

**Monday
8 December 2025**

**Volume 777
No. 218**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 8 December 2025

The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

Abbreviation	Affiliation
Alliance	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Con	Conservative Party
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
Green	Green Party of England and Wales
Ind	Independent*
Lab	Labour Party
Lab/Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
PC	Plaid Cymru
Reform	Reform UK
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

*The term “Independent” may denote—

Members who have been elected as Independent candidates without affiliation to a political party; or

Members who have been elected after standing for a political party but no longer have the party Whip in the House of Commons.

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. John Healey, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Wes Streeting, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS AND TRADE, AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Jo Stevens, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business and Trade—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §
Sir Chris Bryant, MP (Minister for Trade) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Blair McDougall, MP
Kate Dearden, MP
Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §
Chris McDonald, MP §

Cabinet Office—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Dan Jarvis MBE, MP §
The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP (Minister without Portfolio)

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Chris Ward, MP
Satvir Kaur, MP
Josh Simons, MP

Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Stephanie Peacock, MP
Baroness Twycross §

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. John Healey, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Luke Pollard, MP (Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry)
Lord Coaker

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Al Carns DSO OBE MC, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
Louise Sandher-Jones, MP (Minister for Veterans and People)

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Georgia Gould OBE, MP (Minister for School Standards)
The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills, and Minister for Women and Equalities) §
The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Olivia Bailey, MP
Josh MacAlister OBE, MP
Seema Malhotra, MP §

Energy Security and Net Zero—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §
Michael Shanks, MP (Minister for Energy)
Lord Whitehead CBE (Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Katie White OBE, MP
Martin McCluskey, MP
Chris McDonald, MP §

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP (Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Emma Hardy, MP
Mary Creagh CBE, MP
Baroness Hayman of Ullock

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington
Stephen Doughty, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Hamish Falconer, MP
Seema Malhotra, MP §
Chris Elmore, MP

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Wes Streeting, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Karin Smyth, MP (Minister for Secondary Care)
Stephen Kinnock, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Merron
Ashley Dalton, MP
Dr Zubir Ahmed, MP

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Dan Jarvis MBE, MP (Minister for Security) §
The Rt Hon. Lord Hanson of Flint
Sarah Jones, MP (Minister for Policing and Crime)
Alex Norris, MP (Minister for Border Security and Asylum)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jess Phillips, MP
Mike Tapp, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Matthew Pennycook, MP (Minister for Housing and Planning)

Alison McGovern, MP (Minister for Local Government and Homelessness)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Taylor of Stevenage §

Miatta Fahnbulleh, MP

Samantha Dixon MBE, MP

Justice—

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Timpson OBE (Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending)

Sarah Sackman, KC, MP (Minister for Courts and Legal Services)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Alex Davies-Jones, MP

Baroness Levitt, KC

Jake Richards, MP §

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC

SOLICITOR GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Ellie Reeves, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Baroness Smith of Cluny, KC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

Leader of the House of Lords—

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—Lord Collins of Highbury

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Matthew Patrick, MP

Science, Innovation and Technology—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §

The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Digital Government and Data) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §

Kanishka Narayan, MP

Scotland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Kirsty McNeill, MP

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE (Minister for Rail)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Simon Lightwood, MP

Lilian Greenwood, MP §

Keir Mather, MP

Treasury—

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—Lord Livermore

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Dan Tomlinson, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—Lucy Rigby, KC, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP (Chief Whip)

Torsten Bell, MP §

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Christian Wakeford, MP

Stephen Morgan, MP

Lilian Greenwood, MP §
 Gen Kitchen, MP
 Taiwo Owatemi, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Mark Ferguson, MP
 Imogen Walker, MP
 Gregor Poynton, MP
 Jade Botterill, MP
 Deirdre Costigan, MP
 Claire Hughes, MP §
 Jake Richards, MP §

UK Export Finance—

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP
 MINISTER FOR TRADE—Sir Chris Bryant, MP §

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jo Stevens, MP
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
 Anna McMorris, MP
 Claire Hughes, MP §

Work and Pensions—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP
 MINISTERS OF STATE—
 The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §
 The Rt Hon. Dame Diana Johnson DBE, MP
 The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills) §
 Baroness Sherlock OBE
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
 Andrew Western, MP
 Torsten Bell, MP §

His Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon GCVO
 LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Rosslyn
 MASTER OF THE HORSE—The Rt Hon. Lord Ashton of Hyde
 TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Sir Mark Tami, MP
 VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Sir Nicholas Dakin, MP
 COMPTROLLER—Nesil Caliskan, MP
 CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Kennedy of Southwark
 CAPTAIN OF THE KING'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Baroness Wheeler MBE
 LORDS IN WAITING—
 Lord Lemos CMG CBE
 Lord Wilson of Sedgfield
 Lord Katz MBE
 Lord Leong CBE
 BARONESSSES IN WAITING—
 Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §
 Baroness Taylor of Stevenage §
 Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent
 Baroness Twycross §
 Baroness Blake of Leeds

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING THE CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Marsha De Cordova, MP
 REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Stephen Gethins, MP
 REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Nick Smith, MP
 REPRESENTING THE RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD—Nick Smith, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Ms Nusrat Ghani, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Judith Cummins, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Mr Clive Betts, Dawn Butler, Sir Christopher Chope, Peter Dowd, Clive Efford, Gill Furniss, The Rt Hon. Sir Roger Gale, Carolyn Harris, The Rt Hon. Sir John Hayes, Sir Mark Hendrick, Wera Hobhouse, Dr Rupa Huq, Christine Jardine, The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, Emma Lewell, Dame Siobhain McDonagh, The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, The Rt Hon. David Mundell, The Rt Hon. Dr Andrew Murrison, The Rt Hon. Mark Pritchard, Graham Stringer, The Rt Hon. Graham Stuart, The Rt Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne, Karl Turner, Derek Twigg, The Rt Hon. Valerie Vaz, Martin Vickers, Matt Western, The Rt Hon. Sir Jeremy Wright KC.

SECRETARY—Lynn Gardner

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—

The Speaker, The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP (Chair), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General), Mr Shrinivas Honap (External Member), Catherine Ward (External Member), Tom Goldsmith (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Administration), The Rt Hon. Steve Barclay, MP, Rachel Blake, MP, The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP (Leader of the House), Marie Goldman, MP, The Rt Hon. Jesse Norman, MP, Nick Smith, MP

SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Lloyd Owen

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Edward Potton

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—

Tom Goldsmith (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Administration) (Chair), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Participation Team), Alison Giles CB (Director of Security for Parliament), Dr Grant Hill-Cawthorne (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information), James Rhys (Managing Director, Select Committee Team), Vicky Rock (Finance Director and Managing Director, Finance, Portfolio and Performance), Saira Salimi (Speaker's Counsel), Richard Shoreland (Managing Director, People and Culture), Andy Smith (Managing Director, Parliamentary Digital Service)

SECRETARY TO THE BOARD—Hannah Bryce

CHAMBER AND PARTICIPATION TEAM

CLERK ASSISTANT AND MANAGING DIRECTOR—Sarah Davies

CHAMBER BUSINESS

STRATEGIC DIRECTOR—Edward Beale

Public and Private Bill Office—

CLERK OF LEGISLATION—Tom Healey

CLERK OF BILLS—Lynn Gardner

EXAMINER OF PETITIONS FOR PRIVATE BILLS AND TAXING OFFICER—Lynn Gardner

CLERK OF PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS—Anne-Marie Griffiths

CLERK OF PROGRAMMING AND GRAND COMMITTEES—Lucinda Maer

CLERK OF DIVISIONS, ELECTIONS, DIGITAL AND PUBLISHING—Kevin Maddison

CLERK OF DELEGATED LEGISLATION AND SUPPLY—Robert Cope

CLERK OF PRIVATE AND HYBRID BILLS—Simon Armitage

CLERKS—Simon Armitage, Sanjana Balakrishnan, Kevin Candy, Robert Cope, Clare Cozens, Harriet Deane, Dr Adam Evans, Anne-Marie Griffiths, Kevin Maddison, Francis Morse, Dominic Stockbridge

OFFICE MANAGER—Natalie Flanagan

Journal Office—

CLERK OF THE JOURNALS—Eve Samson

CLERKS—Zereena Arshad, Gavin Blake, Ian Bradshaw, Kevin Candy, Richard Cooke, Kenneth Fox, Sara Howe, Liam Laurence Smyth, David Lloyd, Luanne Middleton, Sibel Taner, Susie Smith, George Stokes, Melissa Walker, David Weir, Jonathan Whiffing

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL: SECRETARY—Ian Bradshaw

BUSINESS MANAGER—Julie Evans

ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER—Deborah Courtney

Committees—

PETITIONS: CLERKS—Mike Hennessy, Alison Pickard

PRIVILEGES: CLERKS—David Weir, Susie Smith

PROCEDURE: CLERKS—Gavin Blake, George Stokes

STANDARDS: CLERKS—David Weir, Susie Smith

Statutory Committees—

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS ESTIMATES COMMISSION: SECRETARY—Kevin Candy

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION: SECRETARY—Kevin Candy

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR IPSA: SECRETARY—Kevin Candy

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION: SECRETARY—Kevin Candy

Other Committees—

ECCLESIASTICAL COMMITTEE: COMMONS SECRETARY—George Stokes

Table Office—

PRINCIPAL CLERK—Farrah Bhatti

DEPUTY HEAD—Dr Rebecca Davies

CLERKS—Jim Davey, Anna Gillingham, Bethan Harding, Tim Jarrett, Zac Mead, Anwen Rees, Sarah Thatcher, Nicholas Taylor, Emily Unell, Joanna Welham

BACKBENCH BUSINESS: CLERKS—Nicholas Taylor, Jim Davey

BUSINESS MANAGER—Damith Rajakaruna

Vote Office—

DELIVERER OF THE VOTE—Tom McVeagh

DEPUTY DELIVERER OF THE VOTE—Nick Battley

HEAD OF PUBLISHING—Paul Hood

PROCEDURAL PUBLISHING LEAD (TECHNOLOGY AND SYSTEMS)—Mark Fawcett

PROCEDURAL PUBLISHING LEAD (CONTENT)—Paul Sullivan

PROCEDURAL PUBLISHING LEAD (OPERATIONS)—Tomasz Wiatr

INTERPARLIAMENTARY RELATIONS OFFICE

PRINCIPAL CLERKS—Sarah Hartwell-Naguib

HEAD OF STRATEGY AND PROGRAMMES—Emma Makey

Parliamentary Assemblies—

DELEGATION SECRETARY TO PACE AND UK-EU PPA—Ben Rayner

DELEGATION SECRETARY TO NATO PA AND OSCE PA—Leoni Kurt

CONFERENCE MANAGER—Jasmine Walker

SENIOR CONFERENCE OFFICER—Helena Ali

CONFERENCE OFFICERS—Zainab Balogun, Mathew Hole, Sue Holt

Visits and Engagement—

VISITS MANAGER—Michelle Wenham

INTERPARLIAMENTARY RELATIONS OFFICERS—Karen Georgiou, Wyn Mills, Lisa Stead

OFFICIAL REPORT

EDITOR—Jack Homer

DEPUTY EDITOR—Emma Kirby

PERSONAL ASSISTANT—Caroline Rowlands

DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY BROADCASTING—Michael MacFarlane

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY BROADCASTING—Sarah-Jayne Corbett

MANAGING EDITORS (COMMITTEES)—Jez Oates, Ian Oakhill

MANAGING EDITORS (HOUSE)—Vivien Wilson, Jonathan Hoare, Keith Brown, Tom Martin, Joanna Lipkowska, James Mayne, Charlie Browne

COMMITTEE SUB-EDITORS—Juliet Levy, Ken Gall, Victoria Hart, Richard Purnell, Patricia Hill, Saul Minaee, Cara Clark, Owain Wilkins, Richard Hallas, Helen Lowe, Guy Hursthouse, Matthew Johnson, Andrew Taylor, Guy Mathers, Jennifer Hilder, Josie Kember, William Friend

HOUSE REPORTERS—Emily Morris, Jude Wheway, Angus Andrews, Lydia Davis, Eugene Wolstenholme, Stephen Farrell, Vivienne Kenny, Richard Eaton, Kath Burns, James Lawrenson, William Opposs, George Chapman, Elizabeth Mulready, Jonathan Bray, Hilary Clarke, Hannah Minns

HEAD OF ADMINISTRATION—Stephen O'Riordan

SENIOR HANSARD ADMINISTRATOR—Tes Stranger

ANNUNCIATOR SUPERINTENDENT—John LeHunte

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Daniel Greenberg CB
 REGISTRAR OF MEMBERS' FINANCIAL INTERESTS—James Davies
 SENIOR INVESTIGATIONS AND COMPLAINTS MANAGER—Helen Reid

PARTICIPATION

DIRECTOR OF PARTICIPATION—Matt Ringer
 HEAD OF STRATEGY—Emma Terry
 DIRECTOR OF VISITOR EXPERIENCE—Abbie Fox-Smith
 HEAD OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT—Fran Jeens

SERJEANT AT ARMS

SERJEANT AT ARMS—Ugbana Oyet
 DEPUTY SERJEANT AT ARMS (OPERATIONS)—Chris Rust
 PRINCIPAL DOORKEEPER—Phil Howse
 HEAD OF POLICY—Debbie Southgate

SHARED CPT AND SCT TEAM SERVICES

DIRECTOR OF SHARED TEAM SERVICES—Amy Baxter

Strategy, Performance and Risk—

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SHARED TEAM SERVICES—Clementine Brown
 BUSINESS SUPPORT OFFICER—Robert Middleton
 BUSINESS SUPPORT ADMINISTRATOR—Lorcoln Green

People, Internal Communications and Staff Engagement—

HEAD OF PEOPLE CAPABILITY—Laura Rowick
 INCLUSION LEAD—Chloe Challender
 HEAD OF CLERK EARLY CAREER DEVELOPMENT—Sara Elkhawad
 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT MANAGER—Amanda Hawkins
 COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT OFFICER—Seth Petherick
 PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT AND COACHING MANAGER—Richard Edwards
 OFFICE MANAGER—Garcia Foster

Digital—

DIGITAL COLLABORATION AND INFORMATION LEAD—Salim Ali

Executive Support—

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE CLERK ASSISTANT—Filiz Gurer
 EXECUTIVE SUPPORT OFFICER (CHAMBER OPERATIONS)—Heather Crook

WAYS AND MEANS OFFICE

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Abi Samuels
 ASSISTANT PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—James Holland

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY

DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY—Morgan Edwards
 DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER STRATEGY AND RETAIL—Gabriela Gandolfini
 DIRECTOR OF ACCOMMODATION AND FACILITIES—Dominic Bransden
 DIRECTOR OF CATERING SERVICES—Richard Tapner-Evans
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR, DECANT—Helen Spall
 PARLIAMENTARY LOGISTICS MANAGER—Wesley Auvache
 HEAD OF SERVICE DELIVERY—Simon Mansfield
 HEAD OF RETAIL AND BUYING—Diana Christou
 HEAD OF ACCOMMODATION—Laura Blake
 EXECUTIVE HEAD CHEF—Mark Hill

FINANCE, PORTFOLIO AND PERFORMANCE

MANAGING DIRECTOR—Vicky Rock
 PA TO THE MANAGING DIRECTOR—Aysha Hoque

MEMBERS' PENSIONS

DIRECTOR OF MEMBERS' PENSIONS—Gurpreet Bassi
 HEAD OF TRUSTEE AND SECRETARIAT SERVICES—Abigail Slade

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

DIRECTOR OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE—Malin Eliasson

HEAD OF FINANCIAL OPERATIONS—Rosalind Shaw

CHIEF ACCOUNTANT—Martina Hunter

HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES—Anna Mitchell

HEAD OF SYSTEMS ACCOUNTING—Asad Qureshi

HEAD OF FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING—Sally Thompson, Edward Knight

HEAD OF FINANCIAL PLANNING AND ANALYSIS—Andrew Riley

FINANCIAL BUSINESS PARTNERING

DIRECTOR OF FINANCIAL BUSINESS PARTNERING—James Deane

ASSISTANT DIRECTORS, FINANCE BUSINESS PARTNERING—Nicky Maslin, Ebenezer Oduwole, Anthony Newman, Andrew Martin, Vanessa Chiu, Gbenga Samuel

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

DIRECTOR OF FINANCE IMPROVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE—Alan Stewart

HEAD OF FINANCIAL CAPABILITY—Ollie Stitson

HEAD OF INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION TEAM—Giles Mason

HEAD OF FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE AND VALUE—Jack Dent

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT TEAM

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR—Samir Rao

BUSINESS MANAGER (COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT)—Martha Lowe

BUSINESS MANAGER (PLANNING AND STRATEGY)—Jackie Pavitt

BUSINESS MANAGER (INFORMATION COMPLIANCE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT)—Ramila Jeeawon

ENTERPRISE PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT OFFICE

DIRECTOR OF EPMO—John Hunt

HEAD OF PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT—Abiola Babalola

HEAD OF BUSINESS CHANGE—Gavin Woods

HEAD OF PROJECT DELIVERY CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE AND PROFESSION—Algy Ayson

