well attended.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In Bath we are so lucky to have three independent bookshops: Topping & Company, Persephone Books and Mr B's. Proposed changes to maximum payment terms risk devastating the independent book industry, forcing it to be much more cautious and less willing to take on debut authors. May we have a debate on the proposed changes, and on how the Government can support the creative industries, of which writers, editors and independent booksellers are very much a part?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the importance of the independent bookselling industry, and I will ensure that her words are heard by the relevant Minister. We are changing maximum payment terms, giving certainty to companies that they will be paid on time. Our shopkeepers and family-run firms

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

work hard and they deserve the Government's backing. We are determined to give them that backing, but too often they are held back by late payments.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): New House Farm school in my part of Mickleover in South Derbyshire is planned and groundwork is complete. The trigger point for the release of the section 106 funds is 314 houses, which is likely to be met in November. However, we have yet to receive a clear signal to go ahead and build the school from the Department for Education and we do not want to lose out. Will the Leader of the House please help me to get that clear signal, so that families in Mickleover and the local vicinity can be assured of their children's education in a state-of-the-art local school?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand the anxiety felt by my hon. Friend's constituents, and the need for certainty on their children's future education. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), has committed to provide an update on the outcomes of the review of mainstream free school projects later this year. It is a substantial exercise covering 44 projects, and I will ensure that Members are notified as soon as there is a decision.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Royal Horticultural Society has today launched its report, "Space to Grow", realising the potential of the community gardening movement. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising and celebrating the work of Tidy Randalstown in my South Antrim constituency, and look at the opportunity for the Government, along with devolved Governments, to embed the space to grow campaign in legislation and policy?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will. This issue is really important for many communities, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the example from his constituency. Community gardens are important to bring communities together, and often for people's mental health, so it is great that he has brought the issue to the Floor of the House. I join him in thanking the community gardens movement.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I am delighted that next week a new 107 bus will serve residents in the Gunton area of Lowestoft, following representations that I made to First Bus. However, many of my constituents rely on the No. 99 to get to and from the town centre, and from Monday to Saturday the last bus home leaves at 5.40 pm, closing off our town to tourists. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the impact of buses on local growth and regeneration?

Sir Alan Campbell: I hope that decision makers in bus companies in my hon. Friend's constituency have heard her passionate support for the right of her constituents to have decent public transport. Local public transport should be designed with the interests of the local people it serves in mind, and I hope that should this issue arise in future, such campaigns will be successful. Our landmark Bus Services Act 2025, which became law earlier this week, puts power over local bus services back into the hands of local leaders.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Monday 27 October marked International Religious Freedom Day. In the UK, we are fortunate to enjoy the freedom to believe or not to believe without fear of persecution, but sadly in countries such as Nigeria and Sudan, which was mentioned this morning, many religious minorities continue to suffer appalling daily discrimination and violence. Will the Leader of the House join me in marking that significant day, and urge the Government to reaffirm their commitment to making religious freedom a key foreign policy priority?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in his cause, which he raises steadfastly. He is right to do so. The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion and belief for all across the globe, wherever that happens to be. No one should experience discrimination for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, and I encourage him—I have no need to because he will—to continue to raise these matters in future.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): As we approach Remembrance Day, I thank the volunteers at Chellaston women's institute, Little Angels at St Andrews nursery, Greener Littleover in Blagreaves, Carlisle Against Crime, scout troops, marine training corps and many more. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising their fantastic efforts to honour the courage and sacrifice of our armed forces?

Sir Alan Campbell: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in recognising our armed forces, and I thank both past and present servicemen and women for their valiant work in keeping us safe. As I look around the Chamber, I see hon. Members proudly wearing their poppies, so I know that that sentiment is shared by Members from across the House.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House update us on the progress that is being made to finalise the transfer of the £2.3 billion reserve of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme?

Sir Alan Campbell: We are working with BCSSS trustees to consider those proposals. We are trying to get an agreement and an outcome that can be implemented later this year, and I will ensure that the House is kept updated on any decision.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Bolton mountain rescue team, based in my constituency, provides lifesaving emergency support across Greater Manchester and Lancashire. Currently, voluntary search and rescue organisations like Bolton MRT must pay vehicle excise duty, costing the team £3,800 a year—money that could otherwise be directed to its frontline services. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate to discuss the invaluable contribution of mountain rescue teams and what financial support the Government might provide to them?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to the vital work that mountain rescue volunteers and other such organisations provide across our country. There are currently no VED exemptions for voluntary search and rescue organisations,

but the Government review taxes such as vehicle excise duty annually. I will ensure that the Chancellor has heard my hon. Friend's comments and concerns ahead of the Budget. As I have said, there will be Budget debates on such matters.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): As we approach Remembrance Sunday, we honour those who gave their lives for our freedom, and remember the often overlooked women who served as codebreakers and factory workers, and in countless vital roles. In light of that, I have written to Dudley council asking it to permanently install the first ever women of war silhouette, funded by the Sedgley townswomen's guild. I thank its members for their dedication. Will the Leader of the House join me in remembering the thousands of women who served, and continue to serve, and will he make time for a debate about their contribution?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is our duty to never forget all those who gave their lives for our country, especially during this Remembrance period. I am always particularly moved when I pass the memorial in Whitehall to the women who served our country in the world wars. They played a fundamental role in the war effort, and we must honour and mark that. On Armistice Day, there will be a debate in the House, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to make the points that she has raised today.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Over the summer, I spoke to almost 1,000 Bracknell Forest residents as part of my campaign on road safety. Last week, I published my findings, with recommendations including more action on off-road bikes, uninsured drivers and headlight dazzle. Will the Leader of the House ask the local transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), to meet me to discuss my report further?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to raise road safety. I will ensure that the Minister hears his remarks, and we will see if we can get a meeting for him.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): On 18 October, the post office in Leiston shut its counter for the final time. Will the Leader of the House do two things: will he join me in urging the Post Office to urgently secure alternative premises, and will he support me in my request to have a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss this vital issue?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I am pleased to do both of those things.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): A year ago, I delivered a petition to Downing Street calling for quieter fireworks, keeping the whoosh but getting rid of the bang. This year, fireworks night falls on a Wednesday. Will the Leader of the House consider having a debate on designating a specific weekend for bonfire night and fireworks, to reduce all the disruption to animals and people?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are acutely aware of the concerns, particularly at this time of the year, not least around animal welfare. I encourage my hon. Friend

to seek either an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate, so that she can raise those concerns and we can ensure that legislation on fireworks is kept up to date.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I warmly welcome the news today from the Office of Rail and Road that competition can start on international rail lines to the continent, and I thank the Government for their strong support for that. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is vital that the new operator, Virgin, commits to restoring rail services to Kent and to trains stopping at Ebbsfleet and Ashford stations? Will he commit to having a debate on this matter?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming this news. It is an important step forward in being able to operate cross-border train services using the channel tunnel. It has unlocked investment in new services and will create hundreds of new jobs. It is a win for passengers, customer choice and economic growth. I invite my hon. Friend to apply either for an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate to highlight the matter.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, my constituent Alexander Johnson bravely intervened to stop a phone theft by armed would-be criminals, having himself been a victim of a violent mugging. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending Mr Johnson's bravery? Does he agree that steps taken to address that sort of crime, in particular the Metropolitan police's Operation Echosteep, one of the largest crackdowns on phone theft in the UK, are essential to maintaining central London's reputation as a centre of culture and tourism, and an economic engine?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in commending Mr Johnson for his selfless act of heroism, and I thank her for raising this important matter. We are determined to take the strongest possible action to reduce phone thefts, and I commend Operation Echosteep. We are backing police forces by providing them with stronger powers to tackle this issue in the Crime and Policing Bill.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In recent days, a number of women who have been out in Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre have reported being spiked. That is both criminal and evil, and does not reflect the town that I live in, represent and know. I have raised the issue with the Home Secretary and with Staffordshire's police commissioner. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging Staffordshire police to work around the clock to find the criminals who did this? I urge the Government to do all that they can to ensure that our communities up and down the United Kingdom are safe for women and girls.

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to hear about the cases raised by my hon. Friend, and I join him in expressing the importance of this matter. Violence against women and girls is a national emergency. Our mission is to halve levels of it within a decade. The Crime and Policing Bill will introduce new criminal offences for spiking, and our upcoming violence against women and girls strategy will look across the whole of Government to see how we can best protect victims.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House believe that sufficient progress is being made in rolling out additional driving test appointments? Learner drivers and their instructors in Glasgow West would suggest not. Will he agree to a debate in Government time on the issue?

Sir Alan Campbell: From a personal perspective, the short answer to my hon. Friend's question is no, I do not believe that the issue is being addressed swiftly enough. However, we are taking action to deliver an additional 10,000 driving tests every month and we are accelerating a consultation into abuse of the driving test booking system, which I understand is a big part of the problem. I will ensure that the Transport Secretary has heard her concerns, but my hon. Friend may wish to raise the issue in a Backbench Business debate.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Ruby Bishop is an incredible wheelchair tennis player from Norwich, who proudly represents Great Britain internationally. Despite her success, she faced many barriers at school to accessing sport. She is now campaigning to change things for other children and young people. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Ruby, and will he make time for a debate on how we can make sport and physical education inclusive for all children?

Sir Alan Campbell: Ruby sounds like an exceptional individual, and of course I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to her. Our Inclusion 2028 programme will improve opportunities for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities to take part in sport. I think that this would be a popular topic for a Backbench Business debate, so she may wish to apply for one.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Weston-super-Mare and Worle residents are rightly proud of their community, but abandoned commercial waste and rubbish filling its once proud public spaces undermines our town and civic pride, and the burden of cleaning up has been shifted on to cash-strapped councils and volunteers. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on how businesses, councils and communities can all help to keep our high streets clean?

Sir Alan Campbell: I invite my hon. Friend to apply for either a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate on the subject. He is right that everyone has a role to play. Local authorities have a key role to play in using their power to ensure that spaces are kept clean. As part of our pride in place strategy, we plan to bring forward statutory enforcement guidance on things like littering and fly-tipping.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We need super-short questions. I will try to get everybody in.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): We have fantastic further education providers in Cornwall, and I welcome the Government's recent announcement. However, one of our challenges is the cost and availability of public transport to get learners to and from their college and workplace. Will the Leader of the House arrange for colleagues in the Department for Transport to meet me to ensure that students in coastal areas can get to college?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I will.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I recently met with my constituents Ally and Jemma, who founded We Are Repairs, an online community of 3,000 business members bringing repairers together to combat throwaway culture. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending them for that work and commit to ensuring that the House receives an update on the progress of the circular economy taskforce?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituents on their important work. The work of the circular economy taskforce is a vital component of our sustainability ambitions. We will ensure that Britain is a world leader in circular innovation and will make us a clean energy superpower, and I will ensure that Ministers keep the House updated.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My knees nearly gave way when I ran the Morley 10 km last month, which is possibly the hilliest race in the UK.

Rachel Blake: It's all the bobbing.

Mark Swards: It's partly the bobbing, too.

I persevered, and I did so because Morley running club has raised £20,000 for good causes over the past four years. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Morley running club, to the firefighters who were raising money for their charity—firefighters in full kit were outpacing me—and perhaps grant a debate on the need to support these running clubs to run more charitable races, but perhaps ones that are less punishing on the knees?

Sir Alan Campbell: I congratulate Morley running club and the local firefighters on raising money for such a good cause, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on finishing the run himself—for me, I think more than my knees would be giving way. It is a great contribution of community groups and volunteers coming together, and it brings out the best in our local communities.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Earlier this month a 12-year-old girl was hit by a car while crossing a dangerous crossroads on the A5 in Bridgtown. Despite being thrown to the other side of the road, she miraculously escaped with minor injuries, but the incident has reignited long-standing concerns from residents—including her parents, Andrew and Becky—about pedestrian safety at the crossing. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging National Highways to review this crossing, and may we have a debate on improving pedestrian safety on major roads in order to prevent further tragedies?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am glad to hear that the girl in question suffered only minor injuries, but this is nevertheless a tragic event and my hon. Friend is right to raise those concerns. I urge National Highways, and everybody else who has a role to play in this matter, to listen carefully to what he asks for. He may wish to highlight that through either a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): The Royal & Derngate in Northampton has been named the UK's most welcoming theatre. Will the Leader of the House

join me in commending Jo Gordon, the chief executive; Jesse Jones, our artistic director; and all the team at the Royal & Derngate?

Sir Alan Campbell: I congratulate the Royal & Derngate theatre on being named the UK's most welcoming theatre. Local theatres are an important part of the UK's creative industry and play a vital role in our local communities. I thank everyone involved with the theatre concerned.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): My constituent Clive has a rare and incurable neuroendocrine cancer. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has recommended that selective internal radiation therapy could be used for people with his condition and would improve both life quality and expectancy, but that still is not happening. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on what more is needed for the NHS to finally fund and implement this cost-effective and proven treatment?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to hear of the concern of my hon. Friend's constituent. The Government recognise the need to offer patients the most suitable treatment, but my hon. Friend will know that radiotherapy treatment for cancer is highly individualised, and decisions are made, quite rightly, by clinicians. I am sure that Ministers will have heard his concerns. Some of the concerns that he has raised will be shared by Members across the House, and he may wish therefore to raise them in a debate.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I was proud to welcome thousands of visitors to my constituency recently to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington railway, but we want to

build a permanent tourism legacy. Will the Leader of the House help me to meet the relevant Minister to discuss whether we could put forward this fantastic, historic line to be a UNESCO world heritage site?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to champion such a worthy cause. As the House will know, the Stockton and Darlington railway was the first public railway to use steam trains. I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to make his case.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Reform-led Lancashire county council proposes to close a gritting depot that serves my borough of Rossendale, which could cause absolute chaos this winter. That is just one of many cuts that Reform is considering, with nurseries and care homes already in the firing line. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on Lancashire county council to listen to our communities and stop cutting the services that we rely on?

Sir Alan Campbell: It would not be business questions without a question about the mismanagement of Reform-led Lancashire county council. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising these matters, and he is of course right to continue the fight for the services that his constituents rely on. As I have said previously, raising these matters in Adjournment debates or in Backbench Business debates shines a light on the record of Reform councils not just in Lancashire, but across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank Members for working with me and for speaking at lightning speed. I also thank the Leader of the House, who has got his exercise in for the week.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

12.35 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on the Government's progress in establishing an infected blood compensation scheme.

In July the infected blood inquiry published its additional report, which made a number of recommendations on ways that the compensation scheme could be amended to achieve a scheme that works better for all infected and affected people. I updated the House then to confirm that the Government were responding positively and that we would bring forward legislation as soon as we could to address the recommendations that we could implement immediately.

The regulations that I am laying before the House today will achieve a number of those changes and demonstrate this Government's commitment to responding swiftly and constructively to the inquiry's recommendations. Specifically, the regulations respond to five of the inquiry's recommendations by removing the HIV eligibility start date; removing the minimum earnings threshold for a person to claim the exceptional financial loss award; removing the requirement for evidence of the date of diagnosis of hepatitis B or C; making changes to the deeming provisions for the severity of hepatitis C; and expanding eligibility to include estates of all affected people who have died between 21 May 2024 and 31 March 2031, which actually goes further than the inquiry's recommended date range.

The regulations also put back the transfer of responsibility to make support scheme payments from the infected blood support schemes to the Infected Blood Compensation Authority—IBCA—by one calendar year. That means that IBCA will begin making phased support scheme payments from January to March 2027. IBCA requested that change to allow it to concentrate on accelerating the delivery of compensation and expanding the service to all eligible groups this year, while ensuring—this is essential—that there is no disruption to those receiving support scheme payments. There will of course be a separate opportunity for the House to debate these regulations in fuller detail before they are approved, and I look forward to that debate.

I would also like to inform the House that we have implemented the inquiry's recommendation to reinstate support scheme payments to partners bereaved after 31 March this year until they have received compensation. Applications for those individuals reopened on 22 October, and I am grateful to colleagues across the devolved Administrations and the support schemes for the collaborative approach to making that happen.

Today I am launching a public consultation on proposed changes to the infected blood compensation scheme, as recommended by the inquiry. I encourage responses from the infected blood community and from all those with an interest in the infected blood inquiry. I assure hon. Members that every response will be considered carefully.

The consultation sets out questions across seven specific issues: harm caused by interferon treatment; the special category mechanism and its equivalents; severe psychological harm; past financial loss and past care;

evidence requirements for exceptional loss; supplementary awards for affected people; and unethical research. The Government have sought initial advice from an infected blood compensation scheme technical expert group to develop proposals on those topics in response to the inquiry's additional report for this public consultation. The feedback we receive through that consultation will inform the decisions that the Government take. The technical expert group will also take part in targeted engagement with the community.

I previously gave the House an undertaking that transparency would be at the heart of any expert group going forward. That is why the five additional members who have been appointed to the technical expert group were appointed following valuable feedback from infected blood community stakeholders, and it is why I am today publishing the minutes of the group's meetings that have taken place so far. I look forward to hearing the views of the community within the consultation process and beyond as we work together to ensure that the Government's response meets expectations. We will publish a response to the consultation on gov.uk within 12 weeks of it closing. As I set out in July, we will also need to bring forward further regulations next year to implement changes following the outcome of the consultation. Listening to and working with the infected blood community is essential to ensure a compensation scheme that works for everyone, and I am hopeful that this consultation will allow us to do just that.

I now turn to the delivery of the compensation scheme as it currently stands. IBCA has made significant progress in the delivery of compensation. As of 21 October, 2,476 people have received an offer of compensation, and over £1.35 billion has been paid. IBCA reached the significant milestone of having paid out over £1 billion in compensation last month, which I am sure the House will agree is welcome and notable progress in the delivery of compensation. I can also tell the House that offers totalling over £1.8 billion have now been made.

As of the end of September, all infected people registered with a support scheme have been contacted to begin their claim, and IBCA has set out its intention to open to unregistered infected people in November. In order to open, IBCA must build a service that allows it to confirm an infection before a claim begins, check the identity of each person claiming, and ensure that all the necessary legal and financial support is in place for anyone who wishes to use it. This approach, which IBCA also took with the first group of people making a claim, means that the numbers will initially be lower. However, I expect that—as with the first group—those numbers will rise exponentially as progress is made.

Earlier this month, IBCA also launched a registration service for people who intend to make a claim to register their details. As of 21 October, it has received 10,573 registrations of intent to make a compensation claim. To be clear, that figure represents all registrations, not unique people or claims. Those registrations will be particularly helpful in identifying the unregistered infected people for the next group, and indeed more as the service grows.

As Members of the House are aware from my previous statements on this matter, IBCA is an independent arm's length body, and it is vital that we respect that independence while also ensuring that I do what I can to drive progress forward. That is why in July I asked for

an independent review of IBCA's delivery of the scheme. That review, led by Sir Tyrone Urch, began in August and concluded earlier this month. I am today publishing that review and have deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses. The report notes that IBCA has made "substantial early progress" towards delivering compensation to victims of infected blood, but it also makes recommendations to aid the scaling-up of operations and the delivery of compensation to complex cohorts. I will, of course, consider all of those recommendations carefully.

Alongside IBCA's delivery of the compensation scheme, the Government have continued to make progress on interim payments. In July I informed the House that we would make a further interim payment of £210,000 to the estates of infected persons who were registered with an infected blood support scheme or predecessor scheme and have sadly passed away, in addition to the interim payments of £100,000 that opened for applications in October 2024. I am pleased that applications for those payments opened last week, meaning that some estates could now be eligible for up to £310,000 in interim payments.

Since applications for the initial interim payments opened last year, over 600 estates have received payments, totalling over £60 million. That is in addition to the £1.2 billion that the Government have paid in interim compensation more widely. I hope that this additional interim payment brings some temporary relief to the families impacted, and I also hope that IBCA's intention to begin the first claims on behalf of estates of deceased infected people by the end of this year provides some reassurance.

I am resolute that we get this right, and I hope the progress I have set out today shows that we are taking positive action and, crucially, listening to and making progress alongside the community. After all, those who have been so impacted by this horrendous scandal must be at the core of every decision we make, in Government and across this House—they deserve no less. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.45 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it—although just under an hour is not a lot of time to digest 75 pages of documentation, so I will do my best. I join the Minister in acknowledging the work done by Sir Brian Langstaff and his inquiries, as well as the serious improvement in the pace of payments that IBCA has made in recent months. We thank Sir Robert Francis, David Foley, and all their team at IBCA. On behalf of the Opposition, I welcome the measures that the Minister has announced that implement some of Sir Brian's recommendations from the additional report, particularly those dealing with HIV eligibility start dates, the deeming of severity bands, evidence of the date of diagnosis, affected estates, and bereaved partner support scheme payments.

Turning to the recommendations relating to hepatitis, we of course welcome confirmation that the Government will remove the earnings floor on the supplementary route exceptional loss award. However, I did not hear any specific reference in the Minister's statement to

measures to address recommendation 4(c) of the original report, which deals with effective treatment. Perhaps the Minister could set out how the Government intend to give effect to that recommendation. Similarly, could he set out what measures the Government are taking—beyond the appointment of the new members of the technical expert group that he has announced—in response to recommendation 2(e), which deals with the transparency of scheme design? That is particularly important in light of the inquiry's worrying finding that victims did not feel that they were being listened to.

I now turn to the recommendations that the Government did not feel able to accept immediately. I welcome the fact that the Minister is consulting on a way forward on those issues; clearly, as I have said, there is a need for transparency and proper consultation. The consultation period will last until the end of January next year. We recognise that there is little that the Minister can do about that clearly defined period, but given the need to address these measures without undue delay, will he ensure that once that consultation period closes, the Government respond swiftly to the consultation paper and introduce any necessary further regulations with maximum speed, so that this House can consider any further measures that are necessary?

More broadly, how are the Government applying the lessons learned from the implementation of payment schemes for people infected to better inform the operation of payments to people affected and to their estates, as he referred to in his statement? What action is the Minister taking with the independent IBCA to ensure that the pace of payments, which has seen welcome progress, continues to accelerate and is not jeopardised by changes to rules and processes?

As I said, Sir Brian's inquiries have done incredible and invaluable work to give a voice to those who have battled so courageously against decades of injustice, and to ensure that victims and their families have some remedy, although clearly no amount of money can ever reverse the terrible harm done by this scandal over many years. The recommendations in the additional report that Sir Brian published shortly before the summer are an invaluable contribution. Looking forward, there will need to be a degree of policy certainty as we move from a period of review to one of rectification and delivery. That is one reason that the cross-party work, both before and since the election, has been so important to give confidence and certainty. Looking ahead, does the Minister have any indication as to when we might expect the inquiry to draw to a close, and what might the mechanism be for doing so?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for the tone of his remarks. I note what he said about the time he received the statement and other documents, and he knows me well enough by now to know that I have great respect for this House and will always facilitate shadow Ministers having material with plenty of time. I will certainly take that issue away and look at why that happened.

I join the shadow Minister in paying tribute to the work of the inquiry and to Sir Robert Francis and David Foley, IBCA's chief executive. This House rightly has held me to account for the number of payments. IBCA was running a test-and-learn approach, and I always said to the House that there would be a smaller

[*Nick Thomas-Symonds*]

number that was a representative sample of cases, which would then allow IBCA to scale up exponentially. We are now in that exponential phase—that steep curve. I look every single week at the number of payments, and it is starting to increase significantly. I know that Members across the House will welcome that.

The shadow Minister made a point about treatment for hepatitis. One of the things we are looking at in the consultation is the impact of interferon, which had such a detrimental impact on so many people.

The shadow Minister is right to raise the transparency mechanism. While I do not need a piece of legislation for that, I am looking at that mechanism and want to get it into place as soon as possible.

The shadow Minister asked about the 12-week consultation. The Government will respond to that within 12 weeks, and I will then want to bring forward a fourth set of regulations with the greatest possible speed.

The shadow Minister's final point was about learning lessons, and that is precisely why I asked Sir Tyrone Urch to carry out his work. First, it was about learning the lessons from what has happened so far and how we can best take things forward. Secondly, it is about the practical steps I can take to assist IBCA with scaling up and making payments to affected people, which will clearly be a far larger number of people for IBCA to deal with.

To finish on a consensual point, the cross-party support on this issue has been important. The continuity between the work I have done and the work of my predecessor as Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) has been hugely important in the delivery of this scheme.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend. This issue has its origins back in the 1940s, and it has been going on for an extraordinarily long time. The state has not been responding to or providing information to the people it should have been there to serve. We find ourselves in a situation where people have lived almost all their lives waiting for compensation, and now this issue is arising that they may pass away, having just received compensation, and their estate will then be subject to inheritance tax. The state is giving with one hand and taking back with the other. I realise that my right hon. Friend is not in the Treasury, but we need to take that issue forward.

There is also this outstanding issue of support to the campaigning groups that support the applications of people who are infected and affected. Part of one of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations was that they need extra support from the Department of Health and Social Care. On both these issues, what can my right hon. Friend do to assist the people making these applications and to get them the response to Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations that they deserve?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work with the all-party parliamentary group. On the first question, the compensation that has been received clearly is exempt from tax. I understand exactly the point he is making about someone, such as a widow, who inherits or has the compensation on behalf of a

deceased partner. That money will be received tax-free, but I appreciate his point about the speed that is needed, because of the age of so many of the victims of this scandal. That is through no fault of their own, but is the fault of the state. The tax exemption is in line with the policy that is pursued consistently across Government. On his second point about the campaigning groups, I am conscious that we are approaching the end of another tax year. I pay tribute to the work that the charities do, and I undertake to him that I will take up that matter with the Department of Health and Social Care.

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

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The Minister will see my pile of papers, which I hope are criticisms that I never have to raise again. I welcome his statement and the work being done, particularly by Sir Brian Langstaff and others. I also welcome his intention to listen to and work with the infected blood community. This scandal remains the worst treatment disaster in the history of our national health service, and it is a source of shame for successive Governments and for the health service. We have heard from our constituents, who have been let down by medical professionals and the NHS. In many cases, they were victims of deliberate malpractice and cover-up. All those warnings about unsafe blood were ignored and officials failed to inform patients. In many cases, those patients paid, or are still paying, with their lives.

An estimated 30,000 victims suffered, and that suffering was compounded by the further injustice of having to wait decades for compensation. As of my latest data, I understand that six times as many people have died waiting for justice as have benefited from this scheme. I hope the Minister can update me with a slightly more accurate figure. Payments to date have been made at an infuriatingly glacial pace.

I would like to ask the Minister about the timelines for delivering compensation. Can he reaffirm that all eligible victims—all 30,000—will receive compensation by 2029? Will he confirm that the consultation he will undertake will not delay in any way or affect the speed at which the payments are being made? More specifically, I have challenged him before about the 916 victims of the special category mechanism. Are they in a different state from the advice given in August last year? Have things changed completely from the situation in February this year, when the rules changed?

I just want to check something that I am not entirely clear about. With the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, the current approach was that people could not apply for compensation, and you are now saying that they can and that they will not have to wait—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Ms Munt, you say, "you are saying", but I am not. I hope you are coming to a conclusion.

Tessa Munt: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can the Minister confirm that people will not have to wait and that those 10,573 registrations are only part of it, when we recognise that there are 30,000 victims?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the hon. Lady for the tone of her comments. On her final point, that number is just the number of registrations, not the totality of the number of victims. On the point that she raises, I entirely share her concern. As I said when I gave evidence to the inquiry in May, the test that I always have at the forefront of my mind when making changes is about not causing additional undue delay to the payment of compensation.

The hon. Lady asked me about 2029; that is a backstop, not a target date. I said that to the inquiry in May as well. The target is to get the payments out as quickly as possible. As I said in response to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), the test-and-learn approach was always taken because we felt—and IBCA felt—that that would ultimately be the way to get the money out to the largest number of people as quickly as possible. I think we are now in an exponential phase where the number of payments is going up quickly.

The hon. Lady is entirely right to draw attention to the number of people who have died before actually securing justice. That is again a reason why I have been pushing for payments to be made as quickly as possible.

Finally, the special category mechanism is one of the seven issues mentioned in the consultation. I know this has been asked before, but I would urge her and her constituents to respond to that.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the content, clarification and tone of his statement. It is clearly an awful situation. I would like to speak up for my constituents in Easington and to seek some clarification regarding those people who contracted hepatitis C. Will the Minister confirm that all in the infected blood community, including those suffering with hepatitis C, will have access to the consultation, as recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff? I understand that the consultation closes in January, and he mentioned that there would be a 12-week period in which the Government would consider that.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The straight answer is yes. My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for the victims in his constituency of Easington. Whether for hepatitis C victims or the other victims of this scandal, I want the consultation to be as accessible as possible, and I very much hope that he will encourage his constituents to respond to it.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister is clearly totally committed to this subject, and I thank him for the way in which he reaches out to the MPs he knows have an interest in it. Will he join me in commending IBCA for the quality of its communications? Both the website and the MPs' toolkit recently sent out could not be more free of jargon, which sets an excellent example.

Going back to the point raised by the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), as I understand it, if a compensation grant is made to the family of someone who has already died, those relatives will receive it tax-free, but if the grant is made to the individual shortly before their death, the very same family members might have to pay inheritance tax on it. That is clearly an anomaly, so will the Minister speak to the Treasury about it?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, who has campaigned on this issue for many years. On his first point, I agree; whether the documents and communications are from the Government or the IBCA, I am constantly pressing for plain English. To be fair to those tasked with producing those documents, some of the content is complicated, but trying to communicate in accessible ways is hugely important.

On the right hon. Gentleman's second point regarding the tax exemption, he is correct, I think, in his interpretation that there is a single tax exemption. The compensation is received free of tax in the first instance, but there is no subsequent tax exemption. That is in line with general Government policy on tax exemptions across the board.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. On lessons learned, I hope he has looked at the National Audit Office's work on different compensation schemes so that we can learn from that. I also hope that he supports the national campaign to encourage people who received a blood transfusion to get tested for hepatitis C, as two people a month are contacting the helpline to say that they were infected during the relevant period.

To press the Minister further on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), under this scheme people get compensation because they are dying due to infected blood; it is not random, coincidental or due to something else. If they happen to receive the compensation just before they die, their family will pay inheritance tax on it. The victims want to ensure that their families are properly supported, because they are no longer able to do that, so will the Minister renew his efforts to talk to the Treasury about this issue? This is a small, defined group of people, which does not need to set a more general precedent, but for this particular scheme—where the state failed people so much—the issue is an important one to resolve.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does on this. I entirely agree with her about learning lessons from the different compensation schemes across several Governments in recent decades. On her second point, regarding tax exemptions, I have set out the Government's position, but I hear very strongly what Members are saying.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the Minister for his meticulous and thorough analysis of all the different strands of this challenging problem, and for the work he has done to deal with the complexity of different groups' concerns over delivery of the compensation. I also thank Sir Brian Langstaff for what he has done.

However, after six years, £140 million has been spent on this inquiry—and we do not yet have the accounts for the current year. In Sir Tyrone Urch's review, which the Minister mentioned, the first recommendation is regarding policy stability. Can the Minister say something about how we will achieve that policy stability? Respectfully, is it not time to thank Sir Brian and Sir Robert for their work and then focus on the delivery of IBCA, rather than have more iterations of recommendations, which do not achieve much for the individuals who need this accelerated?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the painstaking, significant work he did when he was Paymaster General. The reference to Sir Tyrone Urch and his report is apposite, because I asked Sir Tyrone to look at the workings of IBCA—to look, practically, at what barriers are still there to delivering compensation quickly. Of course, Sir Tyrone's first recommendation was around policy stability. As I said when I was before the inquiry in May, we would not want to be making changes to the scheme that were detrimental to the ability to deliver the compensation quickly. That is something that I think is really important going forward.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate and thank the Minister for his work on this; I know how much of his time it is taking. Further to the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) and for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), there is a perversity in the people who were failed by the state potentially being asked to repay 40% of their compensation to the same state that failed them.

The Minister has clearly set out that that is in line with policy; is he willing to stand at that Dispatch Box and state, categorically, that that is fair? If he cannot say that it is fair, will he at least undertake to again raise this issue with the Treasury, so that those people who were failed by the state are not then penalised by the state?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend and a number of Members have made that case powerfully. I will say to the House that they can be assured that I look at all aspects of this scheme and test whether they are fair, and I think we can see, across parties, the strength of feeling on this today.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I congratulate the Minister on making real progress on this matter, after many years of delays. I recently met Jean Hill and her daughters. She has been campaigning on this issue for 30 years. Sadly, her husband died in 2004 at the age of 48; his brother died at 25; and a nephew died in more recent years. What assurance can the Minister give me—and Jean—that payments to deceased estates will be expedited as a matter of urgency, and what additional resources will be put in place to achieve that?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work; I know that he has raised this issue on previous occasions. With regard to deceased estates, he will have heard what I said in my statement about the interim payments. Additional interim payments have just opened, which shows the urgency of the situation to the Government and the importance of the money getting to where it is needed. That is why I made sure that those payments were opened in recent weeks.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement today, and for the work that he has done. One issue raised by a constituent is that when she applied for the interim payment, she filled out lots of forms and gave information, as she has been doing for many years, because her husband died some time ago, having contracted infection back in the 1970s. She now has to apply again, and the same information

will be asked for. There must be a way of expediting the process to make life slightly simpler for people like her. She, too, is in a situation in which, at the age of 88 and having not received all the payments that she is likely to get, she is worried about inheritance tax—not on her own behalf, but on behalf of her children. I am sorry to belabour the point, but may I add my voice to those around the Chamber? Perhaps those voices will help the Minister to have the ammunition to take to the Treasury to say, “We’re not happy with this.”

Nick Thomas-Symonds: With regard to my hon. Friend's first point, on the interim payments, there is an expedited process if the details are unchanged from the first interim application. If my hon. Friend writes to me with the particular details of her constituent, I am happy to look at that. On her second point, I think the strength of feeling in the House is very clear.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): On previous occasions, I have paid tribute to the Minister for his sincerity and hard work in this matter, and I add to that the collegiate and consensual way that he approaches all of this, particularly in his work with the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government. I previously asked for the work of voluntary organisations—third-sector organisations—to be placed on a statutory footing. The Minister will understand that despite the system being fairly straightforward and simple, as has been acknowledged, claimants still need support, particularly those who are unwell. Can the Minister advise whether that work has now been placed on a statutory footing?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I have worked with the devolved Administrations throughout. We have to take into account that this is a pre-devolution scandal, so it is UK-wide, and a number of Sir Brian's recommendations from his initial report are UK-wide. They are now within devolved competence, so this is hugely important. I have always been conscious of that, and I work with the devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's second point, on the issue of voluntary bodies, a couple of different issues are mixed up on that question. If he writes to me precisely about putting work on a statutory footing, I will give him an answer. More generally, the work of voluntary bodies and charities in supporting victims has been absolutely invaluable, and I am very conscious of the financial pressures they are facing.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): So many lives have been scarred or ended by this betrayal of trust, cover-ups, denials and delays, and my constituents have waited for up to decades for justice. Many are concerned that they will not see it in their lifetime. Can the Minister outline how he will ensure that my constituents and the infected blood community find the consultation accessible, and can he say when the third set of regulations that have been published will become law?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On my hon. Friend's second question, and subject to the will of the House, I would really like the third set of regulations to become law by the end of the year. His advocacy for his constituents

has never been anything short of impressive, and I am more than happy to look at any specific case that he brings to me.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his commitment to finding solutions, and for his incredibly compassionate demeanour in handling these issues. I think we all thank him for that. The streamlined scheme for compensation opened just three weeks ago; can the Minister confirm that it is indeed now easier for people to access the money that they deserve? I hope that the scheme is not adding more worry and stress to those who live their life under a burden not of their making. Are the Government truly sharing the load with them, and what more can the Minister do to make the process smoother?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a very useful point, building on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) a moment or two ago. I am very keen to ensure that the consultation is as accessible as possible, and some of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations—for example, about how we calculate past and future loss—are quite technical. I always say to both the Department and IBCA that it is really important that we do everything we can to make the system simpler, but we also need ready explainers. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that I will continue to push for them.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his continued compassion and commitment to the cause, and for the communications that we have had about affected constituents in my constituency. As he will recall, their concerns are about bureaucracy and delays. Given what he said in his statement, can he assure me that this Government remain committed to ensuring that all affected and infected individuals will see their compensation as quickly as possible? What assurances can he give me and my constituents about when they will be invited to start their claims?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; as ever, he makes a powerful case on behalf of his constituents. At the moment, offers have been made that are worth over £1.8 billion, but I remain restless about the speed of progress; I want it to continue to increase. I am very conscious that IBCA will be moving from dealing with those who have been infected to the much larger number of people who have been affected. I appointed Sir Tyrone Urch to look at the lessons that we can learn, and at how IBCA can best scale up to deal with a much larger number of claims. Indeed, over 10,000 claims have been registered. I stand ready to assist and support IBCA as we move forward into a new phase.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his very clear personal commitment on this issue. He will be aware that building and maintaining trust between the affected families and the Government is essential. I am sure he will agree that the Hillsborough law, which comes before the House next week, is one example of how we can continue to repay that trust and demonstrate that we are determined to see recommendations, such as the duty of candour, put in statute. My constituents who are affected by the

scandal still continually ask me for reassurance on transparency, so will he consider publishing regular data on claims received, assessed and paid, so that the public can clearly see the progress that is being made—exponential or otherwise?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is entirely correct about transparency. IBCA continues to publish statistics, which are very important. I have today published the technical expert group's minutes, which are very important, too. My hon. Friend puts his finger on another really important aspect of the response to Sir Brian Langstaff's report from last year: the duty of candour, which will be hugely important in driving cultural change across public service. I am proud that we will have the Second Reading of the relevant Bill on Monday.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, and the opening of further interim payments last week. The families of infected people in Falkirk have in the past told me that systems could be better streamlined to improve the pace of delivery. I know the pace of delivery will continue to be imperative for families, so what assurances can the Minister provide that the actions set out in his statement, and actions taken following the consultation, will continue to reflect the feedback of infected people and affected families?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. We will have a consultation and introduce a transparency mechanism, but we will also look very seriously at the recommendations that Tyrone Urch has made. We need to ensure that the speed of payments continues to increase, but also, as my hon. Friend says, that feedback from victims is at the heart of the process.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): In one of the first contributions I had the privilege of making in the House, I raised the case of the Blake family. Their son Stuart was infected aged six, and he died at the age of 27, back in 2006. I have been in regular contact with the family, and it was my privilege to show them around this place just a few weeks ago. I am sure the Minister and the House will understand that this has consumed their family for four decades, and they are still seeking reassurance about the urgency with which the Government are bringing forward payments, and about whether they will be made as quickly as possible. I am really encouraged by the statement. The family are eligible for the second interim payment, but I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed his personal commitment to bringing such cases to resolution as soon as possible.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend has previously spoken to me movingly about the experience of the Blake family, and it is exactly families with such experiences who are at the forefront of all our minds across the House as we drive this forward. I can of course give him a personal commitment that I will continue to do all I can to quicken even further the pace of the compensation payments.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the update, especially on behalf of my constituent Robert, who lost his brother aged 31, and who has been in regular contact with me on this issue. The Government previously announced that they were allocating funding

[James Naish]

to charities; that was a recommendation of the inquiry. Will the Minister confirm the steps that he has been taking with the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that money gets to those charities, so they are funded to process applications as quickly as possible?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue, because charities have played an absolutely vital role in supporting and advocating for the victims of this scandal. Money was already allocated in this financial year. I know that there are concerns going forward. He can be assured that I will work closely with Health and Social Care Ministers on that.

Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for his update. I am pleased to report that one of my constituents, the one whom I have been most in contact with the Minister about, has finally been fully compensated, which is a huge relief to him and his family. I spoke with him this morning, and he is watching now. Although he welcomes the improved service from IBCA, and I find it reassuring that the intention is to begin paying the first claims on behalf of estates of deceased infected people by the end of this year, my constituent asks if there is anything we can do to prioritise those close to the end of their life, so that they can get the justice they deserve in life, bearing in mind the valid inheritance tax concerns raised by Members from across the House.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend's constituent has had his compensation payment. My hon. Friend speaks very powerfully on his constituent's behalf. On his point about those nearing the end of their life, IBCA has published how it prioritises claims. He and his constituent should be assured that it is exactly those who are at an advanced age, and who are dealing with this matter at this moment in their life for no other reason than the state's failure to deal with it over past decades, who are at the forefront of my mind as I try to drive progress even faster.

Points of Order

1.22 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This weekend, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) suggested on a Reform UK broadcast that the country could soon be run by an “appalling Hamas-supporting, LGBT-supporting nationalist party”.

As a gay man and an MP, I am proud to say I will always support LGBT rights. To suggest that that support is the same as backing Hamas—a vile terrorist organisation that systematically persecutes LGBT people—is beyond the pale. What can we do across this House to make it clear to him and his party that supporting LGBT rights is fundamental to our British values, and to the values of this Parliament?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Gentleman for notice of his point of order, and his assurance that the Member concerned has been notified.

Peter Swallow *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can see the hon. Gentleman nodding. What Members say outside the Chamber is not a matter for the Chair, but he has most definitely put his point on the record. He has most likely read the recent report from the Speaker's Conference, which once again talked about Members using moderate political language.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In July, a Treasury Minister agreed to meet me about the closure of the Lending Standards Board ahead of the launch of the ethnicity code. This meeting was scheduled to take place in September, but was cancelled due to the Government reshuffle. Despite an initial indication that this meeting would be rescheduled, I have had no recent response to requests from my office for a date and a time. Given that the Lending Standards Board is due to close tomorrow, I wish to ask for your advice about what further steps I can take to ask the Government to engage with me on the ethnicity code.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for notice of her point of order, and her assurance that she has notified the Minister. While this is not a matter for the Chair, I am sure those on the Treasury Bench—I am seeking to make eye contact—have heard and noted her frustration.

Israel-Palestine Conflict: Government Response

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Emily Thornberry will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement, and these should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.25 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I must confess that, in the 20 years I have been in Parliament, I have never done one of these before; it is all entirely new to me. If I am doing anything wrong, please, Madam Deputy Speaker—and I am sure you will—put me back on the straight and narrow.

The situation in Palestine is a humanitarian catastrophe, an injustice and great unfinished business. It has also been a huge diplomatic challenge for our country and indeed for the rest of the world. We as a country believe that we have some responsibility to try to find a way through—and rightly so, given our history in the region and the potential assistance that we can give.

For a long time, our policy on Israel and Palestine has been dictated by being close to the Americans, believing that they are the ones with the influence, but the Americans, until recently, were not really doing anything. In any event, the Israelis were certainly not listening to the Americans, and for sure they were not listening to us. The international community, I think, just stood and watched as hopes for a two-state solution ran into the sand.

Meanwhile, our long-standing alliances with countries such as the Arab countries were blemished by our continual refusal to recognise Palestine, so while we had willingness, we were not as influential as we should or could be. In the view of our Committee, Britain needed to have a stronger voice, and there is more that we could do. In the words of the former Member for North East Bedfordshire, the former Middle East Minister, we tended to do “too little, too late”.

Most of us thought that it was beyond time to recognise a Palestinian state. It was of immense importance as an expression of intent and good will, and to help reset the important relationships in the region. I was really pleased that, four days after our report was published, the Government committed to recognising a Palestinian state. I accept that it was not just our report that persuaded them. It was also the circumstances of the France-Saudi Arabia conference, and the campaigning of a great many people, not least Members of this House, particularly the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion).

Our report also recommended that humanitarian aid must immediately flow in under the auspices of the UN, and called for the immediate dismantling of the Gaza

Humanitarian Foundation. I am glad that we have seen the back of that organisation—good riddance—but I am keen to hear more from the Government about their contribution to the UN 60-day plan to deliver vital food, aid and sanitation.

The Committee’s report was not just about Gaza. We all agreed that everything has to be done to protect the west bank from an increasingly violent and organised settler movement with representation at the highest levels of the Israeli Government. We went on a visit, and saw evidence of settlers thinking they could act with impunity. We also met organisations established to monitor the settlements that are being undermined by Israeli legislation taking funding away from non-governmental organisations. We urge the Government to prepare a comprehensive ban on the import of settlement goods, because when we say that settlements are illegal, we must mean it, and we must follow through.

We also called for the Government to immediately evacuate injured children for medical treatment in the UK, and I am pleased that they immediately committed to doing so. We called for the Government to participate in peacebuilding, and to kick-start negotiations for a long-term two-state solution. They told us that they had played a full part in the France-Saudi Arabia conference, but the question is: what is happening now, and how are we going to keep moving forward? We have to keep moving forward.

Many of us have been asked to express a conclusion on breaches of international law, from genocide downwards. The Government have consistently maintained the position that they are not able to make a determination—first because it is not for them but for a court, and secondly because we need to see the evidence. I have to say, it looks like a genocide to me, but I am not a court. That is why we need to play a role in collecting evidence for the future legal reckoning that must come.

I am really disappointed—more than that, I am genuinely surprised—that the Government did not agree to this in their response to our report. One of the things that the Labour Government pride themselves on, which I am proud of too, is their commitment to upholding international law, no matter how difficult it is. I really do not understand why they have taken that view.

Our report is the sum of a huge amount of work by members of the Committee and Committee staff, for which I am hugely grateful. We always knew that as soon as it was published it would go out of date. Maybe it has gone out of date in a good way; at least there is some semblance of a ceasefire now and the hostages have been released, though it is very difficult to say all that given the events of this week.

What remains consistent is the approach that we believe the Government should take: to be consistent and clear; to act as a convenor, a sensible friend and a force for good; to work hard; to refuse to look away; and to take seriously our responsibilities in the region. Peace will come. It is a question of when and how, and whether Britain will be at the forefront of crafting it. We believe that Britain should be.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her Committee’s report. In response to the seventh recommendation about a Palestinian state, the Government state:

[Sir Julian Lewis]

“Our message to the terrorists of Hamas is unchanged and unequivocal. They must immediately release all the hostages, sign up to a ceasefire, disarm and accept that they will play no part in the government of Gaza.”

Did the Foreign Affairs Committee give consideration to what should be done if Hamas refuse to disarm and give way to, for example, the Palestinian Authority?

Emily Thornberry: At the moment we find ourselves in a vacuum where there is no plan for what is to happen to the strip now. In a lawless situation, it is extremely challenging. That is why we have to keep moving forward. The ceasefire is not the answer but only the first step. There is some work being done, but I would like to be reassured that we are playing a central role in that. I believe that we could be and we should be.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Committee for her statement and her recognition of the Committee's members. On recommendation 6 on the reconstruction of Gaza, Gaza is still the most dangerous place in the world to be a child. Over 64,000 children are reported to have been killed or injured, and nearly the same number have lost a parent. UNICEF, which is headquartered in my constituency, has raised urgent concerns about the devastating and long-term consequences that children are facing, including the trauma of mass displacement. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the long road to recovery must include specialist care for children, so many of whom have witnessed unimaginable horrors and whose survival, safety and dignity have been imperilled by war and humanitarian crisis for over two years?

Emily Thornberry: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work on this report; her contribution has been so important. She is right: what we are trying to do when finding peace is to bring hope and a future, not just for Palestinian children but for Israeli children too, so that they can live in peace together and have a decent future.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful to the Chair of the Committee for her statement. In this place, we use the phrase “two-state solution” very readily and often, so much so that it becomes a cliché. Our visit as a Committee to the Knesset revealed just how limited support for a two-state solution is there.

I was pleased that the Government announced their intention to recognise a Palestinian state on 29 July, just four days after the Committee published its report, but I draw the House's attention to the September two-state solution conference convened by France and Saudi Arabia. In responding to the Committee's report, the Government said that they played a full part in that conference and did so by co-chairing the working group on humanitarian action and reconstruction. Does the right hon. Member share my view that the UK's contribution needs to go beyond humanitarian action and that the UK must continue its engagement on how we can make a two-state solution a reality?

Emily Thornberry: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution to the report and all his work. It has been a great deal of work, and he certainly played his part in it, so I thank him.

Yes, Britain can do so much. We have experience in the region, and we have really good friends. We also have the experience of Northern Ireland. People said there was no chance of getting peace and a long-term solution in Northern Ireland, until suddenly there it was. We need to bring a hopeful and positive attitude to this. I believe there is an important contribution that we can make.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I welcome the statement of the Chair of the Committee. I think all of us on the Committee are relieved that since our report was published, we have now reached a ceasefire. The UN has been able to re-enter Gaza and the situation it has seen on the ground is devastating. The UN's humanitarian chief described it as like going through the ruins of Hiroshima. While it is welcome that the UN is able to restart its humanitarian deliveries, this is only a first step towards the lasting peace that is needed. Does the Chair agree that the UK must play its part, with international partners, on security and governance as we move towards a two-state-solution? We need to enable Palestinians to rebuild the place where they live in a way that is fair for them.

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend is another Member of the Committee who worked very hard on this report. His focus and commitment really made a difference to the report, so I thank him for that.

We on the Committee are concerned about the funding and assistance that can be given for governance, defending democracy and creating states, not just in Gaza but in other countries. We are very concerned about the budget and exactly how much will be available to do the vital work that Britain is really good at. We do not want to withdraw from the field.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Chair for her Committee's report. She mentioned the possible determination of genocide and said that, in her personal view, that is what has taken place. Of course, a UN report has reached that conclusion as well. I am fairly certain that that should place certain obligations on the UK, so will the Committee commit to investigating exactly what the UK's obligations are to any kind of international accountability process?

Emily Thornberry: Just as I do not think Britain as a country can look away from what is happening, I do not think our Committee can look away either. We have asked the Government for their response to that particular court case, and we are still awaiting a proper response. There may well be some obligations that are attached to it, and we do think that it has taken too long for the Government to respond.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Committee itself for the report, which I thought was very helpful and insightful. I share the concern that the Chair outlines about the gathering of evidence. I want to ask about media access into the Gaza strip. Is that an area that the Committee could look at in future, and does the Chair have a view on how it might help or hinder evidence gathering?

Emily Thornberry: In our report we called for the media to have free and full access to Gaza. The question has to be, “What have people got to hide?” Not allowing the media in is a breach of established norms. The media is allowed in no matter how difficult the circumstances. It is for the media to decide whether or not it should take the risk of going into a particular area, but the world does need to know what happened. There has to be some form of accountability. There has been limited accountability but nothing like the accountability there ought to have been had there been free access for the media.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair and the Committee very much for their report, and I think what they are saying is positive. The United States of America, the United Kingdom, the EU and many Arab states have all pushed for peace. They state collectively that Hamas cannot have any part in the future of Palestine, that Hamas is the obstacle, and that Hamas must be disarmed and can never ever be allowed to exist. For a lasting peace to mean something, Hamas has to go. Does the right hon. Lady agree with that?

Emily Thornberry: Of course I agree with that, and I respect the experience the hon. Gentleman has in relation to Northern Ireland. Disarming terrorists and being able to move on is of crucial importance.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Committee on this important report, and I thank the Chair for explaining it and answering questions in the Chamber today. There has been a lot of discussion already, even in this short interchange, about gathering evidence. The right hon. Lady has highlighted the position of the Government on this, but there are international bodies that need to gather evidence, and I reflect the point earlier that even journalists are not allowed in. What can she tell us about other evidence that is being gathered by international organisations, and what more does she think the international community, not just individual Governments, should do?

Emily Thornberry: It is a very good question. Of course, the problem is that there is still not free access for anyone going in. Part of the concern, obviously, is that there is an attempt to undermine international jurists and the international courts by not just Israel but some of its allies. We need to ensure that we stand by the rule of law and the international courts. There needs to be a reckoning on both sides. There have been, on the face of it, the most terrible crimes committed and we need to ensure that people are held to account. We must not be afraid; we must do that.

Backbench Business

Property Service Charges

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 17 June, on Property Management Companies, HC 980; correspondence between the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and FirstPort UK, on property management companies, dated 30 September, 21 August, 11 July and 1 July, reported to the House on 14 October, 9 September and 1 July.]

1.40 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered property service charges.

It is a privilege to bring this important debate to the House today. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

I remember vividly the day, over 20 years ago now, when I picked up the keys to my first flat in south-east London. It took time to get to a position where my salary was sufficient to secure a mortgage and to save up the deposit, but I managed to do it. I spent the first few weeks on a mattress on the floor while I saved for a bed, but it was the most amazing feeling in the world to own my own home. I was fortunate enough to have purchased the freehold, so I never had to face paying service charges that I could not afford and I never had to rely on a third-party management company to make essential repairs. When the time was right for me to move on, my flat was easy to sell.

Others have not been so lucky. They have bought leasehold on a private estate, and with that comes a life sentence. Today, I want to give a voice to those people on the hook for ever-increasing service charges, trapped in homes they cannot afford but cannot sell either, who thought they were buying their dream home when actually it was the start of a nightmare. Make no mistake—this is no exaggeration on my part—people's lives have been and are being ruined by excessive service charges.

Let me start, Madam Deputy Speaker, by telling you about Park 25, a housing estate in Redhill. It was built 18 years ago and has 500 homes, a mixture of houses and flats. It is a contemporary and stunning site, with the type of homes that people want to live in. It is particularly attractive to key workers, such as doctors and nurses, due to its proximity to East Surrey hospital. Like many new estates, it was built by private developers with no arrangements made for the local authority to adopt the communal land after completion, so FirstPort was appointed as the property manager to maintain the estate. This means that residents of Park 25 pay an expensive service charge to FirstPort, on top of their mortgage and on top of their council tax, for pretty basic services. Those service charges are going up significantly every year, driving some homeowners to the absolute brink.

I first became aware of the issue when I met Louise, a single mum, at my first ever surgery last year—a meeting I will never forget. She told me how she had purchased a one-bedroom flat on Park 25 when they were first built, but the service charges quickly increased, becoming unaffordable for her, in part due to the expensive biomass communal heating system. In desperation she tried to sell, but three times over she lost her buyer. She now lets out the flat and has moved back in with her family,

[Rebecca Paul]

unable to access the equity that would allow her to buy somewhere else. She is trapped, not able to move on with her life.

Then there is Alfie, who purchased a two-bedroom flat in 2018. He was

“thrilled to get on the property ladder at the age of 23, thinking it was a valuable investment.”

His first service charge payment was just under £2,200 per annum. Six years later, it is over £3,600—a 70% increase. For that, he says

“they basically cut the grass and insure the building”.

When heating is included it gets even worse, due to the biomass system. The first amount becomes £3,400, going up to a whopping £8,000 per annum—a 135% increase. Again, Madam Deputy Speaker, I remind you that he is paying council tax and a mortgage on top.

Alfie did consider challenging the service fees at a tribunal, but he was advised by the Leasehold Advisory Service that for any chance of success he would need to appoint a surveyor to review the service charges. However, to do that there needed to be a recognised tenants’ association, and to set that up, over 50% of leaseholders needed to agree. In the case of Park 25, he quickly found that to be an impossible task as many rent out their properties and so are not easily traced. With that door closed to him, he tried to sell his property for over two years—even for £50,000 less than he bought it for just to cover the mortgage. There was lots of interest, but every time the potential purchaser found out about the service charges, they withdrew. Alfie says:

“Understandably, nobody wants to buy it. The ‘we buy any property’ companies won’t touch it and even the auction sites which run a ‘no sale no fee’ policy don’t want to take it on”.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this important debate—the fact that so many Members are present is an indication of its importance. In my constituency I have seen an increase in the number of people who bought their house or flat many years ago and are now facing difficulties with the level of charges, unexpected cost increases, and poor communication and service quality. Does she agree that a service charge can never be seen as a blank cheque for the owners, and that what those charges are spent on must be itemised and made clear?

Rebecca Paul: I completely agree.

To add insult to injury, Alfie told me that FirstPort charges an £80 administration fee if payment is not made within 30 days of demand. In 2023 he received his fee on Christmas day while in discussions about a payment plan to settle outstanding fees. FirstPort refused to remove the charge despite his financial struggles. Alfie has now left the UK and is renting his flat out at a loss, because that is the only option available to him.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): The hon. Lady highlights the problem of residents being charged late payment fees. I have a number of constituents who never received an original letter demanding payment, but who are then charged late payment fees despite not knowing a payment was due. Does she agree with me that the lack of communication is another critical issue that we must address?

Rebecca Paul: I thank the hon. Member for raising that point. I completely agree that is very much an issue, as I have heard that too.

Alfie and Louise, sadly, are not alone. So many other people on Park 25 find themselves in the same situation: trapped, unable to sell and move on with their lives, and wishing they had never bought the property in the first place. Sam, another resident, said that

“it’s not an exaggeration to say this is ruining people’s lives”.

He has a wife and child and wants to have another, but he cannot move to a bigger property as he cannot sell this one. It is literally stopping them growing their family. He even tried selling his flat for £80,000 less than the valuation, and he still could not sell it due to the service charges. This is devastating for them as a family.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As a constituency MP, I have had some appalling experiences with FirstPort, at Oak Lodge in Hockley and at King Georges Court in Rayleigh. The latter is a four-storey McCarthy Stone development that it manages, where the lift was out of action for almost a year. Is not the fundamental problem with FirstPort that it is ultimately owned by several offshore venture capital companies that are very aggressive in seeking revenue from their tenants, but do not seem very willing to provide a decent quality of service in return?

Rebecca Paul: I thank my right hon. Friend for providing that very useful context. I will come on to that in my speech. One of the challenges we have is that property service companies are seeking to make a profit, yet they are unregulated and free to do as they will. It is for this place to get a handle on that. I hope that today we can think constructively about potential solutions to address the problem, the scale of which, across the House, we all recognise. We do not want our constituents to continue to face it. I am afraid to say that FirstPort is not covering itself in glory. I have now heard hundreds of times over about its lack of responsiveness, lack of transparency on costs and inadequate explanations of service charge increases. Residents have told me about being billed for services they have never received, like window cleaning, with no avenue to formally challenge and remediate. Any opportunity to charge a resident is used to the full.

These things are all symptomatic of an industry that prioritises extracting maximum value from leaseholders, regardless of the human cost. There is no incentive for property service companies to act any differently. It is incredibly hard for leaseholders to remove them, so the companies have free rein to do pretty much what they like. This fundamental power imbalance must be addressed, and it must be made easier for leaseholders to take their business elsewhere.

The Park 25 service charge for the year ending 30 April 2026 is estimated to be just under £1.9 million—13% higher than last year’s estimate. The increase in costs is primarily to cover the future replacement of playground equipment, street lighting, road repairs and other infrastructure. Park 25 residents are also paying council tax for exactly those types of things outside the estate. Out of the £1.9 million service charge, FirstPort keeps around £142,000 in fees, which works out at just under 8% of the total service charge. How easy was it for me to find that £142,000 figure in FirstPort’s costs

breakdown? Not very—I had to total up numbers across many pages of costs, as there is no nice, neat summary at the front showing the total amount.

That 8% may or may not be out of kilter with industry—I found it difficult when researching to confirm one way or another, which is an issue in itself. The key point to recognise here, though, is that there is absolutely no incentive or requirement for FirstPort to keep the cost base low. In fact, the more money it spends on maintaining the estate and the more people it employs to deliver services, the smaller the percentage proportion its management fee appears to be—a perverse incentive indeed.

It would be very easy for me to berate property service companies throughout my speech, and I suspect that others will take up that mantle during the debate. However, we must recognise that it is the current system that allows the companies to operate in this way.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): South Derbyshire district council has taken the bold and rather commendable decision to ban any new property management fees, and to backdate that to January 2025. However, that does not help those who already have homes they bought before 2025. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should press our Government to legislate to help those who are tied into these arrangements to come out of them?

Rebecca Paul: I thank the hon. Member for that point. An important debate for us to have today is about what we do going forward, both for those who have not yet bought a leasehold and to help our constituents who are in this situation right now. I am really interested to hear everyone's views on that.

These companies are a symptom of the problem; they are opportunists making money from an inequitable system. It is this House that must take responsibility for addressing the intrinsic unfairness and urgently make the changes needed to unshackle leaseholders. I hope that we will today hear hon. Members' views on the solutions, not just the issues. We cannot keep building new housing estates under this same model, perpetuating the problem. This is increasingly important in the light of the Government's ambitious plan to build 1.5 million new homes over the next few years. I have to say, if nothing has changed when the time comes for my children to purchase a property, I will be strongly advising them not to purchase a leasehold on a private estate.

To start us off, I will give the House my view. I think making it easier for leaseholders to change property service company is important, as is better regulation and higher standards, but that will not fundamentally transform the situation. What is needed—what is critical—is a change to the default model, so that homeowners are not paying both the council and a private company for the exact same services.

One sensible and equitable option would be that local authorities are obliged to adopt communal land and infrastructure on completion of new estates in all but the most exceptional cases. For that to work in practice, developers would need to be obliged to ensure that the infrastructure meets the council's standards before transfer. That way, owners of leasehold properties would be put on an equal footing with everyone else, paying for communal services once through their council tax. That would certainly deal with future issues.

But what about those who, like our constituents, are already trapped? It may be that something more radical is needed, such as a mandatory direction to all local authorities to adopt communal land where requested by existing estates. It would be difficult, I know, in this current financial environment and with the likely variability of estate quality, but it would certainly address much of the issue and allow my constituents to sell their properties and move on with their lives.

I know that this Government are also keen to move forwards and towards commonhold arrangements, especially for flats, which essentially put management of the estate in the hands of leaseholders themselves. There are some benefits to commonhold over the current model, but it is not the silver bullet that is needed and brings its own set of problems. Anyone who, like me, has been involved in a residents' association or similar organisation—or, indeed, who simply understands human nature—will know that most people do not want to pay out for significant works, so the works will not get done, which in time will result in crumbling roads, failing roofs and falling home values. Again, it will become difficult for residents to sell their properties. It is just another version of the same trap, and one that pits neighbours against each other. I urge the Government to think again on plans to make commonhold the default tenure for new build flats.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Lady is making some excellent points. I really think it is the radical solutions that we need to consider. I should probably declare an interest as a director of a right-to-manage company—we got so fed up with the freeholder failing to manage our building properly that we took back control. However, as she points out, that is not the end of the story, and we still need to get a lot of people to agree on a lot of things, and building up the reserve fund is particularly difficult. I encourage the hon. Lady to keep coming up with ideas that are bolder than the ones that are out there at the moment, because it is a sticky problem to fix.

Rebecca Paul: I thank the hon. Member for his encouragement and I will keep coming up with radical ideas.

Before I finish, I want to raise the issue of education and information provision to homebuyers. If most people knew the current problems with leasehold arrangements, they would not buy them—or they certainly would not pay as much for them. I am sure that conveyancers include warnings and information when managing the sale and purchase process, but it is not cutting through. People are sleepwalking into purchases with little or no understanding of the uncapped service charges they are signing up to, and we must do more to ensure that people are adequately advised and informed before signing on the dotted line.

I would be most grateful if the Minister could today give his view on a few things. How can we best address the current power imbalance between leaseholders and property service companies? What role does he see an industry regulator playing in driving up standards? What default tenure model should be used for future housing estates to reduce the incidences of these issues in the first place? I would also appreciate his views on my suggestion to move to a mandatory adoption model after development completion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. All Back Benchers are now on a six-minute speaking limit. I call Justin Madders.

1.57 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on her excellent speech and on securing the debate. I state for the record that I am a patron of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, which does such good work in advising leaseholders.

It was eight years ago that I stood on the Opposition side of the Chamber and described the use of leasehold in new developments as the payment protection insurance of the house building industry. I am pleased to say that the previous Government eventually started to tackle that, and the current Government will hopefully complete that work soon so that we can finally condemn leasehold to the history books.

It was four years ago that I stood on the Opposition side of the Chamber and warned that estate management fees could replacement leasehold as the new PPI of the house building industry—or, as the indomitable women of the National Leasehold Campaign termed it, “fleecehold.” Now that has come to pass; it seems that just about every new development built in this country adopts the same exploitative model, and the public are rightly asking what we are going to do about it. The Minister has amassed great expertise in this area, and I know he is keen to crack on with reform.

There are a number of legal cases ongoing. I am pleased to see that the bogus argument about human rights has been dispatched by the High Court. However, there are a number of others where well-resourced freeholders are trying to preserve the status quo, and not every court is as wise as the High Court was in the human rights case. The Court of Appeal recently found in the Romney House case that where a tenant goes to the first-tier tribunal to challenge a service charge, the tribunal needs only to consider whether the process was reasonable, and not whether the charges themselves were reasonable. That is absurd, and has had the effect of requiring those leaseholders to pay for the refurbishment of a gym that they do not actually own. It is freeholders with their seemingly limitless resources that can challenge and delay actions by leaseholders to preserve their rotten system at every turn, so the sooner we implement the leasehold Act in full the better.

There is a clear warning here as to why we must crack on with tackling estate management fees more broadly. I look forward to the Government’s response to the consultation. When it comes to stopping any more estates being built in this way, and we must end this practice as a matter of urgency, I suggest, as the hon. Member did, that it will actually be much easier to do this than it has been for ending leasehold. I urge the Minister to send a clear instruction to local authorities that estate management arrangements will no longer be accepted in planning applications, and to legislate to ban them on any new developments if necessary. The longer we put off fixing that, the longer it will take to fix this mess.

I fear the Minister will be told that such a move would have an impact on the ambitious house building plans that we rightly have and would damage the housing

market more generally, but were we not faced with the same arguments when we tried to abolish leasehold? After all, these developers do not have to pay a community sum to the local authority—indeed, they have an additional lucrative income stream—but despite those new income sources, it does not seem to have had any impact on the price they charge for people to buy their homes in the first place.

The reality is that an estate management company is nothing more than a calculation on a balance sheet. The developers have zero interest in keeping the verges neat and tidy after they have gone. If they can make the bottom line look more attractive by creating the management company, they will, and they keep getting away with it because we let them.

Of course, we must act to protect those already caught in this trap. It is also clear, as we have heard, that many people are not aware of the implications of an estate management company or how much it will cost them when they buy their home. Often, first-time buyers are excited by the prospect of owning a new home, and they place their trust in the system—the lenders, the developers, the lawyers—and the echoes of the leasehold scandal with this are loud. Glitzy sales staff paint a very different picture. They never set out the reality that, in addition to the significant commitment people are making when they buy a home, they are also agreeing to pay an unspecified sum to often unspecified recipients for as long as they stay in that home.

The mis-selling and failure to properly advise has all the hallmarks of the leasehold scandal. We should not be surprised by that because the same actors are involved in that industry as are involved in these rip-offs. An example of some of the novel ways that this financial trap can be described by sales staff came to my attention when constituents on a recently built estate all had the common explanation given to them that this service charge was for a storm drain, but that it would be paid off in a few years so they did not need to worry about it. Well, they are still paying it 15 years later. They are not even sure if there is a storm drain and, even if there is, who is actually responsible for it, and yet the invoices and threatening letters still come.

We also recently met interested parties on another new development where we were trying to clarify who was responsible for maintaining what and who they were accountable to. Because the estate had been developed over several years by different developers, about 10 different organisations were represented at that meeting. It is little wonder that we struggle for transparency with so many people involved.

The fundamental question from the homeowner is: why are we paying twice for the maintenance of open spaces, once through a management fee and once through council tax? We should start from the basic principle that the local council should be doing all the work and that estate management companies are an unnecessary tax on homeowners. How long will it be before we see a concerted campaign for people to get reductions on their council tax on the basis that they are being taxed twice? In the wrong hands, that sort of campaign could pit communities against one another.

Let us not forget that buying a home is the biggest single purchase people will ever make. We need far greater accountability for what developers say and what

they build. Housing is of course a critical part of our infrastructure and a fundamental part of a person's life, but it has been shown time and again that we cannot rely on the market alone to deliver that in a responsible way. Let us get control over these companies, empower homeowners and legislate if necessary so that this rotten, avaricious model becomes history, just like leasehold eventually will.

2.3 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on securing this debate in the House. Earlier this year, I wrote to hundreds of residents across the Weald of Kent to get a better understanding of how property management companies operate across our home. What I discovered was very worrying and, as many Members here will recognise, it is an all too common story. To date, I have heard from nearly 100 people across 11 estates all complaining about their property management company FirstPort. The pattern is as depressing as it is predictable: steep and unexplained increases in service charges, slow and inadequate responses to maintenance issues, and a serious lack of accountability and transparency.

Let me share a few examples. Constituents in Yalding and Headcorn have told me that they face a 70% and a 40% rise in their management fees respectively. Those are not minor uplifts, and nobody can tell them clearly what they are paying for. I understand that costs are rising not least for things like insurance, but at the very least, hikes like that should be clearly explained. Constituents in Marden and Kingsnorth have documented cases where no maintenance at all was carried out for months, despite repeated chasing—grass not cut, lights not fixed and rubbish not cleared—and yet the bills keep coming.

Finally, constituents in Tenterden and Coxheath have told me that it is beginning to affect the value of their homes, as my hon. Friend mentioned. Some have said that their properties are becoming unsellable because buyers will not take on the liability of these charges and this management. In one case, two sisters are trying to sell their late father's flat. He bought it for £150,000 and they now cannot even sell it at £60,000. At auction, the price has fallen below £20,000. They told me that local estate agents refuse to list it because of the fees associated with managing the property.

Much of this is part of a wider pattern. Many residents on these estates pay twice for what most people would regard as the same basic services. They pay full council tax to their local authority, as everyone does, but on a growing number of estates, the council has not taken over the roads, street lighting or green spaces and therefore does not maintain them.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): To that point about councils not having yet adopted such things as the roads or pavements, I have the example of Pebble Beach in Seaton where I represent, where residents have been charged fees and even threatened with legal action before the estate has been handed from the developer to the property management company. Has she come across that, too?

Katie Lam: I am afraid so, and fairly regularly in fact. The legal action that the hon. Member mentions is important to reflect on because it can in some cases be

deeply distressing and seem very aggressive for people just trying to get what they have already paid for, which in some cases does not even exist yet.

Residents are required to pay a second set of charges on top of the council tax to a private management company, such as FirstPort. They pay council tax for street lighting and then they pay a private company for street lighting. They pay council tax for maintaining the verges, and then they pay again for someone to cut the grass—except of course in many cases the grass is not cut. In these situations, the homeowner has almost no practical leverage. The council says, "It is private land"; the management company says, "You are contractually obliged to pay us anyway"; and the person who lives there, who cannot simply switch provider and who must disclose the charges when they come to sell, is left with little ability to challenge poor value. People are paying more and getting less. There is a continuing lack of transparency, with residents routinely denied a proper breakdown of charges, not given meaningful answers and, in some cases, not even given the dignity of a reply.

FirstPort is one of many property management companies that have been allowed, in some respects, to conduct themselves with impunity, largely because local residents have almost no consumer power or transparency. I have met representatives of FirstPort, and they assure me that the company is changing and improving. I very much hope that this is true. But, in case that does not happen, the last Government took important steps to address this through the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

The purpose of the Act is to give residents clear information about what they are being charged and why; to widen access to redress when something goes wrong, which is crucial; and to ensure that disputes with management companies can be resolved fairly. But residents will not see those benefits until all the secondary legislation is brought into force, guidance is published and management companies are given a clear expectation that they will need to comply.

I caution the Government against assuming that the answer might be to layer on fresh regulation or to draft a new Bill. I encourage the Government to accelerate the implementation of those elements of the Act. My constituents do not want to wait, say, another year to see itemised, comprehensible service charge bills and prompt access to redress. They accept that the streetlights must be maintained, the gutters cleared and insurance bought—they know all of that costs money—but what they will not accept, and nor should they, is paying more for less with no answers and no accountability.

2.9 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome this important debate and thank the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) very much on behalf of the many constituents who come to my surgeries, who write to me, and who I meet when I am out and about in the many developments across Putney, Southfields, Roehampton and Wandsworth town.

I speak today on behalf not just of my constituents, but of leaseholders across the country who feel that they are being let down by the broken system—one that continues to allow unfair and sharply rising service charges, poor communication, and substandard services to persist unchecked. The limited rights to challenge

[Fleur Anderson]

such changes leave people feeling as if they are fighting the battle on their own. As we know from the number of Members present and from many other meetings, people across the country face these issues, so there is something wrong not just with the individual managing agencies that we are all thinking of, but with the system itself.

The hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) mentioned regulation. Do we need more layers of it? We must also consider the checks and balances in the system. Asking people to go to the first-tier tribunal as a last resort is so daunting and cumbersome that it is not a proper check on the system. I welcome the Government's decisive action to tackle long-standing injustices in leasehold and estate management. I thank the Minister for all his work on that, including the incoming changes. This debate is full of hope about those changes making a difference.

Ahead of the closure of the Government's recent consultation on strengthening leaseholder protections, I conducted a service charge consultation in my constituency, where it is a big issue in so many developments. The results, which I have submitted to the Government, were deeply troubling. More than 200 constituents responded to my consultation, and I think they speak for hundreds more. Almost 90% of respondents reported significant increases in their service charges. Even more—96%—said that they felt those increases were unjustified. That comes down not only to poor communication, but to the fact that many of those services charges do seem to be unjustified.

Those are not isolated cases, as we are hearing in the debate. In 2024, service charges rose by 11% on average—well above the 2.5% rate of inflation—and, in my constituency, they average £2,300 per year. I see countless examples of eye-watering hikes. One constituent reported that their annual service charge had increased from £1,600 to £6,660 per year, for example, while another told me they were sent a large additional bill right before Christmas as their managing agent clawed back more money after an “error” in its accounting. That often happens during years in which the amount has already risen a lot, before rising more still because of extra charges and services provided—or not provided, as many constituents see it.