SAVINGS AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

PROGRAMME DIRECTOR—Julie Tague

GOVERNANCE OFFICE

SECRETARY TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION AND HEAD OF THE GOVERNANCE OFFICE—Lloyd Owen

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR—Cara Moore

DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY SAFETY (INTERIM)—Joel Crompton

HEAD OF THE DOMESTIC COMMITTEES AND GOVERNANCE SECRETARIAT—Edward Potton

HEAD OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ASSURANCE (INTERIM)—Ashleigh Osborne-Scott

HEAD OF INTERNAL AUDIT—Richard Stammers

HEAD OF INFORMATION COMPLIANCE—Victoria Payne

ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURE DIRECTOR—Sarah Petit

INDEPENDENT COMPLAINTS AND GRIEVANCE SCHEME

DIRECTOR—Miriam Minty

DEPUTY DIRECTOR—Stuart Ramsay

SENIOR OPERATIONS MANAGER—Rachel Briggs

OFFICE OF SPEAKER'S COUNSEL

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

COUNSEL—Daniel Denman (Joint Head of Select Committee Legal Advisers), Helen Emes (Deputy Speaker's Counsel), Justin Leslie (Domestic Legislation), Indira Rao MBE (Joint Head of Select Committee Legal Advisers)

OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE

CLERK OF THE HOUSE—Tom Goldsmith

DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—Marianne Cwynarski

Operations—

DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS—Vasilis Gialias

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE DIRECTOR GENERAL—Will Newing

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE CLERK OF THE HOUSE—James Hockaday
 ASSISTANT PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE CLERK OF THE HOUSE AND DIRECTOR GENERAL—Ed Hamill
 BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR—Cara Moore
 SENIOR FINANCE BUSINESS PARTNER—Grace Akora

Delivery—

DIRECTOR OF DELIVERY AND SECRETARY TO THE COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—HANNAH BRYCE

Strategic Business Resilience—

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC BUSINESS RESILIENCE—John Owen

Communications Office—

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS—Liz Hickey
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS (INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS)—Alex Noonoo
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS (MEDIA RELATIONS)—ALASDAIR RENDALL

PARLIAMENTARY DIGITAL SERVICE

MANAGING DIRECTOR AND CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER—Andy Smith
 CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER—Mark Lyons
 DIRECTOR OF CYBER AND INFORMATION SECURITY—Mark Harbord
 DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL CUSTOMER SERVICES—Rob Sanders
 DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL DELIVERY—Laura Bennett
 DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL DELIVERY—Nikola Spicer
 DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC DIGITAL DEMAND—Rebecca Elton
 DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL VALUE—Luke Hussey
 DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE—Elaine Thain

PARLIAMENTARY MAINTENANCE SERVICES TEAM

DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY MAINTENANCE—Mark Ryce
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR, MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS—Andrew Doherty
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR, MAINTENANCE PROJECTS—Adnan Al-Ammaren
 HEAD OF COMPLIANCE—Jason Bunn
 HEAD OF MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS—Mark Hill
 ENGINEERING OPERATIONS MANAGER—James May
 BUILDING SERVICES AND CEREMONIAL WORKS MANAGER—Michael Elliott
 REACTIVE WORKS TEAM LEADER—Alan Dilly
 PROGRAMME MANAGER—Funke Adelekun
 PRINCIPAL ENGINEER—Alex Wong
 HEAD OF PMST CHANGE PROGRAMMES—Whitley Lane
 PRIVATE SECRETARY TO PMST DIRECTORS—Megan Ward

PARLIAMENTARY SECURITY DEPARTMENT

DIRECTOR OF SECURITY FOR PARLIAMENT—Alison Giles
 PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE DIRECTOR—Joanna Walker
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SECURITY (PEOPLE SECURITY)—Oliver Davis
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SECURITY (SECURITY PORTFOLIO)—Catherine Hallett
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SECURITY (PERSONNEL SECURITY)—Alice Fairbairn
 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SECURITY (SECURITY AND FIRE OPERATIONS)—Simon Hankins

PEOPLE AND CULTURE TEAM

MANAGING DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE AND CULTURE—Richard Shoreland
 PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE MANAGING DIRECTOR—Mike Page
 PA TO THE MANAGING DIRECTOR—Katey Fuller

HUMAN RESOURCES

HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTORS—Tina Beeden, Sally Jackson, Mark Pomroy
 HEAD OF DEVELOPMENT—Roxanne Burrows
 HEAD OF PEOPLE MANAGEMENT—Karen Bovaird
 HEAD OF HR SHARED SERVICES—Deborah Macaly
 HEAD OF RECRUITMENT—Andy Williamson
 HEAD OF REWARD—Catherine Vincent
 HEAD OF EMPLOYEE RELATIONS—Elizabeth Drewett

MEMBERS' AND MEMBERS' STAFF SERVICES TEAM

DIRECTOR OF MEMBERS' SERVICES—Katy Stout

DIRECTOR OF MEMBERS' STAFF ENGAGEMENT—Jo Willows

HEAD OF MEMBERS' HR SERVICES—Kim McGrath

OPERATIONS LEAD—Tara Cullen

HEAD OF MEMBER LIAISON—Zoe Backhouse

ORGANISATION EFFECTIVENESS

HEAD OF WORKFORCE PLANNING AND DATA—Caroline Young

HEAD OF CHANGE—Dominic Virdee-Livens

HEAD OF ORGANISATION DESIGN PROJECTS—Jane Grieveson

HEAD OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT—Sophie Merat-Esfandiari

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

HEAD OF PARLIAMENTARY HEALTH AND WELLBEING—Josie Lazenby

HEALTH AND WELLBEING MANAGER—Tanya Price

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH MANAGER—Carol Gill

PRACTICE NURSE MANAGER—Edson Cruz

PRACTICE MANAGER—Samantha Holliday

QUALITY AND GOVERNANCE LEAD—Chris Johns

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

DIRECTOR OF INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY—Anne Foster

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY LEAD—Rachael Holbrook

SENIOR INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY MANAGER—Ann Moghaddami

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION

HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARIAN AND MANAGING DIRECTOR—Dr Grant Hill-Cawthorne

LIBRARY SERVICES

DIRECTOR OF LIBRARY SERVICES—Martin Reid

HEAD OF MEMBERS' LIBRARY SERVICES—Linda Coombs

HEAD OF LIBRARY RESOURCES—Katharine Marke

HEAD OF RESEARCH INFORMATION SERVICE—Claire Sewell

LIBRARY SERVICES PROGRAMME MANAGER—Paul Lester

R&I RESTORATION AND RENEWAL LEAD—Hannah Russell

RESEARCH

DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH—Dr Anna Dickson

HEAD OF BUSINESS AND TRANSPORT SECTION—Patrick Briône

HEAD OF ECONOMIC POLICY AND STATISTICS SECTION—Dr Lorna Booth

HEAD OF HOME AFFAIRS SECTION—Doug Pyper

HEAD OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE SECTION—Dr Sarah Barber

HEAD OF PARLIAMENT AND CONSTITUTION CENTRE—Chris Rhodes

HEAD OF SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT SECTION—Xameerah Malik

HEAD OF SOCIAL AND GENERAL STATISTICS SECTION—Carl Baker

HEAD OF SOCIAL POLICY SECTION—Dr Elise Uberoi

CAREER SUPPORT LEAD—Andrew Mackley

POLICY, RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS COMMUNITY (R&I AND SCT)

HEAD OF PARLIAMENT, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTION HUB—Graeme Cowie

HEAD OF CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT HUB—Becky Mawhood

HEAD OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND NATIONAL SECURITY HUB—Ashlee Godwin

HEAD OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND WELLBEING HUB—Thomas Powell

HEAD OF HOME AFFAIRS, JUSTICE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITIES HUB—Mariam Keating

HEAD OF SCIENCE, DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGY HUB—Sarah Bunn

HEAD OF THE BUSINESS, INDUSTRY AND PUBLIC FINANCE HUB—Georgina Hutton

HEAD OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY AND THE WORKFORCE HUB—Libby McEnhill

HEAD OF THE EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HUB—Chloë Cockett

PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

HEAD OF PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY—Oliver Bennett MBE

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE LEAD—Sarah Foxen

COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

HEAD OF RESEARCH AND INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT—Pippa Lansdell

DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS LEAD—Ed Knight

EDITOR—Campbell Brooks

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS LEAD—Rachel Griffiths

DATA SERVICES

DIRECTOR OF DATA SERVICES—Bryn Morgan

HEAD OF INDEXING AND DATA MANAGEMENT—Anya Somerville

DATA SCIENCE LEAD—Louie Pollock

TEAM SERVICES

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR—Richard Keen

SENIOR BUSINESS MANAGER—Melissa Macdonald

RESEARCH PROGRAMME MANAGER—James Sparke

PEOPLE CAPABILITY LEAD—Claire Catherall

STRATEGIC TRAINING LEAD—Anne-Lise Harding

OFFICE SERVICES MANAGER—Gabrielle Hughes

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT TEAM

MANAGING DIRECTOR—Charlotte Simmonds

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY AND BUSINESS CASE—Jenni Singleton

DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMME AND ASSURANCE—James Young

DIRECTOR OF R&R BOARDS AND GROUPS—Elizabeth Hunt

DIRECTOR OF R&R ENGAGEMENT AND CHANGE—Emma Downing

SELECT COMMITTEE TEAM

MANAGING DIRECTOR—James Rhys

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE MANAGING DIRECTOR—Olivia Cormack

SUPERVISING CLERKS OF SELECT COMMITTEES—Gosia McBride (Economics, Transport & Social Policy Cluster), Chris Stanton (Justice, Home Affairs, Parliament & Constitution Cluster), Adam Mellows-Facer (International Affairs, Defence, Science & Environment Cluster)

DIRECTOR OF SELECT COMMITTEE SCRUTINY AND ANALYSIS—Ariella Huff

DIRECTOR OF SELECT COMMITTEE COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT—Anikka Weerasinghe

HEAD OF SELECT COMMITTEE OPERATIONS—Hannah Wentworth

Departmental Select Committees—

BUSINESS AND TRADE: CLERKS—Libby Kurien, Jonathan Finlay, Jennifer McCormick

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT: CLERKS—Ben Sneddon, Chris Watson

DEFENCE: CLERKS—Steven Mark, George James

EDUCATION: CLERKS—Laura Daniels/Sian Woodward, Edward Hicks

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO: CLERKS—Stephen McGinness, Sam Nariani

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Sean Kinsey, Aaron Kulakiewicz

FOREIGN AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Sarah Rees, Charlotte Swift/Emma Cabezaolias

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE: CLERKS—Ben Williams, Amna Bokhari

HOME AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Chris Shaw, Ed Faulkner

JUSTICE: CLERKS—Robi Quigley, Tamsin Maddock

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT: CLERKS—Mike Everett, Bethan Harding

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Stephen Habberley, Emma Elson

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY: CLERKS—Hannah Stone, Kate Anderson

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Bradley Albrow, Heather Nathoo

TRANSPORT: CLERKS—Judith Boyce, Gini Griffin/Edward Hicks

TREASURY: CLERKS—Nick Beech, Ffion Morgan

WELSH AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Alison Groves, Lauren Kosky

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES: CLERKS—Phil Jones, Danniella Kinder

WORK AND PENSIONS: CLERKS—John-Paul Flaherty, Paul Owen

Other Committees—

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT: CLERKS—Ian Cruse, Jonathan Edwards
 INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: CLERKS—Faten Hussein, Kay Gammie
 JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS: COMMONS CLERKS—Rhiannon Hollis, Ray Jerram
 LIAISON: CLERK—Kate Emms
 MODERNISATION: CLERKS—Joanna Dodd, George Wilson/Yohanna Sallberg
 JOINT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: COMMONS CLERK—Charlotte Swift
 JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS: COMMONS CLERK—Adam Evans
 PUBLIC ACCOUNTS: CLERKS—Sarah Heath, Jonathan Arkless/Jodie Willcox
 PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Mike Winter, Kate Johal

SPEAKER'S OFFICE

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY AND CHIEF OF STAFF—Helen Wood
 SPEAKER'S DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF (EXTERNAL AFFAIRS)—David Clark
 SPEAKER'S PRESS SECRETARY—Jackie Storer
 SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—The Rev. Canon Mark Birch
 SPEAKER'S TRAINBEARER—Sean Harris
 SPEAKER'S ASSISTANT TRAINBEARER—Tom Walls
 SPEAKER'S PROTOCOL MANAGER—Tara-Jane Kerpens-Lee
 SPEAKER'S DIARY SECRETARY MANAGER AND PRIVATE OFFICE SUPPORT—Zoe Opoku

STRATEGIC ESTATES

MANAGING DIRECTOR—Vacant
 DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE AND BUSINESS MANAGEMENT—Belinda Newth
 DIRECTOR OF PROPERTY AND ASSET STRATEGY—Gemma Colins
 DIRECTOR OF PROJECT DELIVERY—Christine Evans
 DIRECTOR OF INTEGRATION (R&R)—Bev Weston
 DIRECTOR OF PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT OFFICE (INTERIM)—David Leach-Thomas
 DIRECTOR OF HERITAGE AND CHIEF CURATOR—Vacant

OTHER PRINCIPAL OFFICERS

CLERK OF THE CROWN IN CHANCERY—Dr Jo Farrar CB OBE
 COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL—Gareth Davies
 PARLIAMENTARY AND HEALTH SERVICE OMBUDSMAN—Paula Sussex

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 777

TWENTY SIXTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 8 December 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Welfare Spending: Economic Impact

1. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential impact of future welfare spending on the economy. [906748]

21. **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential impact of future welfare spending on the economy. [906770]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): We inherited from the Conservative party a welfare system that forced too many people out of work and on to long-term benefits, while leaving millions of children in poverty. We have begun to address that through reforms to universal credit, increased employment support, more help for children in poverty and, now, a youth guarantee to offer work and training to young people who are unemployed.

Sarah Bool: The oldest law in economics is that if we tax something more, we get less of it. The inverse is also true: if we subsidise something more, we get more of it. Why do this Government believe that subsidising unemployment through huge increases to the welfare bill will not lead to more unemployment? Will the Secretary of State accept that those changes disincentivise work, and will he tell the House how much the Budget is expected to increase unemployment?

Pat McFadden: The Conservative party watched the number of those who are not in education, employment or training grow year by year and did nothing about it. The hon. Lady will find that, at the Budget a couple of weeks ago, the Office for Budget Responsibility projected that the levels of people in employment will rise in every year of the forecast.

Mr Bedford: In their first Budget, the Government hiked taxes on employers, leading to a sustained increase in unemployment. Earlier this year, we saw a botched attempt to reform welfare, which is now going to cost us more in welfare spending, and in the Chancellor's "Nightmare before Christmas" Budget, she hammered hard-working families with yet more tax rises. Why do the Government loathe aspiration and hard work in favour of an economy based on welfare and state dependency?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman will find that the welfare budget had risen three times as fast as a proportion of GDP as it is projected to rise under this Government. We have begun to make changes through the reform to universal credit—that is more change in the system than his party introduced in many years—and, critically, to employment support for both the long-term sick and disabled and the young unemployed.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Around 600 young people in Rochester and Strood are claiming unemployment benefits; many more are NEETs—not in education, employment or training—and are not known to the Department for Work and Pensions. Does the Minister agree that the best way to improve their

futures and reduce the welfare bill in the long term is through targeted support programmes, such as the youth guarantee, which will get them into good, stable jobs and off benefits?

Pat McFadden: We have a very different approach to the issue of NEETs from the Conservative party. We are not going to sit and look at the graph rise year by year without offering young people hope and aspiration for the future. That is why we brought forward a package, with £800 million of backing, to offer training or work to the young unemployed, and ensure that they have options in life rather than a life on benefits.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I welcome the child poverty strategy published on Friday. Will the Secretary of State outline what more needs to be done to end child poverty for good?

Pat McFadden: It is estimated that the child poverty strategy we published on Friday will lift more than 500,000 children out of poverty by the end of this Parliament. Critically, most of the children in poverty are living in households where someone works, so setting up the working against the non-working is completely contrary to the facts on child poverty.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): In the Budget last month, the Chancellor put up taxes in order to spend £16 billion more on welfare. The Government chose to make working people worse off in order to spend more on benefits. The sickness benefit bill is now set to skyrocket to more than £100 billion by the end of this decade. The Secretary of State likes to blame us, but his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), cancelled our reforms, and Labour Back Benchers stymied the Government's. Working people are saying to me, "Why bother? I'd be better off on benefits." The country cannot afford that. The Secretary of State must know this—he is no fool—so when is he going to come up with some welfare savings?

Pat McFadden: The Conservatives' zeal for change is very touching; it is just a pity that they only discovered it the day they stopped having any responsibility for running the welfare system. Let me remind the hon. Lady that this is the system that they created, and these are the gateways to benefits that they created. The reform that they put forward was struck down by the courts, and the incentives in the system that she attacks are the ones that they legislated for. Now we have begun to change the system, with the first change in universal credit incentives for years, more support for the long-term sick and disabled, and a youth guarantee that offers hope where previously there was only neglect.

Unemployment Levels

2. **Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con):** What assessment he has made of trends in the level of unemployment. [906749]

22. **Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con):** What assessment he has made of trends in the level of unemployment. [906772]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): I am sure that the hon. Lady will be pleased to know that more than 329,000 more people are in work this year. The economically active working-age population has reached a record high of 34.3 million. However, the unemployment level has increased by 282,000 over the year. These figures show why we must continue supporting people into work with our Get Britain Working plan, which includes creating a new jobs and careers service, tackling economic inactivity due to ill health and delivering our youth guarantee.

Harriet Cross: As I am sure the Minister and the rest of the Front-Bench team know, we are seeing huge redundancies and mass unemployment within the oil and gas sector increasing every week. When did any of the Front-Bench DWP team last meet the oil and gas sector to discuss that?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady might not know this, but I joined the team in September, so I will have to find out. I am happy to write to her about when the last meeting in that area took place.

Peter Fortune: I recently heard from Bill Perera, who runs a franchise of McDonald's in my constituency of Bromley and Biggin Hill. He runs nine restaurants and employs nearly 800 people, 70% of whom are aged 16 to 24. He wants to increase this pathway and opportunity into employment for young people, but he is finding it increasingly difficult, because of the increased national insurance contributions. Does the Minister agree that one way to reduce unemployment would be to reverse this disastrous policy?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman will know that, for under-21s, there are no national insurance contributions that are payable by an employer. I fully recognise that McDonald's provides good-quality work for young people and is often their entry into the workplace. I am keen to work alongside employers. That is why we are looking at the jobs and careers service and how best we can engage with employers to ensure that they have a pipeline of young people who are ready to work and can get into those jobs, which is what the gentleman at McDonald's to whom the hon. Gentleman has just referred is looking for.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's £820 million investment to help young people into work. In Dudley, one in five school leavers—the highest proportion in the country—are not in education, employment or training. Will the Minister guarantee that this funding prioritises areas with the greatest need, including Dudley? Will she commit to visiting my constituency?

Dame Diana Johnson: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. The growth in the number of NEETs over time is absolutely a matter of inequality. The previous Government failed to tackle this issue and the numbers went up and up. This Government are going to do something, because it is about opportunity for young people and our economic future. We cannot have nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Since the general election, the number of people claiming universal credit in my constituency has fallen by 7.3%. Does the Minister agree that central to this Government's mission of getting people back into work is that it must reach every part of the country, including those areas that have been let down for far too long?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is exactly right. At the mayors council on Thursday, we were discussing this very point about ensuring that all parts of the country benefit from employment opportunities for their local people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I was sorry that the Secretary of State could not answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) earlier. Fortunately, there are people who can help. For instance, UKHospitality has told us that 100,000 people will lose their jobs because of the Budget. That is on top of the 150,000 jobs already lost since Labour came to power. At this rate, there will be queues forming outside jobcentres. Can she tell me what preparations the Government are making to cope with the influx of benefit claimants from all these job losses?

Dame Diana Johnson: May I just say gently to the shadow Secretary of State that she seems to be suffering from amnesia? We know that in the last four years of the previous Government, the number of NEETs increased by 50%. This is the Government who are going to do something about NEETs. We have our youth guarantee and our commitment to a subsidised job opportunity for those who have been out of work for 18 months or more. This is the Government who will tackle the NEETs problem.

Helen Whately: Businesses are cutting jobs at the fastest rate since the pandemic and unemployment has gone up every month under this Government, but clearly they are not ready to deal with the consequences. The number of jobcentre work coaches has actually fallen since they took over. No doubt the Minister will proudly tell us that they have just announced millions of pounds of spending on Government-created jobs for young people, but may I ask her to reflect for a moment? After hiking taxes on businesses so that they cannot afford to employ young people, the Government are spending a load of that tax on state-subsidised jobs for the same young people. Some are calling this the economics of the madhouse, but I simply call it Labour economics. Does the Minister not agree that the Government should get out of the way and reduce the burden on businesses so that they can create jobs, opportunities and economic growth?

Dame Diana Johnson: Of course we want employers and businesses to create jobs, but let me reiterate—as I am not sure that the shadow Secretary of State heard my earlier answer—that for the under-21s, no national insurance contributions are payable by an employer. Let me also refer her to my first answer and repeat that more than 329,000 more people are in work this year.

NEET Young People

3. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training. [906750]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): When this Government came to power, we inherited a situation in which almost 1 million young people were not in education, employment or training. As we have said, the number rose by 50% in the last few years of the Conservatives' time in government, and they did nothing about it. That is why we are acting. In the Budget we announced a youth guarantee, with £820 million of investment, to offer hope where previously there was only Tory neglect.

Blake Stephenson: About 1,200 people in my constituency are not in education, employment or training. With two job-destroying Budgets and the Employment Rights Bill on the horizon, does the Minister really understand the concerns of my constituents, who feel that this Government are simply making it so much harder for young people to find work and get on the career ladder?

Pat McFadden: If the hon. Gentleman cared about young people and opportunity, he might regret the fact that there was a 40% decline in young people's apprenticeships over the last decade, when his party were in power. As well as the introducing the youth guarantee, we have brought forward £725 million more in investment for apprenticeships—again, to provide hope where there was previously Tory neglect.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome the commitment to free apprenticeships for small and medium-sized enterprises if they take on under-25s, which was announced in the Budget, and I also welcome the commitment to apprenticeships in the hospitality sector. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that there will be a focus on coastal communities such as East Thanet in these programmes, given the disproportionate number of young people written off by the Tories over the past 14 years and the significant number of small and medium-sized hospitality businesses, in particular, that are desperate to hire local talent?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the issue of youth opportunity is also an issue of inequality, and that the rate of NEETs is often highest where deprivation and inequality are highest. That is why it is essential that we have an active policy, through the youth guarantee, to offer training, work experience, subsidised employment and more apprenticeships for young people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Since the Chancellor delivered her Budget, it has come to light that benefits have been extended for the parents of teenagers with disabilities or illnesses. Although on the face of it that may seem kind and compassionate, it is also contradictory. Parents and carers are no longer required to ensure that their teenagers are attending an educational setting at all to receive additional child benefit, which means that young people living with neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD are being

enabled to stay at home and out of education, training or even work. This flies directly in the face of the Prime Minister's words after the Budget:

"if you're not given the support you need...or if you are simply written off because you're neurodivergent or disabled, then it can trap you in a cycle of worklessness and dependency for decades."

May I ask the Secretary of State how extending access to benefits for conditions such as ADHD in teenagers before coming up with a plan to ensure that young people remain in full-time education and training delivers on the Prime Minister's point?

Pat McFadden: I hate to sound repetitive, but the rates of absence from school rocketed when the Conservatives were in power. Again, this is something that we have begun to address, because children cannot achieve unless they are attending school. That is why absence from school really matters, and why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has rightly made attendance such a high priority for herself and her Department.

Motability

4. **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the Motability scheme. [906751]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Changes announced at the Budget will improve value for money for taxpayers while ensuring that the Motability scheme continues to provide outstanding support for disabled people.

Shaun Davies: The Motability scheme stems from the vital principle that people with disabilities should be able to live a dignified and independent life. I have heard from several constituents about how accessible cars can help them into work and healthcare, which I welcome, but I have also heard from a number of others about those with questionable conditions being provided with cars that, quite simply, the average working family could not afford. In many cases the cars are not even made in Britain. Does the Minister agree that, in order to keep faith and confidence in the scheme, it is really important that the scheme addresses real need across the country and in my constituency? Will he meet me to discuss some of the extreme cases that I am hearing about in Telford?

Sir Stephen Timms: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and I would be happy to meet him. Motability is an important scheme that does an important job. Some tax reliefs will be removed in July. Existing leases will not be affected, and neither will wheelchair-adapted vehicles. There will still be vehicles, with no up-front payment, that are affordable solely through the mobility component of personal independence payment, so the scheme will continue to do a great job but will give better value for money for taxpayers.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): The shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions recently stated that "millions are getting benefits for anxiety or ADHD along with a free Motability car."

That is clearly nonsense, because only 200,000 claimants—at most—would be eligible to apply in the first place, and many of them also have a physical disability, which is

the real reason for the car. Does the Minister agree that this must rank as one of the least accurate claims ever made by a politician, despite the strong competition?

Sir Stephen Timms: Well, choosing the most misleading claim is a tough contest, but the hon. Gentleman is right. The shadow Secretary of State's colleagues introduced PIP, with the current criteria, in 2013. They then had 11 years to change it if they thought doing so was necessary, but they did absolutely nothing. My review will look at the eligibility criteria for the mobility component of PIP.

Child Poverty

5. **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of children in poverty. [906752]

18. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of children in poverty. [906767]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): At the autumn Budget we built on the substantial action that we have already taken to tackle child poverty and announced the removal of the two-child limit, which will lift 450,000 children out of poverty by 2029-30. That rises to 550,000 alongside other measures, such as the expansion of free school meals set out in our child poverty strategy, which was published on Friday. The Secretary of State for Education will be making an oral statement on the child poverty strategy this afternoon.

Steve Race: I recently held roundtables with Exeter residents to discuss child poverty, which in some of our neighbourhoods runs as high as 30%. All the evidence suggests that ingrained poverty cuts across a wide range of policy areas, so I was delighted by the publication of the child poverty strategy and the introduction of the new measure of deep material poverty. Could the Minister set out what this will mean for integrated policy development across Government, so that we can end child poverty for good?

Dame Diana Johnson: May I commend my hon. Friend for his interest in this area? Deep material poverty is where families lack basic essentials, such as a warm home and healthy food. Families who cannot afford four or more of the 13 essential items are judged to be in deep material poverty, and 2 million children are in deep material poverty today. Over the course of the 10-year strategy, the items and thresholds that have been identified will not change, but they will enable us to use a broader set of measures when assessing our success in tackling child poverty.

Emma Foody: Child poverty in the north-east reached shameful levels under the previous Conservative Government, damaging the life chances of children and young people. As the Minister has set out, this Government are turning the tide with not only the removal of the two-child cap, but the expansion of free school meals and the introduction of breakfast clubs, lifting 550,000 children out of poverty. Can she set out how the child poverty taskforce will work with the north-east's child poverty reduction unit to ensure that we can go even further in the north-east?

Dame Diana Johnson: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for her interest in this area. On Thursday I spoke to the North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness, at the North East combined authority about the excellent work that she is already undertaking through the child poverty reduction unit that she has created. Now that the strategy has been published, we will continue to work with mayors and local authorities, the public and private sectors, and civil society through a dedicated team in Government, with strong ministerial oversight, to deliver on tackling child poverty across the whole United Kingdom.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): One thing that really concerns me is that I have met a number of parents who have had to leave work because of the unmet need of their children with special educational needs and disabilities. Children who are already really vulnerable are ending up being forced into poverty because there is not the support from schools and local authorities. What conversations has the Minister had about assessing the impact of SEND and how that leads to the unemployment of parents?

Dame Diana Johnson: That is obviously a very important question, and the Government are looking at the whole issue of SEND. I have been in the House long enough to know that the regime currently operating, which is not working for parents and children, was introduced by the previous Government—if I recall correctly, it was the Conservative Government rather than the coalition one—and we clearly need to look at how we can have a system that works, that supports families and children, and that helps parents get back into work.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): It took the Government a year and a half to confirm that they were going to scrap the two-child benefit cap. What estimate has the Minister made of the number of children who, during that time, were unnecessarily kept in poverty because of it?

Dame Diana Johnson: I think it is absolutely right and proper that this Government have the child poverty taskforce to look at not just the issue of the two-child limit, which is obviously very important, but all the other measures we need to have in place to support families. As the Employment Minister, I am particularly pleased that we have measures in the strategy to help parents into work—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry about this. I do not want a complete conversation to be going on across the Chair. Mr Jopp, you are better than that. Being a Whip, you know that you are meant to set an example, not the opposite.

Dame Diana Johnson: I was saying that it is important that there are measures in the child poverty strategy to help with childcare in particular. It is not just that; we have free school meals and the breakfast clubs. There are also the issues of temporary accommodation. The statistic the hon. Gentleman perhaps wants me to give is that I understand 100 children a week were pushed into child poverty through the two-child limit that the previous Government introduced in 2017.¹

1.[*Official Report*, 11 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 7WC.] (Correction)

Pensioner Poverty

6. Gill Furniss (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle pensioner poverty. [906753]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): To tackle pensioner poverty, we are both increasing the state pension and running the biggest ever pension credit take-up campaign. Raising the new state pension in line with the triple lock over this Parliament is set to increase it by over £2,000 a year, while 60,000 extra pension credit awards were made in the year to July compared with the previous 12 months.

Gill Furniss: More than a quarter of a million pensioners received compensation from the Pension Protection Fund and the financial assistance scheme, but those who accrued their income before 1997 have suffered a real-terms cut of 24% in the past five years alone. I welcome the Chancellor's commitment to provide indexation on these accruals, but many of those who will benefit are elderly and in ill health. Can the Minister confirm that he will implement this much-welcomed change as quickly as possible?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. I, like her, have met and listened to lots of those affected by the lack of indexation on pre-1997 accruals within the PPF and the FAS. I can assure her that, assuming the Pension Schemes Bill receives Royal Assent, the uprating will take place at the next PPF uprating, which means January 2027 on current estimates.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister to be in receipt of the triple lock, but it is not an effective way of tackling pensioner poverty and it is bankrupting the country. I am sorry not to be party political, but can we not have a consensus between the parties that we should phase out the triple lock, concentrate resources on pensioners in real poverty and have an agreement on dealing with benefits generally to get people back into work? We should work together.

Torsten Bell: I am always keen to work together with the Father of the House. He mentions the triple lock, but we are doing far more things to tackle pensioner poverty. There were 900,000 pensioners eligible for pension credit under the Conservatives who were not claiming, and that is why we have brought forward the biggest take-up campaign ever seen. The marketing campaign this year will run from September to the end of the financial year, we are carrying out research on what works to encourage take-up of pension credit and we are stepping up data sharing across Departments, including between His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Review of Carer's Allowance Overpayments

7. Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to implement the recommendations of the review of carer's allowance overpayments, published on 25 November 2025. [906755]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Liz Sayce did an outstanding forensic job in getting to the bottom of the carer's allowance overpayment problems. We have accepted or partially accepted 38 of her 40 recommendations. The Department will reassess overpayments incurred between 2015 and last summer where fluctuating earnings were an issue, and we will set out detailed plans in the new year.

Anna Dixon: I thank the Minister for his response. As he well knows, over the last decade, around 185,000 unpaid family carers have been pursued by the Department for Work and Pensions to return overpayments in their carer's allowance. Through no fault of their own, many working carers have faced bills that have often run into thousands of pounds. It is incredibly positive that, after years of inaction from the Tories, this Government have acted. Does the Minister share my hope that trust might now be rebuilt between the state and the near 6 million unpaid family carers in this country?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is a great campaigner for carers on this issue and others. She is absolutely right: this is a very serious problem that was ignored for 10 years, despite there being quite a lot of publicity about it. I hope, as she says, that trust will now be rebuilt as we fix these problems in the coming months.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Cumbria has a much higher than average number of unpaid carers, largely due to the much higher than average number of people who are older, and the situation is exacerbated by rural isolation. It is a community with a significant amount of seasonal and variable work. What is the Minister doing to ensure that carers can take flexible seasonal work without fear of losing all support?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman will know that the carer's allowance has an earnings threshold, which we have increased very significantly—the biggest increase in the earnings threshold that there has ever been. We are also looking, in the longer term, at introducing a taper to carer's allowance, instead of the cliff-edge earnings threshold that is still there at the moment. That will not be a quick fix, but once it is in place, I think it will help with the concern he raises.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the fact that the Government have accepted the findings of the Sayce review into carer's allowance overpayments, but what assurances can the Minister give that the Government will stop hounding carers about overpayments? Will the Government also apologise?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am very sorry about what happened to many carers. For example, only about half of the alerts that came into the Department from HMRC were checked, so overpayments that the Department had been notified of carried on for months and months. Of course, genuine overpayments do still need recovery and that work will continue. If people run into difficulties, it is always worth talking to the DWP debt management service.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation

8. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent job seekers and welfare claimants being subject to commercial sexual exploitation. [906756]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): I thank the hon. Lady for her question; it is one that, like her, I take a deep interest in. Work coaches in jobcentres are trained to recognise a wide range of risks. If they identify safeguarding concerns, including a risk of commercial sexual exploitation, action is taken to escalate them to the appropriate agencies. The DWP does not accept jobs relating to sexual services, or those seeking employees for jobs of a sexual nature.

Rosie Duffield: Commercial sexual exploitation is the exchange of money, goods or services in return for sex acts. It is a form of violence against women. Inquiries by the all-party parliamentary group on commercial sexual exploitation have revealed that it is now taking place on an industrial scale. With the growth and mainstreaming of sites such as OnlyFans and online brothels such as Vivastreet, does the Minister agree that we should urgently outlaw pimping websites and force all pornography websites to verify the age and ongoing consent of everyone featured on their platform, as is proposed in amendments tabled to the Crime and Policing Bill?