Too many leaseholders are ignored by managing agents and charged for services that are sub-standard or not delivered at all, including cleaning services that show no signs of leaving the building cleaner, painting in communal areas that do not need to be painted or for which the charge should be lower, and, in one case, gardening services for gardens that do not exist. One of the most shocking examples in my consultation was a large development in my constituency. Leaseholders reported a revolving door of housing managers who are inexperienced, unqualified, overstretched and unfamiliar with the building's history. The managing agent presents accounts that simply do not add up. Contractors are paid without checks, faults go un-penalised and residents are left to clean up the mess time and again. The managing agent has ignored numerous industry experts who have stated that important plumbing works need to be carried out. Some have said that the building is in serious danger of complete structural failure. Basic services are not carried out, yet leaseholders continue to foot the

bill. The managing agent is supposed to paint the exterior at least every 10 years, but nothing happens. It is the same old story again and again.

Six managing agents were named many times in my consultation. I will not name them here, because that would be damaging for the people who live in those developments. Clearly, there are some good managing agents and landlords, but there are also some very bad ones, and those are the ones that we need a new Bill to deal with. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 contains proposals for greater transparency through standardised accounts, mandatory reserve funds and easier routes to challenge unreasonable service charge rises, and managing agents will face mandatory qualifications and enforced membership of professional bodies. Those measures are all welcome. The previous Conservative Government had 14 years to act on these matters but passed leasehold reform law only in the dying days of the last Parliament, so their measures were rushed, poorly drafted and failed to ban new leasehold homes.

I am very glad that this debate offers us the chance to talk about going further on industry regulation and to welcome the commonhold Bill. Leaseholders in my constituency and across the country have waited long enough. The system is broken, the injustice is real, and the need for reform is urgent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call David Reed. Many congratulations on baby Reuben!

2.15 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is nice to have his name on the record.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for bringing the topic to the House's attention. In my constituency, this is rapidly becoming one of the most frequently raised issues. The biggest problem is that people who have worked hard, saved responsibly and bought a home in good faith find themselves trapped in a system that is opaque, unaccountable, and, in the worst cases, exploitative.

Like other Members, since being elected I have been inundated with complaints about one company in particular. We all know its name: FirstPort. It is, by some distance, the most problematic housing management company operating in my constituency. My office is dealing with almost 40 open cases relating to developments that it manages. The stories are depressingly consistent: residents describe unexplained charges, unclear billing and long delays in resolving the simplest issues—we have heard many such examples today. They send long chains of unanswered emails. They attend my surgeries exhausted and frustrated. When my team contacts FirstPort on residents' behalf, we often wait an unacceptable length of time for a reply, and progress—if it comes at all—is slow.

Earlier this year, I and other Members of this House met FirstPort's managing director. I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you see me as a chilled-out kind of guy, but I left that meeting with my blood boiling, and other Members had a similar experience. We asked straightforward questions but received vague answers, rehearsed corporate language and no clear commitment to improving customer service. A group of MPs will meet FirstPort

again soon, and I hope that the company has set to work in earnest. On reflection, what angered me most was that many of the people caught up in these issues are elderly. They feel intimidated by the complexity of the system. They are passed from pillar to post, ignored when they raise legitimate concerns, and made to feel like an inconvenience simply for asking what their money is being spent on.

However, when FirstPort wants payment—this is something that it is very good at—its communication becomes clear and very persistent. When residents in several developments tried to move away from FirstPort, essential financial documents, including sinking fund balances and reconciliation statements, were withheld. In some cases, large sums of residents' money were retained for months, preventing new management companies from planning maintenance or accounting properly. In my constituency, local resident directors Karen Wheeler and David Buller—fierce campaigners—have documented delayed fund transfers, missing paperwork and opaque accounting.

Karen eventually gave up trying to reconcile the final balance because the spreadsheets were, in her words, “unfathomable”. For Karen's development, the cost was about £500—quite a significant sum for many elderly residents—but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate rightly said, the real issue here is the power imbalance. Residents have no transparency, no clarity and no meaningful route to resolution, despite FirstPort's own code of conduct, which promises transparency, value for money and excellent customer service. I think we can all agree that that does not stack up.

This is neither an isolated concern nor a partisan one. Former Ministers have highlighted FirstPort and other companies being consistently associated with high charges and poor service. The BBC has reported homeowners being billed for things such as “terrorism insurance”, without any context, while basic grounds maintenance is not completed. More than 30 MPs have written jointly to FirstPort demanding action.

We all know that the problem is structural. Far too many homeowners are locked into contracts they never chose, are forced to pay service charges for poorly maintained communal areas, and have no ability to change providers when the services fail. As we have heard, many homeowners on private estates—the so-called “fleecehold” estates—are effectively paying twice: once through council tax, and once through service charges. Leaseholders trying to sell their homes frequently face long delays and eye-watering administration fees, and what should be a proud milestone—owning or selling a home—becomes a source of stress and financial burden.

We have heard that legal protections exist, but they are not enough. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 will bring mandatory transparency—

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Reed: I have one minute left and I will make my final points. The Act aimed to bring mandatory transparency, through standardised billing, greater rights to challenge charges, and easier routes to taking over management, but those reforms are not yet implemented. Why is that? I hope that the Minister, in his closing

remarks, will set out a course for when those measures will be implemented, and will say what new legislation will be brought in to ensure that people are protected. I finish on a point on which I think we all agree: residents who are on these schemes do not need more consultations; they need action, and this Parliament must deliver.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. It is up to Members if they wish to take an intervention. If they do, they have an extra minute on their speaking time.

2.20 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I often hear the same story across Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme about bills that jump without warning, charges that people cannot control, invoices that are hard to decipher and work that arrives late or not at all. If we pay for services, we should know what we are paying for, the standard we can expect, and how to put things right when they go wrong.

There has been some progress on what has been coined “fleecehold”, and on the rights of homeowners. I welcome steps to protect leaseholders from unjustified service charges and to raise standards in managing the agent sector, but many people still feel powerless when a bill lands. Change must bite on the ground.

We have heard that many households pay estate rent charges on top of council tax, and in the worst cases there are excessive or unexplained fees, charges for services that would normally be provided by local authorities, arbitrary administration costs and fees imposed during a sale. Too many discover too late that roads, verges and play areas are not adopted. No family should be ambushed by a large one-off bill for works that they could not foresee. Clear pre-sell disclosure and sensible reserve planning are essential.

There are good actors. Resident-led management companies, responsible freeholders and professional agents already publish clear breakdowns and engage on works early. They should feel backed by a system that raises the floor and rewards good practice. I therefore ask the Minister today for four things. First, will the Government promptly bring forward secondary legislation? We need to define what insurance fees are permitted, end hidden commissions and require standardised, transparent statements, so residents can see where every single pound goes. Secondly, will they set professional standards for managing agents? We need mandatory qualifications and a robust code of practice that will lift the quality bar and give residents confidence that estates are run properly. Thirdly, will they fix the major works regime? We need clear pre-sale information to be provided, early engagement on big projects to be required, sensible reserves to be planned, and safeguards put in place, so that households are not hit by avoidable spikes. Fourthly, will the Government make redress fast and affordable? We need to resource the first-tier tribunal, and publish simple guidance, so that residents can challenge unreasonable costs without needing deep pockets. I am sure that a small number of timely rulings will reset behaviour across entire developments.

My constituents in Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme are not asking for special treatment. They are just asking for fairness—bills that are clear, charges that

[Lee Pitcher]

are reasonable, and services delivered as promised. I have set up a number of street surgeries in the areas from which I get the most comments on this matter. That way, I can hear constituents' voices and directly feed back what they have said to the Minister and the Department as we move forward with the legislation. With prompt secondary legislation, tight definitions on insurance, professional standards for agents and an accessible tribunal system, we can turn a confusing and stressful system into one that treats residents with respect and provides peace of mind.

Richard Foord: The hon. Member talks about secondary legislation when suggesting what should happen next. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act provides protections for leaseholders on private managed estates; it enables them to go to a tribunal to challenge management charges. Does he think that that ought to exist for freeholders as well?

Lee Pitcher: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and it is certainly one that the Minister should listen to and take into account. I was concluding when he intervened, so I will finish with this: our home should be a place where we get to dream, not where we have nightmares.

2.25 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I want to bring the House's attention to the work we did in the summer looking into property management companies. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), would have been here if she was not already committed to a Westminster Hall debate at the same time, so I send her apologies.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing this important debate. Like many in this House, my constituents have been affected by property charges and the lack of transparency from certain companies. We have already heard about FirstPort, and I wish to expand on what has been said about it. In Penn Place in Rickmansworth in my constituency, FirstPort looks after about 140 apartments on an estate. Many of my constituents who live there have contacted me regarding the ever-increasing service charges that they face. Their monthly payments have more than doubled, on occasion. They receive no communication as to why an increase is needed, and that places extortionate pressure, both financial and emotional, on those living there.

We all are aware of the cost of living in our communities at the moment, given the cost of council tax, energy prices, and licence fees for renting properties in certain London boroughs. Many of my constituents have been unable to sell or move, as people do not want to purchase properties that come with ever-increasing service charges, and we have already heard about that.

This is not just an issue in my constituency. I have worked with many of my fellow Conservative MPs on this, and indeed, I know it to be a proper cross-party issue. I have a huge amount of respect for the Minister, who I know will continue to ensure that this issue is addressed, build on the legacy of my Government, and

continue to push the matter forward, hopefully at speed. I look forward to him giving that commitment when he responds to this debate.

Despite its expensive charges, FirstPort does not even provide an adequate property management service. One of my constituents made me aware that carpets were not being replaced and walls were not being repainted. There is also a high turnover of property managers, which is ineffective for maintaining the estate and symptomatic of a poorly run company. When we were in government, we brought in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, which required transparency about leasehold service charges. It would have allowed leaseholders, such as those in Penn Place in my constituency, to scrutinise and challenge increases if they are unreasonable. The Act has received Royal Assent, but it is yet to be brought fully into force. I understand some of the reasons behind that, but I urge the Minister to get moving on this. I am sure he will give us that reassurance a bit later. In closing, what assurances will the Minister provide to my constituents and many across the country, who constantly face service charge increases but no increase in service, and how we can better protect those residents?

2.28 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I am so pleased that we are taking the time today to debate property service charges in depth. Across my constituency, residents are drowning in soaring bills, deferred maintenance, opaque accounts and a carousel of management companies passing the buck. These charges do not exist in a vacuum; they sit alongside dodgy contracts, conflicts of interest and unadopted roads—a structural failure that leaves residents feeling trapped and powerless.

Since being elected, I have had so many constituents come to me with leasehold horror stories. Of course, it is the service charge hikes that are brought up most. In one case, a £4,600 charge in 2017 was due to increase to over £9,000 this year, in a property where many residents are retired and on a fixed income. That is not to mention the lack of transparency over what the charges were for. In this instance, residents pointed out that a £6,000 charge for staffing was levied during a time when there were no permanent on-site managers. I want to give credit where it is due. When I met the team at that management company for an explanation, they held their hands up and acknowledged that things needed to improve, and they have since followed up with residents.

Other companies, however, are not quite as reflective. Having thought about this, I will not name the companies in my speech, because I do not want to blight the developments in question, but I must warn these companies that that is an option in the future if we do not see improvements. The managing agent of one development in my constituency did not respond positively to my letter setting out residents' concerns. Indeed, it is displaying what I have come to call the four horsemen of the managing agent: hikes in service charges, inadequate maintenance, poor communication with residents and a lack of financial transparency.

In a previous contribution in the House, I said that residents had informed me of a 150% increase in the service charge in two years. In its very blunt reply, the

managing agent said that that was wrong and that the real increase was only a doubling in four years, which it considers reasonable. I do not, and nor do my affected constituents, who have pointed out that if we factor in various additional costs that used to be in the service charge but were then separated out, it is closer to the increase they cited.

Maintenance work does not get done. When residents took me around their development this year, I saw for myself the shoddily constructed steps that create hazards, plus defective drainage, malfunctioning lighting and so much more. The responsibility for some of these issues is not clear, as the developer should be taking on some issues that arose shortly after development. The lack of clarity means that residents are dealing with onerous back-and-forths, whereby responsibility is forever passed on and it seems like maintenance issues will never be solved. Just today, a resident described to me how there was a rat infestation at one point, and a contractor was apparently paid £30,000 of residents' money to resolve it. It did not. The residents' association was later able to sort it out, but not before that huge sum of their money was frittered away.

That brings me on to the poor communication. When highlighting the above problems, as well as concerns from residents about service charge breakdowns, I asked the managing agent what it would do to improve communication. I expected an answer that pushed back but at least agreed to look into the concerns I raised. I did not even get that. The response said it all:

"We do not consider that communication requires improvement."

Then we come to the fourth horseman: a lack of financial transparency. I have been told by residents that they are contractually bound to an insurance policy with a £5,000 excess, making it completely unusable. A resident has shown me figures for one block that show a total insurance premium charged of over £60,000, of which just under £20,000—around 30%—was commission, in a confusing brokerage set-up, with much of that going to a company linked to the managing agent in quite clear ways, which smacks of a conflict of interest or worse. There are so many other examples of this. At another development in my constituency, accounts were provided late to residents for three of the last five years, and in the most recent two years, accounts have not been provided at all, despite much pushing from residents and leaseholders.

It is not just leaseholders in flats who are affected by service charges. I have not yet discussed the fleecing scandal sweeping up so many of my residents in the newly built developments of Hampton. Unadopted roads are rife in new developments, meaning that residents are paying twice for their local areas to be maintained: once in their council tax, and once in a separate service charge. I counted the number of roads that need to be adopted but are without a section 38 agreement—meaning there is a long way to go before they are adopted—in the Peterborough part of my constituency. There are 289 of them, and they are mostly housing roads. That is an unjust extra charge for thousands of residents in Hampton, Stanground, Orton and elsewhere because roads are not being adopted. Some proposals have been made on how we could tackle this problem. The Home Builders Federation, for example, has made useful suggestions about common adoptable standards and mandatory adoption by public authorities.

Dame Meg Hillier: Many Members have raised the issue of the adoption of roads. Obviously, physical roads are easier to define, but there are parts of private estates that are only for that estate. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a challenge, given the current financial situation, because it usually costs councils money to adopt a road, and under the current law, it could be a big hit for those leaseholders to pay the fee up front for the council to adopt the road?

Sam Carling: My hon. Friend makes a very useful point. I should have clarified that the figure I gave does not include the private roads that were not supposed to be adopted; it was purely the ones that are having this issue.

As my hon. Friend says, councils are in a difficult financial situation. The precarious state of local government finances after 14 years of cuts and freezes certainly has not helped. We also have a lot of councils blaming developers and developers blaming councils, and there is an increasing divergence between what council planning departments are requiring to grant permission for development and what the highways departments of said councils are willing to adopt. That is particularly vexing when there is a two-tier system, with planning at one level and highways at another. I hope local government reorganisation will help with that, but it is happening in unitary authorities too, and we need to explore ways to deal with that.

Ultimately, these are symptoms of a wider issue in how the system treats freeholders and leaseholders alike. The leasehold and commonhold reform Bill will be a vital step forward. I am pleased the Government are committed to ending leasehold for new developments. From my experience, that change cannot come soon enough. A key advantage of commonhold becoming the default tenure is that managing agents will be appointed by and responsible to leaseholders, rather than absentee corporate freeholders. Of course, the situation with managing agents still needs to be improved, and I am very supportive of mandatory regulation as a core step towards that, which I hope the Minister will comment on.

This debate comes in a week of real progress: the Renters' Rights Act 2025 has become law, finally giving tenants the fair treatment they deserve. Let's keep up that progress, because nobody should have to pay through the nose for poor service, broken promises and a system that puts profit before residents.

2.36 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing this important debate. Across the country, and certainly across my constituency, leaseholders are trapped in a system that too often leaves them feeling powerless. They face spiralling service charges, opaque management practices and little or no accountability from the agents or freeholders who control their lived environments.

In my experience, these problems are particularly acute for elderly and more vulnerable residents, many of whom live in retirement developments and depend on the professionalism of those entrusted with managing their estates. Far too often, what they experience is mismanagement, confusion and financial anxiety. To illustrate the scale of the issue, I want to draw on two cases from my Surrey Heath constituency that encapsulate

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

the national failings: first, Mytchett Heath, a retirement complex managed by Cognatum Estates, a not-for-profit developer and operator based in the south and south-east of England; and secondly, the Courtyard in Camberley, a residential building currently undergoing cladding remediation—in effect, two scandals rolled into one.

At the Courtyard, one of my constituents, Sharon, has seen her annual service charges rise by £1,394 between 2017 and 2025, and has paid a total of £22,727 over that period on top of council tax. In 2021 alone, her bill rose by 38% with no clear explanation. When she sought answers from Pinnacle Property Management, the managing agent, the responses were slow, incomplete and unhelpful. She has been left anxious, powerless and deeply mistrustful of those managing her building.

At Mytchett Heath, residents face an equally troubling pattern, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) for supporting me in my investigations of the organisation. Maintenance costs appear without warning or justification. Worse still, the managing fee at Mytchett Heath—the basic charge that residents pay for estate management—has increased by 75% since 2019, at an average rate of 10.7% per year. As all of us know, that far exceeds inflation, wage growth and pension increases, yet residents have been given no clear explanation of how those rises are justified, nor any transparent breakdown of where their money is going.

There is no effective oversight mechanism for managing agents or freeholders. Although residents can, in theory, appeal to the industry ombudsman, many are deterred from that process because it is too long, too complex and often too costly. What is particularly concerning for my residents at Mytchett Heath is that the managing director of Cognatum Estates, Mr John Lavin, also sits on the board of the Association of Retirement Housing Managers—the very trade body that purports to regulate and uphold standards across the sector. That is a textbook case of marking one's own homework.

Elderly residents, meanwhile, are left financially trapped, emotionally exhausted and with nowhere to turn. The human cost of all this is immense: stress, anxiety, depleted savings and a complete loss of peace of mind. These are retirees spending their later years poring over spreadsheets and unanswered emails, when they should be enjoying the comfort and security they have worked for.

Back in April, I met the board of Cognatum Estates to hear its side of the story. I was told that some residents were “encouraging others to protest”. In a recent letter from Cognatum's chief executive officer, I heard that complaints were, in fact, part of a

“co-ordinated campaign to...denigrate the organisation.”

These are not political agitators—I should know, because I have met enough of them—but elderly homeowners who are asking basic questions about the bills they receive. They deserve answers, not accusations.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister three simple questions. When can leaseholders—particularly elderly residents—expect to be able to receive clear, itemised explanations of how their service charges are calculated? Secondly, when managing agents fail to communicate or justify large increases, such as the 70% rise in Mytchett Heath's

managing fee since 2019, what meaningful sanctions might they face? Finally, will the Government review the governance of trade associations such as the Association of Retirement Housing Managers to ensure genuine independence and oversight, rather than industry insiders marking their own homework?

2.41 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Ind): The scandal of property service charges is one of the most unjust, indefensible and generally enraging issues facing my constituents. In many cases, the charges amount to little more than a form of parasitic exploitation of ordinary people by absentee landlords and businesses. It has been allowed to fester for far too long.

Across the country, 5 million people are trapped in a broken system that leaves them beholden to obscure, often overseas companies with a licence to cream off their hard-earned earnings with almost complete impunity. They have got away with it for years because leaseholders simply cannot effectively challenge this unfairness. As so often in Britain today, wealth is translated directly into power and ordinary people are left without any sense of agency over something as basic as their month to month finances.

The issue of unfair and arbitrary property service charges is impacting every corner of North East Hertfordshire, from Royston to Tewin and from Baldock to Buntingford. There are fleecehold estates where constituents have purchased a new build property under freehold conditions but found they are

“hostages to the whims and desires of service companies who can charge any amount of service fee they wish and without redress”, making a mockery of the notion of freehold. There are housing association tenants paying eye-watering fees, yet left with neglected and inadequate services; residents in retirement accommodation facing extortionate maintenance costs that leave families struggling to pay care fees and trapped with properties that have little resale value; and leaseholders facing huge hikes in service charges by freeholders, yet seeing little evidence of the maintenance they are supposedly paying for. One constituent put the experience plainly:

“They are committing service charge abuse”

and

“they are making people's lives miserable.”

I have previously criticised privatised water companies and housing developers for raking in vast profits despite substandard delivery, but in many ways they pale in comparison with the sheer audacity of the leasehold scandal.

These are issues rooted in feudal concepts of property ownership, and those trapped paying these fees, with next to no ability to challenge or escape them, are in effect still suffering from a form of economic serfdom where those with the right title deeds can levy private taxes on ordinary people that bear practically no relation to services rendered. Nearly 1,000 years after William's conquest, I think the English have suffered under this Norman yoke quite enough.

The Government's own Competition and Markets Authority found

“no persuasive evidence that consumers receive anything in return” for the ground rents they pay. In communities like Letchworth, that rings painfully true. We should all welcome the Government's recent victory in the High

Court over wealthy private interests who threw millions at trying to block vital reforms. I also welcome Ministers' commitment to finishing the job of reforming leasehold. I look forward to supporting further steps to end this scandal once and for all.

The solution is clear: municipal estate ownership and the ability to move to commonhold as quickly as is reasonably possible. Home ownership should mean owning the bricks and mortar and should come with a sense of freedom, not exposure to exploitation. No one should be left behind as we put this injustice to bed.

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the broader campaign for a charter of community empowerment. Many of its principles are relevant to the debate. If the Government are to achieve that historic Labour mission of redistributing not just wealth but power into the hands of the majority, in today's context that must mean trusting that ordinary people are more capable of upkeeping their own estates and managing their homes fairly than offshore firms or the landowning aristocracy.

For once, I will not rain down a series of detailed demands on the Minister, as I know he faces a complex legal situation left by the previous Administration. Today I want only to urge him to cut this Gordian knot in this Parliament and give my constituents a straightforward way out of being forever tied to service fees by unaccountable companies. The economic benefits to our high streets, which are desperately needed in villages and market towns such as those I represent, would be enormous, as thousands of families across the country found their disposable income no longer slashed every month by charges that cannot be justified.

The resistance that the Government have faced from the freehold lobby, clinging desperately to their ill-gotten gains and the sacred right to turn hard-working people into cash cows, should only renew our sense of urgency. I am sure that we will see more appeals and outcry from vested interests—the Government should know the Labour party and millions outside this place are united behind them.

After the High Court's ruling, the Residential Freehold Association warned that the decision

"opens the door for Government to intervene in markets far beyond the leasehold sector"—

in other words, the terrible spectre that democracy may be empowered to secure the public good before private profit. As my constituents lose out in an economy rigged against ordinary people—one that rewards wealthy property owners and unearned income rather than those who go out and work for a living—I say, quite simply: I hope it is right.

2.46 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing this important debate. I understand more than most the issues with property service charges, because I am a leaseholder where I live in Hoddesdon. A quarter of my constituents live in flats or maisonettes, and 25% of property transactions in Broxbourne last year involved leasehold properties, but shockingly, as we have heard, it is hard to find any leaseholder who has a good word to say about their landlord or their service charge.

Landlords and solicitors do not provide enough information to new residents, and far too often prospective residents are not properly informed before they move in about how much service charges have increased in previous years. They are then hit with huge rises down the line. It is also unclear where the money is going.

A resident in Waltham Cross told me:

"The service charge has skyrocketed from around £800 to £6,000 for each leaseholder, yet living conditions remain extremely dire. Residents here face ongoing issues including trespassers, mould, broken security doors, mice infestations and squatters. Our building also has several defects, including weak floors, fire safety issues, and ongoing leakages. At one point my flat became uninhabitable after a severe leak that took months to resolve".

I hear these stories again and again from constituents who come to me as the contact of last resort after months and sometimes years of neglect to their property. In that case I met the management company involved, RMG, earlier this year, but nothing has changed. Whether it is RMG, FirstPort, Bampton, EN8 Homes or Warwick Estates, leaseholders deserve better from their landlords and management companies, who focus purely on collecting ever higher charges for worse services.

However, by far the worst treatment of leaseholders in my constituency has been at the hands of—I hope the Minister is listening to this point—Labour-run Enfield council. I was first contacted by residents on the Whitefields estate in May this year, and what I heard left me outraged. Completely out of the blue, Enfield council was demanding up to £50,000 from each leaseholder for "urgent" repairs. Roofs that had never had a leak were earmarked to be replaced, and windows would be fixed, even though they had been used for years without issue. Understandably, my residents immediately asked, "What about my service charge?" Well, as the Leasehold Advisory Service says, many landlords collect money out of the service charge for a sinking fund, to help cover the cost of exactly these kinds of major works. But not Enfield council. No, it expects my constituents to stump up all the cash, even after raising the service charge that year and, as far as the residents are concerned, having not spent a single penny on the estate in decades.

The Whitefields estate tenants association, and in particular leaseholder Nicky McCabe, have worked incredibly hard to bring the community together in response to this issue. They simply demanded straightforward answers to straightforward questions, but they were met with confusing statements from Enfield council representatives, who found it far too easy to say, "That's not my job." I attended the meeting. There were a number of directors from Enfield council there, all of whom earn significant sums of money, and they could not answer basic questions from my constituents about how much they would have to pay, and what was going to change on the estate. The communication was shocking. My constituents' fight is still ongoing, and they have my full support.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I am sure that many Members have attended meetings with groups of residents who, in trying to resolve issues that are causing them so much anxiety, are at their wits' end. We have an example in Fylde that is actually pre the management company. An estate has been developed, but it flooded during the construction and twice since, and now the estate company is desperate to get it into a

[Mr Andrew Snowden]

management company, and to transfer all the flood risk liability to that company. Does my hon. Friend agree that kind of thing will just cause further problems down the line?

Lewis Cocking: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an excellent point in standing up for his constituents. This is an important point. All MPs across the House have probably attended such meetings, and these companies are unable to answer the most basic questions. They are paid considerable amounts of money, and they cannot answer simple questions from constituents about how much money they will have to pay, where the liability sits, and what work they are going to do.

Dame Meg Hillier: I do not know the case the hon. Gentleman is talking about, but I agree that good communication is important. However, it was his Government, under Margaret Thatcher, who introduced the right to buy. That means we have leaseholders mixed with council tenants, so where a council has to improve a property, it needs to go to the leaseholders for their share of the costs. There was always going to be a tension there, and he must acknowledge that that will be a reality where we have pepper-potted estates—nonwithstanding that he obviously needs to fight for proper information for his constituents.

Lewis Cocking: I fully support the right to buy, which was a good policy—[*Interruption.*] I am just stating that it was a good policy and I supported that. The hon. Lady makes an interesting point about communication, which must be there. As I have mentioned, Enfield council does not collect a sinking fund, which can go some way towards mitigating some of the issues, as she and I have raised, with leaseholders being asked to stump up for large bills. We need more transparency and better regulation, and we must ensure—here I agree with hon. Members across the Chamber—that councils adopt outside amenity spaces.

We need real improvements in the way that leaseholders are treated. Abolishing ground rent is a good first step and the Government need to get on with delivering that. I also agree that commonhold must be more widespread, but is by no means a silver bullet or right for everyone. I urge the Government to get on with it, improve the lives of hundreds of my constituents, and urgently implement more of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. We must get on with those improvements and help hundreds of our constituents.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. With an immediate five-minute time limit, I call Ms Julie Minns.

2.53 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing the debate and enabling Members across the House to give voice to our constituents, like mine in Carlisle, who are, quite frankly, fed up. They are fed up with being charged hundreds of pounds a year in estate management fees for services that are either not delivered or delivered poorly; they are fed up with asking for transparency and getting vague spreadsheets, instead of receipts for

the services that they are told have been delivered; and they are fed up with being told that they have no choice, no voice and no way to challenge that.

One of my first pieces of casework, after my election last year, concerned FirstPort, and one of the more recent cases concerned another estate management company, Gateway. They are different companies, but there was the same problem with charges for things like grass cutting, street cleaning and lighting maintenance. One might say that those charges are to be expected, but too often they are levied while the grass becomes overgrown, the rubbish is not picked up and the roads remain unlit. Quite rightly, residents then ask for proof of where their money has been going and, quite consistently, they are given a list of costs, not invoices—no evidence and no accountability. In some cases, the same service appears more than once under different names. It is confusing, opaque and unfair.

I acknowledge the work done by the last Government and continued by our Government. I was pleased to see swift action in the early months of this Government to implement key provisions of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. I welcome the Government's wider programme of reform, removing the threat of forfeiture, tackling abuse by managing agents and implementing the Law Commission's recommendations on right to manage, but we must go further, especially as we build new homes.

The Government's house building agenda is ambitious, and rightly so. We need more homes and we need them quickly, but we also need to ensure that when people move into those homes, they are not being ripped off by management companies they did not choose. It is not enough just to get the bricks and mortar down; we need to ensure that the regulation around property charges is constructed properly too.

We need enforceable standards for transparency. If a company charges for a service, they must be required to show that it was delivered and provide proof of what it cost. If the grass becomes overgrown, the litter piles up and the roads remain unlit, residents should not be expected to pay. We also need a clear route to redress. At the moment, too many people feel trapped by being tied to a management company that they did not choose, with no meaningful way to hold it to account.

Asking for reform is not about undermining the sector; it is about fairness, restoring trust and ensuring that when people buy a home, they are not buying into a system that takes advantage of them. We have made a start, but if we are serious about protecting homeowners, we need to finish the job and to bring cowboy estate management companies to heel.

2.57 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing today's debate and setting out the deep concerns about property service charges that many of us hear about from our constituents.

Since being elected, I have received countless emails from constituents across Bexleyheath, Crayford and Slade Green who are struggling with rising service charges, lack of transparency and poor communication from managing agents. In the words of a constituent who lives in a development where the service charge has increased from £1,800 a year to £3,200 a year:

“We honestly don’t have a clue what we are paying for.”

Others describe themselves as “cash cows” and speak of “financial hardship to those trapped in their clutches”.

One constituent, a pensioner, had to borrow money from her adult children, and she is now considering selling her car if another unexpected bill arrives. Another, who asked to spread an additional bill over monthly payments, was told that she would be charged £60 for the trouble.

I have been holding public meetings with residents across my constituency this year to discuss these issues. The meetings have seen large turnouts and residents understandably at the end of their tether. I accept that some increases in service charges can be explained by rising insurance costs, building safety costs and other economic factors, but other items on service charge bills beggar belief: £1,000 a year for CCTV, when there is no CCTV; service charges for a gym that had not been built; service charges for a 24/7 concierge service that operates from 7 am to 7 pm; and £5,000 a year to empty one dog bin that members of the public, living outside of the estate, are using on a communal open space. Despite those costs, maintenance often remains poor.

I will focus on one example: the Eastside Quarter development in Bexleyheath, on the site of our former council or civic offices built a few years ago. The development was originally managed by DJC, which was then bought by FirstPort, which has been relieved of its duties and replaced by a new managing agent. The directors of the management company took action to remove FirstPort in 2024 due to concerns about performance levels and a lack of financial transparency, which was raised by residents.

FirstPort was responsible for producing audited accounts for the years 2022, 2023 and 2024, but in the most recent correspondence I have received it failed to do so. As a result, the developer is legally pursuing those accounts at their cost. FirstPort was unable to provide any funds on account to the new managing agent. In correspondence to me, the new managing agent stated that the service charge bank account was empty and that many suppliers were owed substantial sums, with many of them having withdrawn services as a result. Continuing management on the estate was possible only because the developer provided substantial funding to the new managing agent to enable it to pay suppliers.

I have seen similar issues on Talehangers Close in Bexleyheath. At Vickers Green in Crayford, where FirstPort has attended a public meeting and where I believe we are making some progress, I have seen that some of the fault lies—in my view—with the local authority, which agreed a planning development back in 2009 in which residents took on responsibility for the roads, the lighting and the public space, which is then costed back to the residents.

I welcome the Government’s consultation on plans to strengthen protections over charges and services and hope that they will bring forward measures to support my constituents. I was proud to sponsor the Managing Agents (Regulation) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), and I support calls from across the Chamber for the need for clear managing agent standards and regulation. I welcome the Minister’s comments on these matters and the measures to be brought forward in secondary legislation. I support the Government’s work in this area, but I will continue

to press for further action to empower residents and deal with service charges to protect residents across the Bexleyheath and Crayford constituency.

3.1 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on securing this debate. I know that leaseholders across the country will be watching this debate very closely, because the cost of being a leaseholder has contributed to the cost of living challenges that so many of our constituents have faced for such a long time.

My leaseholder action group in Kensington and Bayswater, which the Minister kindly met with recently, regularly shares stories of escalating, unaccountable and untransparent service charges levied by managing agents that they have no control over. At worst, the current system can represent a cartel, with a broken market in which competition between managing agents is undermined by monopoly-type relationships with some freeholders and a broken connection between those who pay the bills and those who deliver the services.

The impact can be devastating. One of my constituents, Adriana, has taken her housing provider to tribunal three separate times simply to get clarity on how her service charge was calculated. Each time she has won, but the housing provider is still not providing the information; indeed, it is now offering to withdraw all the charges, rather than provide that information. That is not transparency: it relies on the assumption that the other residents, many of whom are elderly or financially strained, will not have the resources to challenge. Rather than giving up, Adriana now supports other residents in helping them to understand their rights and how to contest these unfair practices. Her determination is admirable, but it should not fall to residents themselves to protect one another from a system that is supposed to protect them.

Another group of residents who speak to me regularly about these issues, who live in a building called Shaftesbury Place, have been hit with crippling increases to their charges after a 2,489% increase in their building insurance premium. That annual cost, which is up from £15,000 to £375,000 a year, has been passed directly to the leaseholders through their service charges. The housing provider says that the freeholder procured the insurance—the residents have seen evidence suggesting otherwise—but the confusion over who procured the insurance and how the premium was calculated has left leaseholders caught in the middle. The justification appears to rest on a fire risk assessment that many residents believe is flawed, but the result is that ordinary homeowners, including shared ownership homeowners trying to climb the ladder, have been left with unaffordable bills and no clear line of accountability for how those costs have been allowed to spiral.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for explaining the problems so clearly, problems that are shared by my elderly residents in Aire Valley Court and Sutton Court in Bingley. They too have seen above-inflation rises in service charges and a lack of transparency about accounts, with no evidence to justify them. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is now time that we bring in licensing and stronger regulation of managing agents such as FirstPort?

Joe Powell: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. There is now an overwhelming case for introducing mandatory professional standards—which I know the Government are bringing forward—and for considering what regulation might look like, whether that is a new regulator or expanding on the current system. It is clear that some of the suggestions that the Government have consulted on in their “Strengthening leaseholder protections over charges and services” consultation have the potential to deliver for residents such as mine and my hon. Friend’s. That includes a right to veto their property agent, and I hope the threshold for that will be set at a level that will work in places such as my constituency. With a large number of overseas and absent owners, reaching high thresholds can be challenging, so I hope the threshold will be accessible. My constituents would appreciate hearing from the Minister—or from a different Minister at a later stage—about our progress on tackling the issue of building insurance. It is a big issue, particularly for metropolitan Members of Parliament. Of course, that must go hand in hand with continuing on the path to full reform of the system. I was delighted by the High Court’s decision to comprehensively dismiss challenges to the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. That is a vital step that will enable progress towards implementing reforms that will make it easier and cheaper for leaseholders to extend their lease or buy their freehold. I hope it will smooth the way for a new Bill that will deliver on our manifesto commitment to leaseholders—to “bring the feudal leasehold system to an end”

in this Parliament. I am incredibly proud of that commitment, and I know that millions of leaseholders watching this debate also want to see it delivered. It is something that previous Governments promised, but failed to deliver.

This Government have already taken decisive action to dramatically improve the rights of 4.6 million private rented households in England by abolishing no-fault evictions, increasing security in tenancies, and ensuring safe and healthy homes for all. We have taken action to dramatically improve the rights of 5 million social rented households in England by bringing Awaab’s law into force, guaranteeing emergency repairs within a statutory timeframe. Now, we have the opportunity to deliver on our promise to the 5 million leasehold households, too.

3.7 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I place on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for bringing this debate before the House, and to the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling time for it. From the number of Members present in the Chamber today, we can all see that property service charges are a problem across the entire country, but they certainly are for people in Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages.

In the time I have, I will focus on just one of the estates where these charges are an issue: the Roman Heights estate in the village of Streethay, on the edge of Lichfield. The people who live on that estate know just how difficult managing agents can be. I have had dozens of households get in touch to tell me about the appalling service they have received from their managing agent—I will not name it, but I am sure it is the first name we would think of. Over the summer, I held a town hall

with residents, at which I heard the same thing over and over again. Bills for management were coming through completely irregularly, sometimes with three bills for three years being received in the space of three months, which is interesting. There was absolutely no transparency about the level of charge, with demands to come up with huge sums of money at a moment’s notice. All the while, basic maintenance such as cutting the grass just was not being done, leaving residents wondering what exactly they were paying for.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, who is also from Staffordshire, for giving way. A constituent has got in touch with me to say, “It genuinely feels like they are stealing money from us.” Another said, “I just feel like we are a cash cow for these companies.” Does my hon. Friend agree that if managing agents and companies want to continue operating these services, they must increase transparency and make things more regular for their customers?

Dave Robertson: My hon. Friend is right. She is a very good friend, and often she has seen speeches before I give them, but she has not seen this one, and she gives me the perfect segue into my next point.

Transparency is so important. When I surveyed residents in the affected estate, 85% told me that billing was either poor or very poor. Some 79% have told me that the management of the estate was poor or very poor. I have written to that management company, and I am looking forward to meeting it, because its written response is simply not good enough.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Much like my hon. Friend in Staffordshire, I have constituents who are under the same management company. Even when trying to use mechanisms to see things, such as by a section 21 request under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, they have been ignored and dismissed, or often are given incorrect information. Does my hon. Friend hope, like I do, that when the Minister sums up, he will talk a little bit about the technical measures for holding these organisations to account and why they are not working so well? Enforcement of the existing rules should be enough. Whether or not those should be changed, there are mechanisms available that my constituents are trying to access that are simply not working.

Dave Robertson: My hon. Friend is well apprised over the specific issue. Part of the issue we may be facing is that he refers to an Act of Parliament that is older than either of us. There may be significant space for an update in this area.

It is clear from my hon. Friends’ comments and from everything we have heard this afternoon that this situation is all too common. Up and down the country, managing agents are just letting people down. The long-term solution has to be councils taking on the management of these estates themselves. It is an absolute travesty that we have a bizarre situation where some people are being charged twice for the same service.

Last week, other Labour MPs and I met the House Builders Federation to discuss this issue, and I place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) for organising that. The message

that came out of that was clear that adoption is holding up those companies, too. They want to see adoptions happening faster. There are massive issues with how they are approached for things. We heard one story of a particular local authority that demands semi-permeable paving as part of its planning process, but its highways department will apparently never adopt anything with semi-permeable paving. That is a totally bizarre situation. It is a case not of two councils but of one organisation where the different parts are not talking to each other.

Councils need to work harder on this issue. They need to ensure that they are working with residents and companies to get it right, but they also need to have the money and expertise to be able to do so. Fourteen years of cuts, freezes and austerity on councils have left planning departments hollowed out, and we need to ensure we are rebuilding that capacity so that things can be done correctly. It is important that we take this issue seriously, so that residents in my constituency and across the country get the service they so deeply need, for which they apparently are paying through the nose.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am imposing an immediate four-minute time limit.

3.12 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I will see what I can do, Madam Deputy Speaker. Property service charges and the behaviour of the companies that levy them are causing real distress across the country. I thank the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for her speech setting out those challenges.

In Colchester, I have heard from residents in Orchard Gardens, Colne View and Kingswood Heath who are being charged astonishing amounts—often thousands of pounds a year—for services that are either poorly delivered or not delivered at all. Many of those homes are managed by one company, and the House could guess that that company is FirstPort. When I walked into the Chamber, FirstPort had been named 39 times in the Chamber this year, but I imagine that has doubled in the course of this afternoon. It claims to be an “award-winning property management service” that “makes sure customers feel safe and happy in their homes.”

I think we all have a little bit of news for FirstPort.

Retired residents in Orchard Gardens showed me demands for payments for services that they never received or for which they had already paid. Residents at the Colne View development have faced a 15-year battle over neglect, overcharging and obfuscation. They have faced extortionate service charges—sometimes doubling in a year—yet their buildings are left mouldy, unsafe and unclean. They feel bullied, belittled and beyond hope that they will ever resolve what has become a living nightmare. I am pleased to say that one of those residents, Chia, was able to come into Parliament last week to give some evidence to a panel of MPs organised by my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), who have been working on this issue for some time. I hope the Minister will consider the evidence that was gathered.

Anna Dixon: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Pam Cox: I am advised not to, so that we can keep to time. Lord Best, chair of the Regulation of Property Agents Working Group, said in his recent evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that this “is an unregulated sector”, and his group has called for proper regulation. If property agents cannot behave responsibly, they must be held to account. This is about fairness, restoring trust, and ensuring that nobody in Colchester, or anywhere else, has to pay over the odds for basic services, or fight tooth and nail just to get a straight answer from companies like FirstPort. I urge the Minister to move at pace to implement this new framework.

3.15 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I welcome this debate warmly. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing it, and for her excellent speech introducing it, and to other Members for their great contributions.

Property service charges, whether for freeholders who have purchased homes on unadopted new build estates or for leaseholders living in flats, are a huge concern to residents across Dartford. It is no exaggeration to say that the charges are causing misery to my constituents. Home to Ebbsfleet Garden City, Ingress Park in Greenhithe and the Bridge estate near Dartford, the constituency that I am proud to represent has among the highest number of leaseholders and freeholders paying property service charges of any in the country.

As others have, I have surveyed my residents on managing agents and costs, and it is fair to say in summary that residents are bemused by what seems to be the lack of a framework for assessing what reasonable service charges should cover. Long-term trends in rising building insurance costs and energy prices and opaque charging practices by managing agents have created a toxic mix for residents. As if that was not enough, long after buying their new properties, residents have been shocked to receive demands for three to five years-worth of backdated service charges. In some cases, they even predate their ownership of the property, or apply soon after they bought the property, and the bills often contain immediate demands for repayment, despite coming years after people started occupying their home.

Another incredibly frustrating issue for residents, which the Minister might be able to pick up directly with developers, is lack of transparency for buyers regarding the service charges they should expect to pay. One constituent ended up £4,000 in debt, as he was being charged for the maintenance of the estate around his house—on which construction had not even been completed.

Much of the area around new build estates in my constituency remains unadopted by the local authority, an issue that we discussed earlier this year in a Westminster Hall debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern). There is a huge sense of unease and unfairness among residents living on those unadopted estates. They are paying full council tax in addition to hefty service charges. They are paying for the local authority to maintain roads and parks in other parts of the area, but not those on the estate on which they live. I warmly welcomed the Minister’s response in that debate, in which he confirmed that it remained a commitment to end the injustice of so-called fleecehold estates, and I hope we can have an update on that at the end of this debate.

[*Jim Dickson*]

I am grateful to have been among more than 100 Government Members who have, since November 2024, banded together to hold to account managing agents, including FirstPort and RMG. We will not let managing agents off the hook for the extremely poor service that they deliver to our residents. We need a road map from the Government on how unadopted roads and estates will be taken on by the local authority.

Finally, perhaps the Minister might could remind house builders that their choices of managing agents for new developments will cause them long-term reputational damage if they continue to select companies that simply are not up to the job. Let us get this right on behalf of freeholders and leaseholders across the country.

3.18 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): While we have heard countless examples of grievances about property service charges today, for many residents, this ultimately boils down to one fundamental issue: disparity. Far be it from me to play devil's advocate for a broken sector—a market failure—but some residents do face affordable service charges, and benefit from management companies that are responsive and effective in resolving their problems; yet others, often living in similar developments, are saddled with soaring fees and management companies that are slow, unaccountable and uncommunicative, leaving basic issues unresolved for months on end. When people are forced to pay ever-higher prices for worsening service, it is no wonder that frustration and resentment towards the sector as a whole is growing.

One of my constituents recently wrote to me to say that they were alarmed by their service charge, which had risen from £161 a month to £266 the following year—a staggering 65% increase, which might be a record today. The justification provided was that the management company, which I will not name—the House can hazard a guess—had simply overspent on work that it had carried out. Such an arbitrary rise is unaffordable for so many households, and illustrates the dramatic and damaging impact that unchecked service charges inflation can have.

Beyond the question of cost lies an equally important issue: transparency. Too often, residents have no idea what they are paying for and why, as we have heard. Service charge statements are opaque, and when people ask for explanations, they are often met with obfuscation and silence.

There is also a chronic lack of oversight and accountability, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the potential to address that. As we have heard, when residents wish to challenge high or unjustified costs, their options for any form of recourse, except through the courts, are limited. The balance of power lies entirely with the managing agents, not the homeowners footing the bill.

Worst of all, many people discover only after moving in that the management company responsible for the estate is unfit for purpose and provides a poor and inconsistent service in exchange for their hard-earned money. Residents still have to pay council tax in addition to their service charges, leading to a feeling of being double charged. It is therefore no surprise that my constituents are crying out for a stronger ability to take on the right to manage. Areas that are managed locally

are often extraordinarily effective, with better services, better value for money and better local oversight all compounding to support communities to thrive.

One of my constituents shared her frustration that her estate's management company consistently fails to maintain communal grounds. She wrote:

"My issue is that we, the residents, have no real power or control over the management of the communal grounds, but we are expected to pay all the costs. I want that control. We should have the right to make our own choice of property manager."

That sentiment is shared by thousands across the country. It speaks to an urgent need for regulation of a sector that has had a licence to print money. Its high yield gives private equity companies a perverse incentive dynamic, which the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) described so eloquently at the start of this debate. As we have heard, problems also arise from the failure of local authorities to adopt highways, which is due to the poor incentive structure.

I hope to see all these issues—particularly transparency, value for money, accountability and professional standards—addressed in the leasehold and commonhold reform Bill. After all the progress we have made on renters' rights in the past week, the Bill represents a huge opportunity for leaseholders across the country, thanks to this Labour Government. Until we rebalance those relationships, residents will continue to feel powerless, exploited and unheard, and that is completely unacceptable.

3.23 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest as a leaseholder myself.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling), I will not name any managing agent or developments, because many of my residents are concerned that if their block is named, it will cause them very big issues. I was delighted to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) that there are some good management companies, because the picture is certainly mixed in my patch. The company that has been named often in this debate manages some estates in my area, and some are better run than others. A lot seems to depend on the individual property manager and how they run their development, and the size and age of a development definitely has an impact.

In the short time that I have, I will raise a couple of important issues. One is about insurance. We know that costs went up post Grenfell because insurance moved from insuring just the floor that a flat is on to the entire block, but other increases have arisen that are difficult to explain, and there is a danger that we will struggle to get insurance. One block in my patch was able to get one insurer quote for 12 months only, and it was quoted an extortionately high excess rate at the beginning—somewhere in the region of £15,000. That was the excess that the housing association freeholder would have to pay before anything happened. It managed to get that down, but it could only get one 12-month period of insurance.

I think we need to be careful in our discussions about the relationship between insurance companies and managing agents. I know from my role as Chair of the Treasury Committee that there are very strict rules on ringfencing operations, so insurance companies and managing agents should not have a cosy relationship. In law, they are not entitled to do so.

Sam Carling: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on this issue on the Treasury Committee. In my speech, I raised an insurance issue that my constituents have gone to the Financial Ombudsman Service about, but they are having problems about whether it is a FOS issue or a property ombudsman issue, and it is just not very clear. Would she join me in calling for more clarity?

Dame Meg Hillier: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need clarity on this issue. We are talking a lot about service charges, but the insurance industry has a responsibility because it accounts for a large chunk of them. Regulators have a clear role to play, and it is important that that is considered in all the changes we are discussing.

I am pleased that the Government have been consulting on these issues. The consultation on service charges ended in February, so I hope the Minister can give us an update about it. It is important to touch on a couple of other issues. We know that poor maintenance leads to high costs, so standards and expectations should be set on maintenance, which costs leaseholders, but costs them less in the long run if things are maintained. That is a repeated theme across my constituency, as some very modern blocks have not been maintained properly, which means leaseholders end up paying more in the end than they should have done.

There is also an issue with greening blocks. I have constituents working very effectively to try to get electric vehicle charging points and better insulation in a block that is an old warehouse; the famous loft apartments were very popular in my constituency at one point. However, improving such things creates betterment, which increases the ground rent, because the owner of the building can say it is an improvement and can charge more. Such tenants are making their property greener, cleaner and more efficient—costing them less in a lot of ways—but they are ending up with their costs being put up somewhere else, which seems to be a complete imbalance that we have not discussed.

On the right to manage and commonhold—I am a Labour and Co-op MP, and I am very proud to be pushing for commonhold—there can be issues where there is a right to manage. I am working with a development where there is a right-to-manage company, but the directors have hidden themselves away and are not acting responsibly in answering and providing information to their neighbours in the development. I think governance needs an overhaul in this area. It is not going to solve everything if residents take over the management but then do not do a good job, so there needs to be transparency all round.

As we know, this is on top of increased mortgage charges, and let us not forget what the 2022 Budget did to mortgage charges. Shared owners are paying mortgages, rents and service charges, and this is all adding to the cost of living and causing huge upset, on top of the spending on building safety requirements that are hitting so many of my constituents. That is causing real problems, but we need to be clear, so rather than go through the list myself, I will endorse all the asks that my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) listed about transparency, openness and getting clearer rights for residents to challenge service charges and to make sure they absolutely understand why they are being charged such fees. That is the basic minimum, but we should be making sure it happens.

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

3.28 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on securing what, given the number of Members taking part, has clearly been an important debate.

Liberal Members of this place have been campaigning to end residential leasehold and the charges it entails since Lloyd George, who, at the time his People's Budget in 1909, said that the practice

"is not business, it is blackmail... Ground rent is a part of it—fines, fees; you are to make no alteration without...consent."

His words ring true today. Over a century later, we still have the same feudal system, and charges that trap homeowners in a cycle of uncapped ground rents, exploitative charges and similarly unreasonable estate management fees.

The scale of the problem is staggering—there are 4.8 million leasehold properties in England, which is more than a fifth of the housing stock—but England, Wales and Australia are the only countries still operating such residential leasehold approaches. Most other countries are perfectly able to ensure building maintenance and safety without relying on such outdated practices. One of the things I hear most often from my constituents is how long it takes to get change in this place, and property service charges are a perfect example. They have been around for decades, but very little seems to have happened.

In 2019, the Government commissioned the independent Lord Best to write a report, and he laid out sensible solutions and a clear path ahead: a new property regulator to establish a code of practice, the licensing of property managers and agents, and minimum qualifications for those working in the sector.

While I acknowledge the last Government's work in this area, it took them five years to bring forward legislation, and when they did in the form of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, they completely neglected to regulate property management or spiralling service charges. That is a measure of how leaseholders have been let down despite the overwhelming evidence of the need for action. The Labour Government promised that they would implement the rest of the Act, but well over a year later little progress has been made—progress that would give redress to those saddled with charges they cannot contest and marriage values that are wholly unreasonable. These delays are failing the people who are trapped in these properties.

Recently, I heard from one constituent about their experience of leasehold service charges. When they purchased their property in 2022, the service charges were £1,700. In 2023 they rose to £2,600, which is a 52% increase. The next year they went up to £3,700, which is a further 43% increase. The following year—2025—they reached £5,010, which is another 34% increase. Overall, the service charges tripled in just three years, and for what? After a huge effort by residents asking to see quotes and invoices, it turns out that the answer was that it was for nothing—or rather for incompetence and, as Lloyd George might have put it, for greed. There were invoices relating to other buildings entirely and gaping differences between maintenance quotes and actual costs.

[Gideon Amos]

Eventually, through the right to manage, the residents appointed a new managing agent and got their charges back down to around £2,000. That means that over those four years, residents paid approximately £13,000 in service charges. If the charges had remained at the proper level, it would have been £2,000 a year, so they have overpaid by £5,000 each and they will never get that money back. The money went straight into the pockets of unregulated managers. That is the cost of delay—it is a real cost being borne by constituents of mine and other Members.

The constituent said to me that the process was akin to having a full-time job, which is an entirely unreasonable way for the property industry to be working—and what about residents who are less able than my constituent? Some residents may be older or in poor health, or simply ill-equipped for the massive task of navigating that bureaucracy. They may be so busy with work or children that they do not know they have been ripped off until it is too late. Folk should not have to devote that level of time and energy to get redress.

The issue of fleecehold, which has been referred to by hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) and for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), must not be forgotten. Companies such as FirstPort have been mentioned, and I assure Members that they are as much of a problem in Taunton and Wellington as they are elsewhere. Freeholders often have even fewer rights to challenge estate management charges than those who have leases. The arrangements operate almost like leaseholds. Such residents pay double—both their council tax and estate management charges—and often receive a far worse service than those who live on estates fully adopted by a local authority, where the only charge is council tax. They have all the financial burdens of leasehold without the legal protections. Another constituent—a freeholder in Taunton—has been awaiting the regulations for years now so that he can take his case to tribunal.

Even the rights that exist on paper are worthless without effective enforcement. Currently neither leaseholders nor those paying estate management charges have any easy way to ensure that their rights are upheld. That is why we need both the provisions of the 2024 Act to be commenced, and an independent regulator with teeth and the ability to cap unreasonable charges levied on both leaseholders and freeholders. Even the British Property Federation said back in 2023 that

“the lack of any provision to introduce competency standards or regulation to our sector is a missed opportunity.”

The Property Institute has welcomed proposals for oversight. When even those who would be regulated are asking for it, surely it is time to act.

The Government rightly have an ambition to build 300,000 new homes a year, but we Lib Dems would prefer that to include a stretching target of 150,000 social homes. We agree that homes are needed. However, in building them we must not create a next generation of fleecehold properties. The practice of developers building estates with shared roadways and public spaces, then retaining ownership through management companies and charging residents for their upkeep while those same residents are paying council tax, has to end. For the vast majority of standard developments, there needs

to be a presumption that shared areas must be adopted by the local authority. Crucially, councils need to be given the proper resources to allow that; the ability to recoup the costs of managing those spaces from developers or landowners; and powers to sanction those who fail to complete roads and similar infrastructure to the right standard. We cannot allow developers to profit from management companies, while residents pay twice for the same services.

It has been 116 years since Lloyd George called out these practices. We have had six years since Lord Best's report laid out a clear path forward. We have had over a year with the new Government in office. The evidence is overwhelming and the solutions are clear. Liberal Democrats are therefore calling for: a new property regulator, as recommended in the Best report, establishing a code of practice, minimum qualifications and the licensing of property managers; leaseholders to be enabled to get alternative quotes for maintenance; a power for residents to act in common to take ownership of management companies and common areas; the strengthening of councils' powers to adopt, with resources from developers or landowners; the urgent abolition of ground rents for existing residential leases; and, crucially, the capping of unreasonable service and estate management charges.

Millions of leaseholders and freeholders are waiting. They have waited long enough. It is time for the Government to act and end what has become the great British property rip-off.

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

3.35 pm

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I start by putting on record my gratitude, which I suspect echoes the views of many right hon. and hon. Members, to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing the debate and setting out so clearly in her opening remarks the significance of this issue and the corrosive impact it has on so many people.

The number of speeches, the tone of those speeches and, sadly, the regular themes we have heard through those speeches tell a really tragic and frustrating story. The experience of constituents across many different parts of the country is unfortunately consistent. They are in a situation where they feel trapped, powerless and voiceless, and where the balance of power is completely unfair. And that is all wrapped up in something that should be a positive experience: owning a home and being able to enjoy your home and its surroundings. The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) summed it up very well as something that is meant to be a dream turning into a nightmare. That a consistent theme we have heard.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders). He clearly has not just passion on this issue, but real experience of it. I also pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed). I was struck by his confession that his normal mild mannered demeanour was sacrificed after a meeting. I know his background—I am not sure if all right hon. and hon. Members know it—and I can assure the House and the management companies that he is not someone they should inspire to lose his temper.

Today's debate has been held in a very positive spirit. This is an issue, as has been evident today, that generates genuine cross-party agreement. I am proud of the fact that my party in government started the process of reform in this area. I will concede that we did not complete the process—we absolutely recognise that. A number of things that we put in place have made a difference, but we recognise that there is more to do.

I have no intention of trying to play party politics on this matter. This debate has shown that whether a leaseholder is living in a—currently—Labour-held constituency, a Lib Dem constituency or a Conservative constituency, their pain and suffering is real, and I think we are all collectively duty bound to do something about it. That is why I encourage the Government to continue with the process of implementing the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 and ensure that the appropriate secondary legislation is fully in place, and to do so quickly. Like others, I have received numerous pieces of correspondence from people whose properties are managed by FirstPort and others, and our constituents want us to get a grip of this situation.

There are political and legitimate philosophical differences across this House. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) made a great point about a by-product of what my side of the House regard as an incredibly positive move by the Thatcher Government in the '80s—I know that not everyone will agree that it was positive, for completely legitimate reasons. One of the practical implications of that move is a mixture of ownership types within a block of properties, and that has to be resolved. That resolution is not a political issue, but a practical one. Finding opportunities to work across the House to deliver those practical responses is absolutely key.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) recognised in his speech that there is cross-party unity and focus on this matter, and my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) made it clear that implementation is key. People do not want grandstanding on this issue; they want actual shoulder-to-the-wheel delivery. I have no doubt that I speak for all Members of my party when I say that in the boring, behind-the-scenes, get-stuff-done bit of this House's business, the Government will enjoy our support in using the legislation that we started off to bring about a better living environment for the people whom we serve.

I will not detain the House much longer, because the message we need to send to the people we serve is that we recognise this challenge and we recognise that the market forces that provide consumer choice are not working properly in this situation. People are not able to choose between alternative providers; the professionalism that is forced on commercial organisations through the pressure of competition is not working here, which is why we are seeing costs that are hidden, obscured and, in some instances, completely created out of thin air. That is not how a market is meant to work. There has to be Government intervention in this. As a free-marketeer Conservative, that is not my default setting, but in this instance it is clearly what we have to do.

I will conclude by saying that when the Government take action to deliver on this matter, they can rest assured that the Opposition will give them practical support and will be chivvyng them along at every opportunity.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a genuine pleasure to follow that constructive speech by the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly). I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on securing a debate on what is without question a critically important and pressing issue for residential freeholders and leaseholders alike across the country, and one that, as the shadow Secretary of State rightly said, enjoys significant cross-party consensus. In opening the debate, the hon. Lady spoke forcefully and eloquently on behalf of her constituents in Redhill and, in sharing their plight with the House, brought alive the financial and emotional toll that leasehold terms can take on homeowners across the country.

The many excellent contributions that followed from hon. and right hon. Members powerfully reinforced the arguments that the hon. Lady made. The case studies littered across those contributions were shocking but will not have surprised anyone in this House. We all know from the work we do supporting leaseholders and residential freeholders in our constituencies that, for far too many of them, the reality of home ownership has fallen woefully short of the dream. It is precisely because this Government are no longer prepared to accept that situation that we are determined to honour the commitments made in our manifesto and do what is necessary to finally bring the feudal leasehold system to an end in this Parliament.

I do not intend to detain the House for a huge amount of time—I know there is another debate to follow—but in the time I have available I would like to address the main issues that have been raised in the debate, starting with the various problems affecting homeowners on private and mixed-tenure housing estates. But, as ever, I am more than happy to meet any hon. or right hon. Member who has raised an issue that I am unable to cover.

As several hon. Members argued in their contributions, we have seen over recent years a significant shift away from a situation where local authorities and utility companies would generally adopt the respective amenities and public spaces within new residential developments to one where private management arrangements take hold—a so-called fleecehold arrangement. Shared amenities and open spaces are now routinely not adopted and maintained at the public expense, and the maintenance costs fall to residents through an estate rent charge, a fee paid in addition to council tax.

The estate charge also normally covers the management costs of the estate management company, although, as has been evidenced in the debate, residential freeholders frequently complain that these companies deliver little, if anything, beyond what a local authority would usually provide in an area where amenities would have been adopted.

My Department estimates that up to 1.75 million homes in England are located on such private and mixed-tenure estates, although not all are subject to charges. Properties on these estates often have restrictive covenants registered at the Land Registry. They may require homeowners to seek permission, often for a fee, from the management company for actions such as selling or letting their home or altering its appearance.

[Matthew Pennycook]

In the worst cases, residents face excessive or unjustified charges levied for minimal services. Those may include fees for services normally provided by local authorities, arbitrary and costly administration fees, unexplained increase in charges and fees imposed during the sale of their home.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I just want to add one more case study to the plethora that have already been provided today. I have a resident who has a one-bed flat who saw their charges rise by thousands of pounds in just a few years. That financial burden also makes it even harder to sell their property. Simply too many rogue developers and estate management companies, as alluded to, are exploiting residents and demanding excessive fees for maintaining shared and public spaces in developments. Will the Minister, as many Members have called for, today commit finally to cracking down on these money-grabbing companies, capping unreasonable service and management charges, and urgently abolish ground rents on existing leases?

Matthew Pennycook: If the hon. Lady had been present for the debate, she would have heard extensive exchanges on this subject, but I will set out what the Government intend to do to provide leaseholders and residential freeholders with redress in these areas.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I won't. I am more than happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman about this issue, as I do on a regular basis, and pick up these exchanges, but I want to make a bit of progress.

Lastly, the fragmentation of management on many of these estates compounds the problems we experience. Even on relatively new developments, homeowners often have to deal with multiple management companies, each levying fees in ways that reduce transparency and increase the risk of exploitation. In those situations, homeowners understandably often feel misled and trapped.

Dame Meg Hillier: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: No, I will not give way any further. There is another debate to follow and I will not test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is worth saying that the Competition and Markets Authority published a study of the house building industry last year. It recommended stronger protections for homeowners and called for the mandatory adoption of certain amenities on new estates and, crucially, common adoptable standards for those amenities. The Government's response to that report accepted many of its recommendations in principle, but acknowledged that further work is required.

I reiterate the Government's firm commitment to end the injustice of fleecing entirely. As I set out in my written ministerial statement of November 2024, we will consult this year on legislative and policy options to reduce the prevalence of private estate management arrangements, which are the root cause of the problems experienced by many residential freeholders.

On that point, I say to the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed)—I congratulate him on the birth of his child—that I must gently push back on his assertion that we do not need to consult. Through the consultation responses that we are receiving on issues such as service charge protections, we are gathering a huge amount of information that will allow us to implement these changes effectively, to the lasting benefit of leaseholders.

It is also vital that homebuyers understand what will happen to the estate that they are moving into. The Government are currently consulting on guidance to support estate agents with their legal responsibility to provide potential buyers with relevant material information during property transactions, as well as consulting on what should be considered material information for buyers. The Government also want to empower homeowners who are already living on estates under these arrangements. In September this year, the Law Commission published its 14th programme of law reform, which included a project on the management of housing estates. It will consider how residents could be given greater control over the management of their housing estates. My Department is proud to be the sponsoring Department for the project.

In the short term, it is imperative that we protect residential freeholders on privately managed estates from unfair charges. As hon. Members will be aware, the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 contains provision for a new regulatory framework, broadly mirroring the rights already enjoyed by leaseholders and designed to give residential freeholders new consumer protections. We intend to consult again this year on how to implement those new protections to ensure that the framework is effective, but I want to assure hon. Members that I am determined to bring them into force as quickly as possible.

Many hon. Members mentioned service charges in a wider sense, and it is right that they champion the cause of leaseholders in their constituencies. As I have made clear on many occasions in this House, this Government recognise the considerable financial strain that rising service charges place on leaseholders and tenants. I reiterate the Government's firm view that overcharging through service charges is completely unacceptable. In July this year we consulted on the measures in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 that are designed to drive up the transparency of service charges. We also consulted on proposals to introduce a fairer litigation costs regime, helping leaseholders to challenge service charges and protecting them from disproportionate legal expenses. The consultation included proposals on mandating reserve funds and reforming the major works process. As I have said, we have received a huge amount of useful feedback from the consultation, which closed on 26 September. I assure hon. Members that the stories I have heard today will inform my thinking on how the Government respond in due course.

On that point, let me say briefly that I would welcome correspondence from my hon. Friends the Members for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) with some further details about why judgments of the tribunal are not being enforced in the cases that they raised.

Before I conclude my remarks, I must address the legitimate concerns that have been raised in respect of the performance of managing agents, both on freehold estates and in leasehold blocks. We know that there are

good managing agents who work hard to ensure that the residents they are responsible for are safe and secure, and that homes are properly looked after, but we also know that far too many leaseholders suffer from poor practice at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents.

I heard so many references to FirstPort during the debate that while I was sitting on the Front Bench I asked my private office to send a request to its managing director asking that he come and meet me so that I can convey some of the concerns that have been raised. Managing agents play a key role in the maintenance of multi-occupancy buildings and freehold estates, and their importance will only increase as we transition toward commonhold, so it is essential that we strengthen their regulation to drive up the standard of their service.

As hon. Members will know, the previous Government committed to regulate the property agent sector in 2018. They asked a working group, chaired by Lord Best, to advise them on how to do it. Yet they failed to respond to the group's final report, published in July 2019. This Government have engaged seriously and constructively with the findings set out in that report, and we have already taken forward a number of its recommendations. In the recent consultation on strengthening leaseholder protections from charges and services, which I referenced earlier, we consulted on powers to appoint a manager or replace a managing agent, as well as on mandatory professional qualifications for managing agents in England, but that is not the final step in this process, and we will set out our full position on regulation of estate, letting and managing agents in due course.

To conclude, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Reigate for giving the House an opportunity to debate these important matters, I thank all Members who have participated in the debate today for sharing their concerns and insights, and—I say this genuinely—I very much look forward to further engagement with right hon. and hon. Members as the Government continue to implement the reforms to the leasehold system that are already in statute, and to progress the wider set of reforms necessary to end the feudal leasehold system for good in this Parliament, and not least the ambitious draft commonhold and leasehold reform Bill, which we will publish before the end of the year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Rebecca Paul to wind up.

3.54 pm

Rebecca Paul: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for participating today. I also thank all Members for leaving politics at the door, on the whole. Everyone recognises that there is a challenge, we all agree that that challenge is impacting our constituents' lives in a detrimental way, and I think everyone came here today to try to solve that, and I thank them for that.

I also thank the Minister, who has clearly listened closely to everything that was said today. I am grateful to him for taking this with the seriousness that it deserves. He has already contacted FirstPort—that is incredible and I thank him for it.

I thank the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), for his contributions and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos). I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate. I think we can all agree that it was time well spent, and I am sure that the Committee will be happy with the number of hon. Members who were here to speak today.

In summary, we have heard some truly astounding things today. I am sure that we are all horrified by what some leaseholders have to endure. It is clear that some property service companies are exploiting leaseholders for their own benefit and profit. Some do not provide a value-for-money service, do not adequately maintain communal areas and are most certainly not transparent in their dealings. Their actions trap residents in homes they cannot afford and cannot sell, but the law of the land currently allows those companies to do that. It is a travesty and an absolute scandal. I look forward to the Minister and the Government acting quickly to prevent further abuse, and I will support them and cheer them on in that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered property service charges.

Ageing and End-of-life Care

3.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the ageing community and end of life care.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this subject for debate. I declare an interest as the son of Mona Shannon, who is 94 years young and resides in a nursing home near Killyleagh in my constituency. Along with most other middle-aged sons or daughters—in my case, maybe a wee bit more than middle-aged—I am acutely aware that time is marching on and so are my mum's needs.

The wee five-foot-nothing lady who kept three six-foot sons under control is no longer to live alone, but she is as sharp as a tack and I am thankful for the wisdom she gives me when I visit her twice weekly. Indeed, I suspect that every Friday and every Sunday I get a wee bit of wisdom—and maybe a wee bit of a telling off. She always likes to know what happens in this House and I am able to tell her that, but she will also give me her opinion, which I never ignore—indeed, I probably keep to it as much as I can.

Those visits to the nursing home, coupled with the focus on assisted dying, have highlighted to me with greater effect the changes that are needed in how we handle our older generation and their needs. I have spoken with representatives of both Sue Ryder and Marie Curie not simply to highlight the difficulties that most of us will be aware of, but to offer some ways that we can improve.

I am pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), in his place. He and I are becoming a bit of a tag team, because on three days this week he has been the Minister responding to the debates that I have been involved in. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), has been there as well, so he should not be left out.

According to Marie Curie, in the next 25 years in Northern Ireland—I know it is not the Minister's responsibility, but I want to give the stats, because they are important—there will be 20,500 people requiring this type of care, which is a rise of 32%. That includes a doubling of need by those aged over 85. It is also projected that the number of deaths in the community in Northern Ireland could rise by 74% during that time. Approximately 60% of the cost of care delivered through the independent hospice sector in Northern Ireland is reliant on charity. That is unsustainable. A new palliative care strategy for Northern Ireland that takes account of demographic changes and associated requirements for service transformation and investment is urgently needed.

That is what is happening in Northern Ireland, and in the mainland, things are very similar. Marie Curie has highlighted that as the population ages, more people will be living with and dying with multiple complex conditions. Every week in my office, when it comes to assisting those of my mum's generation—and perhaps some of my own—with benefits, I see people with multiple complex needs more than ever. It is not just one thing that people are suffering from, but a multitude of things.

By 2050, the number of people in need of palliative and end-of-life care in the UK will rise by 147,000 to over 745,000 every year, and that increase will be driven by a growth in the number of people dying over the age of 85. These are really important stats, and we cannot ignore them; indeed, I believe the Minister will be focusing on them. Around 90% of the people who die each year need palliative care, but one in four of them is missing out. Older people, and particularly those with a non-cancer diagnosis, are at risk of missing out on the palliative care they need at the end of life. Research indicates that most people want to receive care at the end of their life and die at home. Elderly people tell me that all the time—they want to be at home.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way; I know he is pressed for time. The charity Together for Short Lives points out that where children's palliative care is concerned, there is wide variation across different regions in the country. Is he afraid that this applies to the ageing population as well—that there is no consistency in the amount of palliative care available?

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention and for the wisdom that he brings to all the debates he participates in. The Minister is listening, and he is a good Minister, so I know he will come back with the response we hope to have.

How often have we listened to family members who are past themselves with exhaustion and guilt about how they are caring for their loved one and who feel unprepared and yet unwilling to let them go into nursing care? With more support, their lives would be easier and their loved one's life happier. This knowledge is why I was not surprised to learn that almost £12 billion of public funds was spent on healthcare for people in their last year of life, 81% of which was spent in hospital, with only 11% spent on primary and community care.

Access to a 24/7 palliative care advice and support telephone line has been recommended as a minimum service requirement for nearly two decades, but research shows that very little has happened, which underlines the issue that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) raised. Only seven of the 42 integrated care boards in England said they have a dedicated 24/7 single point of access to palliative and end-of-life care advice, guidance and onward referral to other services, when needed—those are all important factors.

Despite the introduction of a new legal duty for ICBs to commission palliative care services in the Health and Care Act 2022, the urgency and importance of ensuring that everyone has the best possible care and support at the end of life has yet to be recognised as a national priority. I hope the Minister will be able to provide assurance on this, because that is what Marie Curie wants, it is what Sue Ryder wants, and it is what every mum, dad and family member wants as well.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): The day I get to intervene on such an amazing Member is a remarkable day. I live in a very rural area where there are places with real socioeconomic deprivation. I know for a fact that there is huge inequality in those kinds of areas when it comes to palliative care. Does he agree that the Minister and the Government need to look at how to reduce that inequality over the next 10 years?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member is absolutely right. Politics aside, I want the Minister and the Government to do the job. It does not matter who the politician or the political party is; let us just give our people some hope. That is what I wish to see come out of this.

What assessment have the Government made of the need for a national strategy for palliative and end-of-life care? How will the Government ensure that palliative care specialists are included in neighbourhood health centres? What progress are the Government making on ensuring that every person with palliative care needs in the UK has access to a 24/7 support and advice line?

I believe that we can find a route towards an acceptable standard of life not simply for those who can afford private healthcare, but for all in our ageing communities. I understand that the Minister has a copy of my notes, and my seven points will be in there. To realise the 10-year plan objectives, which I have clearly said I support and want to see happen as soon as possible, palliative and end-of-life care must be recognised as a vital part of our health and social care system. Without making palliative and end-of-life care a priority for health reform, the Government will not achieve their bold ambition to provide more care in the community. I want the Government to achieve that ambition.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I spoke earlier to the hon. Gentleman to ask if he would take an intervention. When earlier this year my mum was placed on end-of-life care—she was put into the local hospital to receive that care—I had to repeatedly ask hospital staff to transfer her to our local, excellent Eden Valley hospice. It took three days for that request to be actioned. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one change we could make is that, when someone in our hospitals is placed on end-of-life care, their families could be immediately apprised of the alternative provision that exists in our communities?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right—by the way, that is one of my seven points. We have spoken, but not exactly about that. The debate brings us together with our requests for the Minister and the Government; we are thankful for that.

Only 38% of those who died aged 85 or older received care from palliative care specialists, compared with 51.5% of those aged 65 to 84 and 59.3% of those aged 18 to 64. To the point made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East, most aged 18 to 64 spent most of their final months in a private home, but fewer than 50% of those aged 65 or older did so. One in seven people—15%—who died in hospital had been in there for less than 24 hours. When someone is coming to their last days, many complex needs are involved—there are also the problems for the family—but they will have to deal with two things in particular: pain, and probably breathlessness.