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for her supplementary question. She will appreciate that she is raising a number of issues that are outside my role as Employment Minister, but I will certainly raise them with my ministerial colleagues in the relevant Departments. She may, however, be interested in today's written ministerial statement on safeguarding in the DWP for vulnerable claimants, which sets out the work that is already under way to deliver in this important area.

Skills England

9. Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): What recent progress Skills England has made on its priorities. [906758]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): Skills England is playing a central role in delivering the Government's plan for change and industrial strategy. It is the authoritative voice on skills needs and is informing the post-16 education and skills White Paper; supporting the delivery of sector skills packages in digital, AI, engineering, construction and defence; and informing decision making through the labour market evidence group's work on migration.

Damian Hinds: It really is not ideal to have the body responsible for upholding standards in qualifications inside a Department that will be judged on how many people it gets through to passing those qualifications. It was not ideal when it was at the Department for Education; it is even less ideal now that it is at the Department for Work and Pensions. Will the Minister give a commitment that once Skills England is up and running, he will make it independent from Government, with a guaranteed voice for industry, and will he set that out in statute?

Andrew Western: I appreciate the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. Clearly we want to ensure that Skills England is set up to be successful and to have a real impact in delivering the skills that we need in the workforce now and into the future. I am very happy to commit today to setting up a meeting for the right hon. Gentleman, should he so wish, with the chair of the board of Skills England, Phil Smith, to discuss his concerns directly.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Skills England has the potential to really make an impact in places like north Staffordshire, where there are skills that we need for the jobs of tomorrow. However, those programmes are too often piloted through mayoral combined authorities, and we are a long way from that in Staffordshire. How will the Minister ensure that areas that do not have mayors on the horizon can access the same exciting opportunities as everywhere else?

Andrew Western: I recognise that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in the delivery of these courses and in various skills training sectors in his constituency. Indeed, I am writing to him today in response to his last question. He is absolutely right that we need to ensure that areas that are further away from the establishment of MCAs are not left behind. That is a valid concern, and I will be certain to share it with my noble Friend the Skills Minister on his behalf.

Post-16 Skills Education

10. **Michelle Scrogg** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help to ensure that post-16 education provides the necessary skills to support the economy. [906759]

17. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help to ensure that post-16 education provides the necessary skills to support the economy. [906766]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): We have already taken action: we published the skills White Paper in October and we are investing £1 billion in skills packages in sectors that will create hundreds of thousands of jobs over the next five years. The Budget set out more than £1.5 billion over the spending review period for investment in employment and skills support, including for the youth guarantee and apprenticeships for young people.

Michelle Scrogg: After 14 years of neglect, young people in Barrow and Furness are going to benefit from this Government's commitment to supporting the apprenticeships that will drive our local economy. Does the Minister agree that Labour's unprecedented investment in skills shows just how serious this Government's commitment is to driving opportunity in communities like mine, and will he further agree that Barrow-in-Furness should be one of the locations for the Government's new defence technical excellence colleges?

Andrew Western: I will take my hon. Friend's two questions separately. I strongly agree with her on the first question, because this package of investment will fund new measures to support apprenticeships for young

people, including by fully funding apprenticeships at small and medium-sized enterprises for eligible people aged 16 to 24 to boost small business starts and prioritise funding to young people, starting from the next academic year. We are working with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Education to deliver the £182 million defence skills package aimed at harnessing the skills needed for the future and meeting the needs of people at various stages in their training and career pathways. My hon. Friend is an exceptional champion for her community in Barrow and Furness. I will not be drawn directly on her question about the location of defence technical excellence colleges, but I would say that there is considerable and rich expertise in Barrow, and I am sure that a college there would be hugely successful.

Perran Moon: Cornwall has been identified as a strategically important region for renewable energy and critical minerals, but we currently have a worrying shortage of places at our outstanding further education colleges. Can the Minister reassure me that the necessary skills funding will be made available to support these growth industries in an area of high social deprivation that was neglected by the Conservatives for 14 years?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we published our clean energy jobs plan in October, which set out how we will deliver the pipeline of skilled workers that the sector needs. The plan includes five technical excellence colleges that will specialise in training skilled clean energy workforces as part of a £182 million investment to support engineering skills in clean energy occupations and other priority sectors. Local skills improvement plans will help to identify the key skills priorities for each area of the country, and clean energy and other green skills must be considered in the development of those plans.

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): Stuart, the managing director of GW Martin—a precision engineering manufacturing firm based in my constituency—welcomes the additional support for apprentice training in small and medium-sized enterprises, but asks that the Government ensure that training providers will receive adequate funding to strengthen the training available. Can the Minister assure Stuart that fantastic SMEs such as GW Martin will be supported so that they can employ more young people from Eastleigh and give them meaningful opportunities to start their careers?

Andrew Western: I can give the hon. Lady that clear assurance, using two specific examples of the work the Government are doing. First, we have provided £725 million of additional support for the delivery of the growth and skills levy in the Budget. Secondly—specifically to the hon. Lady's question—the delivery of apprenticeships for small and medium-sized enterprises will be fully funded for young people moving forward. That crucial intervention will ensure that the funding that this Government are allocating to apprenticeships tackles the problem of young people not in education, employment or training.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): As was identified in the national food strategy, there is a shortage of skills in food and farming. The Liberal Democrats are proposing a "Farm First" scheme to give

young people training and the incentive they need to choose a career in farming. Will the Minister outline the steps the Government are taking to create pathways to increase the number of post-16 learners who undertake training in food and farming?

Andrew Western: The hon. Lady will recognise the significant investment that this Government have put into agriculture more broadly since coming into office. I am not aware of the “Farm First” scheme, but if she would like to write to me about it, I would be happy to meet to discuss it further.

Support into Work: Mental Ill Health

11. **Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support people with mental health illnesses into work. [906760]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): I thank the hon. Lady for her very important question. The Government are committed to supporting those with mental health conditions, alongside those with other long-term health conditions and disabilities, into work. More disabled people and people with health conditions will be supported to enter and stay in work through our Pathways to Work guarantee and our Connect to Work supported employment programme.

Monica Harding: As is the case throughout the country, young constituents in Esher and Walton are out of work due to mental health conditions. I welcome departmental initiatives such as the disability employment advisers and cross-Government work through the joint work and health directorate and WorkWell. However, fragile mental health can be picked up on and supported earlier in school and may be a result of poorly identified special education needs—an area that we know is at breaking point—and the current state of mental health waiting lists; in Esher and Walton, for instance, the average wait for under-18s is 184 days. What current learnings from the Department for Work and Pensions are being fed back into the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the next cohort is ready for work?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady knows that there are already resources going into schools to provide mental health support to children and young people early on. There is also additional money going in through the Government’s investment into the NHS, which will include mental health services.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady highlighted the range of options available to people with mental health conditions, because we know that those people are very diverse and that there is no one thing that will support them into work and keep them in work. As she said, we have work coaches, Pathways to Work advisers, Connect to Work, and employment advisers in NHS talking therapies. There is a whole range of options to ensure that we get people with mental health conditions into work and keep them there.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What conversations has the Department had with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the 10-year plan tackles

the root causes of mental ill health? My constituents in Harlow tell me that they get mental health support only when they are really facing crisis, and by the time they have got to that crisis point, they have already given up work and training.

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We know that 6,700 workers in the NHS are already providing that additional mental health support and, as I have said, work is going on in schools as well, recognising that early intervention is so important. I have also had meetings with the DHSC, particularly to look at how the two Departments can work together to ensure that we are providing wraparound care to people in work. This is happening alongside the Charlie Mayfield review “Keep Britain Working”, because we know that people may develop mental health conditions during the course of their life in employment, and we want to ensure that they stay in employment with the right support wrapped around them.

Support into Work: Health Conditions

12. **Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people with health conditions into work. [906761]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), just mentioned our Pathways to Work guarantee, which will offer everybody with health impairments on out-of-work benefits a support conversation to work out best next steps, one-to-one caseworker support for those ready to move towards work, specialist longer-term support for those who can benefit from that, and periodic engagement for those not yet ready to move towards work.

Paulette Hamilton: A constituent of mine with severe health needs recently told me that she gained employment only after she was able to learn to drive and then secure a car through the Motability scheme. Can the Minister set out what further steps the Department is taking to ensure that disabled people with health needs receive the support they need to gain access to work and to take part fully in the things they enjoy?

Sir Stephen Timms: There is a great deal of work to be done: the disability employment gap has been stuck at around 30 percentage points ever since 2010. We have talked already today about Motability, which is key for enabling many disabled people to get to work. After the changes next July, there will still be a wide range of vehicles available in exchange solely for mobility benefit. Access to Work is also extremely important. We consulted earlier in the year through our Green Paper on reform to Access to Work, so that we can help and support more people, and we will be bringing forward proposals along those lines in the new year.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I have been assisting several constituents who are deaf and need the support of British Sign Language interpreters and face-to-face appointments. There are only five BSL interpreters available to cover the whole of Dorset,

and as a result people are waiting extremely long periods not only to get appointments but to get access to help them get to work. Can the Minister explain what is being done to provide more such services?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am sure that the hon. Lady will be interested in the recent report published by the BSL Advisory Board, which works with the Government specifically on BSL. I met members of the board last week. They produced a report recently on access to health and care support, specifically highlighting some of these issues. For example, how do BSL users make GP appointments? The other steps that I have outlined today will also be important for deaf and disabled people, and we will continue to work closely with BSL Advisory Board on these issues.

Topical Questions

T1. [906773] **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Since the last set of Work and Pensions oral questions, we have announced £820 million of funding to offer training and work to young unemployed people through the youth guarantee and £725 million more in apprenticeship investment, with 50,000 more apprenticeship starts for young people. We have responded positively to the Sayce review on carer's allowance and we have published our child poverty strategy, which will lift more than half a million children out of poverty by the end of this Parliament.

John Slinger: I have been campaigning for a youth hub and working with officials in the DWP and local councils to try to secure a much-needed youth hub in Rugby. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this service, offering employment advice, wellbeing support and more, would help tackle the problem of youth dependency on benefits, which is at 16% in Rugby—roughly the national average? Does he further agree that, as young people would say: no cap, it is only this party that will do what is necessary to back young people?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to say that youth hubs can deliver vital help to get young people back on track. This is about getting the jobcentre out of the jobcentre, if you will, and making sure that we meet young people where they are in the community. We are expanding youth hubs; there will be a total of 360 around the country. Locations will be announced in due course, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will keep campaigning for one in his area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The Chancellor's Budget put a cap on salary sacrifice for pension savers at just £2,000. That was to raise an extra £4.8 billion in 2029, and it will affect 3.3 million savers and 290,000 employers. What research has the Pensions Minister done to understand and quantify the negative effects that this will have on pension savings?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question because it gives me a chance to bring

the House's attention to research published after the general election in 2024 but commissioned under the last Conservative Government—I have the document here. What was the research into? It was into capping salary sacrifice pension contributions at £2,000. The hon. Gentleman can read the research published and commissioned by his own party about putting back under control this tax relief, which had got out of hand.

Mark Garnier: Well, it was not us who put it in place; it was Labour.

This policy hits the private sector disproportionately: 14 times as many people save through salary sacrifice in the private sector as they do in the public sector. Whether it is kite-flying about lump sum withdrawal or taxing inherited pension pots, in a week when Labour Together is canvassing Labour members about a new Labour leader, is it not the case that the Chancellor is more interested in throwing red meat to her sad and unfortunate Back Benchers in a vain attempt to save her job than she is in the interests of the savings of our hard-working constituents?

Torsten Bell: There is nothing sad about Labour Members watching wages rise faster under this Government than they did under the Conservatives. There is nothing sad about our Back Benchers seeing the end of austerity and seeing public services being improved right across this country.

T2. [906774] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): A constituent of mine who is in his mid-50s wrote to me about the flagrant and extensive age discrimination he faces looking for work, citing a job advert seeking applicants with under 15 years' experience. His case reflects the Women and Equalities Committee's "The rights of older people" report, which calls for stronger legal protection and a cross-Government strategy. Age discrimination is already unlawful, so how will the Minister ensure that people are properly protected?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): As my hon. Friend says, it is against the law to impose age restrictions on jobs unless they can be objectively justified. The Equality Act 2010 provides legal redress. There is also practical help available through the Equality Advisory and Support Service, which his constituent should certainly give a call, and we have 50PLUS champions working across the whole of our jobcentre network.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Disability News Service has stated that both the Treasury and the DWP have refused to clarify the £1.9 billion of cuts to disability benefits set to take place over the next five years that were quietly sneaked into the Budget the other week. Will the Minister now set the record straight and advise us on how those cuts, which amount to almost £2 billion, will occur and on what impacts they will have on people with disabilities?

Sir Stephen Timms: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman is referring to. I will happily look into the report he has spoken of. There will be no changes at all to eligibility for personal independence payments until the conclusion of my review, which will be in the autumn of next year.

T3. [906775] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Government's new youth investment fund is supporting the charity Nacro in my constituency to build a youth hub in Wythenshawe park. The Minister knows my constituency well, so I am sure he will agree that this project shows that we have an Administration who are serious about investing in our nation's young people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his question and for highlighting the record of the Conservatives on this issue. He knows that I know his constituency well. I also know the work of Nacro well, and I take this opportunity to commend that organisation. Youth hubs such as this one—along with our youth guarantee and other interventions—are a really important part of this Government's work to bear down on young people not in education, employment and training.

T5. [906777] **Peter Fortune** (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I have recently been contacted by constituents who are concerned that local jobcentres are not doing enough to get people back into work. What more can the Minister do to ensure that sufficient support and training help people back into employment?

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The transformation of our jobs and career service will provide wraparound support to individuals who are looking for work or career development. We want to change the feel of jobcentres so that they are about supporting people, rather than having people go in just to comply with benefit conditions.

T4. [906776] **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Data from the millennium cohort study suggests that over half of cases of young people not in education, employment or training are attributable to persistent childhood poverty and adverse experiences. I recently visited Starting Point, a charity that helps young people in Reading back into work, and I heard about those people's experiences. Does the Minister agree that there is a strong economic case behind the Government's moral mission to cut childhood poverty?

Dame Diana Johnson: I absolutely agree. We all know that child poverty stifles opportunity, making it harder for children to succeed and get on in life. Nearly 1 million young people aged 16 to 24 are not in education, employment or training. We need to break that cycle, and we will do so through the child poverty strategy.

T7. [906779] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): The Budget introduced more taxes for people who work and more benefits for those who do not. Since the Government came into office, 1 million more people are claiming universal credit. We are now paying out almost £1 billion a month in benefits to foreign national households. Do the Government really think that their £16 billion benefits bung is fair on the hard-working people who have to pay for it?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman attacks the system, gateways and conditions that his Government created. When it comes to working people and non-working people, he will be aware that most children in poverty

live in a household in which someone works, as are most of the children helped by the lifting of the two-child limit. Those who are not are often children under the age of three with a lone parent.

T6. [906778] **Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling the NEETs crisis in this country. Will the Secretary of State work on that with the Department for Education? Doncaster university technical college has been incredibly good at linking industry and education. I hope that, in the near future, the Government will agree to expand such work in my constituency and across the country.

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is correct. The Milburn review will consider all the interventions required to bear down on NEETs and to support institutions such as the Doncaster UTC. It will consider what is working, what is not, and what needs to change, given our shameful inheritance from the Conservative party of nearly 1 million young people not in education, employment or training.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): One of my constituents recently spent nearly two weeks calling the DWP every day to find out why his employment and support allowance had been stopped without warning. Each time he called, he waited for over an hour, only for the line to be cut off with no reply. Will the Minister explain to my constituent—and to the thousands of others who are out there hanging on a line somewhere—what action the Department is taking to ensure that vulnerable claimants can actually speak to a human when they need to?

Andrew Western: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important case. If she writes to me about it, I will be certain to look into the circumstances she has set out. On telephony more generally, there has been a significant decrease—of more than a minute—in the average waiting time, but clearly the case that she describes is unacceptable, and I will look into it on her behalf.

T8. [906780] **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): More than 400 16 to 24-year-olds across my constituency are not in education, employment or training, and are claiming unemployment benefits. That has the potential to cause lifelong damage and deprive them of vital skills and opportunities for development. How will the Government's youth guarantee provide support to those young people and help them to get the skills and support they need to gain access to fulfilling opportunities?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. The numbers of people not in education, employment or training have been going in that direction for several years. That is why we brought forward the youth guarantee, which will offer work experience, training and, ultimately, subsidised work, offering hope where previously there was only neglect.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We all know that disabled people often face higher energy bills. In my constituency, that is exacerbated by higher standing charges. The Government have now abolished the energy

company obligation. Can the Minister tell me what support with bills will be available for disabled people this winter?

Sir Stephen Timms: In April, there will be a permanent real-terms increase in the headline rate of out-of-work benefits for the first time, I think, since the 1970s. We are taking £150 on average off household energy bills, expanding the £150 warm home discount to 6 million lower-income households, and freezing NHS prescription charges for a year.

T9. [906781] **Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss the role that allied health professionals, such as physios, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and others, can play in helping NEETs to overcome barriers and secure meaningful and lasting work?

Pat McFadden: It is always a pleasure to meet my parliamentary neighbour from Dudley. She is absolutely right to draw attention to the role of allied health professionals, because there is a strong link between good health and employment, and this problem has to be seen across departmental boundaries.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Following the Budget, a furious Labour voter, 30 years old, texted me to say, “I am furious about the salary sacrifice thing. I give up a lot of things to put 20% of my salary into my pension. That’s going to cost me almost two grand a year for being responsible.” Why are the Government so keen on punishing savers?

Torsten Bell: We are taking a pragmatic approach to reforming pension contributions made via salary sacrifice, the costs of which are set nearly to triple to £8 billion between 2017 and the end of this decade. The case for change was made powerfully by a previous Chancellor:

“The majority of employees pay tax on a cash salary, but some are able to sacrifice salary...and pay much lower tax... That is unfair”.—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 907.]

So said Baron Hammond of Runnymede.

T10. [906782] **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Around 700 young people in Uxbridge and South Ruislip are not currently in employment, and that needs to change. I have met the local college, the jobcentre and employers in Uxbridge, and they are keen, eager and willing to support the establishment of a youth jobs hub in the constituency. Will the Secretary of State outline what support is available in constituencies such as mine to set up youth jobs hubs, so that every young person can reach their potential?

Pat McFadden: I applaud my hon. Friend’s campaigning for young people in his constituency. We are expanding the number of youth hubs, which will offer support across the country. The precise locations will be announced in due course.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I recognise, as do so many Members across the House, the injustice and maladministration suffered by the so-called WASPI women born in the 1950s. I welcome the recent development announced by the Secretary of State, but will he give an undertaking that if compensation

is agreed, it will take into account the poverty suffered by so many of these women and include recompense for their significant legal costs?

Torsten Bell: As the Secretary of State set out to the House a few months ago, the decision to which the hon. Member refers is being retaken by the Department, and we have committed to updating the House on that decision in due course.

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

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I warmly welcome the child poverty strategy published last week, and I congratulate past and present ministerial teams on all they have done on that strategy. Can my right hon. Friend give details on when he expects to publish the targets, the detailed metrics and the monitoring and review framework? Those are essential if we are to reduce child poverty.

Pat McFadden: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her question. We estimate that the measure will lift 450,000 children out of relative poverty, and 550,000 for the strategy as a whole. She is absolutely right to say that, having published the strategy, we will bring forward the legislation and monitor its impact right across Government and well beyond the boundaries of the DWP.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): A lady came to my surgery the other week to tell me that she had been assessed at only the basic level of PIP and as fit to work. I was staggered, because she could barely walk and could barely breathe. Will the Minister meet me to see how we can rectify this crazy situation in which somebody who can barely walk to a surgery has been told that they are fit to work as a cleaner?

Sir Stephen Timms: Whether people get PIP is not about whether they can work—they may be working or not. The limited capability for work-related activity part of universal credit is about whether or not a person can work, but I will be very happy to have a conversation with the hon. Lady about what has happened.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Some 1,750 kids in Falkirk, most of whom have a parent in work, will be lifted from poverty and its lifelong economic consequences by the fully funded lifting of the two-child cap. Does the Minister agree that the cost of this poverty-alleviation policy is far less than the long-term cost of leaving those parents in poverty?

Dame Diana Johnson: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is shocking that during the previous Government some 900,000 children were allowed to get into poverty. The cost of that will be borne by us all, which is why the investment now will pay dividends in the future.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Since Maximus began the contract to provide work capability assessments in September last year, nearly 1,000 people have had their assessment appointments cancelled. However, a whistleblower has been in touch with me to state that cancellations are a regular occurrence largely because of IT services provided by the DWP. Shockingly, one of my constituents had their assessment cancelled five times

in my city of Dundee. What action is the Minister taking to monitor and improve the service provided by Maximus so that no one has to suffer the distress of such cancellations?

Sir Stephen Timms: I would be happy to look into the details. I was not aware of that whistleblowing report, but I would be happy to look at it.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): The youth guarantee scheme represents a clear statement of intent from this Labour Government. Unlike the Conservatives, we will not abandon our young people to a lifetime on benefits, or allow the mental health toll of long-term unemployment to define their futures. Will my right hon. Friend outline how this policy will deliver for those young people by providing skills, confidence and meaningful work, and deliver for the wider economy by turning potential into productivity and reducing the cost of economic inactivity?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to say that purposeful activity, be it training or work, can be an answer to some of the mental health problems that we are seeing in society, so I welcome her endorsement of the youth guarantee and the intentions behind it.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): Employers across the construction, care and manufacturing sectors have warned that Skills England's dumbed down reforms mean that apprenticeships will not be recognised by professional bodies. Today's announcement of 50,000 apprenticeships is meaningless if employers will not recognise those standards, so will the Secretary of State guarantee that reformed apprenticeships will still meet those standards? That is a particular concern in the construction industry—

Mr Speaker: Order. These are topical questions. I am trying to get everybody in but the hon. Member is not helping me. Hopefully, he asked at least three of his questions.

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is right to say that apprenticeship standards are highly valued. Our constituents value what an apprenticeship means. As we take the scheme forward, it is important that the public and employers have trust in the high standards that an apprenticeship offers.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Nan Roberts is 92. She was widowed this year and is facing her first Christmas without her husband of 64 years, and she is feeling utterly fobbed off by a creaking DWP system. She is waiting for her "choices letter", despite having ingoing state pension payments dating back to 1994. The threat of asking this question has already led to some action by the DWP, but will the Secretary of State outline how I can do more to support my constituent?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Gentleman is a powerful champion for his constituents and I am sure that all hon. Members will be unhappy to hear about this case. I know that staff from the Department for Work and Pensions have already been in touch with his office, and I am happy to follow up myself.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon to show us how to ask brief questions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The highest level of pensioner poverty in the UK is in Northern Ireland. One way of lifting pensioners out of poverty is through pension credit applications, which require a one-to-one conversation. Will the Minister undertake to ensure that pensioners are able to have such conversations during the term of this Government, so that they can be lifted out of poverty?

Mr Speaker: For Jim, that was brief.

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his brief question. Pensioner poverty halved under the last Labour Government. It went up under the previous Conservative Government, but it is going to come down again under this Government.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday, I learned of an 81-year-old constituent who had had to return to work because of the cost of living in York. Will the Government take a deep dive and carry out an inquiry into poverty in later life, so that we can ensure that we deal with pensioner poverty once and for all?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. We have seen poverty rates fall less fast among people approaching the state pension age, rather than those over it. We need to look across the range of policy levers to address that, which includes growing the economy so that wages are rising and building houses so that people's housing costs come down.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Cornwall Marine Network in my constituency is a small and medium-sized enterprise members association that provides training and apprenticeship support. It recently celebrated providing 5,000 new jobs and apprenticeships. It will welcome the Government's youth guarantee and the news that SMEs will not have to pay for apprenticeship training for under-25s. Will the Minister confirm how this Government will increase the capacity of such training providers?

Pat McFadden: I warmly commend my hon. Friend and the company she mentions. One of the apprenticeship reforms that we have announced is fully funding apprenticeships for SMEs for under-25s. That will help companies such as the one she mentions, and many more besides.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The Injury Time campaign wants to classify brain injuries in football, such as dementia, as an industrial injury. The campaign wants former players to receive Government support and benefits and wants an increase in funding for research. Will the relevant Minister meet me and PFA Scotland to discuss this important topic?

Sir Stephen Timms: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Restriction of Jury Trials

3.40 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the accuracy of data used to justify the restriction of jury trials in relation to rape victim attrition rates and magistrates court capacity.

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): This Government inherited an emergency in our criminal courts. Record and rising caseloads are leaving victims and many accused who are seeking to clear their name facing agonising delays, while some defendants game the system in the hope that their accusers simply give up on justice. We inherited a system in which, quite truly, justice delayed is justice denied. That is why we asked Sir Brian Leveson to undertake his independent review of the criminal courts. He presented us with his report, and we considered it carefully.

On Tuesday, the Deputy Prime Minister announced the Government's proposals in the light of that report, following many of the recommendations. In announcing part of our plan to tackle that emergency, he centred victims. He commented that victims of rape are "pulling out" of trials and told LBC that

"60 per cent are pulling out of cases"

before they come to trial. That statement is accurate. It is unacceptable that around 60% of victims who report rape drop out of the criminal system.

After speaking to victims, campaign organisations and those who represent those victims and support them, we know that, for many, the fact that their trial may not come to court for several years is a key factor in their deciding to withdraw from the process or perhaps not even to report the case at all. The system was not designed for a scenario in which victims face such delays for justice. No one in this House thinks that the system is anything other than broken, which means that we are failing the British public.

On the second part of the right hon. Gentleman's question, the vast majority of cases—the less serious but still important everyday cases, which comprise around 90% of all criminal trials—are already heard in our magistrates courts, where cases continue to be dealt with swiftly and robustly. Our magistrates hear around 1.3 million cases a year, and it is not unusual to have an open caseload of more than 360,000 cases, as is currently the case in our magistrates courts. That ensures that there is around six months' worth of work ready to be heard. We know that our magistrates courts deal with equivalent cases—those trials for either-way cases that can be heard in either the magistrates court or the Crown court—four times faster. We are working to bring in new and diverse magistrates over the next 12 months, and we will continue to recruit at high levels in future years.

Ultimately, we must ensure that the Crown court has the capacity to deal with those who commit the most serious crimes, so that victims do not have to face those agonising delays and do not withdraw before their case even gets to court. Justice is simply not being served in that situation, and the Government will not watch idly while the system continues to fail those victims. It is for that reason that we are bringing forward our bold

proposals and reforms, coupled with record investment—to ensure that victims and the wider British public are served and so that we can put to bed once and for all justice delayed being justice denied.

Robert Jenrick: The Government are slashing jury trials under false pretences. Last week, the Justice Secretary suggested that 60% of those who report being raped are now pulling out of cases because of court delays, but Home Office statistics show that this year, only 9% of rape cases were abandoned after a charge was brought. Although that is not good enough, the fact is that the figure is down, and the number of victim-based prosecutions is near its peak. In some parts of the country, the backlog is far lower, and rape cases are rightly being prioritised. The Justice Secretary's plans will do next to nothing to cut backlogs for rape victims, but his claims are certain to further erode women's confidence in the justice system.

That was not the only claim that did not stack up. The Justice Secretary said that he will divert cases to the magistrates courts because they

"do not currently have a backlog"—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2025; Vol. 776, c. 806.]

but as of September, there is a backlog—or open caseload, as the Minister now calls it—of 361,000 cases, up 25% on this Government's watch. He claimed that scrapping juries will cut trial times by 20%, but Sir Brian Leveson's own review found that figure to be "highly uncertain", stating that "further detailed analysis" was required.

There are still reams of unanswered questions. The Justice Secretary will not let the Crown courts sit around the clock, when today, 63 courtrooms sit completely empty. He will not rule out applying these changes to those who are already in the court backlog, and he will not publish modelling showing that victims of rape will wait less time, or indeed any modelling whatsoever. Unless the Minister can answer those questions today, we can only conclude that the Government simply do not know. If they want to make a major change to our constitution—something that we have enjoyed for 800 years—they should do so on the basis of facts, not baseless claims. The plan is already unravelling, as did the last such attempt 20 years ago. I say to the Minister that it is not too late to avoid a humiliating defeat.

Sarah Sackman: As I said a moment ago, not a single person who has encountered the system—not the barristers, the prosecutors, the judiciary, the court staff, the victims or the jurors; no one whom I have met—thinks it is working as it should. The shadow Justice Secretary has made a startling defence of the status quo while victims—not just women and girls but of all backgrounds—continue to watch delays creep up and up. Some 80,000 cases are currently in our Crown court backlog, and behind each and every one of those cases is an individual human story—someone waiting to clear their name.

We inherited a broken system. We did not do what the previous Government did, which was stick their head in the sand and hope that the problem would go away, with no solutions, under-investing for years while undermining our justice system. We were not prepared to do the same, which was why it was important to ask an independent review made up of Sir Brian Leveson—one of our leading judges—academics and data scientists to look at the evidence from both this country and

[Sarah Sackman]

comparators from across the world, to consult and to produce a set of proposals for reform that will fix the system. In the meantime, the Government have been gripping the crisis. We have made record investment in sitting days, increased the sentencing powers of magistrates courts, and invested in legal aid and the capacity of our legal community.

No responsible Government worthy of the name would take receipt of an independent review that is carefully considered, evidence-based and informed by experts and say, “Do you know what? We’ll just ignore that.” Responsible government shows leadership, which is why last week, we announced our proposals to increase magistrates courts’ sentencing powers and remove the right of defendants to insist on a jury trial when their case can be reasonably, proportionately and swiftly dealt with in a magistrates court. We followed Sir Brian’s recommendation to establish a Crown court bench division to deal with cases more swiftly. His report says that in his view and that of his expert team, doing so will provide time savings of at least 20%. On that basis, through investment, modernisation and systemic reform taken together, we will begin to see the backlog come down. That is Government offering evidence-based, expert-led solutions while all we hear from the Opposition is what cannot be done, letting down victims, letting down the public and ultimately undermining faith in one of the most important institutions in this country—our justice system.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): There is no reason why the Government should not consider mode of trial as part of their reform of the criminal courts, but they would find more support if they could better evidence the effects of the proposed changes to jury trial. To what extent will they reduce the backlog? What proportion and types of cases will no longer be eligible for jury trial? If courts are to be swifter and have greater sentencing powers, what effect will that have on the prison population?

Sarah Sackman: I am grateful to the Chair of the Justice Committee for his reflection that mode of trial is worth looking at. Of course, the Government will provide an impact assessment when we bring forward the legislation necessary to accompany these reforms, but I suggest that we do have an evidence base, as provided to us by the independent review of the criminal courts. We also have the very real evidence base that the offences we are talking about are not summary-only, which are already dealt with in the magistrates court, nor indictable-only offences, which will always have a jury trial in our Crown court, but triable either way offences. At the moment, defendants can opt either for a magistrates trial or for a Crown court trial. What we know is that where defendants opt for a magistrates trial, those are being heard four times faster on average than those heard in the Crown court. That is a pretty strong evidence base, coupled with that of the IRCC. Of course we will need to present the impact assessment of the package that we are bringing forward, but there is no doubt that the Government are taking action on an evidential basis, provided through an independent review.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The Liberal Democrats agree that under the current system victims and survivors of rape are being failed and far too few see justice served. However, for those victims who do decide to proceed through the justice system, fewer than 10% withdraw after a charge has been made, so the Deputy Prime Minister’s standing in the Chamber and using an assessment of the data to justify his reasoning for removing jury trials does not hold up to scrutiny.

It seems that a number of the Deputy Prime Minister’s Back Benchers, including the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), agree with the Liberal Democrats that the delays that plague our system will not be addressed by reducing jury trials, with the Government neither diagnosing the cause of the crisis nor providing the solutions to the record backlog. How do the Government justify restricting jury trials when backlog issues are caused by court mismanagement and broken private contracts rather than the jury system, as identified and confirmed by those working in the system from all sides? Will the Minister confirm which stakeholders, including victim support organisations and legal professionals, have been consulted on the reforms? What feedback has she received?

Sarah Sackman: I will answer the hon. Member’s last question first. All the bodies that she referred to—victim support, victims’ organisations, the legal community, the Bar Council and the Law Society—have engaged over many months, first with the independent review of criminal courts led by Sir Brian Leveson, and indeed now with the Ministry of Justice. That engagement is happening all the time.

On those who represent victims, the incoming Victims’ Commissioner has said that the system is broken and there is need for bold reform. The bold reform recommended by Sir Brian Leveson’s review is precisely the proportionate reform—radical, yes; and necessary, yes—that we are going to pursue.

On the hon. Member’s comment about victims and the significant figure of 60% of rape victims pulling out of cases, there are many reasons that victims pull out. It is difficult to know exactly what is going on in a victim’s head at any one time, but we all know how lengthy the delays are in our courts, and everyone is aware how retraumatising the court process can be. We know from Rape Crisis, for example, that one in three sexual offence trials is the subject of adjournment, so there is not just delay but victims thinking they have a trial date only for that to be put off. No one can say that that is defensible. For many, the fact that their case might not come to court for years is key to their withdrawing from the process, at whatever stage, so it is material to the context. That is why action needs to be taken.

As the Crown Prosecution Service data discussed at the Justice Committee has brought forward, one striking statistic shows the need for action: there were more than 4,000 cases that could have been heard in the magistrates court, but our current system privileges the defendant’s right to insist on a jury trial with the greater length of time that that takes. As a result, the person who has stolen a bottle of whisky or a bunch of flowers—a low-value

item—has every right to insist on a jury trial, and is then stuck in the same queue as serious crimes such as rape, murder and kidnapping. That is exactly how this works. And that is exactly why, on Sir Brian's expert recommendation, we are seeking to remove such cases from the queue and reassign them to where they can be better and more swiftly dealt with in the system, so that we can come to the most serious cases more swiftly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I have had a number of cases, including two recently. When the Opposition were in power, a woman came to me with her case, which was of historical child sexual abuse; her trial was being adjourned repeatedly, and there was a risk that the perpetrator would die before the case was heard. I now have two cases of children awaiting child sexual abuse cases that have had repeated adjournments. Can the Minister reassure me that the Government's proposals might help to progress those cases, which are impacting lives?