Almost two thirds of unpaid carers felt anxious most or all the time about the dying person's illness or treatment. Shifting care from the hospital to the community would benefit older people, support the shift from hospital to community—analogue to digital—and prevent avoidable emergency care admissions. Those are all things that the Government must develop in a national strategy for palliative and end-of-life care.

The strategy must deliver on these seven points. First, an integrated whole-system approach is needed enabling patients at the end of life to move seamlessly through services as their health changes. Secondly, the Government

must place palliative care at the centre of plans for neighbourhood health centres and ensure the inclusion of palliative care specialists. A key benefit of including palliative and end-of-life care in neighbourhood health centres will be the earlier identification of palliative care need and greater uptake of advance care planning.

Thirdly, the Government implement models of emergency and urgent care that can minimise avoidable accident and emergency visits. That would provide financial savings for the NHS as well as giving better care in a better system. That also comes to the input of the families, which is the very thing we all wish to see.

Fourthly, the Government need to strengthen the statutory guidance on the legal duty to commission palliative care services in the Health and Care Act 2022. Holding integrated care boards to account for the delivery of this duty must be part of that. Fifthly, we must introduce national quality standards for palliative and end-of-life care that must be met in all health and care settings. That would strengthen accountability while catalysing the 10-year health plan's targeted shift from hospital to community for patients at the end of life. They must also support more equitable implementation of the vision set out in the ambitious national framework for local action.

Sixthly, there must be access to 24/7 support—the very thing being asked for—by creating a universal gateway to 24/7 specialist palliative and end-of-life care advice, guidance and support through NHS 111. In my constituency, we would say “yin, yin, yin.”

Seventhly, there must be a long-term, sustainable funding solution for palliative and end-of-life care that can reduce reliance on charitable fundraising and ensure parity of esteem for the NHS and non-NHS palliative care workforce. A transformation fund must also be created to invest in innovative and integrated models of care to meet different community needs. The Minister is probably saying, “My goodness, is it just seven points?”, but yes, I will stop at those seven, although I would like to comment on Sue Ryder if I may.

All of these stats can become figures on a page, but when I read them I think of the wee mummy lying on her bathroom floor after a fall, all night in tears; I think of my constituents who sob in my office, begging for help with their dying parent; I think of carers who are run ragged and know that a 15-minute call with that elderly person cannot possibly cater to their hygiene needs as well as feeding them; I think of district nurses who are late home because they would not leave their elderly patient upset after a wound change, and who made them a wee cup of tea and stayed for that comforting chat that time had not been allocated for.

Professor Jugdeep Dhesi, president of the British Geriatrics Society, said:

“Everyone should have access to high quality care until the end of their life, including palliative and end of life care when they need it. Sadly, this is not the case for many older people across the United Kingdom.”

Sue Ryder also asked me to highlight some issues. It is working to create a new ecosystem around palliative and end-of-life care, and to unlock hospital productivity through swiftly shifting care to the community in a progressive way that is sensitive to the resources available across the wider system, and focused on genuine collaboration at a local, place, and system level. The envisaged ecosystem would absorb patients from across the acute setting and increase referrals to community

[Jim Shannon]

settings, helping our wonderful NHS to use its bed capacity more effectively, and relieving strain on the discharge system. The Sue Ryder model will shift care into the community by increasing hospice-at-home services and virtual wards, funded in line with national currencies and fast-track CHC reform. It is believed that this new approach to hospital care will develop dedicated care, alongside suites on NHS sites to provide compassionate, tailored care for those approaching the end of life, and to relieve pressure on hospital teams.

We must increase support for people in their own homes—that is what I want, what the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) wants, and probably what we are all seeking. It is about expanding care in the community through partnerships, virtual wards, and increased hospice-at-home services to help more people die at home and reduce emergency admissions. We must aim to make full use of hospices' expertise and space to support people with complex multi-morbidities and those in the last 1,000 days of life, preventing emergency admissions and helping people to live well.

I will keep to your timescale, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am coming to the end. The end of life is not a happy topic, but I believe it is a necessary conversation. We must open that conversation to ensure that people feel able to record their wishes for the end of life, so that more of their needs are met by the people involved in their care. We must ensure that there is information, and above all funding to deal with the growing pressure—the family issue that the hon. Member for Carlisle referred to—because how we treat the most vulnerable in our society is the measure that we will all be judged by.

I am no better than anybody else, but as elected representatives you and I, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everyone in the Chamber want to do the best for our people. Today we ask for the best for our people. I work alongside my mum to ensure that her last time on earth is the best we can make it, and I know I can safely say that it is the desire of this House and the Minister to provide that for every person in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But we cannot do it without Government buy-in, or without help from the Minister, and from the Labour Government and those in power. The hospice sector is looking for a way to do things better, so I ask the Minister to join those who know this issue inside out, and find a route to help our ageing community and those in end-of-life care. That is also from Marie Curie, Sue Ryder and Professor Dhesi—all those people, and all of us as MPs on behalf of our constituents.

Thank you for your time, Minister, and I look forward to your response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the first speaker, Members will have noticed that we are pushed-ish for time, so I ask them to keep their comments to around eight minutes.

4.13 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests. I am an officer

of the all-party groups on carers, and on housing and care for older people, and I was formerly chief executive of the Centre for Ageing Better.

As ageing is a subject close to my heart, I decided to check out my latest personal life expectancy projection according to the Office for National Statistics life expectancy calculator, and it turned out that I have a one in four chance of living to 95. Many people would think, "Oh, how fantastic!" Yes, we all want to live longer, but not everybody will enjoy that same life expectancy. We know that there is a significant gap—about 19 years—in life expectancy between the most and the least deprived. That gap is reflected across the country, as well as in my own constituency, between Wharfedale and Windhill and Wrose.

Despite the tech bros trying to defy ageing and death through all sorts of techniques, in reality we are mortal and we will all face death at some point. More of us will die at older ages because of increased life expectancy. To be honest with hon. Members, death is a boom industry, and if they have not already invested in a funeral director, that might be something to look at. The post-war baby boomers are now in their 60s, 70s and heading into their 80s, so more of us will be dying in the coming decades.

Society needs to change in a number of ways to respond to our ageing society. Departments across Government are looking at related issues, including working for longer, which is a matter for the Department for Work and Pensions, and ensuring that we build new homes that are accessible. I will be speaking to the Minister for Housing and Planning, who summed up in the previous debate, about bringing in new regulations to make homes more accessible.

In addition, we need to reform end-of-life care. By 2050, it is projected that an additional 147,000 people will die per year, bringing the total to 745,000 per year. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the people who miss out on end of life care are more likely to be older, from black and minority ethnic communities, from lower socioeconomic communities or to have a non-cancer diagnosis. There is a lot to do to close the gap in access to palliative and end-of-life care, particularly for older people.

An example of really good practice in Bradford is the REACT model—the Responsive Emergency Assessment and Community Team model. If you have not already visited, Madam Deputy Speaker, you may wish to do so. It is a partnership between the Marie Curie hospice and Bradford Royal infirmary. A palliative care doctor is embedded in A&E, so when people who are at the end of life are hitting the accident and emergency department, they get an intervention, assessment and referral back to a proactive multidisciplinary community-based team. The results are staggering in reducing the number of hospital bed days that people at end of life experience.

As we have heard, most people do not want to die in hospital. I commend the shift that this Government are looking to make from hospital to community, which I hope is as true around end-of-life care as around other services. However, there is a huge lack of consistency between integrated care boards in how and what they commission. There is much to do to support better care in the community, including providing better support to GPs, particularly those with a specialist interest in end-of-life care; having district nurses working more

closely with primary care teams and embedded within the new neighbourhood health teams; more examples of hospice at home and multidisciplinary community teams; more training for care home managers and staff; and the innovative use of unused hospital wards to provide hospice services in hospital, where appropriate.

As has been mentioned, we must ensure that there is a 24/7 hotline for patients and, importantly, for their carers, so that when they find themselves in crisis at home, they can get access to the advice that they need. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has said they should have had access to such advice since 2011, but according to Marie Curie, only one in three areas has such a 24/7 hotline.

While there are examples of good practice, there is much to do. It is good news that more of us are living longer, but society has to adapt. I am pleased that we are doing things as a Government—we have a pensions commission and the Casey review looking at social care—but I say to the Minister: now is the time to have a national strategy for palliative and end-of-life care. We are an ageing society and we need that, along with reform of continuing healthcare. In his response, I hope he will set out how we ensure that everybody dies well in old age and has a good death.

4.19 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. It has been a pleasure to see his passion for his community and for the people of Northern Ireland, especially as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Care at the end of life and ensuring dignity, compassion and community in every chapter of life is so incredibly important. I pay tribute to Weston Hospicecare, and particularly to Paul Winspear and his amazing team, who are an extraordinary example of what compassionate, community-based care can achieve. Their current director of patient services, John Bailey, retires in December after 30 years of dedicated services. Paul, the chief exec, describes John as a “truly exceptional” person, and I absolutely agree.

Founded in 1989, Weston Hospicecare supports more than 1,000 patients and families each year, serving a population of around 225,000 people from Clevedon to Burnham-on-Sea and from Cheddar to Weston-super-Mare, Worle and the villages that surround my constituency. It is hard to find somebody in my town whose life has not been touched by Weston Hospicecare’s dedicated team; my family is no exception. Weston Hospicecare helped us during some of our darkest times. I have a personal mission to help safeguard the future of this important facility. Its dedicated team provides in-patient, day hospice and community nursing services alongside physiotherapy, counselling and bereavement support, all free of charge.

Weston Hospicecare truly embodies the spirit of my home town—caring, community-minded and determined to do the right thing—but it is important to acknowledge the pressures that it faces daily. Weston Hospicecare receives only around 18% of its operating costs from the NHS, compared with a national average closer to 29%. The rest must be raised through community fundraising, shops and donations. The generosity of our community is remarkable, but it is being stretched to its limit, despite some of the most innovative approaches to

fundraising that I have witnessed. I am genuinely, truly impressed by what Weston Hospicecare has been able to achieve.

Over recent years, hospice funding increases have fallen well behind inflation. The national living wage increase has rightly lifted incomes, and I am entirely in favour of it, but that and other factors have increased staffing costs for many hospices. Weston Hospicecare faces an annual deficit of £500,000—roughly 10% of its £6 million budget—and it has had to dip into reserves, which now stand at less than six months’ cover. For such vital services that mean so much to my community and to the communities around us, we must find a better way.

Despite that, Weston Hospicecare continues to deliver outstanding value. It provides care for patients with complex, multi-morbid conditions who would otherwise occupy hospital beds or require costly community nursing, and it is relieving pressure on the NHS in my town. Weston Hospicecare saves the health system money while delivering really outstanding outcomes for patients and families.

The Government’s recent £75 million capital investment in hospices has been so important. Weston Hospicecare has benefited from it, and is particularly grateful for it, as am I, but we all recognise that while one-off capital investment is welcome, it cannot by itself secure the future. We need a sustainable commissioning model and fair funding for the essential, specialist care that hospices provide, while allowing them to continue raising community funds for services that are so often seen as optional, but which are in reality vital, such as family support, bereavement care and the holistic and therapeutic services that help people to live and die well.

This issue is also about the wider fabric of our communities. In coastal towns such as Weston-super-Mare, where we have higher proportions of older residents, fewer large employers and sometimes higher levels of isolation, hospices—in particular my hospice—are part of what hold our communities together. They offer not just care and employment, but training, volunteering and opportunities for young people to build meaningful careers in care. One of my best friends, John Williams, has been a carer his whole life. All too often, what I consider to be a vocation—a profession—is undervalued. That is something that we must change.

When we talk about ageing and end-of-life care, we must see it not as a burden, but as a mark of who we are—a society that values every life at every stage, and sees worth in all human life. Weston Hospicecare is a beacon of that principle, and with the right long-term funding framework, I believe it and other providers like it across the country can continue to serve our communities for decades to come.

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

4.25 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate.

It is well known that our population is ageing, with the latest census showing that people aged 65 and over account for 19.1% of the total population in Surrey.

[Helen Maguire]

That figure is predicted to increase to 25% by 2047. In my constituency of Epsom and Ewell, there are brilliant charities working to support the older population, including Age Concern, which empowers older people to live the most fulfilling lives they can while providing services, including advice, medical transport, social support and befriending. Organisations such as Age Concern are a vital lifeline for many, especially following the Conservatives' failure to fix social care and invest in preventive measures that support older people to stay in good health.

Our older and ageing communities also need to be able to access public services, including GP provision. According to Age UK, the number of full-time equivalent GPs, including trainees, increased by just 2.5% between 2023 and 2024, which is not keeping pace with the population growth of older people aged 75 and over. Many GPs are heading towards retirement, leaving an even bigger gap, so the Government must go further with plans for recruitment. There needs to be a concerted effort to build a strong, resilient GP workforce that prioritises retention and delivers services that stop older people from ending up in hospital due to delays in primary care.

Along with GP provision, access to social care services is vital. With an ageing population, we are seeing more and more older and frail carers supporting their spouses, putting a further strain on the carer's own health. We need to do more to support, protect and empower older people, so will the Minister commit to reversing the Conservatives' cuts to public health funding and facilitate a social care system that is accessible to older people, encourages preventive care, and tackles key issues such as loneliness and frailty?

As our population ages, more people will be living with—and dying with—multiple complex conditions. Marie Curie reports that by 2050, the number of people in need of palliative and end-of-life care will rise to over 745,000 people per year, which is 147,000 more than at present. One local family in Epsom and Ewell have shared their experience of struggling to access hospice care for a loved one with a terminal illness. Despite their efforts, no hospice place was available, and delays in pain relief made their loved one's final days distressing, something that could have been alleviated by better funding and co-ordination of end-of-life services.

Funding cuts and years of neglect under the previous Conservative Government have led to reduced services, which has a direct impact on patients and their families, who deserve dignity and support in their final days. The Liberal Democrats have proposed exempting health and care providers from increases in employer's national insurance contributions, yet the Government have ignored that proposal and have not provided much-needed support to the social care sector. In a further damning development, a report released just this week by the National Audit Office revealed that nearly two thirds of independent hospices in England reported a deficit in 2023-24. As a result, services have been slashed and hospices have been forced to cut the number of beds available, due to a lack of Government funding.

With hospices and care services under strain, people desperately need support, and families often have no place to turn. There have been a number of successful and ongoing pilots by local NHS trusts of dedicated

phone lines for palliative and end-of-life care needs. The Thames Valley pilot advice line led to a reduction in ambulance conveyances, a 35% reduction in referrals to out-of-hours primary care, and a fourfold increase in calls closed with no further intervention required. NHS 111 is a brilliant service, but it is not always appropriate. Access to a specialised palliative care expert can alleviate patient anxiety, streamline support and facilitate better care. That is something that I urge the Minister to investigate.

Will the Minister commit to ending the postcode lottery of funding for palliative care, create a dedicated hospice workforce plan, expand carer's allowance, and provide guaranteed respite care before end-of-life care eligibility begins? As we manage the ageing population and navigate end-of-life care, this Government must put patients first and prevent a devastating erosion of public services, tackle dangerous understaffing, and support people to age well in their community.

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

4.29 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I yet again thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He should be proud of Mona Shannon, and she will be proud of him not just for raising this topic today, but for all the work he does across this House talking about health, because he is assiduous and dedicated to timely health interventions, and that should be applauded across the House and this nation. I am indebted to him for securing this debate.

In the hon. Member's speech, he mentioned who he had spoken to. I, too, have met the organisations Sue Ryder and Marie Curie, including at party conference, and I have met many other organisations, including LOROS and Rainbows, that cover my area. When I saw the title "Ageing Community" for this debate, I must admit that I thought the hon. Member should have applied for a five-day debate, considering what we could cover. I also notice the expertise in this debate. We have a secondary care surgeon, someone with public health experience at the back and me as a GP. It is turning into a multidisciplinary team, and there is a lot to unpack, whether it is prevention, mitigation, healthy lifestyles or looking at the best examples across the world. I recently travelled to Japan and Korea and saw how they look after their elderly and their approach to the lifestyle of the elderly. There is a lot to be learned out there, as across the world we all grapple with an ageing population.

There are other topics that we could talk about, and some were touched on. On social care, it is a shame that there has been a change from cross-party talks to an independent commission. I note that Baroness Casey is being taken back to the Home Office, which means she is spread thinly. There is a wider debate to be had on social care, which is: what do the British public actually want? Often we look at the Scandinavian model, but say that we do not want to pay the taxes for it. We want the household or family approach, like the Bangladeshi or Pakistani model, but we certainly do not actually want grandma or grandpa coming to stay with us and we want to stay working. Therein lies the problem in British culture. We are not 100% sure what we want when we cross over from the NHS into social care, and we are not sure how to provide it.

Some hard evidence of policies on an ageing community has been talked about, and unfortunately I have to raise the issue of winter fuel. In the Government's analysis when they took away winter fuel payments—despite all the warnings—they knew that it would put 50,000 people into absolute poverty and 100,000 people into relative poverty. We can contrast that with the Opposition and our recent announcement on stamp duty. Jackson-Stops estimates that in the first year alone, up to 500,000 people above the age of 55 would consider downsizing because of that policy. I do not call that downsizing, as we heard in the debate on stamp duty—it is right-sizing, because it gives a real chance not only for more families to go upwards, but for people to move into more appropriate accommodation as they age.

There is a lot to be said in the debate about an ageing population, as the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) pointed out, but I will focus my comments on the three questions that I think I caught from the hon. Member for Strangford: the assessment of the need for a national strategy for palliative care; what the Government are doing to ensure that palliative care is included in neighbourhood health centres; and the progress being made on 24-hour support.

I will start with the national strategy and funding, and let us give credit to the Government where it is due. When it comes to children's hospice funding, they have continued the payment and extended it, which is welcome, although it does not offer enough mitigation for national insurance contributions. The Government will say that when it comes to adult funding, they have given £100 million. That is capital funding, though, and as one hospice worker put it to me, there is no point in having new curtains and a lick of paint if there are no staff.

As the Liberal Democrats pointed out, the National Audit Office report on the hospice sector that came out only yesterday states:

“DHSC and NHS England do not know what proportion of the total amount of palliative and end-of-life care provided in England is delivered by the independent adult hospice sector, and therefore how reliant they are on the sector”,

or what the real impact of Government funding is. It continues:

“In 2024-25, 11 independent adult hospices in England reported service reductions or staff redundancies, and other hospices announced plans to reduce services, in response to reduced income or increased costs. Cuts appear to be across all types of services offered by hospices. Most hospices reported the increase in the costs of service delivery within the palliative and end-of-life care sector as being the primary reason for service reductions...Six hospices have been designated by ICBs as ‘commissioner requested services’, a mechanism to forewarn ICBs of potential difficulties with services that, should they discontinue, would have significant impact on the local population”.

Hospice UK responded to that, saying:

“unfortunately the whole hospice sector is...struggling, just as demand for their services is rising. Surging costs mean 2 in 5 English hospices are planning cuts this year, and 20% ended last year with a deficit of over £1m.”

What does that actually look like in real life? In my area, LOROS is facing a deficit of £2 million. It has already had to reduce its in-patient capacity from 31 to 20 beds, and it is reducing its day therapy and cutting its physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social work, chaplaincy and complementary therapies, and closing the volunteer home-visiting service.

It is not just my region that is affected: a cursory look at *Hansard* will show that the Kirkwood hospice in Kirklees has made 19 redundancies; the Ashgate hospice in Derbyshire has 52 jobs at risk, with beds cut from 21 to 15; St Catherine's hospice in West Sussex is looking at 40 job cuts, with half of its new rooms being mothballed; Weston Hospicecare—highlighted both here today by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), and by others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) at other times—faces an increased national insurance bill of £139,000; the Arthur Rank hospice in Cambridgeshire is losing £829,000, which is forcing the closure of nine beds, 40% of its capacity; and Marie Curie has pointed out that its national insurance contribution costs have risen by £2.9 million.

Through all this, we have still never heard whether the Health team knew that this was going to happen and chose to push it through, or whether it was simply an oversight when it came to challenging the Treasury. Ever since the Budget, we have never heard an answer to that. At the time of the Budget, the CEO of Marie Curie, Matthew Reed, said:

“The Health Secretary himself has acknowledged that palliative and end of life care is not good enough, so we are shocked by the lack of measures in the budget to fix it. Palliative care needs are projected to rise by 25% over the next 25 years, around 147,000 more people each year, yet this government lacks a strategy to tackle the magnitude of this challenge.”

Have the Government made an assessment of how much the NICs increase has impacted the hospice sector? As has been mentioned, Together for Short Lives estimates that the average hospice is facing a bill of about £133,000.

I raised a lot of these questions in a debate in January, and the Minister for Care kindly wrote to me in response. It is not just about the financial side; we are looking at the structural aspect too. He wrote:

“As you are aware, integrated care boards...are responsible for the commissioning of palliative and end-of-life care services to meet the needs of their local populations. To support ICBs in this duty, NHS England has published statutory guidance and service specifications. In addition, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence...has published quality standards and guidelines to support commissioners to carry out this duty. While the NICE guidelines are not legally binding, they act as a regulatory benchmark for best practice in palliative and end-of-life care...Whilst the majority of palliative and end-of-life care is provided by NHS staff and services, we recognise the vital part that voluntary sector organisations, including hospices, also play in providing support to people at the end of life and their loved ones.”

So there is a grey area about where hospices are covered, and that fits in with the NAO report.

Anna Dixon: As the hon. Member rightly says, ICBs are under a legal duty to commission palliative care services. Does he not recognise that the problems we are having, not just with hospice care but with the lack of availability of palliative and end-of-life care, often come down to poor commissioning—ICBs failing to commission in line with that statutory guidance—and the confusion that arises between charitable donations and that which should be commissioned by the NHS?

Dr Evans: The hon. Lady is spot on; that is exactly the point that I was getting at. While there is a legal duty in terms of palliation, what that palliation looks like is important. Her question was also raised by the

[Dr Luke Evans]

hon. Member for Strangford, who asked whether it is now time to have a strategy dedicated to palliative care, given the rise in demand.

The letter goes on to say:

“Charitable hospices are autonomous organisations that provide a range of services that go beyond that which statutory services are legally required to provide. Consequently, the funding arrangements reflect this.”

We are in a grey area, and a palliative care strategy could well be a way to unlock this problem. I will be interested to hear what the Government have to say on this issue.

However, it is not just about finances and commissioning; it is also about the workforce. That is partly addressed in the letter:

“As set out above, we have committed to develop a ten-year plan to deliver an NHS fit for the future. This summer, we will publish a refreshed NHS long-term workforce plan to deliver the transformed health service we will build over the next decade so that patients can be treated on time again.”

By my calculations, we are coming up to Halloween and even bonfire night, and we still have not seen a workforce plan. My question to the Government is: when are we likely to see that?

That leads me on to my next point: how do the Government intend to ensure that palliative care specialists are included in neighbourhood health centres? The 10-year plan is laudable, and I think there is agreement across the political spectrum on its contents, but the one thing it is missing is a delivery chapter. How are we going to do it? The shift is correct, but we do not know how we are going to get there, so I would be grateful if the Minister could address that. The 10-year plan explicitly talks about public-private partnerships, and there is concern on both sides of the House that we could see PFI mark 2. If Members need to have their memory jogged, private finance initiatives brought in £13 billion to build hospitals and services, but at a cost of £80 billion to taxpayers.

Why does this all matter? In my last few moments, I will turn to the final question that was posed by the hon. Member for Strangford, which was about access to 24-hour support. I will quickly read out a couple of comments from one of my constituents, whose husband Mat sadly passed away from a brain tumour. She highlights this issue:

“During the day, the support was outstanding because I could call the community nurses and the palliative nurses, and they would always call me straight back. They would visit Mat daily to administer the medications needed in his syringe drivers. They were kind, caring and so supportive to us and our family.

The night times were different and frightening. Often during the night when I was trying to get support, he could see how scared and stressed I was, which made him more scared, often telling me he was okay just to try and not make me worry. Every night I used to be thinking what might happen tonight—will Mat have another seizure? Will he be in so much pain again? Will they call me back if I need support? How long will it take to get help to arrive?”

Marie Curie points out that only seven of the 42 ICBs in England have a single point of access. I raised this issue with the Minister in a letter in August, and he kindly responded in September. He pointed out that integrated care boards must commission on this basis. There is NICE guidance on “End of life care for adults”,

under quality standard 13, and on “End of life care for adults: service delivery”, under NICE guideline 142, which talks about the fact that there should be some form of 24-hour care, but at no point did the letter address the issue of the phoneline. When I asked the Department about data, I was told in a letter:

“Regarding data about palliative care helplines, such as average waiting/response times, the Department does not collect or hold this information.”

Will the Minister look at that and consider whether the Department should hold such information?

The letter went on to say:

“We recognise that more could be done to support the palliative and end-of-life care sector. I have tasked officials within the Department and at NHS England to look at how improving the access, quality and sustainability of all-age palliative and end-of-life care to ensure that their proposals are in line with the ten-year plan.”

I would be grateful if the Minister could ask the Minister responsible whether there is indeed an update and what that looks like. At the end of the day, we are concerned not necessarily about inputs, but much more about outputs.

We know that death is certain for us all; only our willingness to face it seems optional. This is very much a British mentality, and I believe we need to change that when it comes to talking about death and our mortality. We need to speak more openly and candidly about what an ageing population looks like, for that is what we are. That is why the hon. Member for Strangford brought forward this debate, and he reminds us that we chase the days ahead while never quite noticing how swiftly they turn into years behind us. That leads me to reflect on the fact that, as politicians and as a society, we build a world to live longer, yet we all too easily forget to ask: how do we want to grow old?

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this debate. The range of topics about which he is knowledgeable never ceases to surprise me. We are grateful for his contribution to this House, and I wish his mother well.

I am also grateful for the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon). She is too modest to say so, but she is indeed an expert in social care and ageing, and her calls for a national strategy for end-of-life care and ageing have been heard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for sharing her powerful story about her mother—that cannot have been easy, so I am grateful for her bravery. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), I pay tribute to the hospice in Weston and the dedicated team there. I will be happy to pass on any correspondence required regarding the issues that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) highlighted about the 111 service.

The planning, funding and delivery of health services are devolved matters, but I am delighted to answer on behalf of the Government on what we are doing to improve palliative care and end-of-life care in England. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who work and volunteer in palliative care, both in the NHS and in our hospice sector, for the support they provide to patients, families and loved ones. It would be remiss of me not to mention the Prince & Princess of

Wales hospice in my own constituency, which recently took such good care of my cousin as she passed away from breast cancer.

This Government want a society in which every person receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to the end of their lives, irrespective of their age, condition or geographical region. As the hon. Member for Strangford has adumbrated, end-of-life care and palliative care is much more than cancer care; it is about ageing and ageing well. We recognise that there are currently a high number of hospital admissions and bed days at the end of people's lives, and the last year of people's lives accounts for 15% of emergency admissions and approximately a third of all bed days.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I am passionate about ensuring that older people in medical settings are not subjected to coercion over their medical decisions. I have recently been contacted by a whistleblower from the Jehovah's Witnesses, who has expressed concern that some of the religious assistants who come in to support patients with their decisions are actually coercing them. Will he offer any thoughts, more broadly, on how we can ensure that people are not being subjected to coercion in older care settings?

Dr Ahmed: I am very concerned to hear what my hon. Friend has reported to the House. Clearly, coercion is unacceptable in all forms. Safeguarding is taken very seriously by the national health service and by the Department of Health and Social Care, and as the Minister with responsibility for patient safety, I am very happy to look into that further and to take it up with him after the debate.

As set out in the 10-year health plan, we are going to shift more care out of hospitals and into communities, and make care more personalised. If there is anywhere where that is most important it is palliative care and end-of-life care. Palliative care and end-of-life care, including hospices, have a big role to play in that shift, and they were highlighted in the 10-year plan as an integral component of neighbourhood health teams.

In England, integrated care boards are responsible for the commissioning of palliative care and end-of-life care to meet the needs of the local population. To support ICBs in this duty, NHS England has produced statutory guidance. That includes the need for 24/7 access to palliative care and advice, and a palliative care and end-of-life care dashboard that brings together all relevant data in one place. The dashboard helps commissioners understand the palliative care needs of the local population. Of course, the majority of palliative care and end-of-life care is provided by NHS staff and NHS services, and that has benefited from the record funding in the NHS that the Chancellor delivered in the last Budget.

I will not be able to address all the points made by the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), as he was in a typically verbose mood, but if he wills the ends, he must will the means, and if he does not agree with the means, he must present his thesis as to the alternative model of funding that he wishes to see. Otherwise, it is a case of cutting services.

However, we recognise the vital part that voluntary sector organisations, including hospices, play in providing support to people at the end of their lives and to their

loved ones. In recognition of that, £100 million of capital funding has been made available to hospices in England to ensure that they have the best physical environment for caring. That includes helping hospices to provide the best end-of-life care to patients and their families in a supportive and dignified environment. It includes funding to deliver IT systems and provide refurbishments and facilities for patients and visitors, so that they can see their family members at the end of their lives in a dignified environment—much more than just a lick of paint.

Dr Evans: Given the recent National Audit Office report and the fact that the tax increase to national insurance contributions has had the biggest impact on the voluntary sector, has an impact assessment been carried out into how much the cost has gone up for hospices in England to provide their services? If not, will the Minister consider it?

Dr Ahmed: The hon. Gentleman knows that the NAO report covers a period both when his party was in government and beyond. I go back to the point about NICs. If he wills the end, he must understand the means. I am very happy to have that conversation with him at length after the debate, respecting the confines of the time that I have—I do not want to test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am delighted that the first £25 million of the £100 million fund has been passed to Hospice UK and has been spent on capital projects already. The Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), visited Katharine House hospice earlier this year, Wigan and Leigh hospice in July, and Noah's Ark children's hospice earlier this month to see directly for himself how that record investment is making a meaningful impact on the ground. We can confirm that the Department of Health and Social Care has now transferred the rest of the £75 million to Hospice UK for onward spending in 2025-26. We are also providing £26 million of revenue funding to support children and young people's hospices. This is a continuation of the funding that, up until recently, was known as the children's hospice grant. That funding will see circa £26 million allocated to children and young people's hospices in England each year via local integrated care boards on behalf of NHS England. This amounts in total to £80 million of hospice funding over the next three years.

For many of us who are in good health, managing complexity and ageing seems a distant idea. The Government recognise that the number of people with palliative care and ageing needs is projected to rise significantly over the next quarter of a century. That is why we are shifting more healthcare out of hospital and into communities through our plan for change. That is why we are investing, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, over £3 million in a policy research unit in palliative and end-of-life care. The unit launched in January 2024 and is building the evidence base on palliative care and end-of-life care.

Earlier this year the Minister of State for Care and, more recently, the Secretary of State met key palliative care and end-of-life care and hospice stakeholders at dedicated roundtables, and focused that discussion on long-term sector sustainability within the context of the 10-year plan. Following the recent publication of the plan, the Minister of State for Care tasked officials to

[Dr Ahmed]

work at speed to generate proposals to improve the access, quality and sustainability of all-age palliative care and end-of-life care as we start to implement the plan.

In closing, I hope that those measures assure the hon. Member for Strangford of the Government's seriousness to build a sustainable palliative care and end-of-life care sector for the long term.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Ahmed: I will not, in the interests of time.

I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford for bringing forward this vital issue, and I thank all hon. Members who have spoken today. He can be assured that he has raised the voice of those who deserve dignity at the end of their lives, and that his call has been well and truly heard by the Government.

4.53 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate, including the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), and the hon. Members for Carlisle (Ms Minns) and for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher). The hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) brought her knowledge to the Chamber, as did the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) and I thank him for that.

It is good news that we are living longer, but there is a cost factor and we understand that. The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare referred to hospices holding the community together, and he is absolutely right. They are always there and always available, and it is good to have that. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) reminded us that there is better care in our latter days, and that is what we all need to see.

I am very pleased, as always, to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), in his place. I always look forward to the contributions he makes in debates and enjoy his company. He spoke about cuts across all hospice services and the impact of that, which cannot be ignored. He made a comment about how end-of-life care is provided in Japan. There are lessons we can learn from other countries, which is an important point that I had not thought of.

I thank the Minister for his positive, heartfelt and honest response. He referred to moneys in his speech—some £100 million for hospices and some £26 million for children's hospices, which the right hon. Member for New Forest East also mentioned. We are seeing palliative care and end-of-life care being central to the Government's 10-year plan. Not one of us in this Chamber will not welcome that plan; if it brings forward what our people want, it is the right plan. With that in mind, I thank the Minister and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your patience.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the ageing community and end of life care.

GP Services: Melton and Syston

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

4.56 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker, and through you I thank Mr Speaker for granting this important Adjournment debate. I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), on his well-deserved promotion to ministerial office—it was in very short order, but it is very well deserved. I thank him for being present to respond to this debate tonight, because he has, as I have just indicated, a rather longer journey home to his constituency than I do back to Leicestershire. At the outset of this debate, I should put on the record that I am, of course, registered as a patient at one of the NHS GP practices in my constituency, which I may refer to in the course of this debate.

As every Member of this House will recognise, general practice is in many ways the gateway to the NHS for our constituents. It has the potential to do a huge amount more. Sadly, on some occasions the gateway to NHS services for our constituents is simply to go to A&E, rather than seeking to go to their general practitioner, or indeed rather than using—to the extent that it has the potential to be used—pharmacy as a first port of call, as people can see a pharmacist for some advice in the first instance. For the vast majority of people, though, it is the GP practice that is the route into the NHS and where people go when they are concerned about their health.

I am sure that all Members of the House would recognise the challenges and pressures faced by general practice irrespective of Government in recent years. There are a number of factors behind that. We should not forget the impact of the pandemic, with the changing patterns of attendance that followed it and the increased demand that came immediately after it. We are also seeing the consequences of an ageing population in our country, with people living longer with more chronic conditions.

We also see the increased pressure in many of our communities, irrespective of where they are in the country, that arises from increases in housing development that are not met with increases in the provision of key local infrastructure. This has been especially true in recent years in my constituency, where we have seen huge increased local development without that infrastructure. There is also the prospect of significantly more development.

I am going to talk primarily today about the particular issues in Melton Mowbray and the surrounding villages, as I have indicated to the Minister, as I am keen that he is able to give a pragmatic and helpful response for my constituents. I will also touch on some broader themes and on the provision of general practice in the village of Sileby in my constituency, which also faces pressure and challenges.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I find in my constituency, and I think the right hon. Gentleman will find the same, that the extra responsibility of filling in forms, such as for personal independence payments, universal credit, employment and support allowance

and disability living allowance, falls on the GP. Has he found that providing the evidence for those benefits adds even more to the already large workloads of GPs?

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is right. Although I spent two and a half years as a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, I was never the Minister for Primary Care, but I am very much aware, as I suspect Members across the House are, that that is an additional pressure on time for general practitioners. We in government sought to do what we could to reduce that, and to be fair to the new Government, I know the Secretary of State is actively looking at what can be done to further streamline administrative processes to allow general practitioners and their teams to spend more time with patients.

Although my focus is on GP services in Melton Mowbray and Sileby, it is true that all GP surgeries in my area—whether that is the County practice and Jubilee medical practice in Syston, or practices in Thurmaston, Bottesford, Long Clawson and other nearby villages—continue to face huge pressures. It is important to say that these practices really do their best. Their staff—not just the GPs, but the whole teams—work incredibly hard, and I know they care deeply about the service they provide to their patients. In Melton Mowbray especially, they see acute pressure, particularly on appointments: we have just one GP practice for a growing town. Latham House medical practice has over 36,000 patients on its books, making it one of the largest in the country. Timely access to GP appointments is one of the largest regular issues to appear in my constituency inbox, with waits—according to the correspondence I receive—of at least six weeks, and it can be eight or 10 weeks before an appointment is available. Clearly, that is not right.

It is important to say, to be fair to Latham House medical practice, that when my constituents get to see either a nurse, an allied health professional or a GP, they regularly cite in their emails the quality of the care and the kindness shown by the staff. Indeed, we recently saw a Cavell star award given to Debra Gilbert, one of the nurses at the practice, so the team there work hard and are passionate about what they do. In 2024, they saw an average of 6,900 appointments per 1,000 of the population on their list. That is higher than the national average, but I would urge a little caution because that is a crude statistic that does not necessarily comparatively reflect the different demographics of different areas, such as whether an older population or deprivation in an area lead to a higher need. It is important to put on the record that they are doing what they can to try to improve access, but clearly, an increase in provision is needed locally.