Sarah Sackman: I am very sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's cases, which graphically highlight precisely why reform is needed and the grave crisis in our criminal justice system, which, as Sir Brian has told us, is on the brink of collapse. We need a holistic approach: reform, significant investment and modernisation. On the earlier question about efficiencies, do we need to improve the time that it takes to bring prisoners from prison to court? Yes, we do. Do we need to improve things such as listing, and look at whether they can be done more efficiently? Do we need to look at productivity in our courts? Absolutely. That is why we have asked the independent review of the criminal courts to conduct part two of its review, and it is why we are looking at these issues very intently with the MOJ. There is no silver bullet, and her constituents' case illustrates the mountain that we have to climb. Such stories motivate me to work every day to get these reforms through and deliver swifter justice for victims.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My maths teacher always required us to show our workings. Last week, the Secretary of State told us that only 3% of prosecutions proceed to jury trials. How can marginally reducing such a small proportion produce the savings that have been identified? Will the Minister publish the modelling?

Sarah Sackman: We have the IRCC—Sir Brian Leveson's review. Over 388 pages of careful analysis, he sets out how his package of reforms will begin to bear down on the backlog. As I have said, an impact assessment will of course be provided in the ordinary way, but I can tell the right hon. Gentleman and assure the rest of the House that unless we were confident that the package of reform and investment that we are bringing forward was capable of bringing down the backlog, we would not be pursuing it. Of course, that is exactly what we are aiming at: to see the backlog coming down by the end of this Parliament, so that we can deliver swifter justice for victims.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does the Minister recall that the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was chastised by the Office for Statistics Regulation when he was Housing Secretary? Does she further agree, therefore, that we will not take lessons from him?

Sarah Sackman: I was not here when the right hon. Member for Newark was failing to show his working out. What I have observed, however, both in my professional life before I came to this House and since I have been the Courts Minister, is how the previous Government presided over an absolute collapse in criminal justice. The so-called party of law and order allowed the prisons to run boiling hot, with backlogs spiralling out of control, and caused a collapse in confidence in our courts system, not only in the legal community, but in the victim community. Unlike his Government, we will do the serious work of looking at where the evidence takes us. We identify the problem and do not stand idly by. We get out there and make the argument for how we will fix it.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The logic of the Minister's argument seems to be that the Justice Secretary was repeatedly wrong in the past to defend jury trials, that many of her colleagues are wrong to have concerns, and that her own Government were wrong not to mention it at all in the Labour party manifesto. She has repeatedly refused to say whether she would publish modelling and referred to the impact assessment. Can she clarify this: has the work in the Department been done on the impact assessment and she simply will not publish it, or has it not done that work, in which case the claims she is making are without evidence?

Sarah Sackman: If the right hon. Member had attended earlier debates, he would know that I have been clear that the state's obligation is to guarantee everybody who comes before the court a fair trial. The essence of a fair trial is a swift trial—not one that might be two years away. It is not a guarantee of a jury trial, because 90% of cases in this country already take place without a jury trial. I have also made it clear that we believe in jury trials. I do not believe in jury trials that are delayed for a couple of years, where witnesses and victims pull out of the system, but I do believe in jury trials as a cornerstone of British justice. As I have said, the quantitative and qualitative analyses have been happening not just within Sir Brian's team, but within the Ministry of Justice. We will be publishing an impact assessment at the requisite time.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased, if not a little surprised, to see how even the Conservatives have been to talk about issues of criminal justice in recent weeks, considering they showed next to no interest when they were in government and I was working in the prison system. I believe that the last Government stated that they would bring the Crown court backlog back to 53,000 by March 2025. Can the Minister therefore outline what the backlog was when we took office in July 2024? That figure is incredibly important when we are looking at why we need to take the bold action that has been announced by the Government in the past week.

Sarah Sackman: As my hon. Friend knows, we inherited record and rising backlogs. As I have said, we have a mountain to climb. We are trying to turn around an oil tanker, and we are not going to do that simply by sitting our way out of the problem. That is what Sir Brian Leveson concludes in his report. Of course, we need additional

[Sarah Sackman]

sitting days, and we are already sitting over 5,000 more days than we were when we took over. Sir Brian concludes that that alone will be insufficient to turn the tide on the backlog, and that is why we need system reform coupled with the investment. That will do the job to bring down the backlogs to sustainable levels.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I have some sympathy for the Minister. We all know that the Tories fiddled, leaving our criminal justice system to burn. As the Law Society president noted earlier this year, we are still not using our courts efficiently, despite what the Minister says. What steps have been taken to increase court sitting days and make better use of our under-utilised courtrooms?

Sarah Sackman: First, I pay tribute not just to our judges, but our court staff and our hard-working prosecutors and defence lawyers, because we know that judges in the Crown court are hearing almost 30% more cases than they were pre-covid. In that sense, the system is working harder. As I have just indicated, we have added more sitting days. We have added more than 5,000 more sitting days than were being sat when we took over in government, and I want us to go further. We need to match the system reform with investment, and I hope that we will be able to come back to the House at the conclusion of the concordat process, which needs to take its course, and assure the House that we are sitting at maximum system capacity.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): It is horrific that victims of rape and sexual assault are waiting years for justice, and we should never forget, in these conversations or decisions, the toll that that process takes on a victim's life. Can the Minister please confirm that victims will be kept at the heart of the justice system, and that this Government will deliver timely justice for survivors?

Sarah Sackman: As she so often does, my hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. We have in focus, at the heart of all that we are doing, the goal of delivering swifter justice for victims. Last week the Deputy Prime Minister announced a package of £550 million to be put towards victim support and keeping victims engaged in the process, which, as it takes longer and longer, is harder to do. Ultimately, the best thing that we can do for victims is deliver on the promise of bringing down the backlog so that they do not have to face these agonising waits to see justice done. If victims pull out—and, in these cases, the victim is often the only witness to the crime—the worst aspect is that it is not even a question of “justice delayed is justice denied”; justice simply is not served at all.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I think we would all agree that it is a tragedy when any rape victim withdraws from the criminal justice system, but I do not buy the faux outrage from the shadow Secretary of State. I was the chief executive of a rape crisis centre when his party was in government, and every single day I heard victims talk about the delays in the system causing them more trauma, about the police's poor interviewing techniques and about the lack of understanding in the criminal justice system of the effects of the

trauma that they had been through on that Government's watch, and nothing was improving. We know that rape trials will not be affected by this decision on jury trials, so I believe that the Deputy Prime Minister was wrong to use that as a justification for changing the jury trial process, but have the Government given any consideration, or will they be giving any consideration, to a specialist court system to deal with rape and sexual violence offences?

Sarah Sackman: I thank the hon. Lady for the work that she did before coming to the House. I respect her experience, and it is not clear that experience of that kind and range is shared by all Members, including those who are so quick to criticise the attempts to reform what is a failing system. As she has said, the best thing that we can achieve for victims of sexual offences—not just rape, but other sexual offences as well—is reducing the backlogs. We know from charities such as Rape Crisis that some 17% of cases in the backlog relate to sexual offences. If we can get hold of this problem—if we can get a real grip on it across the piece, from the magistrates all the way to the Crown—that, more than anything else, will deliver swifter justice for the victims whom the hon. Lady once supported.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): Jury trials allow ordinary citizens to participate in the justice system—which many groups simply do not trust—ensuring community representation and transparency. Can the Minister explain how citizen involvement can be continued, so that we do not see additional miscarriages of justice as a result of influence from personal bias or external pressures that can potentially lead to unfair outcomes?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend has asked a very important question. Equality before the law is, of course, a fundamental principle, but so is the need for all our communities to have confidence in our justice system. One of the worst symptoms of the broken system that we have today is the fact that so few people now have that confidence.

Let me say first to my hon. Friend that we are preserving jury trial for the most serious cases, and secondly that our proposals represent a vote of confidence in our magistracy, which is increasingly diverse and needs to be more diverse still. In London, more than 30% of magistrates are drawn from the communities that they are serving and come from black and minority ethnic communities. In the midlands, where I know my hon. Friend has a great deal of experience, the numbers are getting higher and higher, at 15% or 16%, and we want more still. This is how we continue to include that very important democratic and community component in our justice system, so that communities such as hers can continue to have confidence in it.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am afraid that the Minister's treatment of the 60% figure only tends to confirm my belief that one is better off with the common sense of 12 ordinary people than with one legal professional. [Laughter.] Even she is smiling—good for her. Can she look again at this point? Yes, it is disastrous if 60% of women who allege rape drop the case before it proceeds to a conclusion, but if only 9% drop the case after the alleged criminal has been charged,

the overwhelming reason for their dropping the case is not the length of the trial by jury, but the slowness between the reporting of the allegation and the criminal being charged. Will she accept that, in this case, she is looking at the wrong target?

Sarah Sackman: I smile because I know the spirit in which the question is asked. I know that it is asked in good faith, but I also say this: as well as being a lawyer, I am also a Member of Parliament and I am also a woman. The question that was asked earlier was put very well: a single victim of whatever crime—rape being one of the most agonising that we can imagine—is one too many pulling out of the system. We do not know exactly what is going through every victim's head, and it is right to say that the 60% figure was accurate on its own terms. We do not know exactly why people might pull out of the system, but we do know that everyone is aware that the system is broken. Even when they come to consider whether to report a crime, they are aware of what that might entail, knowing the delays, the agony and the bureaucracy that lie ahead. Quite honestly, if something were to happen to me or a loved one today and I was advising them or asking myself, "Would I want to go through with that, knowing what I do about the delays?" I would have to think long and hard about it.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): On Friday, I met senior detectives in Bradford who investigate and bring prosecutions for historical cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse, including group-based abuse. They do all they can to support victims to get justice—in fact, West Yorkshire police were commended by Baroness Casey for its work—but it was clear to me that court delays add to the trauma experienced by victims and survivors who bravely come forward. That is true for those I have spoken to. How will these reforms speed up justice for victims of rape, serious sexual offences and vile grooming gangs?

Sarah Sackman: I thank my hon. Friend for all her tireless work for victims in her community who have been seriously impacted by some of the crimes that she outlines. My job is to take a look at the whole system and how it is functioning for all victims, for those who are accused and for all participants in the system who are currently being let down. The package of measures that was announced last week includes an increase in sitting powers, and the removal of the defendant's right to insist on a jury in favour of having cases triaged by the experts—namely, the court itself. With the establishment of a bench division, which Sir Brian advises, cases could be heard at least 20% faster, and we are taking cases such as fraud out of the list so that they can be heard by judges alone. We believe that, taken together, the package's measures can deliver swifter justice for victims, including those in my hon. Friend's own community.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Members on both sides of the House know how important these changes are, and getting them right is absolutely vital. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) asked a specific question as to whether the Department has done an impact assessment. Could the Minister clarify whether that impact assessment has been done? If so, will it be immediately published?

Sarah Sackman: The right hon. Gentleman is right: we should have a robust debate about the best way forward to fix what is undeniably a broken system. As a Department, we have several sources of evidence and assessment, not least the work that was done by the Leveson review. We will bring forward the impact assessment at the appropriate time, and the House will be able to scrutinise it then.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): There is capacity for almost 2,000 more court sitting days that are not being used for rape or other trials at the moment. Why is the Justice Secretary not prioritising funding those days to help reduce the backlog, rather than trying to scrap jury trials?

Sarah Sackman: We are looking, where we can, to invest as much as possible, but I remind the hon. Member that, when we talk about investment in sitting days, we must look at system capacity. That requires not just judicial time, but sufficient numbers of barristers—both defence and prosecution—and as the previous Lord Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) said, we cannot simply 3D print those. We have to invest in the professionals, and that is exactly what we announced last week, with £92 million in legal aid for criminal solicitors and an additional £34 million for barristers. I should also mention match funding for criminal law pupillages to develop the talent pipeline. All of that increases the system capacity, so that when we add on sitting days, it is not just a judge sitting there waiting for a barrister to turn up, which sometimes does not happen and leads to the trial being adjourned, but we have enough system capacity to run at the maximal and most productive level possible.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): In Shropshire and wider West Mercia, victims of rape and other serious offences are being told to wait for their jury trials into 2027, 2028 and even later. Meanwhile, defendants of some other offences are opting for jury trials, the magistrates having already accepted jurisdiction. Is it not time that we back, trust and empower our magistrates and district judges up and down this country?

Sarah Sackman: Yes. As my hon. Friend knows, when I came to visit the justice centre in Telford with him we spoke a lot about the role that magistrates play, and I want to pay huge tribute to them. The proposals we brought forward last week are, as his question suggests, a huge vote of confidence in our magistrates and in our magistrates courts system to hear cases swiftly and robustly, and we should back them.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on both her passion and her ability to get so many words into *Hansard* in her responses on an urgent question. However, one bit of detail that we are missing—and she is now being asked about this for the fifth time—is an impact assessment. She has said again that the impact assessment will be brought forward at the appropriate time. The question was: has it been written already and she is keeping hold of it, or has it not been written but will be brought forward at the appropriate time? I would appreciate clarity on that, with a simple yes or no.

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Member can get hold of *Hansard* and read my previous answer, which is that there will be an impact assessment at the requisite moment.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I find it heartbreaking to hear that there are victims of domestic violence, rape and sexual violence who feel that they are tackling a system that is absolutely broken. From a piece of casework I have dealt with, I can tell the House about a young lady, the victim of domestic violence, who had to wait so long for justice to be served that she actually returned to the perpetrator. To me, that is not only terrifying, but obviously it had a huge impact on her family. Can I ask the Minister, working with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), to promise me that she will do everything she possibly can to ensure that victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape get the justice they deserve as soon as they can?

Sarah Sackman: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that the Under-Secretary of State and I are working incredibly hard. This is central to our Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls, and we have to look at how not just the delays in our criminal justice system but the processes in our courts are often retraumatising women and girls. We are resolute in our efforts to tackle exactly what he has described.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Government's proposals on jury trials are causing concern and consternation in my constituency, and my mailbag is quite full of people's messages opposing the Government's proposals. Just so we understand where the Secretary of State is on this, could the Minister please explain to us what he is doing right now such that he could not come and answer this urgent question himself?

Sarah Sackman: At the moment, the Secretary of State is giving a very important speech launching the Government's anti-corruption strategy.

Mr Speaker: I hope that announcement has been made first to the House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. Rape victims must be paramount in all that happens. Rape and sexual assault trials are already lengthy and very emotional for victims. Juries signal a public perception of justice, and highlight the importance of the community and the average person. What assessment has been made of the impact that judge-only trials can have on the victims of rape, and what steps will be taken to ensure that judge-only trials do not feel less empowering, because this step could increase victim attrition with victims feeling that they do not have the support of the public?

Sarah Sackman: Let me make it very clear that for the offence of rape there will always be a jury trial. That was made clear in our proposals last week.

Mr Speaker: It is very helpful to get through the questions and the Minister has done very well. Justice does matter and I think all of us represent victims of crime. The more quickly we can get through, the happier we will be. As I say, Chorley magistrates court would love to be reopened in order to help.

Maccabi Tel Aviv FC: Away Fans Ban

4.21 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the adequacy of the evidence on which West Midlands police took decisions relating to the Aston Villa versus Maccabi Tel Aviv match.

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Let me again acknowledge the concern and disappointment caused by the decision to ban away fans at Villa Park on 6 November. I recognise the continued strength of feeling in this House, and in the country more widely, and I welcome this opportunity to update Members on the latest developments.

The House will be aware that Chief Constable Craig Guildford, Assistant Chief Constable Mike O'Hara and police and crime commissioner Simon Foster gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee last week. I am aware that Assistant Chief Constable Mike O'Hara has since apologised for some of his remarks in relation to Jewish community support for the decisions taken. He will need to set out his correction to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee directly and we will await the Committee's conclusions.

Any suggestion that the intelligence gathering and community engagement led by West Midlands police was anything other than of the highest standard would, of course, be a matter of profound concern. I am sure that the House will understand that I remain limited in what I can say about the specific intelligence underpinning this decision while investigations continue. However, in my evidence to the Committee last week, and to this House before then, I explained that the Home Secretary had already commissioned His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to review how forces in England and Wales provide risk assessment advice to local safety advisory groups and other bodies responsible for licensing high-profile public events. That wider report will be returned to the Home Secretary by 31 March.

Before then, I can confirm that, by the end of the year, HMICFRS will also provide a specific update on the intelligence gathered by West Midlands police on this matter and how it was used. Operational independence is an important principle and one we must protect. At the same time, scrutiny and accountability are essential, especially when it comes to issues with clear implications for public safety and public confidence. It is absolutely right that West Midlands police are asked to explain as fully as possible how the decision was reached.

Sport is a source of joy and excitement for millions of people around the world. Football supporters should be able to follow their team, whatever their nationality, faith or background. That has been the clear and unequivocal stance of the Government throughout this episode, and it will remain so.

Nick Timothy: I thank the Minister for that response, including the news of the HMICFRS report by the end of the year.

The police intelligence used to justify the ban on Israeli fans from Villa Park has fallen apart, and so has the evidence given to the Select Committee by Chief

Constable Craig Guildford and Assistant Chief Constable Mike O'Hara. The police say their information came from the Netherlands, after Maccabi Tel Aviv played Ajax last year, but the Dutch said the West Midlands intelligence report was "not true".

At the Committee, the police repeated claims—denied by the Dutch—that the fans were "militaristic", threw people in the river and targeted Muslim civilians. They even said that the Dutch police had lied under political pressure from their own mayor. We are asked to believe that the Dutch police lied to their own people, the media, their justice and security inspectorate, their mayor, their Government and even their King, but told the truth once in a Zoom call with West Midlands police that was never even minuted.

The police again claimed that the Dutch deployed 5,000 officers—a claim denied by the Dutch—but admitted to the Committee that they made up the number themselves. Asked whether a fictional match cited in the intelligence report came from artificial intelligence, Craig Guildford told the Committee "not at all", but AI detection programmes conclude otherwise. The police have already had to apologise for wrongly telling the Committee that a local Jewish community had supported the ban.

There are many questions here, but I will limit myself to four. First, did the Policing Minister believe the evidence that the police presented to the Committee? Secondly, have the police replied to the letter she sent to them two weeks ago? Thirdly, will she guarantee the publication of all relevant information and correspondence? Fourthly, does the chief constable retain her confidence as Policing Minister and the confidence of the Home Secretary?

The police are accused of fabricating evidence to justify a predetermined outcome demanded by Islamists. They have had weeks to defend themselves and have failed to do so. This is fatal for public confidence in the police and in justice, and in my opinion the chief constable must go.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this urgent question. I know that he will have watched proceedings at the Home Affairs Committee with interest. Of course, it will be for the Committee to draw its own conclusions. As I said in my statement, it is right that the police clarify the latest reports that we heard over the weekend—through the pages of a newspaper, sadly, rather than proactively—on the situation regarding the engagement with the Jewish community and the conclusions that came from those conversations.

The hon. Gentleman will hopefully understand that I do not want to express judgment here when we have a very thorough process, which is ongoing, about the evidence that was gathered in order to reach the conclusion that was reached on the Villa match, and it is absolutely right that HMICFRS is looking at this matter. I know that the hon. Gentleman is frustrated—I can hear his frustration. However, it is right that it goes through that process and talks to whoever it needs to talk to in order to get to the bottom of the pros and cons of the evidence, both as the hon. Gentleman portrayed it and as West Midlands police portrayed it. We need to understand that.

I have been clear that if it is the case that there is anything other than the highest standard in terms of what we would expect, that is a matter of profound

concern. It is clear that mistakes have been made in this process—not least with the fictitious match to which the hon. Gentleman referred—and I want to get to the bottom of what happened. I have also been on the record praising West Midlands police for things that it has done in the past, and I would not want to jump to conclusions. However, I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that we will get to the bottom of this and that we will act accordingly once we have that information.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the police responded to me. Yes, they did. I think I can put that into the public domain, should he want to see it. He also asked whether we will publish the relevant documentation. Of course, we always want to publish what we can. The Home Affairs Committee has already asked some follow-up points from that sitting, and we will be very happy to provide that information. The hon. Gentleman also asked whether I have confidence in the chief constable, which I was asked last week. I will repeat that I have seen some very good work in the west midlands across a range of issues, but we need to get to the bottom of this particular issue.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that at the heart of this matter is the question of the truth, and the question of whether the deliberation of the safety advisory group at Birmingham city council was compromised or prejudiced?

Sarah Jones: There are a number of questions we need to think about. The safety advisory groups were set up many years ago and in a different context, so it is right that we look at the way in which police intelligence and information are fed into those groups. That is the topic of the main piece of work that the inspector is doing, which will report by the end of March. The piece of work relating to West Midlands in particular will report by the end of the year.

The Home Secretary has asked officials to look at Louise Casey's recommendation from 2021 that we signify certain events as "nationally significant" and then perhaps have a different model for how we take them forward. There is also a review going on in the Cabinet Office of the guidance for safety advisory groups. All those factors need to feed in together. Clearly, we need to look at whether we can improve the structures that exist for very large significant events—in this case globally significant.

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

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) for securing this critical urgent question.

It is important not to forget the context of this decision. It came only weeks after the tragic events of the Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation attack. After the attack, the Prime Minister spoke to the Jewish people. He said that he would do everything in his power to guarantee them the security that they deserve. Yet when it came to a football club predominantly supported by Jewish people, they were suddenly deemed a risk to public safety. That is not just inconsistent but an insult to a community still reeling from a violent antisemitic attack. At a moment when Jewish families

[Matt Vickers]

needed reassurance, this decision sent entirely the wrong message. It undermined confidence, contradicted the Prime Minister's own promise and fell short of the duty we owe to the Jewish people to keep them safe.

Why was this decision taken? When the Minister addressed the House a couple of weeks ago, she said that the shadow Home Secretary was "jumping the gun a bit" in saying that certain pieces of intelligence were "just made up". We now know that not only did imaginary matches somehow enter the intelligence picture, but officers giving evidence to Parliament were inaccurate about their dealings with the local Jewish community. That seriously undermines the integrity of this House and the vital work that police forces do in securing accurate intelligence.

The Government have asked HMICFRS to review the intelligence, but will the Minister go further and ensure that the details are made public? We need full transparency and more accurate accounts than we have seen so far, so that proper accountability can finally take place.

Sarah Jones: I remind the House that the Prime Minister's view and the view of this Government is that the decision taken was the wrong one. The Prime Minister was very clear about that from the outset, saying:

"This is the wrong decision. We will not tolerate antisemitism on our streets. The role of the police is to ensure all football fans can enjoy the game, without fear of violence or intimidation."

That is our view, as it has been consistently since.

We are trying to make sure that we can avoid such a situation happening again. HMICFRS will do its report in the normal way, and we are asking it to do so in two stages. One stage will include the information about West Midlands, and the second will take a wider look at how police information is fed into safety advisory groups. HMICFRS will do its report in the way that we would expect.

I do not want to disagree with the hon. Member about the harm that this has done. I am very well aware of it, and I have had many conversations with Jewish colleagues and organisations since this incident. I hope that we can put it behind us by learning the right lessons and making sure that we take appropriate action.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): As someone who has had the pleasure of working with the chief constable, I can say that he is a very considered man. Having said that, as an MP who represents the adjoining constituency, I was given absolutely no information about what was going on. Can the Minister assure the House that lessons will be learned and the appropriate actions will be taken to ensure that this does not happen again?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. She might not be the MP directly in the area but, as the Member for Erdington, she has a very close interest in this matter. The safety advisory group as constructed at the moment has a couple of councillors on it, so there was representation, but is that the right mix? This speaks to the wider question of whether, if there are issues of national significance, we need a different lens through which to view them. In answer to

her question: yes, I will do all I can to ensure that we get to the bottom of what happened and learn the lessons in the appropriate way.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): This has been a sorry saga from the very beginning. First, we were told that the fans had to be banned for safety reasons. Intelligence reports, we were told, said that Maccabi Tel Aviv fans were highly organised, skilled fighters with the serious desire and will to fight with police and opposing groups. That was false. Last week, the West Midlands assistant chief constable told MPs that the Jewish community in the local area supported the ban. This has now been found to be false, too, and he has rightly apologised. There are serious questions to be answered about West Midlands police's handling of this decision, so will the Minister commit to support the setting up of any independent inquiries that are needed to get to the bottom this, in excess of what is already going on, if the answers are not found, so that anyone who is responsible can be held to account?

Finally, with antisemitic incidents remaining at record highs in this country, the Government must reassure the Jewish community of its safety. Ministers assured me last month that the community cohesion strategy would be published when it was ready. Can they assure us that the Jewish community remains part of that process, and can they give us a concrete timeline for the strategy's publication?

Sarah Jones: I very much hope that through the processes I have listed—the HMICFRS review into what happens to police intelligence and the advice feeding into safety advisory groups, the wider look at what is needed for events of national significance, and the Cabinet Office review of the role of safety advisory groups—we will ensure that we do not have a situation like this ever again. The hon. Gentleman asks what we would do if we did not get to the bottom of this, but I very much hope that we will. Of course I will come to this place and make sure that the House has all the information it needs to draw its own conclusions.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the community cohesion strategy, and we are working hard on that. In the wider context of how we deal with it when we know that large groups of people will attend protests, we are doing a wider piece of work that will help us navigate whether the existing legislation on protests is fit for purpose on a range of issues. For example, we have had significant concerns about antisemitism rearing its head at protests and we are working really hard with Jewish organisations to make sure that we get it right on that. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on that.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I wish to associate myself with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton). Something has clearly gone very wrong with the safety advisory group process in respect of Aston Villa, as the Minister, to her credit, has said from the start. I am particularly concerned by the apparent absence of clear decision-making processes, and of evidence and recording surrounding those processes, and I wish to know whether this is indicative of other decisions that might have been made by the respective

police forces. Can the Minister confirm to the House whether, as part of her considerations, she is looking at new national minimum standards for the way that decisions are made and evidenced through safety advisory groups?

Sarah Jones: The Cabinet Office is updating the guidance on safety advisory groups and it is looking at exactly those kinds of issues. There is a wider point about the need to reference, account for and minute decisions when they are made and to record how they are made. We do that in government and we do it for a reason. It is because when we are questioned about our decisions, we need to have access to the right information about what was said, when and to whom. That is a wider question that I definitely take away from this episode.

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

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I would be grateful if the Minister could share any correspondence she has with the Committee because we are keen to get full transparency on this issue.

Does the Minister share my incredulity that a decision that was so sensitive appears to have been taken on the basis of a single unminuted Zoom call between a West Midlands police officer and officers from Amsterdam, and that the exercise in social media scraping led the police to believe that a match that had never taken place could be cited in the evidence for the decision to ban the away fans?

Sarah Jones: Of course, the mistakes that have clearly been made played out in the evidence to the right hon. Member's Select Committee. The mistake about that particular match does seem to be alarming, as does the subsequent apology.

On access to the intelligence and what was said and when, I know that the right hon. Member will find this frustrating, but I repeat that I want HMICFRS to go through its proper process and to come to a conclusion. It would not be right for me to base my conclusion on the evidence I have before me. It is absolutely right that HMICFRS looks at this matter thoroughly and comes back to us, and we will take whatever action is required afterwards.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Chris Murray, a member of the Select Committee.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her answers and her evidence at the Select Committee last week. It is shocking and deeply concerning that evidence from senior police officers at a Select Committee can fall apart within a week. This was a highly sensitive fixture, and this decision has had a significant impact on the Jewish community in the context of rising antisemitism. Policing in this country depends on the principle of consent and the idea that all communities are treated fairly and equally. I know that the Minister does not want to prejudge the outcomes of this specific case, but can she tell us her thoughts on the impact that this whole issue is having on the principle of policing by consent and on different communities in the country?

Sarah Jones: Policing by consent is the bedrock of our policing, and I think everybody across the House would agree with that—those Peel principles drive everything

we want our police to do. There are a number of areas where that model of policing by consent has been tested in recent years, and public order and protest are a case in point. It is hard for the police, and I praise them for virtually every decision they make when it comes to public order. Most protests go ahead well and are policed well. There are good relations between the protesters and the police, and the routes are discussed, debated and agreed. The vast majority of protests happen in a way that we do not even notice because the policing is done brilliantly—there are some absolutely excellent police who deal with this. But when we get something wrong, of course the public question what is happening and question that confidence. That is why it is so important that we in this place do not jump to conclusions and that we get the right answers in a careful way, so that can give the right response.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) on securing an urgent question on this important matter. Does the Minister agree that it is not only the Jewish community who have been seriously let down by this sequence of events, but all of us in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield and across Birmingham? Does she accept that it is not right to blame the SAG, which will always go—on the whole—with the police evidence that is put before that committee? That might well be an argument for looking again at the structure of how these decisions are taken. Does she also agree that this looks like a maladroitness political decision rather than a policy decision, and does she understand that many local people are very disappointed in the role of the police and crime commissioner, who is supposed to stand up for local communities and has not done so in this case?

Sarah Jones: I was in Birmingham last week to launch our winter of action: police working in our town centres and closely with retailers and other organisations to stamp down on and prevent crime. I was with the police and crime commissioner, who is doing a good job in the policing of the community. For the 4 million people who go through the Birmingham Christmas market, it will be a lovely experience. I will not condemn anybody in this place. There are questions to answer, and I know that the right hon. Gentleman's community, like everybody here, wants answers. We want to get to a point where we can celebrate the fact that Villa won at the weekend. That should be the only story in town, but unfortunately it is not because of this situation. We need to get to the bottom of it, and the Government will do so and respond appropriately.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): When making these sorts of decisions, it is important to have several points of information. Can the Minister confirm whether UEFA was present at the safety advisory group meeting when the decision to ban Maccabi fans was taken, and, if so, what was its advice? More broadly, can she say what UEFA's general advice is on banning any fans from any match?

Sarah Jones: As far as I am aware, UEFA was not in the SAG meeting. Of course, there would have been conversations with Villa, which ultimately had to make the decisions. It is a complicated decision-making process,

[Sarah Jones]

as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) said. The SAG sits to consider advice. The police give their evidence and opinion. The right hon. Member was right to say that, on the whole, the SAG will take the police advice, but there are other views in the room. It is then for the local authority to decide whether to allow the event to have the correct licence, and for Villa, in this case, to decide what that means and whether to allow fans to come. It is quite a complex picture. UEFA's oversight of the whole league is important, but the decision about whether the event should go ahead was taken locally. We are trying to get to the heart of whether that is the right model for events of such national significance, or whether we should have a different model.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): This really is a catalogue of disaster, and it raises a range of issues, some of which the Committee will consider when we kick off our inquiry into major events tomorrow. In the previous Parliament, the Committee looked at the safety of sporting events and concluded that safety advisory groups have, at best, a fairly dubious record on seeking out and considering the necessary perspectives to inform better decision making. May I invite the Minister to look at our recommendations from a couple of years ago on amending the Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975 so that police and safety advisory groups have no choice but to engage properly from the outset on such cases?

When considering the competence of the West Midlands chief constable, might the Minister start by asking him to respond to his correspondence? The Select Committee wrote to him about the ban on Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, but we still have not received a response.

Sarah Jones: I will certainly look back at and read that report, which I very much welcome. It relates to some of the wider questions about nationally significant events and how SAGs operate. I am sorry that there has not been a response to the Committee; I encourage everybody to respond as quickly as possible. The hon. Lady is right to raise wider questions about how SAGs operate; we need to get to the heart of that.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): This quagmire needs much greater scrutiny, and to be brought out into the disinfectant of daylight. Let me repeat the question: why have no safety advisory group minutes been produced? How many times did the SAG meet on this issue? Will the Minister ask whether there was a UEFA representative at the safety advisory group meeting, and what their advice was?

Sarah Jones: I cannot answer my hon. Friend's question. As we mentioned at the Select Committee, how many times the safety advisory group was meeting was slightly unclear to us at the Home Office, because our relationship with the safety advisory group is through the UK football organisation. We were receiving information in a slightly ad hoc way, according to when we asked for that information, and that is one of the things we need

to look at. Of course, I am very happy, as my hon. Friend is, to go back and ask questions about who was there.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): After hearing the Policing Minister, I am slightly incredulous. In her last reply to a perfectly reasonable question from her own side of the House about the roles of UEFA and the safety advisory group, she said she is happy to go back and ask questions. She said in her statement that the mistakes were "alarming"—that is the phrase she used.

This has been going on for weeks. The Minister has had a letter back from West Midlands police that she has not shared with the House before replying to this urgent question. She is saying that we will not have all the answers until the end of March, yet the Prime Minister is saying that this is a really high priority. Why is it taking so long to get simple answers on something that is of concern across the House?

Sarah Jones: I completely reject the right hon. Gentleman's framing. We have been clear, and the Prime Minister has been clear, from the minute this decision was made that we believe it to be the wrong decision, and we worked tirelessly from that point to try to ensure that the match went ahead with the fans present. There was a weekend of activity to try to enable the match to go ahead in a safe way with whatever resources were required. There were lots of conversations across Government, and locally as well. Of course, Maccabi Tel Aviv then decided that they would not bring their fans, so the need for that process ended.

We then asked HMICFRS to look at this properly so that we can shine a light on what happened and what has gone wrong—we have been very clear about that, and it is completely right. I am not making up my mind on the hoof, but doing this through a proper process. I hope the right hon. Gentleman agrees it is a proper process. We are also looking at whether we need to change the wider structures so that an issue like this does not arise again.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is fairly clear that my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) is right that this was a predetermined decision, and that the evidence was something for which West Midlands police scabbled about later, but whatever the outcome of the Minister's inquiries, whether it turns out, heaven forbid, that there was an antisemitic element to this or—in my view, more probably—that the police thought they would have a quieter life if they went down this road, will she guarantee to the House that whatever lessons are learned will be communicated in the strongest terms to the chief constables of all the other police forces so that they do not follow a bad example?