Back in 2021, the then clinical commissioning group agreed that it recognised the need for increased provision of GP services in Melton Mowbray. In 2023, the integrated care board continued with that and agreed to explore a second GP practice, recognising the need for it. I believe that was a sensible decision by the ICB, but regrettably, just a few weeks ago in early October, it announced that

it was pausing its work to develop such a plan until 2027. I have been around the Department of Health and Social Care and worked with the NHS long enough to know what a pause, sadly, all too often means. In Melton Mowbray, we have seen a pause of six months at the St Mary's birth centre—a midwifery-led unit—to allow for staffing shortages to be addressed. Four months into that pause, we have yet to see any suggestion of how it might be brought to an end. When I hear the word "pause", I fear that will run on into something more permanent.

This issue, which is hugely important to my constituents, has been covered extensively and powerfully in the local media—in particular by the excellent local paper, the *Melton Times*. It is important to say that I am conscious that neither I, as a Member of Parliament, nor Melton borough council—which is equally keen for increased provision and with which I have spoken—or indeed the Minister himself have the power to simply overrule a decision taken by an integrated care board in a local matter such as this. I took through the 2022 Act, so I have a vague recollection of how that works.

That remains a deeply disappointing decision, and, I believe, the wrong one. The value of access to general practice, and the impact that a lack of access has, is writ large. Earlier today, I had one of my regular catch-ups with Councillor Ronan Browne, the leader of the opposition on Melton borough council, who did a lot to get us to the point where we were hopeful of seeing a second GP practice. He set out his deep disappointment about this decision. There is a clear remaining need.

The ICB, in its announcement on reaching its decision, stated that the section 106 payments on which it was aiming to base the provision of capital for the new building were now insufficient. It also stated that slow growth in new registrations, and slower population growth than had been anticipated, were relevant to its decision making. However, that does not help my constituents. I am conscious of the challenges of funding buildings. As the Minister and I have discussed, in a sense—ironic though it may sound—finding money for a building is sometimes easier than the second part of the equation, which is securing the staff, and managing the oncosts to fund that.

I should say that I am grateful to the ICB for its engagement and to Toby Sanders, its chief executive, for his open engagement with me. As I say, he has emphasised that he believes that section 106 payments are not enough, and the ICB has said that it has no funds to backfill that or pay for anything from its own funds. It is important to remember that, as the Minister will be aware, general practitioners and general practices are, in many ways, private businesses contracted to provide services to the NHS, but they are not direct employees of the NHS, so they cannot be directly instructed by the Minister, by ICBs or by NHS England—it is important to put that context on the record.

In respect of the argument by the ICB that there were insufficient increases in new registrations and new patients to justify a second GP practice at this time—noting the pause—I am afraid that that fails to reflect the importance of choice for patients in switching to a different service in their locality if they so wish, and, in so doing, potentially easing pressure on the existing practice's list. Pausing without a clear alternative long-term plan is simply not good enough.

[Edward Argar]

Latham House surgery has recently announced that it has taken steps to help to address this in the short term. On 15 October, it announced that it was recruiting an extra five GPs and additional nursing staff, that its Asfordby satellite surgery would be opening full-time in the future, and that it was looking to create new provision in a small premises on Sherrard Street in the town. Those are welcome steps for which I am grateful, and I look forward to hearing more about those proposals from the practice, but they do not alter my view on the long-term needs of Melton Mowbray and the surrounding villages. The ICB needs to act and be supported in doing so by the Department of Health and Social Care. It is true to say as well that ICBs face real challenges, including the Government requiring them to force cuts in staff and to restructure, but without seemingly providing them with additional ringfenced funding for the costs of that restructuring, be they redundancies or otherwise. That means that regardless of whether the end is a good one—that is, a leaner ICB—ICBs will potentially have to cut from the frontline in the short to medium term to fund that restructuring.

As I have alluded to, there are also the challenges of oncosts and funding GPs to staff a surgery. GPs have a choice as to where they choose to work, and I suspect the old Carr-Hill formula, which the Minister and I have spoken about in the past, does not aid that. It is a challenge that Governments of all complexions have faced and I hope that he, if he is willing, will take on the challenge of looking at the Carr-Hill formula. He will have my constructive support in doing so. Latham House practice has cited the challenges in securing and retaining staff so I recognise that, but again, those are challenges for the Government and the ICB to assist and support with and not ones that should be borne, as a consequence, by my constituents.

I will briefly mention Sileby, another village in my constituency. It has two good GP practices, but it is a rapidly growing village, and larger premises are needed. Again, the ICB has indicated that it will not have funds to fund or support that and once again, section 106 moneys are likely to be insufficient. It is a real challenge faced by GP practices up and down the country as to how they take that step, often having to accept more patients as houses are built. Even when there is a section 106 payment, it is only triggered later in the process once they have already had to absorb an increase in patients. I hope that the Minister might look at that.

Although I recognise and welcome Latham House's actions and hard work and I hope that delivers results, I fear it simply is not enough to tackle the long-term needs. The Secretary of State's new neighbourhood health centre programme may well help us in the longer term. For example, one of those could be allocated to Melton Mowbray, which already has Melton Mowbray hospital—in my view an underused and therefore perfect site, and the Minister can take that as a potential early bid for such a centre. That may help in the long term, but we still need action now for my constituents to improve access and to build for the long term.

I am sure the Minister will know that Melton Mowbray and the surrounding villages and towns are fantastic places with a real sense of community, a proud history, a great present and huge future potential, just like the

other parts of my constituency. Melton Mowbray's residents are good, decent people who need, and frankly deserve, improved access to GP appointments and an increased focus on tackling this for their communities.

Will the Minister set out what steps the Government are taking in partnership with ICBs to help address increased need for access to GP appointments, both nationally and locally? Is he willing to take on the challenge of looking at the Carr-Hill formula and how GPs are funded per patient for their activity? Will he reassure ICBs that all restructuring costs, over and above their current budgets, will be centrally funded to avoid them cutting frontline services? Will he work for better links between section 106 moneys and the needs of healthcare provision locally? Will he meet me, ideally in Melton Mowbray—he is very welcome—to discuss what can be done locally to improve GP provision?

I genuinely hope that he shares my view that Melton Mowbray and the nearby villages not only need further enhancement to existing services, which Latham House is trying to put in place, but genuinely need that second GP practice to meet their future needs. I will continue to campaign on behalf of my constituents for that, but I will also, as I hope he has seen in the brief time we have known each other, be willing to work with the NHS and with any political party that helps facilitate that locally and nationally. Finally, will he agree to work with me and my constituents to deliver the improved premises and services needed to meet the current and future primary care needs of my fantastic constituents in Melton Mowbray and the surrounding villages?

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): I thank the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) for raising the crucial issue of GP provision. As a relatively junior Member of this place, I have always looked around at the Benches on both sides of the House for elder statesmen and women who are exemplars of how to conduct oneself in this Chamber. He is certainly one of those Members. We miss him on the Front Bench, and we are grateful for all his contributions.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the Minister for that. The only point I would make is that when, at the age of 47, one is described as an elder statesman, one can see retirement looming. I want to reassure him that I have no intention of retiring or stepping back from my duties in this House.

Dr Ahmed: As a medical practitioner, I can assure the right hon. Member that he is ageing well, and I am sure he has many more years of service to give.

I will now take on some of the challenges that the right hon. Member said faced GP services in Melton Mowbray and Syston. He is knowledgeable—possibly more knowledgeable than me—about the Carr-Hill formula. I can assure him that my hon. Friend the Minister for Care, whose portfolio this comes under, is very engaged in reforming the Carr-Hill formula. I am sure he would be pleased to give an update on how he is getting on with that. The right hon. Member wishes for a meeting with the Minister of State, and I would be delighted to arrange that for him—I am afraid I cannot confirm the location, but I can certainly arrange the meeting.

When asked about their top priority for the NHS, the public overwhelmingly call for us to fix general practice and access to it. That is at the heart of what people care about in this country, and it is what they need first and foremost from their health service. General practice remains the front door to our NHS, delivering vital care to millions across this country, yet we all know the challenges faced by both patients and GPs—the right hon. Member alluded to many of them in his excellent speech: access to appointments, capacity and workforce pressures, to name but a few. The Government are absolutely committed to tackling these issues, to ensure that everyone receives the care they deserve.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): On the subject of capacity, one of the biggest concerns that is raised with me when new houses are proposed for a particular area of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme is access to appointments in the future. Can the Minister reassure me and my residents that discussions take place between his Department and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on forecasting future appointments, to ensure that everyone gets the support that they require?

Dr Ahmed: That relates to the point made by the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston about section 106 funding. It would definitely be in the spirit of mission-driven government to work collaboratively across Departments—in this case, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to ensure that, as we build the millions of homes that we wish to in the lifetime of this Parliament, we do not neglect the services required to make those homes happy and fulfilling for the communities who live in them.

Timely access to GP appointments is at the heart of a strong and responsive healthcare system. To deliver more appointments, we must have more GPs. That is why, in October 2024, we took decisive action, investing £160 million in the additional roles reimbursement scheme, or ARRS. This targeted funding has enabled the recruitment of over 2,500 new GPs across England, directly increasing appointment availability and improving care for thousands of patients. Our new £102 million primary care utilisation and modernisation fund will create additional clinical space in over 1,000 GP practices. That will enable them to deliver over 8.3 million more appointments, further expanding appointment capacity and enhancing patient care. In our newly published medium-term planning framework, we have also set an ambitious new target for practices to deliver all urgent appointments on the same day, helping to ensure that patients who need urgent care will be prioritised.

This Government have invested an additional £1.1 billion in general practice—the largest such investment in over a decade. This 8.9% boost to GP contract funding for 2025-26 surpasses the overall NHS budget growth, marking a generational uplift in funding, and it means that we are beginning to reverse a decade of a dwindling share of NHS resources going to general practice.

We are not just investing but reforming contracts, giving GPs streamlined targets, incentivising improved continuity of care for those who would most benefit—usually people with chronic illness—and, crucially, requiring practices to make it possible for patients to go online to

request an appointment throughout the duration of core opening hours. That will also free up time for patients who might require an in-person visit or a phone call.

I turn to the GP-patient ratio in Melton and Syston. As a result of our investment, primary care networks in Melton and Syston have recruited an additional 64 GPs through the additional roles reimbursement scheme, bringing patients in the right hon. Member's constituency the care they need. Today, the median number of doctors in general practice per 10,000 registered patients in Melton and Syston is 6.2 full-time equivalents, which is above the England median of 5.6 full-time equivalents.

I reassure the House that we are listening to patients in the right hon. Member's constituency and trying our best to respond to their needs. For the first time, more patients are contacting their GP online than by phone. That is why, from 1 October, we extended access to GP online services throughout core hours—8 am to 6.30 pm—making it easier for patients to reach their practice in their preferred way. That is a huge step in delivering our manifesto commitment to ending the 8 am scramble, which has long been a barrier to care up and down the country.

Most importantly, practices already using online systems have gone on to see bigger improvements. If I may talk about London for a moment, one London GP surgery reduced its waits from 14 days to just three, with 95% of patients seen within a week. I turn to digital health, which is transforming access in healthcare in Melton and Syston. Patients can now access their GP through the NHS app. They can use it to book appointments, order prescriptions and even receive rapid online consultations, with AI-supported triage ensuring that urgent cases are prioritised within hours.

The GP patient survey shows that in the right hon. Member's integrated care board area of Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland, the percentage of patients using online GP services has increased from 65% to 73% over the past year. The ICB operates virtual wards as part of its "home first" strategy. It uses secure remote monitoring, which saved 11,000 bed days across Leicestershire in 2024 and enables patients in Melton and Syston to recover safely at home.

The Government have approved a spending review settlement that will bring care closer to the community, shift the NHS from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital, and ensure that the NHS is more people-centred. We will provide additional funding by 2028-29 to bring back the family doctor by training thousands more GPs, delivering millions of appointments more over the spending review period, and building further on the 2,500 GPs already recruited.

Patient satisfaction needs to be our guiding star. As a result of all our efforts, 8 million more appointments have been delivered this year compared to last, and it is making a difference to patients' lives. According to the latest health insights survey, 73.1% of patients reported a good overall experience. That is up from 67.4% in July 2024, and reverses years of patient dissatisfaction.

I understand that the development of a new primary care facility in the right hon. Member's constituency has been a matter of local concern for some time. I am grateful to him for bringing it to the Government's attention. I have been informed that Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland ICB is working with Melton borough

[Dr Ahmed]

council to explore options to improve access and extend service capacity for Melton residents. I very much take on his suggestion that it could be a location for a health centre under the Secretary of State's new programme of neighbourhood health centres; I will certainly pass that on to the Secretary of State.

The ICB is working with Latham House to increase the ways in which the practice can support local residents. Proposals include a new digital suite at the main site, and an approved redevelopment of a property owned by the practice on Sherrard Street to extend clinical services. The ICB and Melton borough council will continue to meet to discuss progress. The ICB will revisit the scheme's progression in the fourth quarter of 2026-27 to allow more certainty about developer contribution, the impact of new registrations and staffing availability.

Let me talk briefly about industrial action. The Government are firmly committed to supporting general practice, and we want to continue engaging constructively with colleagues in the profession as we shape the future of general practice together. Since coming into office just over a year ago, this Government have made significant strides in supporting general practice, and we are asking our colleagues in general practice not to close the door

on patients, but to work with the Government to rebuild the NHS for the benefit of patients in the right hon. Member's constituency, and indeed the country.

In conclusion, everything that this Government have done since the election has been geared towards saving the NHS and giving it back to the people, primarily through the lens of community and largely through general practice. We are placing power back into the hands of patients—where it rightly belongs—because this is their health service and it must work for them. Ensuring that every patient has access to the care they need is not just a priority; it is a guiding star for this Government. The Government are committed to delivering on that promise. I end by associating myself with the remarks of the right hon. Member about the hard-working staff in GP practices up and down our constituencies, and the quality of care that they provide. I know how hard it is to work in difficult circumstances, and it is this Government's job to make the working lives of those staff easier, more valuable and more fulfilling. I look forward to working constructively with the right hon. Member, to the benefit of patients and citizens up and down Melton and Syston.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 October 2025

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

Land Value Capture

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): We begin with a Select Committee statement. Florence Eshalomi will speak on the publication of the third report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, “Delivering 1.5 million new homes: Land Value Capture”, HC 672, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement. I will then call Florence Eshalomi to respond to them in turn. Questions should be brief, and Members may ask only one question each.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. This week, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee published our third report, following our inquiry into land value capture. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this statement, and I thank the HCLG Committee staff for their help in preparing the report. I also thank our specialist adviser, Professor Richard Dunning from the University of Liverpool, for his guidance throughout the process.

In many ways, the cost of land is one of the biggest root causes of the housing crisis. Land is usually the single biggest expense of any new housing development. When farmland is granted planning permission for housing, its value can soar. The value of private land also rises when we build new infrastructure nearby, such as road schemes or train links. Those increases in land values are not caused by investment from landowners; they are the result of decisions by local authorities. It is therefore right that land value capture policies seek to recover a fair percentage of those profits for public benefit.

Currently, England’s land value capture system has two key parts. The first is planning obligations through section 106 agreements, which require developers to build affordable homes and public infrastructure alongside homes. The second is the community infrastructure levy—a cash payment to local authorities to fund roads, GPs, schools and other critical investment.

If the Government are serious about delivering new towns, new communities and the infrastructure they require, they must look at reforming land value capture. Our inquiry considered how pragmatic reforms can help to support a rapid increase in house building, which would contribute to the Government’s target of delivering 1.5 million new homes during this Parliament. Our report also takes stock of the Government’s first-year progress towards that target.

Stakeholders told our inquiry that there are several easy wins for reform of section 106. Modest changes could streamline the process for local authorities and small and medium-sized enterprise developers, while delivering more affordable housing, including much-needed homes for social rent.

Currently, the section 106 negotiation process can be unpredictable, complex and drawn out. We heard that local authorities are often tasked with formulating complex legal wording when they should be focusing on site-specific factors such as the community benefits from the development. We therefore recommend that the Government should introduce template clauses for section 106 agreements, and that local authorities should be encouraged to adopt them.

Local planning authorities must be supported with the resources they need to negotiate section 106 agreements on behalf of communities, but the reality is that planning departments have been long stretched. The Government’s pledge to fund 300 new planning officers demonstrates that they recognise the problem, but that is equivalent to less than one planning officer in each local authority in England.

What is more, the Government are restricting access to level 7 planning apprenticeships, despite the skills White Paper’s ambition for more young people to pursue degree-level apprenticeships. We recommend that the Government look at that again and extend access to degree-level planning apprenticeships to students of all ages.

We heard that only 52% of local authorities are currently charging the community infrastructure levy, perhaps in no small part because planning departments are so stretched. Local authorities often want their staff to prioritise affordable housing delivery rather than administering CIL, which cannot be used to fund affordable housing. However, where CIL is charged, we have heard that it is a vital tool to fund infrastructure, which residents expect alongside new housing. Therefore, the Government must push for greater coverage of CIL where it is financially viable. To support that, we recommend that the Government publish a map of CIL coverage. That would make the whole system easier for developers to navigate and bring an end to the complex patchwork of different local rates.

The evidence we heard from across the sector, including from developers, was clear: the Government must extend CIL coverage where possible to support new communities and unlock more housing. That is why we were surprised to hear last week that the Government are planning to cut CIL for some developments in London and effectively cut London’s affordable housing target from 35% to 20%. The Secretary of State has said that cutting London’s target will increase the number of social and affordable homes built overall. My Committee has asked to see what impact assessment the Department has done on that, but the modelling has not been published yet.

We are concerned that, in evidence to our inquiry, the Greater London Authority said that reducing affordable housing targets can inflate land values, inflate developer returns and slow down housing delivery. The Department must therefore publish its modelling in the coming weeks. The Committee has recommended that if there is a decline in the number of affordable homes built in London, the Government should reinstate the 35% target. That is an area that my Committee wants to scrutinise further in coming weeks, including when the detailed consultation is launched in November.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

Our report also finds that there is a vital opportunity for land value capture in new towns to fund the roads, GPs and schools that they will need. However, we are concerned that some of the opportunity may have already been missed. The Government have published maps of possible site locations, yet without policy to protect their land value from speculative development. The new towns taskforce specifically recommended that the Government protect the locations or risk “jeopardising the new town plans.”

We are concerned that land values in those areas may already be rising, long before the Government have set up the development corporations to purchase the land. Therefore, we recommend that the Government bring forward the funding development corporations at the Budget so that the land agreements are in place before the final locations are confirmed in the spring.

Finally, our report takes a step back from land value to consider the progress towards the target of 1.5 million new homes. It is fair to say that the Department has had a busy first year, with a range of planning reform and legislation. However, our Committee has heard a lot of doubt and uncertainty from the sector. Even the Government told us that the target is “stretching” and “hugely ambitious”. The Government were quick to update the housing targets in the national planning policy framework last year, but on average local plans are still taking seven years to produce. We recommend that the Government implement a new 30-month local plan timeline as a priority so that the national reforms lead to change on the ground.

The truth is that while planning reform might be able to deliver more planning permissions, that is not the same as building 1.5 million new homes. The Government must look at the wider issues in the housing market such as mortgages, build-out rates and the workforce capacity. They have started consultation on some of those issues, but there is no overarching long-term housing strategy. The Government promised that the strategy would be published in spring of this year, but we are still waiting. We hope that the strategy will include an impact assessment to show how the policy changes will add up to the 1.5 million new homes and finally give the sector some certainty about what is planned for the rest of this Parliament.

Our most urgent request of the Government is to bring forward the long-term housing strategy within weeks, not months. The sector needs to have confidence in the road map ahead. We think that some of the pragmatic, uncontroversial reforms to land value capture would help to unlock new homes and should be part of that road map. We look forward to a timely response from the Government. I thank all the witnesses and organisations who supported our inquiry, and I commend the report to the House.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): As my hon. Friend has mentioned, land value increases exponentially if planning permission is granted or new public infrastructure such as transport links are developed. In my constituency of Ribble Valley, we have had lots of house building, which is largely welcomed as an affordable way for people to stay in the area and not be priced out, but what is not welcomed is when promises to build infrastructure such as schools, social housing and roads are

reneged on. The existing mechanisms for land value capture—section 106 agreements and the community infrastructure levy—are failing to deliver the maximum funding level for our communities for a variety of reasons, often because of drawn-out negotiation processes. Does my hon. Friend agree that land value capture reforms must be explored so that developers begin to make fair contributions to the areas that our constituents call home?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my fellow Committee member for her useful points. I know this is an issue close to her heart. She represents a rural constituency where additional infrastructure is needed with the new housing, because people need to get to work as well as having somewhere to live, and community facilities are vital. For far too long, many developers have been promising the earth to get over the hurdle of the planning application. Good developers fulfil their obligations, but some renege on them. We hope the Government will look at our recommendations to make the process a lot easier so that there is transparency and, most importantly, so that communities get the infrastructure that they were promised as part of the new developments.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The cut to London’s affordable housing target has a direct knock-on effect on constituencies like mine in Huntingdon, where we are being forced to deliver thousands of new homes, creating an urban sprawl that could destroy the individual character and charm of many of our villages. In a Sky News interview last week, Sadiq Khan was challenged on how he has been reporting the figures for years by counting housing starts that have had no building work done and no spades in the ground, with no increases to London’s affordable housing stock. At least 2,000 houses that he counted as started in 2023 before his re-election have still not been started today. In Ealing alone, almost 1,000 homes that he claimed have been started simply have not. Will the Committee investigate and scrutinise the manipulation of housing stock figures by the Mayor of London?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I know that there are constituencies on the outskirts of London that are feeling the impact of a lack of affordable housing, and there are issues with temporary accommodation. A number of London boroughs simply do not have enough homes to house people, so they look to neighbouring boroughs. The Government are working with the Mayor of London to investigate the issue. They are challenging the mayor on his commitments in the London plan, and we continue to work with him to look at that as well. The Government hope to commit to ensuring that our Committee has monthly updates on the new affordable housing targets that they have agreed with the mayor. That will be open for public scrutiny once the Committee has looked at that.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is an honour to serve on the Select Committee with my hon. Friend. As she knows, I am biased when it comes to the importance of new towns. I represent two fantastic new towns: Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City. What she said this afternoon about the new towns of the future and how we get the balance right was really important. Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City are communities that have

stood the test of time because land value was captured and a good amount of social housing was built right at the start of those developments. It is imperative that we do the same this time around for the new generation of new towns that the Government seek to build. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we get spades in the ground in our new towns, it is crucial not only that we invest in infrastructure, but that the homes for social rent that we so desperately need are built in the first phase of development and are a core part of those communities from day one?

Florence Eshalomi: It is really good to have my hon. Friend's knowledge and expertise on the Committee; he is always citing reasons why new towns are successful and something that this Government should support wholeheartedly. The key thing that we want to ensure is that funding is attached to deliver on those recommendations, including by ensuring a mixture of homes in new towns. The new towns taskforce has recommended a 40% target for affordable homes, including a minimum target of 20% for social rent. We hope the Government will look favourably on that recommendation, and we can see how building those homes will help to make a dent in the housing crisis that exists across all constituencies in the UK.

1.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

Backbench Business

Moles: Histological Testing

1.50 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered histological testing of excised moles.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine.

Many of those present may not yet be familiar with the name Zoe Panayi. If they are, it is likely to be because of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough), who spoke about Zoe at Prime Minister's questions two weeks ago. For Zoe's family, the five years since her tragic death have meant that their daughter, sister, mother and friend has come to represent something far greater—a legacy that continues to grow and touch lives beyond their own. I welcome Charlie, Zoe's brother, to Westminster Hall today.

Zoe was like so many other 26-year-olds. She was a devoted mother to her two boys, a loyal friend to many across the island and a young woman full of promise. Despite her age, Zoe made a remarkable impact on our community. She volunteered as a carer, and later trained to become a radiologist at St Mary's hospital. That is what makes Zoe's story so heartbreaking. While she was dedicating herself to caring for others, her own health concerns were repeatedly dismissed.

On the morning of Zoe's eventual diagnosis, she woke up in pain, but brushed off her concerns, telling her mum that she had been teaching her boys how to do roly-polies—which many Members will know is, as an adult, no mean feat—and must have hurt herself that way. But that evening Zoe was in such excruciating pain that she was taken to hospital where, upon being tested by her boss at St Mary's, she was told that her liver was full of cancer.

Doctors asked Zoe whether any moles on her body had been causing her concern. She then realised that the small mole on her back was the root of her cancer. Zoe died just 55 days after that diagnosis, and in those 55 days she had to try to explain to a five-year-old and a seven-year-old that mummy would soon not be coming home, and would instead become an angel. I do not bring that up purely to cause upset, but to emphasise Zoe's outstanding bravery at such a young age in ensuring her boys were prepared for the unthinkable.

Zoe had not ignored her symptoms; she did everything right. She visited her GP on three separate occasions asking that her mole be tested, yet she was told that her pain was caused by the mole rubbing against her jeans, and that she was too young for it to be clinically concerning. On her third visit, Zoe was told that if it bothered her that much, she should get her mole removed cosmetically. Zoe even paid for her mole to be tested after removal at the beauticians, yet it never was.

There is no doubt that Zoe was failed by her GP, who sent her a letter of apology after learning of her diagnosis, and that Zoe was failed deeply by her beautician, who failed to recognise her cancer or even to send her mole for testing. Zoe's concerns should never have been dismissed, she should never have been referred out of the NHS, and the mole, which was actually a melanoma, should never have been removed. I welcome the fact that the

[Mr Richard Quigley]

Minister has enacted Jess's rule, meaning that on the third time of asking, Zoe's concerns may have brought about a different outcome.

We are not here today because Zoe's family want to cast blame; we are here because Zoe's family want to make sure that what happened to their daughter, their sister and their mother will never have to happen to anyone else again. The safeguard we are asking for is simple: that all healthcare providers must test the lesions they remove. This extra check—a "Zoe check"—would prevent tragedies like Zoe's from occurring.

Over the past months I have spoken with a range of doctors across the NHS and in the private sector, and reassuringly—although it is not mandated—what we are asking for is already standard practice in the NHS for GPs and dermatologists. To avoid that one in a 1,000 case, removed skintags, moles or blemishes, however harmless they look, are almost always sent for testing. NHS doctors order these tests as a matter of routine, and many good private dermatologists insist on including a biopsy before agreeing to treatment in the first place. The tests are relatively cheap, with lab fees around £100. To put that into perspective, the cost of Zoe's cancer treatment could have funded over 650 biopsies.

Using state-of-the-art technology, we could go further. Trials are under way for handheld equipment that can test for melanoma by using artificial intelligence systems to analyse high-definition photographs of skin lesions. If those trials prove successful, the cost of Zoe's treatment could have funded thousands of pre-treatment checks. The checks are cheap, immediate and, with proper training, could easily be deployed in beauty clinics and other non-medical environments. If we combine them with specific melanoma training for all professionals who encounter skin lesions, and encourage GPs and others to take up that training, that approach could significantly improve early detection and reduce the need for costly and often unsuccessful late-stage cancer interventions.

Cancer is not a place to cut corners. Although they are not mandatory, histology tests are already routine practice for benign moles and other lesions in both NHS and private dermatology alike. Zoe's law would ensure that a similar safeguard is applied across the board, from NHS hospitals to private dermatologists and beauty clinics. That would demand more from the clinics that are currently the least regulated. But we should demand more, because this is about protecting the NHS, which will ultimately pick up the bill when those clinics fail, and it is about protecting families like Zoe's from the grief of a tragic and unnecessary death.

I thank the Minister for her engagement, and I am genuinely encouraged by the seriousness with which her Department has adopted the issue. Zoe's family has said that they feel they have got further than ever before over the past weeks, and that they feel listened to. I thank the Minister very much for that, but this can only be the start, and whatever form Zoe's law eventually takes, we must not stop until we get there.

1.55 pm

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of

Wight West (Mr Quigley) and for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) on securing this vital debate on the histological testing of excised moles. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for beauty and wellbeing, and this issue aligns closely with our current inquiry into ultraviolet safety. It sits right at the heart of the concerns that led to the launch of the inquiry earlier this year.

Unprotected UV exposure poses huge risks and is creating a greater volume of potentially malignant lesions. We know that it is the main driver of the formation of new moles and the malignant transformation of existing ones. As the number of cases escalates, so does the need for accurate and timely histological testing. The success of the entire melanoma pathway hinges on that final, non-negotiable diagnostic step. We must ensure that the NHS's resources, training and standardisation for histological analysis are robust enough to manage the growing volume.

Figures from Cancer Research UK paint a worrying picture: nearly 18,000 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed each year in the UK, and that is projected to rise to nearly 27,000 by 2040. The pressure on pathology services to diagnose excised lesions correctly and rapidly is immense, and it is only going to rise. What is perhaps more tragic is that 86% of these cancers are preventable. If people were better able to protect themselves against UV radiation, we could slash the number of cases and ease the burden on our health services.

Our APPG inquiry into UV safety launched in May, and aims to take evidence from clinicians, academics, industry experts, media influencers and those with lived experience. Although we will not report until spring next year, we are already seeing patterns in the evidence we have received in oral sessions and through written submissions: calls for public awareness campaigns so that people are better educated on how to check their moles and seek medical intervention when needed; questions around the labelling of the sun protection factor and affordability of sun cream; and a widespread concern over the regulation and marketing of products that have known melanoma risk factors. I am sure the Minister will listen today and that she is acutely aware of the critical importance of this issue.

We must resource diagnostic services appropriately to meet the rising demand, and at the same time give adequate attention to changes that will help to prevent the predicted rise in cases. By addressing in tandem prevention and detection—from SPF affordability, which will encourage sun cream use, to rapid histology, which will produce timely diagnoses—we will deliver the most significant savings of all. We will save families money, we will save patients long and anxious waits for test results, and we will save the NHS money by reducing costs and easing its burden. Most importantly, we will save lives.

1.59 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) on securing this important debate—I call him a friend, because we are working on quite a lot of issues together. He told the courageous story of Zoe, her family and their courageous campaign so beautifully, and made the case that if we detect cancers like this early, we save

money across the board, because expensive hospital treatment will be avoided. The cost of detection and testing is a fraction of the cost of treatment.

Stories like Zoe's are truly heartbreaking. We cannot change what happened to her, but we must learn from it to make sure it is never allowed to happen again. I entirely welcome the call to make it mandatory for all excised moles to be tested, even if they are removed for cosmetic reasons. Performing histological testing on removed moles will help us to diagnose more cancers and, of course, save lives. We will also probably find out more about the extent of cancers that we would not have linked to other severe cancers if we did not do that testing.

Currently, the British Association of Dermatologists recommends that all removed skin lesions be tested, even if they are taken off for purely cosmetic reasons, but there is currently no specific requirement for those tests, despite that advice. The tests are often carried out when moles are removed in a medical setting by the NHS, but we must ensure that private cosmetic clinics also follow the requirement for testing. The introduction of Zoe's check will ensure that every mole is tested, thereby making sure that early signs of skin cancer are never missed or overlooked and that heartbreaking stories like Zoe's are never repeated.

Early detection is paramount. Too many people are slipping through the cracks in the system and not being diagnosed until it is too late. Catching cancer early allows it to be tested faster, thereby giving treatments a greater chance of being done quickly and succeeding. We have campaigned across the House for the earlier detection of cancers. I also have a campaign to detect breast cancer early through a better screening programme for younger women, because cancer is on the rise throughout all ages—it is not just an illness of older people.

Cancer is a terrible disease that tears families apart. We Liberal Democrats have long called for more to be done to improve the early detection and treatment of cancer, because we recognise that detecting cancer early and treating it faster is our most powerful weapon against it. It is not only about early detection; what follows it is crucial. Early detection is meaningless unless it is followed by direct treatment very quickly. Early detection and fast treatment go hand in hand.

The Government's current target is for a patient to have received their first treatment for cancer within 62 days of an urgent cancer referral, but that target has not been met since 2015, leaving many patients waiting with the knowledge of their cancer diagnosis looming over them. The toll on their mental health is enormous. Once we have a diagnosis, treatment must follow fast on its heels. That is why we Liberal Democrats are calling for the target to be made law, so that patients can be confident that they will receive the treatment they urgently need.

Detecting cancer early saves lives, reduces treatment costs and spares families unimaginable pain. Every check, every screening and every test can make the difference by diagnosing a cancer before it spreads. Zoe's check will help us to do this, and I support it every step of the way.

2.3 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. My speech today will come from a personal perspective, as

well as my talking about Zoe Panayi's life experience. I start with thanks, because this is a huge part of my own journey, as well as the journeys of everyone in this room. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate.

I want to give my thanks to Zoe's family for letting me meet them a couple of weeks ago. It was an honour, and I cannot say that strongly enough. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley); I would never have known about Zoe's journey, tragedy and her family's loss without him reaching out to me and asking me to support and be involved in this vital campaign.

I need to thank those who are currently treating me for stage 2C malignant melanoma. A lot of people might be wondering—including those watching at home—"Is he getting his treatment at the Norfolk and Norwich?" Unfortunately not—so that I can carry on doing my job, which I am really determined to do—my treatment is currently being done at Charing Cross hospital in London. To lift the mask off, yesterday was my treatment day, and I went in for pembrolizumab immunotherapy. I thank those on the sixth floor in the oncology department—I will not name names, because sadly there are too many of them who have to shove a canula into me every three weeks, and I would be here forever listing their names.

I thank everyone in clinic 8 in the phlebotomy team who look after me. I thank my oncologist, who has gone above and beyond to hold my hand and make sure that I have the mental support and wellbeing that I need as well as the physical support. Those people have made a difference to my life. It reminds me of, "There but for the grace of God go I", when we talk about Zoe's life. The reason why I will keep referring to Zoe is because Zoe Panayi is a name that needs to be in *Hansard* as much as humanly possible. We lost her in tragic circumstances.

Jess's law, which the Government are now passing, will make a difference to close the loopholes in the NHS when failures occur, but there are other issues that we need to look at. There is the private sector and the beautician sector as well. Through the great loss of Zoe's life, at least, I hope that in the fullness of time we will be able to turn around and say Zoe Panayi's life gave us something that actually protects others, and that it drives forward the change that we need in this country to ensure that more lives are not destroyed by melanomas and other skin cancers.

The other thanks I want to give is to Skcin—which, for *Hansard*, because their name is a bit funnily spelled, is S-K-C-I-N—a fantastic charity that has advised me over time on what action we can take. As pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), we need to have more investigations into the use of sunbeds. We know that they make a huge difference in our more deprived communities, and I praise the work that my hon. Friend is doing in her APPG.

I also thank Melanoma Focus and the dermatologists from Leeds teaching hospitals for their engagement with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West last week, talking about the solutions. All too often in this place we can talk about the negatives and we say, "Oh, this is too difficult. We can't fix this problem", but we truly can. With a Zoe check and Zoe's law, we can make the advancements that we need.

[Ben Goldsborough]

The best way to think about this in this House is to talk back to the silos. In the NHS, Jess's law will make a difference. With the private sector, we need to look at how we work with the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Surgeons to make sure that they have the training and skills they need to deliver the detection that is needed on different forms of dermatology, skin cancers and melanomas.

There is also the beautician sector. There are lots of different solutions for that, ranging from completely banning all removal of lesions, skin tags and moles to enforced checking of everything through a biopsy, which is where I land on this, and is why I think a Zoe check is so important. We should say, "Yes, this is not something the NHS will pay for; it will be part of the private sector's charge". That private sector money will help us fund more pathologists and drive forward the checks that we need so that more lives are saved.

As I think was said perfectly by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West—this debate is not the end: it is very much the start. Zoe's family have been working on this tirelessly for years, and that shows. It takes a huge amount of strength not just to deal with the loss of a loved one, but to find an inner strength to look after those they have never met—and never will meet—and know that they are doing something good and something that will last. I think that is extremely noble. I thank Charlie and his mum for doing that. It is a time of thanks and a time of optimism. By pulling together on a cross-party basis, which we know we can do on cancers, we can save more lives.

2.9 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Members for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) and for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) on securing this debate. I wish the hon. Member for South Norfolk all the best in his treatment. I have to say, it was hugely brave of him and emotive to hear him talk about the journey he is going through at the moment, and to hear him paying such tributes to all the staff involved in his care. I also thank Zoe's family for coming here today, because it cannot be easy to hear people talk about this disease after everything they have been through.

Many of us will know, some from personal experience, how frightening it can be to face a possible or actual cancer diagnosis. When words such as "biopsy" or "diagnostic tests" enter the conversation, that provokes deep concern, and yet those tests, as everyone has been reiterating, are absolutely vital. Early diagnosis is the single most important factor in improving survival rates. The sooner any type of cancer is identified, the sooner treatment can begin, and the more likely the outcome will be favourable. The tests are very important for people's mental health, because sometimes the test is clear: a person knows that, and knows there is no need to worry unnecessarily.

In an ideal world, someone who notices a suspicious mole or mark would call their GP; be seen within two weeks, as set out in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines; if necessary, a biopsy would be taken; and, if cancer was confirmed, treatment

would begin within 62 days. In an ideal world, that treatment would be available to everyone, regardless of their postcode.

We know that is not the reality for everyone, either in Winchester or the rest of the country. We know GP access is a growing concern. In Winchester, I regularly hear from my constituents that they are waiting weeks for appointments, which means we are falling at the first hurdle. The second hurdle—treatment within 62 days—is just as worrying. In Winchester, in July 2025, only 73.6% of cancer treatments began within 62 days, well below the operational standard of 85%.

The truth is that, at almost every stage of the process—from initial concern to diagnosis and treatment—we are letting too many people down. It is one of the reasons that the Liberal Democrats have been calling for a two-month cancer treatment guarantee for a long time now: a new target so that 100% of patients will start treatment within 62 days. We must also replace ageing radiotherapy machines and expand provision so no communities are left in what have rightly been called radiotherapy deserts. We do not want anyone to have to travel hours and miles when they are feeling ill for lifesaving care.

The last Government's decision to close the National Cancer Research Institute, which had co-ordinated cancer research since 2001, was a grave mistake. One oncology professor compared this to

"turning off air traffic control and hoping the planes will be fine".

We owe it to patients and their families to build confidence in the system, and that means faster access to GPs, earlier diagnosis, better treatment, proper investment in research and a comprehensive long-term plan to boost survival rates. I really welcome all the comments about regulating the private medical sector to ensure they are taking biopsies, as well as the regulation of sunbeds.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wanted to be here at the beginning, but unfortunately I could not because I had other things to do in the Chamber. I declare an interest—like the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough), I am going to get one of mine done very shortly, but in Northern Ireland the wait list is 56 weeks. If it is red-flagged, it is five weeks. There is anxiety and stress for everyone—not for me, but for all the others—because it is not about me but everyone else. Does he agree that the NHS, wherever it may be in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, needs to ensure that those who have melanoma and a biopsy get the urgency that is absolutely critical? The Minister is in her place—there is no better person to answer these questions than her—and I look forward very much to what she says. Does the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) agree that a concerted campaign across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to address those issues might be a way forward?

Dr Chambers: I totally agree with those comments.

I will finish by paying tribute to one of my friends from vet school, Polly Birch. She was diagnosed with a melanoma in 2016 and had it removed, but in 2017, a few months after giving birth to her baby girl, Ada, she discovered it was metastatic, and she passed away. Her final post on social media was beautiful and moving. A couple of days before she passed away, she said:

“Appreciate the people around you, adventure with them, buy less stuff and go out and experience the world...and look after the bees.”

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, I will quote Mary Schmich:

“If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it.”

2.16 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Members for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) and for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) on securing this debate and on their very emotional speeches. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk for his bravery in talking about his own care. I commend Zoe's family for their bravery and for their work to turn a family tragedy into something positive for other people, which is fantastic.

Melanoma is the deadliest form of skin cancer and, frighteningly, the fifth most common cancer in the United Kingdom: almost 20,000 people are diagnosed each year. It usually starts in skin or a mole that is over-exposed to ultraviolet radiation, and then it spreads to vital organs such as the lungs or the liver.

One of the challenges is that melanomas can be difficult to identify. I am a paediatrician, not a dermatologist, but I remember looking at pictures of melanomas and moles in medical school, and in lots of cases I struggled to see the difference that the lecturer was pointing out. They can be brown, red or pink; small or large; flat or raised. Unlike other cancers, which tend to progress as they grow larger, melanomas can be lethal even when they are very small, which means that there is no time to lose in having the diagnosis.

All suspicious moles removed by the NHS should be tested, but those judged benign or removed in cosmetic or beauty settings are not necessarily tested, as has been said. There is therefore the risk that, if that judgment was wrong, the cancer can go undetected and it can have tragic consequences. I want to ask the Minister what steps she is taking to strengthen the regulations in the aesthetics and beauty sector, in particular, and in the private medical sector. What will be done about lasering moles in a way that prevents identification of a melanocytic lesion?

We know that AI can help. There are now computer systems that look at moles in photographs and are reasonably reliable at discerning whether something is malignant. That can be done in conjunction with doctors and histology as an additional layer to ensure there are no mistakes. Will the Minister update the House on what she is doing with AI? One of the big shifts that the Government have talked about is digital, and that is one of the options available to them.

The Government have said that improving diagnosis is a key part of their national cancer plan. Will the Minister give us some highlights from the plan? We were expecting it to be published this year, but it is apparently now delayed until next year. There are rumours that that is to have a presentational effect on 4 February. Given that more than 1,000 people are diagnosed every day across the UK, I really hope that there are not presentational reasons for the delay. It would be helpful to know when she intends to publish the plan.

What assessment has the Minister made of the impact that the plan will have on the progress of speeding up cancer diagnosis for patients? How does she plan to expand access to genomic testing, which can also help to identify the most at-risk patients?

The Government have talked a lot about the shift to prevention, which is always better than cure. In about nine out of 10 cases, melanoma can be prevented. Avoiding over-exposure to the intensity of the sun, applying sunscreen and wearing suitable clothing can help to defend our bodies from the risk of developing melanoma. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the VAT charged on sun cream to the incidence of skin cancer? Sun cream can be quite expensive and young people may find that a barrier to applying it. With the Budget coming up just next month, the Minister is in a prime position to make that case.

It takes only one blistering sunburn to more than double someone's chances of developing melanoma later in life. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that young people are aware of the risks of sunburn? What discussions has she had with the Department for Education about making sure that young people are aware of the risk? Figures show that 65% of 18 to 32-year-olds report annual sunburn. Alarming, in May 2024, researchers predicted a record high of 20,800 skin cancer cases for the year. I worry that sunburn is increasingly regarded as one of those things—a sort of hallmark of a foreign holiday. What steps is the Minister taking to raise awareness of the link between sunburn and skin cancer?

It is not always sunny in the UK. That is why over one in four people, and 43% of 18 to 25-year-olds, use sunbeds to top up their tan. However, that comes with significant health risks. Researchers estimate that sunbeds cause 440 cases of melanoma and around 100 deaths every year in the UK alone. I was surprised to discover that only 62% of people know that sunbed use increases the risk of skin cancer. Worryingly, researchers found that 23% of 18 to 25-year-olds thought that using sunbeds instead of the sun would reduce their risk of skin cancer. What steps is the Minister taking to bust those myths? Will she consider using her women's health strategy to raise awareness of these issues, which put mostly young women at risk?

Banning under-18s from using tanning beds was undoubtedly sensible, but insufficient enforcement mechanisms have been set up. Unfortunately, a 2025 survey by Melanoma Focus of 100 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK found that 34% were still using sunbeds despite the ban. Exposure to indoor tanning before 35 is associated with a 59% increase in the risk of developing skin cancer. Does the Minister have any plans to strengthen the enforcement of regulations that restrict the use of sunbeds by young people?

Frustratingly, not only do the regulations not stop vulnerable people using sunbeds, but they fail to restrict irradiation levels. A report suggested that over half of Tyneside sunbed salons exceeded the irradiation limits, putting users at even greater risk of cancer and melanoma. What steps will the Minister take to put safety first and ensure that sunbed irradiation levels are enforced?

The key measures against a cancer as deadly as melanoma, and our best defences against fatalities, are prevention, early testing, catching it early and good treatment. Given that such a high proportion of cases

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

are preventable, I am interested to hear more about the Minister's plans for further prevention and to know how the cancer plan will help. What are her thoughts on the plan for Zoe's law to ensure that a histology test is always done so that no one slips through the net?

2.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) for this important debate and all hon. Members who have contributed. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for raising the report by the APPG for beauty and wellbeing; I look forward to considering it in the new year. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), for raising the issues of sun damage and sunbeds. I am exploring options with respect to those issues and will report to Parliament as necessary.

Let me say how sorry I was to hear about the heartbreaking circumstances of Zoe's story. My sympathies are with her family. I was honoured to meet them and hear their story at first hand earlier this month, and I am glad to see some of them in the Public Gallery today. I commend their campaigning in Zoe's name.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the personal experience of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) with stage 2C malignant melanoma. I commend his courageous efforts to share Zoe's story alongside his own. From awareness-raising, better regulation and improved diagnostics, all the way through to fundamentally reforming the NHS, we will seize every opportunity to learn from preventable and unnecessary tragedies like Zoe's, to help to save the lives of others.

The last time that I checked, the petition for Zoe's law had received almost 40,000 signatures and many more people will have seen Zoe's story in the news. Just a couple of weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister paid tribute to Zoe's family for their work. I commend all those who have raised awareness of skin cancers through Zoe's story, because the faster and earlier that people are diagnosed with skin cancer, the faster they can begin treatment and the more effective that treatment can be.

The Government are taking steps to promote awareness of signs and symptoms through the NHS's "Help Us Help You" campaigns, which aim to increase knowledge of cancer symptoms and encourage body awareness, helping people to spot symptoms earlier. Let me also take this opportunity to further promote the NHS's clear and accessible information about how to check moles. That guidance is available to everyone on the NHS website and makes it easier for people to recognise when they should seek medical advice.

Most importantly, however, Zoe's story demonstrates that even when someone does the right thing and raises concerns with their GP, accurate referrals to cancer services need to be in place. Let me stress that every patient should receive the thorough, compassionate and safe care that they deserve. Our GPs also need support to catch potentially deadly illnesses, including skin cancer,

sooner. That is why, as a number of hon. Members mentioned, we recently introduced Jess's rule, a new patient safety initiative designed to support GPs in making timely diagnoses. In practice, it means that if a patient returns to their GP three times with symptoms that are either worsening or still undiagnosed satisfactorily, GPs are asked to reflect, review and rethink. The aim is to make sure that no warning sign is missed and that every patient receives the attention they deserve.

I want to reassure hon. Members and others that the Government are committed to ensuring the highest standard of patient care by equipping healthcare professionals with the latest best practice clinical guidance. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence provides evidence-based guidance for the NHS on best practice. NICE has published several guidelines that include recommendations related to the diagnosis, assessment and treatment of skin cancer, including a guideline on referrals for suspected cancer, which was updated in May.

Our commitment to best practice means that histological testing on excised moles is already routine practice in the NHS. There is not NICE guidance for the cosmetic industry, because it is not NHS-funded, but I know that the safety of the cosmetic sector is of significant interest to colleagues. Many Members will no doubt be all too aware of the devastating consequences of a wide range of unsafe cosmetic practices. Since I met Zoe's family, my office has written to colleagues at the Department for Business and Trade to get a better sense of practice and to explore what it is possible for us to do in this space.

My Department will also consider whether Zoe's story can be incorporated into action that we are taking to improve the safety of the cosmetic sector as a whole. We are prioritising developing legal restrictions on high-risk cosmetic procedures, to ensure that they can be performed only by suitably qualified and regulated healthcare professionals who are working for providers registered with the Care Quality Commission. Additionally, we will introduce a local authority licensing scheme in England for lower-risk cosmetic procedures. Licensing will enable us to embed rigorous safety training and insurance standards in the sector, and enable action to be taken against practitioners who fail to comply with the requirements. These measures will allow people to be confident that the practitioner they choose to perform their procedure has the skills to do so safely.

It is important to note that for the majority of skin cancer patients, diagnosis and treatment occur in a timely manner. To ensure that we continue to improve our strong performance and survival rates, we are spending £600 million of capital funding this year on diagnostics. That sum includes, for the first time, funding for the automation of histopathology laboratories to improve productivity. Thanks to the hard work of NHS staff, we exceeded the faster diagnosis standard for skin cancer in August, when more than 80% of patients received an all-clear or a cancer diagnosis within 28 days. The 62-day cancer waiting time for skin cancer was 84.9%—the standard is 85%, so it was just shy—and the five-year survival rate for melanoma is now around 92%.

However, we know there is more to be done. In the longer term, as part of our 10-year health plan, we are ensuring that the NHS is able to harness the power of technological innovation to improve the prevention,

diagnosis and treatment of all cancers, including skin cancer. By using innovative technologies such as teledermatology, in which a high-resolution photograph is taken of the skin and sent directly to a dermatologist, we are increasing diagnostic productivity and reducing waiting times for skin cancer patients. We will ensure that no one waits longer than they should.

Wera Hobhouse: I called for teledermatology on another occasion because it absolutely works. Does the Minister have any figures on how many GPs are using that as the basis of their diagnosis? My husband recently went to our GP and he was still referred to the hospital, so I am not confident that a lot of GPs are making use of it.

Ashley Dalton: The majority of those services are provided through community diagnostic centres. I do not have any figures to hand but I am more than happy to write to the hon. Member with whatever figures we have available.

Within those services, we have recently begun testing AI-based platforms to triage patients following referral from primary care. I have seen at first hand how useful AI can be in flagging potentially risky images so that the consultant can prioritise and explore them. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk takes a keen interest in those developments. Further roll-out of AI in the NHS for this purpose will be subject to assessments of clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, which are ongoing, but I can say from first-hand experience that it offers a very exciting opportunity and falls distinctly within our ambition for the shift from analogue to digital.

Although immediate action is essential, we recognise that bold reform is needed if we are to rise to the growing challenge that cancers of all types present. We will publish the national cancer plan in the new year to reduce the number of lives lost to cancer over the next 10 years. We have received over 11,000 responses to our call for evidence from individuals, professionals and organisations, and we are reviewing the submissions from skin cancer partners. Publication has been delayed by about six weeks to ensure that all the responses are properly considered in the plan. Our expansive engagement will allow the national cancer plan to have patients at its heart. The plan will cover the entirety of the cancer pathway, from referral and diagnosis to treatment and ongoing care.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West again for bringing this important matter to the House, and I thank all Members who have contributed.

I am pleased to assure them that we are undertaking immediate actions to learn from Zoe's story. Combined with our bold reforms to create a health service that is fit for the future, we will reduce the number of lives lost to the biggest killers, including skin cancer.

2.34 pm

Mr Quigley: I thank the Minister for her remarks. I do not think anyone would question her passion and commitment to this cause. I thank her for previously sharing her own diagnosis. It is important that people understand that cancer can affect anybody. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—and it would not be a debate without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) making some contribution.

Zoe Panayi did everything right. She sought help and she trusted the system, and yet the safeguards that should have protected her did not. That is why this debate matters. Zoe's law is not about blame; it is about prevention. It is about making sure that every mole removed is tested. That is a small step with a profound impact—one that could save lives, reduce the burden on the NHS and spare families unimaginable grief. The cost is not preventable: the technology exists and the reason is clear—cancer is not a place to cut corners.

I know that all the contributions we have heard today mean such a lot to Zoe's family, her brother Charlie, and mum Eileen watching at home. We must not forget the human tragedy behind this story: the children who have lost a mother, the family who have lost a sister and a daughter, and the community who have lost a friend. That is why Zoe's law is so important. I urge the Department to continue working with Zoe's family, with me and with my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough), who has shared so much of his own journey, making such a difference. I thank him for his commitment to this cause, and for the support and extremely generous amount of time that he has given me. We need to make this safeguard a reality so that what happened to Zoe is never repeated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered histological testing of excised moles.

2.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Children's Social Care

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

3.10 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Education Committee, Children's social care, HC 430, and the Government response, HC 1350.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for granting time for this debate on the Education Committee's report on children's social care and the Government's response. I am particularly pleased that the debate is taking place on the eve of Care Leavers Month, a time of more intensive focus on children's social care and the support provided to care leavers.

The inquiry was launched by our predecessor Committee in December 2023 to take a comprehensive look at the children's social care system as a whole. It was interrupted by the general election, but the new Committee decided that the work was too important to drop, and agreed to progress the inquiry to a conclusion. In total, the Committee held eight oral evidence sessions. We heard from a range of experts across the sector, and I am particularly pleased that we held an oral evidence session with four care-experienced young people, who spoke powerfully of their experiences of children's social care and their hopes for reform.

Children's social care comprises a set of vital services that support some of our most vulnerable children. Those services include early help and support for families, safeguarding, the care of looked-after children, support for disabled children, and a range of other services. They encompass some of the gravest responsibilities of the state, yet we know that they are under intense pressure.

The erosion of funding, combined with increasing need, has resulted in a situation in which many services are struggling to deliver in a way that is genuinely child-centred. All too often, looked-after children are placed far from home. The outcomes for care-experienced young people are shockingly poor. In 2022, the current Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who was responsible at the time for the independent review of children's social care commissioned by the previous Government, said that the system was in need of a total reset.

Although the situation is very serious, that is in no way to deny the extraordinarily hard work and commitment we see among those who work to support children in the care system, and I pay tribute to them at the start of the debate. Social workers, support workers, advocates, foster carers, kinship carers and many others step in to support the most vulnerable children and to try to deliver a secure and solid foundation for their childhood.

However, our inquiry found that many of the problems highlighted by the independent review of children's social care persist and, in a significant number of cases, have worsened since the review. Witnesses criticised the piecemeal approach to reform, which has focused on new short-term initiatives in a small number of areas, rather than comprehensive change.

There has been a rising need for children's social care over the past decade. The number of looked-after children has risen by over 20% in the past 10 years, standing at 83,630 in 2024. Over the same period, the rate of looked-after children has increased from 60 to 70 per 10,000 children in the population. The number of section 47 inquiries per year in response to child protection concerns has risen by 57% over the past decade.

That rising need has been in direct correlation to the erosion of funding for early help and support services, such as Sure Start, which played such a critical role in preventing families from reaching crisis point. That is leading to a severe shortage of placements for children in care. In 2024, 45% of looked-after children were placed outside their local authority, and 22% were placed over 20 miles from home. The inquiry heard distressing accounts from care-experienced young people who had been placed far from home. One young person had experienced racism for the first time when she was placed in an area with a very different demographic from her home area. Another had had to get up at 4 am and take long-distance trains to school while on a respite placement because her foster family were on holiday. Another had chosen not to pursue higher education, having experienced such frequent moves during her time in care.

There is an acute shortage of foster care placements. The need for 6,500 new foster carers in England has left local authorities over-reliant on expensive private children's home providers, despite evidence of disgraceful profiteering in parts of the sector. We found that some local authorities do much better than others at keeping their looked-after children close to home and avoiding the spot purchasing of expensive and often poor-quality private residential places. Our report recommended that the Department publish a national sufficiency strategy for children's social care and require all local authorities to develop and publish strategies for reducing the number of out-of-area placements.

The Department's response states:

"While we do not believe a national sufficiency strategy would be responsive enough to children's needs at a local level, we are working closely with the two RCC"

—regional care co-operative—

"pathfinder areas and supporting improved placement commissioning and forecasting".

I would like to press the Minister on that. The purpose of a national sufficiency strategy would be to give the Government additional leverage in ironing out the significant variation in practice between local authorities. Local authorities should be adopting best practice on the provision of care placements. We know that some do that really well and therefore have very few children who are not in the borough. Without a national strategy, however, it is hard to see how the Government can grip the extent of the variation.

In response to the severe shortage of foster carers, we recommended that the Department put in place a national fostering strategy and consult on introducing a national register of foster carers. The Department's response states that it is

"considering the potential costs and benefits of a national register of foster carers",

but it does not commit to a national strategy.

For many years now, the only method of foster carer recruitment has been advertising, but that is simply not delivering. The conversion rate is shocking: only 6% of

people who express an interest in fostering put in an application to do so, and only 32% of applications are eventually approved. That tells us that we need a more comprehensive approach that seeks not only to drum up interest but to seek proactively to address some of the barriers to fostering, particularly those in relation to housing, and to deliver better support and respite arrangements for foster carers.

The inquiry heard about the crucial role played by kinship carers, who step in to look after a child within their network of family or friends when the child's biological parents are unable to do so. We heard from a young person who described kinship care as

“a loving, caring, beautiful environment where I felt nurtured and valued”.

Kinship care is often the best arrangement for children whose parents cannot look after them, as it helps them to maintain secure attachments within their family. However, the Committee also heard about the financial struggles faced by kinship carers, including the fact that 67% of children in kinship care live in a deprived household. Kinship carers act out of love, but they should not be forced into poverty for doing so. Our report recommended that the new allowance for kinship carers should be on a par with the allowance for foster carers, and that entitlements to kinship leave should be included in the Government's review of the parental leave system.

The Department's response states that the parental leave review will look at support for kinship carers, but it does not commit to setting the kinship allowance at the same level as support for foster carers. I press the Minister to look carefully at that. There are much higher costs, both to children and to the public purse, when a kinship arrangement breaks down and a local authority has to fund a foster placement or a children's home placement for a child. Kinship carers are the unsung heroes of children's social care, and they need to be properly supported.

Our report concluded:

“It is unacceptable that the continuation of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund was not announced until 1 April 2025, leaving families and children uncertain about the future of their support.”

We recommended that the Department end the annual cliff edge of uncertainty faced by adoptive families and make funding for the adoption and special guardianship support fund permanent. We also expressed our concern about the decision to limit the funding per child within the ASGSF and recommended that the Government keep a very close watch on the impact of that decision and reinstate the previous level of funding rapidly if there are significant adverse effects. The Department's response confirmed that funding for the adoption and special guardianship support fund has been committed for 2026-27, but it did not commit to making the fund permanent.

Our inquiry heard that outcomes for care-experienced young people are far worse on many measures than for their non-care-experienced peers. That is a shocking indication of the failures of the children's social care system. Some 39% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, employment or training, compared with 13% of all young people aged 19 to 21. Only 15% of care leavers go to university by the age of 19, compared with 46% of children who have not been in care.

Approximately one in four—perhaps more—of the adult prison population has been in care, and between 30% and 50% of homeless people are estimated to have spent time in care.

Our inquiry heard about the financial difficulties faced by young people on leaving care. One young person, Jake Hartley, had to use food banks and borrow money to pay bills after turning 18. Louise Fitt told us that she had to drop A-levels after turning 18 due to the need to work and support herself financially. She said:

“I always wanted an education, but I had to sacrifice that because I have to eat, I have to have a roof over my head; that is so important. We should not have to choose between that. We should be allowed to study if we want to... It is not nice being left on your own at 18 to go into the adult world and to figure it out.”

The report recommended that the Department for Education develop a national care offer to harmonise support for care leavers across the country. In response, the Department stated that it had launched a new website “which brings together all relevant information in an easily accessible format.”

I want to press the Minister on that point. Care leavers should not face a postcode lottery for support. There is simply no justification for that. A website with information about the inconsistent support available in different areas is not the same as a national care offer. My Committee is clear that the Government should commit to a national offer to ensure that no care-experienced young person falls through the cracks and that care-experienced young people can feel confident to move, go to university or take up employment without feeling that their aspirations are constrained by worries about whether they will be supported.

Our report also expressed concerns about the Government's proposal to reduce support through universal credit for those aged under 22 who are care experienced, and recommended that care leavers be exempted. In its response, the Department said that

“no decisions have been made yet”

and that it would

“consider consultation feedback before implementing any changes.”

As the Government prepare to consider welfare reforms, I urge the Minister to make the strongest representations to his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury on this issue. It would make a huge difference.

We are concerned by the Government's refusal to commit to a number of our recommendations. We recommended that the Department implement the recommendation of the independent review of children's social care to develop universal standards of care that apply to all children's homes, including supported accommodation, ensuring that children in all settings receive care where they live. In its response, the Department stated:

“Rather than prioritising development of a single universal set of standards, we are focusing on options for updating some of the most out-dated National Minimum Standards to ensure they reflect the latest ambitious goals we have for children and to bring them into better alignment with more recently developed standards.”

I urge the Minister to look again at that recommendation, which would represent greater ambition for the quality of accommodation and support that children receive.

The Committee recommended that the Department introduce national eligibility criteria for disabled children's social care. The Department responded that it was

[Helen Hayes]

waiting for the Law Commission's recommendations on disabled children's social care and would "set out any plans for reform in due course."

Whatever the outcome of the Law Commission's work, it is vital that the postcode lottery currently experienced by families with a disabled child is addressed.

We recommended that the Department take forward the recommendation of the independent review of children's social care to introduce an opt-out model of independent advocacy for all children in care. In its response, the Department said that it would

"introduce new National Standards for Advocacy for Children and Young People and revised statutory guidance on Providing Effective Advocacy for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989 in 2025."

I know that this topic is very close to the Minister's heart. I urge him to go further than the response indicates and look at how access to independent advocacy can be maximised for all children in care.

We welcome the Government's commitment to family group decision making in relation to children on the edge of the care system, but we recommended that the Department clarify the specific model of family group decision making in statutory guidance to ensure that best practice is followed in all local authorities. In response, the Department said:

"It is a local authority's decision on which model of FGDM will best serve the families they support after considering the evidence."

I urge the Minister to look again at producing guidance for local authorities. Family group decision making is a very effective tool for driving better outcomes for children, but only if it is properly understood and rigorously implemented. There are risks in an approach that does not guarantee the quality of this work.

Finally, the Committee recommended that the Department put in place a strategy for supporting children and young people at risk of extra-familial harm. The Department emphasised that it had strengthened the multi-agency response to extra-familial harm through updated statutory guidance. I encourage the Minister to pay further attention to this work. Extra-familial harm is a growing cause of children entering the care system, particularly as teenagers, and our evidence points to systems that are not joined up and are often ill-equipped to protect children from threats outside the home. Indeed, our evidence says that removing a child from their home can harm them further, rather than protecting them from the threats they are experiencing that do not come from within their family network.

By intervening in the lives of children and families through children's social care, the state exercises some of its gravest responsibilities. The stakes are very high and the consequences of failure can be catastrophic, but there are also huge rewards if we get things right. More families would be able to thrive together, and more children would be able to overcome adverse childhood experiences and thrive in education. Disabled children would be able to access education and opportunities on an equal footing with their peers.

Even more importantly, the effectiveness of this work is fundamental if the Government are to meet some of their other challenges. If the Government are serious

about tackling homelessness, or about tackling the intense crisis in the criminal justice system, they must also be serious about the outcomes for children in the care system. This work is of the utmost importance and my Committee supports the Government in their mission to break down the barriers to opportunity and to create a country in which every child can thrive.

3.26 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

With National Care Leavers Month starting next Saturday, it is apt that we are discussing this issue here in Westminster Hall today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), the Chair of the Education Committee, for the Committee's excellent report and its urgency in getting this matter before the House. I thank her also for her powerful recounting of the Committee's inquiry.

On a recent visit to Falkirk & Clackmannanshire Young Carers, which I had more opportunity to do when I was Falkirk council's young persons' elected member champion, I was reminded of the social awareness of young people with care experience, but also of the burden on them in advocating for themselves and the distinct challenges they face, which my hon. Friend so powerfully recounted. Falkirk & Clackmannanshire Young Carers is a fantastic organisation in my constituency, which advocates for the interests of care-experienced young people.

I will focus in on recommendation 78, which is that the Department for Education should commission:

"an independent evaluation of the impact of designating care experience a protected characteristic".

In June 2023, after hearing overwhelmingly powerful testimony from the Falkirk Champs board, which is a group of care-experienced young people who dedicate their time to advocating for young people with similar backgrounds, Falkirk Council, which I was a member of at the time, unanimously agreed to treat care experience as a protected characteristic. We were the first Scottish council to do so. That was achieved through the advocacy and campaigning of the young people in my constituency, and a motion led by my tirelessly hard-working colleague and defender of the interests of young people and women, Councillor Siobhan Paterson.

Recommendation 78 also urges monitoring the impact where action similar to Falkirk council's has been taken by English local authorities, so let me put the Minister on the spot: will the Department, given its apt proximity to the Minister for Women and Equalities, the right hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), consider legislating if the impact of local councils' designating care experience as a protected characteristic is found to be beneficial, but could be enhanced by putting that designation on a statutory footing? What are the Department's thoughts on that issue? For the Minister's information, if Councillor Paterson makes it to the Scottish Parliament next year as a Scottish Labour MSP for Falkirk East and Linlithgow, the Department would have a very powerful colleague to support and assist such a measure being implemented in Holyrood.

When the Minister responds to the debate, will he also thank all the organisations throughout the country involved in this work, especially Falkirk &

Clackmannanshire Carers Centre and Young Carers, all of their staff and all of the young people on the Falkirk Champs board for their continued advocacy?

3.29 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

I thank and commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), the chair of the Education Committee, for leading the inquiry, securing the debate and making an incredibly powerful case as to why, particularly as we begin National Care Leavers Month, we must see action on children's social care.

I welcome the Minister to his role, commend his work on the independent review of children's social care, and congratulate him on being in the most powerful position possible to deliver on something that, tragically, was shelved for several years, until the new Government picked it up.

I am not only a proud member of the Committee that carried out this work, but as some know, I have a particular interest in this issue. For a number of years before being elected to this place, I was the cabinet member for children's services and education in Southampton City Council. With help from many others, I tried to transform services that literally had life or death consequences for many children. It was a pleasure to do that, because I was once there myself: I grew up in foster care, and happily I was adopted. I am a big advocate of the life-transforming difference that the right care at the right time in the right circumstances can make, because had that not been the case for me, thanks to my parents, social workers and others along the way who made decisions on my behalf, I would not be standing here today.

In my maiden speech, I said that, of the many things we get involved with in Parliament, the one thing I want to do is be able to say to those to whom this report speaks, whose lives and circumstances it seeks to make better—those who are going through some of the most challenging times in life, who suffer the stigma of still being more likely to end up in prison than in university or in this place—that we will ensure they have the right support. I want that experience to forge in them a steely determination to achieve their full potential. Many of these recommendations are in that vein.

I was proud to bring a group of care leavers to Parliament earlier this week. I thank the Minister again for making time at the last moment, with no notice, to meet them, so that they could share their aspirations. Their voices were not only heard in this place; they went to the very heart of decision making—the Department for Education.

I want to talk about three key issues: the importance of getting early intervention right, foster carers, and care leavers themselves. The Government have committed to early intervention and help. In Southampton, I saw the power of shifting from reactive services to preventive services, with early help and intervention. That can reduce the number of children entering care, the amount of time they spend in care, and the damaging impact that being in care for too long can have. For many, it turns them around. Unfortunately, the damage can be compounded by the experience of care, so there is a great need for support. I think I am preaching to the choir when I say that early intervention is absolutely key.

The Government's response points to the existing grants and the local government finance settlement, which deals with some early interventions, particularly around things such as housing support. Will the Minister please say a bit more about the conversations he is having with MHCLG ministerial colleagues? Will he ensure we seize the opportunity to make a difference? When council funding is announced later in the year, it will be welcomed not only by cabinet members like I was, leaders in this area and people who work in it, but most importantly by young people themselves, who will see that we are taking this issue seriously.

On the recruitment and retention of foster carers, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood made a powerful case setting out why what we are doing is not working. We need to do more. I believe that a national fostering strategy is needed to bring together the good will and the good practice. We know that there are pockets of excellence across the country, and there moments when a particular campaign works well. In Southampton, we were delighted to have one of our former Saints players engage with us on this issue—we could at least win at something, even if it was not football in that season. That joint working to promote the benefits not just to children, but to families who welcome young people into their homes for however long is needed, was a real success. None the less, recruitment numbers go up and down, and I am sure that is replicated across the country.

I hope the Minister will take on board the need to consider again a national fostering strategy that is properly resourced and brings together the comprehensive measures needed for progress. That would help to bring clarity and far greater awareness of the current crisis, and crucially, it would bring hope. As I believe the Minister said the other day, we want there to be choice. We cannot simply say, "Well, we have a foster carer, but they happen to be 20 or 30 miles away and that is the best fit we can get for an individual." I think we know that we can and should be doing better than that.

On care leavers, our report concluded that it is rightly absolutely unacceptable that young people are left to support themselves financially when they turn 18, particularly if they are in full-time education and have to face either reducing time spent in education or dropping out completely to support themselves. I do not know if anyone has read the book by Ashley John-Baptiste about the decision he faced almost 20 years ago either to accept a property that a council had finally been able to offer him as a care leaver, or to take up his place at university. That is not a position we want anyone to be in. Thankfully, the intervention of an MP at that point made a difference. The system should be making the difference, not forcing young people to choose between opportunities that, in most cases, those who are not care-experienced would not even have to consider.

There are things that no responsible parent would allow, and the state—councils—are in loco parentis. Therefore, as this Government are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity, we must keep the most life-changing opportunity, education, open to all care-experienced young people. Where finance is the barrier, we need to remove that, and where the risk of a placement breakdown is a barrier, we must get extra support for stability. As has been recommended, we need to look at extending corporate parenting to all public bodies that

[Darren Paffey]

are required to support our children in care. A national care leaver offer, as in recommendation 75, should still be on the table; it would go hand in hand with the local care leaver offer that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is bringing in.

As argued strongly by my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), designating care experience a protected characteristic is another tool in our box that we could use to make a difference for children and young people. That is recommendation 78, and I would be grateful if the Minister elaborated on what the Government are doing there. Work is ongoing in Parliament, and the hon. Member for Dundee Central (Chris Law), Baroness Longfield and activists such as Terry Galloway and Chris Wild are working on it. We would be pleased to meet with the Minister on an ongoing basis to ensure that we are working towards it.

Finally, I will list a few of the things that Atlas, Mac, Ethan and George told us when they visited this week about what would make a difference to their experience of being in social care, and in particular leaving social care. They are asking for more funding and focus on mental health and wellbeing. That is in recommendation 49. We know that child and adolescent mental health services are in a poor state, whether someone has been in care or not, and urgently need to be fixed. The Government said in their response that they will take a multidisciplinary approach and that they will review statutory guidance. Can the Minister say when we can expect that? The crisis is ongoing. We cannot continue to wait much longer.

Children want more placements closer to home. They want that stability. They want more affordable housing. As has already been outlined, that speaks to the wider challenges in society that the Government have to tackle: child poverty, relieving financial pressures on families, and having better support for parents, which we know will be given through the new Best Start family hubs.

I am glad that parental pay and parental leave are under review so that in the earliest, most crucial days we might see stronger bonds in children. For some, that may remove the likelihood that they have to go into care. There are risks outside the home that we need to fix, and there are risks in the home such as social media and smartphones. Many things impact the stability of our young people's experience, particularly when they go on to leave care. We need training and experience for the young people themselves, but young people told us that they also want their social workers to be as well trained as possible. Some of them want someone, as they put it, a bit older. They probably mean someone with the deep experience to be able to coach them through the upheaval that many of them face, particularly as they become independent. They want to feel like they are part of a normal family, as much as possible.

I again commend the Chair of the Education Committee for leading this inquiry. It was the first priority of the new Committee. I ask the Minister to make it clear to us and, more importantly, to foster families, to children who are care-experienced, and to those who are leaving care that it is the first priority of this Government. I welcome the many responses that have reassured us of that commitment to make change happen where it is desperately needed, but the Government must not allow

this to be a wait and see moment. The Minister must assure us that decisive action will be taken on those recommendations because, as the Chair of the Committee has said, he will be able to count on the Committee's full support if he does.

3.42 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. As this is the first debate in which I have spoken with the Minister in his place, I warmly welcome him to his new role. I know that he brings an immense amount of professional and personal experience to this role. It is always wonderful to see somebody on the Front Bench who can bring that experience to bear, and who understands where many of us are coming from in what we say. I am honoured to follow excellent speeches from the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and from my other hon. Friends. I echo the thanks to the Select Committee for all its work, and for the long list of fantastic recommendations, which show it has its finger on the pulse of what is being raised and requested in the whole children's social care sector.

I speak not just as a Member of Parliament with a keen interest in children's social care but as somebody who is personally invested in this topic as an adoptive parent and a former foster carer. The Committee's report made very clear what many of us see in our constituencies and from our families and friendship circles: a widening gap between those who are willing to adopt and foster and those who are able to complete the process. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood outlined some statistics around that, which are really concerning, particularly as somebody who has been through this process. Those like me have seen the difficulties that are faced throughout the process, but also how it is at the end of the tunnel, as it were. It is worrying that so many people do not reach that point, and we need to drill down into what is putting off so many people.

Recruitment of foster carers and adopters cannot be limited to local campaigns. We need a national drive on this, and to make it a national mission. We need central Government to commit resources and efforts to this issue. We are seeing a worrying downward trend in the number of foster carers and adopters. We know the cost of that, which is not only the financial cost—with, as the Chair of the Committee said, hugely increasing numbers of private children's homes opening—but the social cost to children: many of them feel that there is nowhere for them to go and they are not wanted by anybody. We know that a foster placement, in particular, can offer so much healing and restore a young person's sense of self and their confidence in the whole system.

When my partner and I applied, we got a lot of our initial information from charities, before we even inquired about an information evening at our local authority. Particularly with ongoing funding challenges, councils are quite limited in what they can do. Staffordshire county council does fantastic work; it has been to many local fairs—when we had a Pride in Cannock Chase it came there with its fostering van, and proactively spoke to people. But obviously it can only do so much, and many of the staff are volunteering their own time to be able to do that.

We also need to look at some of the practical barriers, particularly around things like people in social housing, as was highlighted by the Committee. We clearly do not have a lack of altruistic people in this country who want to put themselves forward to foster, adopt or both. But the dropping numbers suggest that there are many barriers in place that we need to knock down. Fostering and adoption are not luxuries; they are absolute lifelines. Children need stable and loving homes, so we need accessible routes for families to come forward.

I will briefly pick up on the point about priority school admission for kinship carers. I have personal experience of the benefit that having priority admission as an adoptive parent gave us. Unlike most adopted children, whose parents are applying for a school nearby, many children who are going into kinship care are moving further away from home, and I have seen cases where they struggle to get a school place. I appreciate that in its response the Department said that there is limited evidence around that. However, we know that there is limited evidence around a lot of the challenges that are facing kinship carers, because we are only recently waking up to their importance, value and support needs. I hope the Department will do everything it can to gather that evidence and look to see if this is something we can do.

Thirdly, as other colleagues have, I will touch on the adoption and special guardianship support fund. Again, I declare an interest in that as a family we are actively accessing this fund for my daughter. I welcome the Department's acknowledgment that stability and transparency are critical. As has been said in debates in this Chamber and on the Floor of the House, any support that we can provide through the fund will pay for itself many times over. But we also need to look at the capacity in local authorities to provide support.

As a family we have sometimes found that finding a therapist—often a former social worker who has particular expertise in different areas—can be a challenge. Clearly, local authorities are not going to be able to provide the full gambit of support that might be needed, but for issues such as attachment disorder, which is very common among children in care, it would be wonderful to see more of that support available within local authorities, so that we do not have to use the ASGSF or go out to private providers or charities to access that support.

I will touch on the recruitment and retention of social workers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood did. We hear continually from social workers about how there is immense instability in the workforce, and that is undermining everything that they are trying to do, from early intervention to post-adoption support and preparing care leavers. We know that this is a challenge for almost every local authority in the country. A national workforce strategy is critical. We need to offer meaningful career progression and improved pay in many areas—pay disparities even between neighbouring local authorities can be huge.

I have heard about the difference between Birmingham and Worcestershire, for example, and many social workers being sucked out of the counties that ring the west midlands conurbation into those urban authorities because they can pay much better. They therefore often have better staff teams, whereas those in the surrounding shires are struggling. Many newly qualified social workers do not have the mentorship and support from more

experienced colleagues, so they are leaving not long into their career, which is tragic. Stress and workforce pressures will always be there for social workers as it is an incredibly demanding job, but anything we can do to foster a culture that values and uplifts social work, and that means that people have some of the trickier tasks taken away—for example, so they do not have to fill out as much paperwork—would help.

Finally, I will touch on care leavers and the need for a universal support offer. We have repeatedly heard heartbreaking stories of care leavers aged 18, or even 16, moving out of their local authority and often losing support. That is why a national care offer would be a catch-all across the country. Staying Close provisions are really welcome, but they need to be fully rolled out so that we can smoothly transition young adults to independence with emotional and practical support intact. It cannot be a postcode lottery. I have heard from many care leavers that they want to move out of their home authority—they may have done so when they were a young child—but they often remain reliant on the original local authority in which they were taken into care for support. Those local authorities are often far less likely to offer support to someone living far outside their area.

There was also a recent announcement on care leavers and student loans. It would be great if the Minister could provide more information around that, because my understanding is that care leavers already have independent student status and can therefore already get maximum loans in all but a small number of cases. I have been asked to seek a bit more clarity on that so we can see who that announcement will benefit and whether there is any data on that.

I echo my thanks to the Education Committee and the Department for all their work on this, but highlight the need for a national recruitment campaign for foster carers and adopters; as much support as possible for adoptive parents and kinship carers to do their absolute best for their loved ones; a well supported, sustainable social-work workforce; and a care leaver offer that transcends geography, so that young people can access what they need, wherever they are.

3.51 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq—I hope my voice is going to survive this. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for everything that she and the Committee have done on this fantastic report. It is a really important piece of work, and it has been wonderful to hear all the personal stories from people in this debate about this issue.

Children in care, and those at risk of being taken into care, deserve the very best start in life. They deserve the love, stability and support that every child should be able to take for granted, yet for far too long this country has failed them. The previous Conservative Government did not grasp the scale of the crisis in children's social care. Their response to the independent review of children's social care, which called for more than £2 billion to deliver whole system reform, amounted to less than a tenth of that figure.

That failure to invest is a failure to protect vulnerable children. It is also a false economy, because when we do not provide children with stability, we pay the price later

[Anna Sabine]

in lost potential, poor health and lives that never had the chance that they should have had. The Liberal Democrats believe that every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential, no matter their circumstances. That is why we would make care experience a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010—so that young people who have been in care are not left behind or discriminated against, but recognised and supported.

We have also called for proper support for the 150,000 children in England being raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and friends—our kinship carers who step up when families fall apart. These carers deserve the same respect and resources as foster carers. We are calling for a weekly allowance equivalent to that for foster carers; paid leave for kinship carers when a child comes to live with them, just as adoptive parents have; and priority access to schools and pupil premium plus funding for the children in their care. Love alone is not enough; it must be matched with practical, financial and emotional support.

The points today on foster care have been particularly well made. My constituency is Frome and East Somerset, and we are desperately short in Frome, particularly of foster care places, which means many children have to go into residential settings, often very far from their home and hard for local people to access, as we have tricky rural bus routes and a lack of trains. It is also much more expensive for a struggling local authority.

Support for families has been undermined by the Government's handling of the adoption and special guardianship support fund. That fund has been a lifeline, enabling traumatised children to access specialist therapy, healing and hope, yet earlier this year families were left in the dark for months about whether the fund would continue. It was only after Liberal Democrat pressure, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) with an urgent question, that the Government confirmed the funding for '25-26. The truth is that the details of severe cuts were quietly slipped out once Parliament had gone into recess. The therapy limit has been slashed from £5,000 to £3,000, and a separate £2,500 allowance for specialist assessments has been scrapped. Support can also no longer be carried across financial years, robbing families of the flexibility they need.

For some, these consequences are especially devastating. Children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, which I have campaigned on, are among those most affected. FASD is a lifelong condition caused by exposure to alcohol before birth. It can lead to developmental delays, learning and emotional regulation difficulties and a range of physical and cognitive challenges. Many children with FASD are adopted or in special guardianship arrangements. They often require specialist assessments, ongoing therapy and expert support to manage complex needs.

The withdrawal of funding for those diagnostic assessments is catastrophic for those children. Without a proper diagnosis, they cannot access tailored support at school or appropriate interventions at home. The cuts to the adoption and special guardianship fund are therefore not just administrative tinkering; they are an act of neglect towards some of the most vulnerable in our society, including those living with FASD, whose future prospects depend on early and sustained support.

We call on the Government to reverse these harmful cuts immediately and to reaffirm their commitment to adopted children, special guardians and kinship carers. Every child, whether in care, adopted or living with extended family, deserves the same chance to thrive.

3.54 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I hope my voice manages to survive this speech. I am pleased to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Opposition. I welcome the Minister to his new role. I know how knowledgeable and committed he is to the welfare of the children we are discussing today.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on an important Select Committee report. She gave an excellent speech. The hon. Members for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) spoke with experience of their roles in local authorities. The personal experiences of the hon. Members for Southampton Itchen and for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) make them especially important voices on these matters, and I thank both of them.

The report sets out a sobering context. The need for children's social care has risen significantly over the past decade, with the number of looked-after children reaching 83,630 in 2024—an increase of over 20% compared with 10 years earlier. This increase has caused pressures on the provision of care for the children involved, and growing numbers of children are now placed far from where they live. We heard a bit about this in the debate, but last year 45% of looked-after children were placed outside their local authority area and 22% were placed more than 20 miles away from home.

The report found that there are serious shortages of foster carers, with an additional 6,500 foster parents needed to fill the gaps. I am pleased by the report's emphasis on the importance of kinship care. A bugbear of mine, and not a proper criticism of the Committee, is that the report refers to kinship carers being "an essential part of the care system".

I always find the language of "systems" quite dehumanising, when kinship carers are vital, loving family members. A responsible member of the family is always a better option than the inhumanity of a bureaucratic system. As the report says, it is vital that kinship carers have the support they need and deserve.

If we can get children's social care right, the rewards could not be greater: difficult starts giving way to new beginnings; great potential given the promise of a fair chance; and, as the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, a reduction in some of the social problems that we contend with in other parts of Government.

The report makes clear the consequences when we do not get it right. Children in care often experience trauma, abuse and neglect. They are more than four times more likely to suffer emotional or mental health problems than other children of their age. The Committee reported on the poor outcomes for too many care leavers—the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood mentioned this in her speech. Some 39% of care leavers between the ages of 19 and 21 are not in education, employment or training; one third of care leavers become homeless within two years of leaving care; and almost a quarter of the prison population has spent time in care.

Many fantastic organisations, such as Cangle Foyer in Haverhill in my constituency, do so much for vulnerable young people who find themselves with no place to live and little hope of getting the skills they need or a job they would like without professional help to get themselves established. Demand for such help would obviously be less necessary and less urgent if we were successful in improving the social care system for children. I know, after a recent Ofsted report into children's services in Suffolk, how much work there is still to be done.

The Conservative party agrees with the Committee's recommendations for a national sufficiency strategy for children's social care and a reduction in the number of out-of-area placements; the development of a national care offer to harmonise support for care leavers; a new national fostering strategy and a register of foster carers; better financial support for kinship carers in line with support for foster carers; and permanent funding for the adoption and special guardianship support fund.

We broadly welcomed the measures relating to children's social care in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and the policy paper, "Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive". Much of that is a welcome continuation of some of the policies that we pursued in office, including powers to regulate the children's social care provider market, to cap profits, if necessary, and to regulate the use of agency workers in children's social care.

The Conservative party has argued that there are some ways in which the Government might be able to go further. For example, we proposed amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to require the Education Secretary to report annually on the work and impact of multi-agency child protection teams, which would have included their effectiveness in improving information sharing, risk identification and service co-ordination.

There are also important questions about the relationship between social care and special educational needs. I know from our experiences in Suffolk that demand for special educational needs and disabilities places outstrips supply. Parents are waiting and waiting for education, health and care plans, and the system is buckling under the pressure. I look forward to hearing very soon what the Government intend to do in relation to SEND.

Vulnerable children are often not getting the care they need. They are falling out of the education system, sometimes altogether, or travelling great distances—often more than 75 minutes—at great expense, and sometimes leaving them more exposed to harm, to get to schools that can meet their needs. I know that the plan for the White Paper has been delayed into next year, but I would be grateful if the Minister told us more about the Government's broad intentions and how he sees the interaction between special educational needs and the social care system.

We also have to raise some questions to which the Government have to date been reluctant to give answers. The Casey report into the rape gangs did not focus specifically on the systemic failings in social care, but it showed how children's services departments repeatedly failed to protect and support victims—vulnerable children who were in the care of the state.

In Rochdale, for example, Baroness Casey said that health services

"repeatedly shared their significant concerns with the police and children's social care about the organised sexual exploitation of children in the area",

but nothing happened.

Anwar Meah, who was a social worker in Bradford, notoriously attended the so-called wedding of an under-age girl in his care to her abuser. I find that absolutely extraordinary and am surprised there was no prosecution in that case. Will the Minister tell us what the Government will do to earn the trust of the victims involved with the inquiry? Finally, when will the national inquiry into the rape gangs get under way?

Every child deserves the best possible start in life. That is why this Select Committee report is a welcome contribution. This debate has been so important. Members across the House, regardless of party politics, have an important duty to be constructive, to work together and to do everything we can for every young person in our country. It is a duty, and we cannot let them down.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank all Members for their contributions to this important debate. Particular thanks go to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I acknowledge the Select Committee's inquiry and important work, on which I will say more in a moment.

The report highlights a system under pressure, with rising demand, rising costs and inconsistent experiences, which requires urgent reform. Too many children are experiencing childhood without the essential components of connection and love, which should be the central obsession of the care system, but too often are not. As chair of the independent review of children's social care in 2022, I called for a radical reset. Today, as Minister for Children and Families, I am determined to deliver it.

I will respond to Members' contributions before I respond to aspects of the Committee's report. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) in congratulating the young people and organisations that have championed additional rights for care-experienced young people. I encourage people to get behind the Labour candidate in the Scottish parliamentary elections, who has so successfully championed those causes. I also acknowledge Terry Galloway's work across the UK to champion and secure additional rights for care-experienced young people. I will continue to engage with Terry. I do not really have a choice, as Terry makes sure I engage with him—as does Chris Wild. I will follow with keen interest the development of local authorities adopting care experience as a protected characteristic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) has direct experience of the care system. Indeed, one of the strengths of this Parliament is that we have so many parliamentarians who have a foot in some aspect of the care system as well as in the nation's Parliament.

Ahead of National Care Leavers Month in November, we are focused on ensuring that the Government celebrate role models for care-experienced young people. My hon. Friend is one of those role models. I am sure many care-experienced young people will look at what he does here in the UK Parliament and consider what they can go on to achieve themselves.

[*Josh MacAlister*]

I was struck by the clarity of Atlas, Mac, George and Ethan when I met them earlier this week. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing them into my office. They cut through a lot of the noise I hear as a Minister. Having had hundreds of conversations with care-experienced people over the years, I was again reminded of just what it is that we need to get on and deliver.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) for sharing his own experience, and I strongly associate myself with his remarks, particularly on the need for changes in the fostering and adoption system. I will come back to that later.

I welcome the cross-party nature of this debate. I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine), and I will return to aspects of adoption support and the ASGSF, as she raised some important points. I also thank the Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), for the spirit in which he approaches this issue. I recognise the importance of the connection between the overall children's social care system and how essential it is that we strengthen the country's child protection arrangements. A major part of that is tackling harms outside of the home, child abuse, child sexual abuse, group-based violence and the rape gangs he mentioned.

We need to recognise much more than we have in our debates in this Parliament that some of the underlying vulnerabilities of young girls stem from failings in our care system. I see far too many instances of young people who, when something has gone wrong, are sent to live in an institutional setting far away from people who know them and what their face looks like. Because of the vulnerable position that the care system puts them in, they are far too often left prey to violent and appalling criminals. We need to root that out at source.

The Government's overall response is the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is landmark legislation that we tabled within weeks of coming into government. There will be £2 billion of investment over this spending review period, with hundreds of millions being put into the Families First Partnership programme, which is all about building a multidisciplinary family help system.

We are now shifting gear—and this responds directly to a point made by the Chair of the Select Committee—away from pathfinders and tests to whole-system programmes of change that take in the entire country. I am grateful to the Committee for its work, carefully considered recommendations and the in-depth evidence it took, particularly from those with direct experience.

I will move briefly through the areas covered by the Committee's recommendations. First, regarding the need for early intervention and intensive support, I reassure hon. Members that, at their centre, our reforms are about creating multidisciplinary family help teams in every corner of England. These will be staffed not simply by social workers working in a high-assessment, high-referral, paper-based, bureaucratic administration, which is the description that many social workers have of the current orthodoxy. This is about moving towards multidisciplinary, locally based, low-stigma and well-evidenced support for families when they need it, with a focus not only on child protection but on the

vast majority of families who are not posing significant harm to their children but simply need support and help.

To reassure Members, I should say that that is not being taken forward solely by the Department for Education, but is a cross-Government endeavour. In a couple of weeks, I will be taking other Ministers and senior officials from the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care to see one of the most successful examples of multidisciplinary family help teams and multi-agency child protection teams. I am meeting ministerial colleagues at the Ministry for Communities, Housing and Local Government next week to have explicit conversations about how we grip the money we are putting into family help reforms, so that we can get effective change through the system. This is not simply about handing money out to local authorities and expecting change to happen; it is about managing a nationwide programme of reform, with investment alongside it, and holding each other to account to deliver the change that families urgently need.

Secondly, on foster care, I made the point—not as a Member of Parliament, but as someone who chaired the review, giving evidence to Select Committees in this place—that, within a year, we were able as a country to do a remarkable thing in creating 100,000 homes for Ukrainian families from a standing start. If we could do that, why was it not possible for us to do better than approving only 1,800 foster carers last year? That number is not even large enough to replace those who are retiring and leaving the vocation of fostering.

I reassure members of the Committee and Members of this House that we will invest tens of millions of pounds very soon in major changes to the fostering system. Regional care co-operatives and fostering hubs will sit at the heart of those changes. I will come forward soon with a comprehensive set of measures to ensure that we boost the numbers of foster carers and the types of foster care that children need. It is a personal priority for me as the Children and Families Minister.

On multi-agency child protection, the Government are taking forward bold structural changes to create multi-agency child protection teams in every local authority across the country, by fusing together different professionals from across the safeguarding partnerships so that, within one team, they can share the information they need and take joint expert action. The Government will put in place more guidance and extra support for the practitioners in those teams, because identifying significant harm, doing that with accuracy, taking action with pace once harm has been identified, and then holding other agencies to account for results is often what is missing in serious incidents where things go wrong.

Included in that will be a sharp focus on harms outside the home—I make that point because the Chair of the Select Committee emphasised it. During the review, I saw too many times that agencies were coming together in lots of meetings and describing the same concerns, but were not taking action. Parents themselves were sometimes the ones crying out for help when their children were at risk outside the home. Our child protection framework has to work in keeping children safe from harms where those harms are not based on the family network. I will also be setting out details of a consultation on the child protection authority very soon, which will support some of these efforts.

Helen Hayes: On the work on extra-familial harms, what engagement is the Minister having with colleagues in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government? That very much reflects my perspective as a constituency MP and the heartbreaking cases I have seen in my constituency, where a family needed to move due to an extra-familial harm to a child. The social housing system is unable at the moment to protect the family's tenancy rights. What happens is that families then move into temporary accommodation, and the whole stability of their life unravels as a consequence. In the previous Parliament, I put forward a proposal under the name Georgia's law, which was named for one of my constituents who experienced exactly that, with utterly tragic consequences for her family. I wonder whether the Minister might pick that up with colleagues cross-departmentally.

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what sounds like the very important idea for Georgia's law. I would be really delighted to hear more from her about that. If there are aspects that I can take forward with Ministers in other Departments, I will do so.

Regarding information sharing, we are making big changes to set the expectations in different systems, so that they can confidently share information. We have a single unique identifier that enables that to happen. Those pilots are under way at the moment, and the Bill will allow for that.

We want to see support for care leavers that is consistent and strong. The Bill includes national Staying Close support, and we will set out soon more details about what that support should include and the expectations across the country for it. It will help care leavers to live independently, but I stress that one of the changes that I would like us to see as a Government is a shift away from always talking about getting care leavers to the point of independence, because what they actually need from the care system is not independence, but interdependence, connection, a sense of belonging and love. That should be the driving purpose of both care and the leaving care system. Many of the things we are trying to provide through a state function are much more naturally provided through organic family networks.

Specifically on the question about the Government's recent announcement of support for higher education, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase, we will guarantee the maximum maintenance support for care leavers going to university, without a means test. That change, announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education at the Dispatch Box last week, has been widely welcomed.

Ofsted inspections will, and have already started to, provide a dedicated grade looking at the experience of care leavers, which means that there will be a focus on that.

On the question of the adoption and special guardianship support fund, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase and the Front-Bench spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset, I am attracted to my hon. Friend's idea about wider support. There are options for wider support. I met adopters and adoption support staff myself in recent weeks, and especially during National Adoption Week, and there are a number of options. I want to bring forward a longer-term plan for the ASGSF, to provide confidence and certainty, and

I want to continue speaking to Members of this House, but also to members of the adoption community and to special guardians, who are part of that community. We will come back with more detail on that issue, but I recognise the importance of what it provides.

Anna Sabine: Is there any chance that when the Minister is looking at the point about children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, he could look at the fact that certain groups of children, with certain conditions, may require much higher levels of financial support than others to get the diagnoses they need?

Josh MacAlister: I certainly will. The recognition is there that we need to provide a children's social care system that is able to intuitively wrap itself around all sorts of shapes and sizes of families, who may have very different needs. Too often, the system is not able to do that, and when it fails to, problems often escalate, costs go up and the state ends up picking up the bill anyway, but it is much greater, provision is much less effective and the outcomes are worse. So I do recognise the description that the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset has given of that.

On kinship care, we will be bringing forward a pilot for kinship allowances soon. It will benefit up to 5,000 children, and I can confirm that, as part of the pilot, payments will be equivalent to foster rates. I am looking at whether we can widen out some of the support that comes with that as well, and information on that will be shared soon, with a launch. Carers with special guardianship or child arrangements orders will receive payments equivalent to foster rates. I want to be clear about that. There will be an independent evaluation that goes alongside this, to inform the roll-out, and that should give us very strong data and hopefully a strong case in the course of this spending review period.

In terms of regulation and profit, I am concerned about the level of profiteering in the children's social care system about the level of profiteering in the children's social care system and the rising reliance on private providers, particularly of residential children's homes. The Bill will strengthen Ofsted's powers, improve oversight and make more data publicly available. I strongly believe that regional care co-operatives can be a powerful vehicle for getting back control of the broken care market. The Government will use the profit cap if necessary; that is why we have taken those powers in the Bill.

I understand the case made for a fresh, universal set of care standards that are more intuitive and that allow us to regulate and set packages of care around children, regardless of where they live, while they are in the care of the state. The Government's focus at the moment has been on the Bill, but I will continue to look at opportunities to improve care standards. In the meantime, I want to make sure that the options for 16 and 17-year-olds meet their needs. During the review, I met young people who felt abandoned at 16 and 17 because of the type of accommodation they were in. But I have also met 16 and 17-year-olds who do not want the same type of children's home care they may expect to get at the age of 11 or 12. We must design care standards that work for the whole population.

In terms of the children's social care workforce, we are introducing changes to support those in the residential care system. Specifically on social workers, the Government

[Josh MacAlister]

have a sharp focus on improving post-qualifying support, so that we can build expertise through training, both to support the roll-out of multidisciplinary family help teams and to strengthen the expertise we need in multi-agency child protection.

Regarding disabled children, we will consider the Law Commission's 40 recommendations, which have recently been published, and provide a full response. Regarding advocacy, changes will be made, but I am keen to look at what more can be done even once those have been shared. Advocacy can be an important and protective factor for many children who are in institutions where they do not feel as though their voices are heard.

To respond to the Chair of the Select Committee regarding family group decision making, the reason not to push for a specific model of family group decision making in primary legislation is that there is always the possibility in the next few years—I would love it if this did happen—that more impact evaluations come out that show a slightly different model of FGDM, which local authorities should have the choice to use.

As a Government, we are trying to build an infrastructure that sets the national framework with the outcomes that we want children's social care to achieve; practice guides that lay out the best available evidence, and I hope to have practice guidance for FGDMs as part of the roll-out; and then an expectation, through inspection and accountability, that service designers and practitioners are following the best available evidence in order to achieve the outcomes set out by the Government. I hope that reassures the Chair of the Select Committee.

In closing, I give deep thanks to the Committee for its interest in this issue. Children's social care is an area of Government policy that is often overlooked. On the eve of Care Leavers Month—this is the first time we are celebrating it as a month, with an Adjournment debate I am looking forward to taking part in—I thank everyone for their contributions, and I welcome their interest and challenge on this important set of changes. I reassure Members—as my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen asked me to—that this issue is my top priority, and I encourage them to get behind it, as part of a cross-party endeavour that can truly transform children's lives.

4.24 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank all hon. Members for contributing to this debate on a Thursday afternoon. For the benefit of anybody watching these proceedings externally, I should say that Thursday afternoons are a challenging time for hon. Members, when many of them have constituency commitments. The debate has therefore been characterised by the quality of the contributions, but not necessarily their quantity. It has been consensual and constructive, and it is important that we have brought the issues affecting some of the most vulnerable children in our country to the attention of the House.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) for sharing his experience of pursuing, at a local level, making care experience a protected characteristic. Important work is going on in many local authorities on that theme, and I look forward to undertaking further work in the Education Committee to look at the evidence coming from local authorities that have implemented that approach of the benefits that it brings. I too pay tribute to Terry Galloway for all of his campaigning work in that area.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), and pay tribute to him for the contribution he makes to the Education Committee. We are lucky to benefit from his experience of senior leadership in his local authority and his lived experience—they are valuable for the work of the Committee. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), who also spoke powerfully based on his lived experience, and we have benefited from him bringing it to the debate.

Finally, I thank the Minister for his response. The Select Committee is pleased to see him in his place, with the depth of experience and commitment that he brings to this area of policy. We look forward to continuing to scrutinise work on it and to seeing some of the announcements he made bear fruit in the lives of children and young people across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Education Committee, Children's social care, HC 430, and the Government response, HC 1350.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 30 October 2025

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

UK Newspapers: Foreign State Influence Regulations

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): This Government are committed to a pluralistic media landscape, where citizens are able to access information from a range of sources in order to form opinions. The public's ability to access a wide range of news, views and information about the world in which we live is central to the health of our democracy. It is vital that the UK has in place strong measures to protect this, including the foreign state influence regime, which ensures foreign states cannot control or influence UK newspapers or news periodicals.

In July 2025, the Government made affirmative regulations to allow foreign state-owned investors, or SOIs, to hold up to 15% of shares and voting rights in a UK newspaper owner, provided they are passive investors with no right or ability to appoint directors or other company officers of the newspaper owner, or to control or influence the newspaper owner's policy, directly or indirectly. We introduced this 15% cap to balance the need to protect the sector from foreign state influence with the need for newspapers to be able to access new investment from a range of sources if they are to remain sustainable and innovate for the future.

Today we are publishing the Government response to the public consultation on the draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Mergers Involving Newspaper Enterprises and Foreign Powers) (No. 2) Regulations 2025. This consultation ran from 16 July to 16 September 2025, and sought views on draft regulations which proposed to apply a 15% cap on aggregate holdings of shares or voting rights in a newspaper owner by SOIs acting on behalf of foreign powers of different countries.

The consultation also proposed that SOIs acquiring more than 5% of shares or voting rights in a UK newspaper owner directly must give the Secretary of State a qualifying notification within 14 days of the acquisition being made.

This legislation responds to concerns heard in Parliament about the remote risk that multiple SOIs, acting on behalf of different states, could each be able to hold up to 15%, resulting in a significant percentage of a UK newspaper being owned by foreign states.

The consultation response confirms that the regulations will introduce a 15% limit on the total shares or voting rights which may be held in a newspaper, directly or indirectly, by SOIs acting on behalf of any foreign power of any country or territory, and will introduce the notification requirement. In addition, they will introduce a requirement for SOIs which acquire a direct holding of more than 5% and must notify the Secretary of State of their investment, also to publish appropriate details about their investment on a website within the 14 day timeframe. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport commits to report to Parliament regularly on

the details that SOIs have published about their investments pursuant to the regulations. We will endeavour for this to be every six months.

The draft regulations making changes to the foreign state influence regime have been laid before Parliament today.

[HCWS1009]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Office for Nuclear Regulation: Executive Powers Annual Report

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has today published the annual report setting out the use of the Secretary of State's powers exercised in respect of the Office for Nuclear Regulation during the year 2024-25. This is in accordance with section 108(1) of the Energy Act 2013.

[HCWS1011]

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): This Statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by H2 Teesside Limited for the construction and operation of a blue hydrogen production facility situated in Teesside.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report, unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

The statutory deadline for the decision on the H2 Teesside application was 30 October 2025. The Secretary of State has decided to allow an extension and to set a new deadline of 4 December 2025. This is to allow time to consider the information further. The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS1010]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Early Pandemic PPE Procurement

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): During the gathering and review of evidence for module five of the covid-19 public inquiry, officials at the Cabinet Office concluded in April 2024 that another supplier, Luxe Lifestyle Ltd, should be on the list of suppliers identified as having been processed through and awarded a contract from the "high priority lane" for personal protective equipment procurement in 2020. This addition takes the total number of companies awarded contracts through this route to 52.

The Department of Health and Social Care agrees with the Cabinet Office's findings, and notes two other corrections that are to be published. The corrections

amend the referral details for another supplier, P1F Ltd, replacing the previously named person with “FCO Donations Team”, and correct a spelling error for another (Inivos Ltd, previously misspelled as Invios).

These changes and the corrected lists will be published on a new gov.uk page, which will supersede the original page published on 17 November 2021 by the previous Government. This new page will carry any subsequent amendments that might arise. Corrected lists can be found at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-10-30/HCWS1006/>
[HCWS1006]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Knife Surrender and Compensation

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): The ninja sword surrender and compensation scheme and the extended surrender arrangements, introduced by this Government, has been one of the most successful weapon surrender regimes to date. Across both schemes, more weapons were surrendered by members of the public: 4,020, compared with 2,738 during the zombie-style knives and machetes scheme, which took place last year.

The Government have implemented a ban on ninja swords, approved by Parliament earlier this year, and the ban came into force on 1 August 2025.

A surrender and compensation scheme ran from 1 July to 31 July 2025. Compensating lawful owners is a legal requirement, and the owner must be offered compensation when handing in their items in compliance with the law and guidance. An analysis of the scheme is set out below.

Total weapons surrendered	3942 (and this includes 142 weapons where compensation was not claimed)
Overall total claimed in compensation	£6,526.84

For the ninja sword surrender and compensation scheme, only two retailers submitted compensation claims, compared with 25 retailers who submitted claims during the zombie-style knives and machetes surrender and compensation scheme last year.

The Government provided extended knife surrender arrangements in the west midlands, Greater Manchester and London. These arrangements allowed members of the public to surrender weapons anonymously at a mobile surrender van operated by FazAmnesty and in 37 new surrender bins installed by Word 4 Weapons with Home Office funding. No compensation is payable under such arrangements. The total number of surrendered weapons under the extended arrangements are set out below.

Mobile Surrender Van	
Total surrendered weapons	783
Surrender Bins	
Total surrendered weapons	2787 ¹

[1] Count carried out on all surrender bins between 27 August and 3 September 2025

Birmingham Pub Bombings: Request for Public Inquiry

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I wish to update the House on the Government’s consideration of the request for a statutory public inquiry into the events of the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings.

First and foremost, I want to reiterate my deepest sympathies, and the sympathies of the Government, to all the families of those who were brutally murdered, whose lives were changed forever on 21 November 1974. The abhorrent attacks on the Mulberry Bush and the Tavern in the Town public houses, which tragically took 21 innocent lives and injured over 200 others, remain a source of profound grief and heartbreak to everyone affected and to the wider community within the great city of Birmingham, in what was one of this country’s darkest hours.

I would like to pay tribute to Justice4the21 for their continued campaigning, which has been both tireless and dignified. For over five decades, they have sought truth, justice, and accountability, while also grieving for their loved ones. Their unwavering efforts are testament to their remarkable strength, and their continued engagement with the Home Office has been central to our consideration of their request for an inquiry.

I also recognise the many others that have campaigned on this issue including members of the public, community organisations, and fellow parliamentarians. The commitment displayed has been a powerful reflection of the devastating aftermath that these heinous attacks continue to have on the Birmingham community, and I extend my gratitude to all those who have provided contributions.

After very careful consideration, the Government have decided not to establish a public inquiry into the Birmingham pub bombings. While I understand that this will be very disappointing news to the families, it is our firm belief that the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery can effectively investigate the case, offering the best chance to provide answers to Justice4the21’s questions.

The commission was established exclusively to investigate troubles-related cases and operates independently from Government to consider all the circumstances around troubles-related deaths and serious injuries. To do this, the commission has been granted a wide range of powers to access information—including from Government Departments, the police, and the security and intelligence agencies—in connection with an investigation. In investigations into troubles-related offences, the commission has robust powers, including of arrest and to compel evidence. Its caseload is primarily driven by referrals from victims and their families, with the Guildford pub bombings, the Warrenpoint ambush, the Kingsmill massacre and the M62 coach bombing already referred to it by family members. The commission has the powers, resources, and expertise to support the families in seeking answers to their questions, and I would strongly recommend that anyone else affected by the troubles talk to the commission.

As the House will be aware, on 14 October, the Government introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. This will put in place a reformed legacy commission, with strengthened governance and new conflict of interest duties, a statutory oversight board to provide accountability, and a statutory advisory group to ensure that the voices

of victims and survivors are heard as part of the commission's work. It also makes provision for enhanced fact-finding powers and a disclosure regime akin to that for public inquiries.

In addition, the Government have published a remedial order to remove the widely rejected immunity scheme that could have offered immunity to those who committed horrific terrorist acts such as the Birmingham pub bombings and which has been found by the courts to be incompatible with the UK's human rights obligations.

The legislation will also ensure that the cases the commission is currently investigating, or which are referred to it, before our new legislation comes into force, are able to transition smoothly to the new prospective arrangements.

Today I have recommended to the families that they consider referring their case to the commission and discuss how it would approach an investigation. My officials and I will be available to support Justice4the21 as they consider their next steps.

Once again, I would like to thank the families for their advocacy and patience in this matter. I know that the passage of time does not ease the pain, but I want to make clear that the Government recognise the deep trauma that continues to be felt by the victims and loved ones of those killed or injured during the troubles, and we are absolutely committed to supporting everyone who seeks justice and accountability.

[HCWS1008]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Timms Review: Updated Terms of Reference and Next Steps

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): In June, the Government announced it would launch the Timms review, the first ever full review of personal independence payment, with the aim of ensuring we have a system that supports disabled people to achieve better health, higher living standards and greater independence, including through employment.

Listening to those with lived experience will be critical to the success of any future reform. That is why we launched the pathways to work consultation, to which the Government will respond today. It is why we ran collaboration committees to bring together groups of disabled people and other experts to inform the design

of the support we offer. And it is why we will co-produce the Timms review with disabled people, the organisations that represent them, and other experts.

Over the summer, I met with disabled people, disabled people's organisations, disability, welfare and carers' charities, think-tanks and other experts to discuss how we should approach co-production in the Timms review. This is the first time that the Government have undertaken coproduction on this scale, although there have been many good examples in local and devolved contexts, and we wanted to take time to learn from those with expertise and experience.

Having taken this feedback on board, we are today publishing updated terms of reference and setting out the next steps for the review. The updated ToR contain a small number of revisions to reflect the current Government policy following changes to the Universal Credit Act 2025, and to clarify the review's overarching aims and fiscal parameters to give clarity to participants, stakeholders and the public. In line with the principle of co-production, they give the review a broad remit to set its own strategic direction, priorities and workplan. The revised ToR have been published on gov.uk at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/timms-review-of-pip-terms-of-reference>

I can also confirm today that I will co-chair the review alongside Sharon Brennan and Dr Clenton Farquharson CBE. I look forward to drawing upon their wealth of knowledge and experience as we begin this work together.

As co-chairs, we will oversee a steering group with a majority of its membership made up of disabled people or representatives of disabled people's organisations, ensuring disabled people are at the heart of the review. The group will be recruited through an open and transparent expression of interest process, which has launched today and is available on gov.uk and will run for four weeks.

We will share the EOI, which is available in a range of accessible formats, widely with stakeholders and across our networks.

The steering group will not work alone; it will shape and oversee a programme of participation and engagement that brings together the full range of views and voices.

We are ready to listen and learn, and we are committed to continued transparency and evaluation as this work continues. The review is expected to report to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by autumn 2026, with an interim update expected ahead of that.

[HCWS1005]

Petition

Thursday 30 October 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Keighley Picture House

The petition of residents of the constituency of Keighley and Ilkley,

Declares that Keighley Picture House has been part of the town's heritage since 1913 and must be saved from redevelopment by Bradford council.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work constructively with Bradford council and Keighley town council to guarantee the future of Keighley Picture House as a cinema and cultural venue for generations to come.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robbie Moore, *Official Report*, 10 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 1004.]

[P003111]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):

The Government recognise the important role that community assets like Keighley Picture House play in the vitality and identity of local areas, and the efforts of Keighley and Ilkley residents to save the cinema for future community use. As you will appreciate, local authorities are independent of central Government, and we believe local leaders are best placed to identify local priorities.

We are committed to helping local people to protect community assets. The assets of community value scheme allows communities to nominate locally important buildings or land to be listed by their local authority. We are strengthening this scheme through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, with the introduction of a new community right to buy. This will give communities the first opportunity to purchase an asset of community value when it is put up for sale by its owner, and an extended 12-month period to raise funding to buy the asset.

Written Correction

Thursday 30 October 2025

Ministerial Correction

EDUCATION

International Baccalaureate

The following extract is from Education questions on 20 October 2025.

Josh MacAlister: The Government made big decisions at the spending review to increase the overall funding available to 16-to-19 courses. Next financial year, there will be an increase of over £800 million.

[*Official Report*, 20 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 601.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister):

Josh MacAlister: The Government made big decisions at the spending review to increase the overall funding available to 16-to-19 courses. Next financial year, there will be an increase of **nearly** £800 million.

ORAL ANSWERS

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