Sarah Jones: Yes, I can absolutely assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will learn whatever lessons we need to learn and take whatever action we need to take. Of course, that applies across all forces, not just West Midlands police.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Is the Minister aware of any representations made by UEFA in advance of this fixture?

Sarah Jones: I was not a party to conversations between Aston Villa and UEFA, nor was I a party to the decision-making process. The Government have no political involvement whatsoever in the safety advisory groups—we do not feed into that process at all. That is one of the questions we are looking at, because perhaps that is not the right model for the future.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Right across the political spectrum, I think everyone feels that this was a poor decision and a bad decision, which is why it has unravelled so quickly. Can the Minister reassure the House that there was absolutely no local political interference in making this decision?

Sarah Jones: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot tell him the motivation for any of the decisions that were made. The Prime Minister's clear view is that the decision made by the safety advisory group was the wrong decision and that we must ensure that this does not happen again. Safety advisory groups are local groups, with local representatives. The police advise those groups on the safety of events and a licence is then given for that event. Perhaps that structure needs to be looked at, particularly if there are issues of national significance, when there may be a role of national politicians. The operational independence of the police is really important and we have to make sure that we do not ride roughshod over that. That said, we also have to get to the bottom of what happened in this case.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her thoughtful answers. Last week, Chief Constable Craig Guildford told the Home Affairs Committee that the decision “was not taken lightly” and that the police had “taken a careful approach” when making the decision. Once again, I want to raise a concern about how this so-called “careful approach” made people feel and the message that it sent about exclusion. What assessment has the Minister made of the choice that was made and of the steps that should have been taken to ensure that all international football fans were treated fairly, based on correct evidence and information?

Sarah Jones: We have been very clear all the way through that we believe that the wrong decision was made. The message that it sent to the wider world risked being the message that Jews were not welcome in the west midlands; that is one of the most awful things that could be received by Jewish people around the world. We want to get to the bottom of why the decision was made and what we can do to ensure that this does not happen again.

Ajax Armoured Vehicle

4.56 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the latest developments concerning Ajax and other Army vehicles.

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I thank the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) for tabling the question and Mr Speaker for allowing me to provide an update on the current situation, expanding on the written ministerial statement that I laid on 26 November.

As safety is the top priority for the ministerial team, prior to Ajax's initial operating capability being announced, I asked for and was given assurances in writing by senior Ministry of Defence personnel that the system was safe. However, on 22 November, around 30 service personnel operating the Ajax family of vehicles reported noise and vibration symptoms during Exercise Titan Storm. In line with our safety protocols, the exercise was stopped immediately, and those affected received full medical care and attention. These personnel continue to be monitored. None of the symptoms are life-threatening and there have been no hospitalisations.

The safety of our service personnel remains a top priority for the Ministry of Defence. As such, and out of an abundance of caution, I directed a pause on the use of Ajax for training and exercising while safety investigations are carried out. There are three investigations currently under way: one by the Defence Accident Investigation Branch; another by the Army safety investigation team; and the ministerial review that I have directed to be carried out in addition. While investigations remain ongoing, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the potential outcomes or to speculate on the causes of the symptoms. However, I can confirm that officials have been meeting General Dynamics daily since the incident on Titan Storm, and I am meeting General Dynamics tomorrow to ensure a collaborative approach to the issue.

The safety of our people remains the top priority for me and the ministerial team. As such, we will take whatever decisions are required to end the saga one way or another. Where people have concerns around Ajax, I remind them that each organisation involved with Ajax has its own whistleblowing processes to ensure that any concerns are addressed appropriately and, importantly, confidentially.

On vehicle safety more broadly, which the hon. Gentleman asked about, on the issue of the MAN support vehicle fleet—Army trucks—which I mentioned in my recent appearance in front of the Defence Committee, I can confirm that an issue was identified with the vehicles, and that a mitigation and repair schedule was created, which is being rolled out. That is an example of a system working properly in relation to MAN SV.

James Cartlidge: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I state how shocking it was to hear of the Army exercise that took place on 22 November that resulted in more than 30 casualties among soldiers operating Ajax? There have been reports of symptoms ranging from

[James Cartledge]

sickness to hearing loss. As the Minister said, the priority must be the safety of our personnel, and we wish all those affected a swift recovery.

This matter is particularly disturbing for me, as the renewed incidents with noise and vibrations sound strikingly similar to the problems that I was assured had been resolved when I was the Minister for Defence Procurement. In the Defence Committee, the Minister confirmed that he received similar assurances when he agreed to announce that Ajax had reached the key milestone of initial operating capability on 6 November.

The Minister and I may have our political differences, but may I suggest that we have something in common on this issue? We have both been misled about the viability of the Ajax programme. After all, it is not just about the recurrence of extremely worrying noise and vibration problems; over the weekend, we have seen reports of serious allegations from anonymous General Dynamics employees suggesting systemic flaws with the Ajax platform. That includes a disgraceful incident in which a General Dynamics employee publicly belittled the injured soldiers. That is utterly unacceptable.

Given all that, and contrary to assurances given to and accepted in good faith by successive Ministers, including myself, surely the only possible conclusion is that the Ajax vehicle is fundamentally flawed. Does the Minister agree that the manufacturer, General Dynamics, must have been aware of that for years and must be held to account? As such, remembering that the procurement reform I launched in February 2024 stressed the need for a second opinion, will he bring in a completely independent organisation or company steeped in engineering excellence—from outside the Ministry of Defence, with no skin in the game—to pronounce on the one question that we all need answered: is Ajax viable without a fundamental redesign? If not, how much more will it cost to remedy?

On a personal note, I imagine that the Minister is as furious as I am at having been repeatedly given what now turn out to be false assurances by those responsible for the Ajax programme. Surely he is now left with a binary choice: fix it, or fail it.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions and the tone in which he asked them. I too was disgusted when I heard the news of the injuries to our service personnel, especially after a point at which the vehicle was assured to be safe. It is for that very reason that I will not speculate—I hope he understands why—until the investigations have reported, so that we can understand the cause of the noise and vibration injuries. A decision can then be made based on that information. I share the hon. Gentleman's concern, and I want to ensure that information given to Ministers—be it to me or any other Minister, in this Government or any other—is accurate and timely, so it is appropriate that we get to the bottom of this. I also share his concern around a particular issue with one GD employee, which he raised. I can confirm that General Dynamics has written to the Department to apologise for the recent social media posts from a member of its staff, and that was the right thing to do.

The hon. Gentleman asked about an independent review of the platforms. As well as the Defence Accident Investigation Branch and the British Army's teams

investigating, I have asked that an external organisation with experience of noise and vibration be brought in. We are building a team of experts from a number of organisations outside the usual GD production line to add expertise and external challenge to the work. Hopefully, I will be in a situation to say more to the House in my next update; I hope to table a written ministerial statement ahead of the Christmas recess to keep the House informed about progress.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concern for our service personnel. It is not good enough for our service personnel to sustain injuries in this fashion on a platform that they were reassured was safe, just as I was. That is why getting to the bottom of this issue is a priority for me. I await the reports of those three investigations to understand what happened and therefore what decisions we will take as a result.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What an absolute shambles. The Minister should be livid at how things have transpired, given the billions of pounds of British taxpayers' money that has been spent over the years on the Ajax programme and the injuries sustained by our brave service personnel. In addition to problems with Ajax, the Boxer mechanised infantry vehicle is years late into service, and the 6,000 or so MAN support vehicles are currently grounded due to broken parts. Is there a wider systemic problem with land vehicle procurement and sustainment? Where exactly does this leave us with the British Army's readiness at a time of such increased international tensions?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, as well as for the questions he asked me in front of his Select Committee last week, which gave me the opportunity to provide an update to his Committee and the public on the investigations.

The MAN SV fleet is a system that is working properly, in the sense that problems have been identified with a vehicle that is nearly 20 years old. When problems are identified, it is right that fixes are then identified and rectifications are put in place. That is what is happening with the MAN SV fleet, which should return to full capabilities early in the new year. In the meantime, duty holders have the ability to operate those vehicles within strict parameters, to make sure Army tasks can continue to be carried out. However, my hon. Friend will know that the defence procurement system we inherited is in need of quite significant reform. We have started that process already, but there is more work to be done, because we need to move to warfighting readiness—for all our forces to be able to deter aggression, and defeat it if necessary. To do that, we have to get on top of what could be quite significant issues with a number of platforms, and that is what we intend to do.

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

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I associate myself with the comments of the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State regarding the service personnel injured in the recent training incident involving the Ajax vehicles.

The recent revelations about the Ajax programme raise questions that go far beyond this single family of vehicles—they go to the heart of how the Ministry of Defence manages major defence projects, our ability to meet our NATO obligations, and the safety of the men and women who serve so bravely. Meant to enter service in 2017, the Ajax is now getting on for nine years behind schedule, and after more than £6 billion has been spent, the Minister still cannot give a cast-iron guarantee that Ajax is safe to operate. Will he confirm whether the Department has prepared any contingency plan should the Ajax ultimately be deemed unsafe or unviable? If further delays or design overhauls are needed, what assessment has been made of the impact on our NATO commitments, particularly our contribution to the UK's armoured capability? Our allies will be watching closely, as will our enemies.

Finally, given that this programme has been allowed to drift for so many years at eye-watering cost, is the MOD considering an internal investigation into how these failings were able to progress this far without detection? If that investigation were to be undertaken, could it be expanded further to touch on the issues already raised by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), about the Boxer tank, the Boeing E-7 reconnaissance plane, and other MOD acquisition failures over recent years? Taxpayers deserve answers and value for money, and our armed forces deserve equipment they can trust.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words about our service personnel. Every one of them should know that the vehicles or equipment they have been asked to operate are safe, which is why it is important that we get to the bottom of what has happened. We await those reports so that we can provide confidence to our people about what we are asking them to do, albeit with the level of risk that both we and they know they carry.

To reassure the hon. Gentleman, the cost of the entire Ajax programme remains £6.3 billion—that price has not changed since 2014. We will be able to take next steps once we understand the cause of the issue, but the Defence Secretary has been very clear that we are bringing this saga to an end, one way or another. A decision will be made once it can be properly informed by the evidence of what has happened.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): To scrap the Ajax programme completely would be a very bold move, considering that the UK has sunk over £6 billion into it and it is nine years late. The vehicle is still making soldiers ill every time they get in it, even though Ministers both current and former have been repeatedly briefed that it is good to go. It is not good to go, but to decide that it never will be would be very brave. Considering that this Labour Government are the first UK Government since the cold war to increase defence spending, that they have a very ambitious defence reform agenda, and that finally confidence in the armed forces and the morale of serving personnel are going back up—certainly compared with way before I was in the military—does the Minister think we have enough confidence to take a bold decision like that?

Luke Pollard: I thank my constituency neighbour for his question. Taking bold decisions is the hallmark of this Government, because it would not be enough simply

to tinker with some of the procurements we inherited, given the necessary increase in our capabilities to meet the threats that exist. When the defence investment plan is published, it will set out bold decisions, but it is really important in relation to Ajax that we get to the bottom of what happened during Exercise Titan Storm. The Ajax vehicle has completed 42,000 km of testing without such injuries, so we need to understand what has happened with the vehicles that have caused these injuries. Not all the vehicles on that exercise caused injuries, and that needs to be taken into account as part of the investigations. I am looking forward to those results when they come, so that we can make a clear and bold decision one way or another to bring this saga to an end.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I think the procurement Minister will know that I asked his predecessor whether the National Armaments Director would have *carte blanche* to tear up the book when it comes to defence procurement. She answered from the Dispatch Box that not only would they have that ability but they would be held to account for so doing. Defence Committee members do not want them coming in front of us in a year's time to say, "We wanted to change things, but they wouldn't let us." Now that the Minister is in his role, will he reassure us that the policy remains that the National Armaments Director, for their £600,000 a year, will be given *carte blanche* to tear up the book when it comes to procurement?

Luke Pollard: Rupert Pearce is already making substantial changes to how we procure and delivering a programme of change, with reform within Defence Equipment and Support and the wider national armaments director group that is essential if we are to achieve warfighting readiness. Not only does he have a clear policy steer in the defence industrial strategy and the strategic defence review, but I have witnessed quite impressive substantial change in the few weeks he has been in place. I hope that the Defence Committee will be able to hear from him shortly. There is a lot more work to do if we are to get on top of a procurement system that is too slow, too expensive and does not yield the results for our people that they need it to yield, but he is making a good start in that respect.

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I am aware that the problems with the Ajax system have existed for years and that the Conservative party ducked the issues when they were in government. Given that the workers at the Oakdale site in my constituency are diligent and hard-working, and that Christmas is fast approaching, what assurances can the Minister give me that defence jobs associated with this programme in Newport West and Islwyn and across south Wales are safe for the long term?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. When I was in Merthyr speaking to the members of the General Dynamics team, I recognised the importance of the economic contribution that GD makes not just to Merthyr but to the wider community. It is really important that we look at what has happened and what lessons can be learned. As a Government, we are increasing defence spending and supporting businesses large and small across the country. I will be happy to meet her and her south Wales colleagues to discuss this further, if that would be useful.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome the cross-party tone that both Front Benches have adopted in these exchanges. This problem reflects a very long-term, systemic problem in MOD defence acquisition. While there are glimmerings of light and some brilliant people in the Department who want to do things differently—the response to Ukraine shows that we can do things differently—there is a need for a big culture change in the MOD to achieve that. Will the Minister undertake to ensure that people involved in defence acquisition are sent on the courses where such lessons are properly learned and that the change in behaviour and attitude actually takes place? If that radical organisational culture transformation is not implemented, no reform will work unless we throw out all the people and start again, and I suggest that is rather impractical. We must change how these people think and operate in order to change the system and avoid things like this happening again.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Member. One of the hallmarks of a good defence debate in the House, certainly since I was elected in 2017, is that we have more in common across the parties and share a desire to get to the right solution. I am pleased that there is often less party politics in defence debates, because it is so important that we get to the right solution and do not seek to blame or attack. That does not mean that there is no party politics, but we are certainly united on this issue in wanting to get to the right solution.

On the hon. Member's point about culture change, I entirely agree that it is not enough just to change the process. I speak frequently in the MOD about the necessity of culture change to adjust our processes and to learn the lessons from Ukraine to be faster and more agile. There are things that we can do and that we are undertaking, but there is more to be done. In respect of the senior responsible officer recommendations, which featured in particular in the Sheldon review into previous problems with the Ajax programme, those have been implemented, and there have been big improvements in the leadership provided on single programmes by the SRO reform, but I will not be able to speculate on what will happen here until we get the results of those investigations. However, I will update the House when that happens.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): I fully recognise the seriousness of the situation and the need to fully investigate, which must be the priority, and I fully agree with the Minister's comments about the need to keep our personnel safe. As he knows, Ajax are assembled at General Dynamics in my constituency, where more than 700 dedicated employees are working on the programme. I thank the Minister for visiting last month to mark the British Army initial operating capabilities ceremony, after many months and years of robust testing. I seek his reassurance that he will keep the employees at General Dynamics in his thoughts and offer them as much reassurance as possible. In addition, will he meet me, staff and trade unions at General Dynamics once the initial findings are known?

Luke Pollard: As we look into what has happened, it is important that everyone, including General Dynamics employees, has the opportunity to share any concerns. That is why General Dynamics, the British Army, Defence Equipment and Support and elsewhere in the supply chain

have the appropriate whistleblowing structures. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and staff representatives, including the trade unions, which I met when I visited his constituency. It is important that we look not just at the Ajax, but at the other vehicles that are maintained in his constituency, to ensure that we learn the lessons appropriately, based on evidence. That is why I am deliberately not jumping to any conclusions at this stage; I am waiting for the reviews to come back. I know that many in his constituency will be eager to see the results as well.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): The former First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, Lord West, who is also a former Labour security Minister, said in the other place that

“the Ajax programme, no matter how much one dresses it up, has been a complete and utter disaster.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 December 2022; Vol. 826, c. 452.]

Does the Minister agree?

Luke Pollard: I always enjoy hearing Lord West's unique take on defence policy; he has considerable experience, so I am sure he uses his words wisely. I am not going to jump to any conclusions about what happened in Titan Storm until I have seen the results of the investigations. I want to understand what happened with the vehicles that caused injuries to our service personnel and why other vehicles from the same family of vehicle, produced around the same time, did not cause injuries to other service personnel. That is being looked at as part of the review. Once we have that, I will report back to the House.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): These concerns are very worrying, no less so for those employed in the sector in south Wales. Will the Minister work with defence companies in Wales and with Welsh MPs to offer reassurances to the staff, and more widely to continue to ensure that Wales is at the forefront of retaining and growing job opportunities in the defence sector?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the staff. They can play an important role in helping us to understand what happened to the vehicles and why it happened. As a Government, we are committed to the defence sector in Wales. Indeed, we are in discussions with the Welsh Labour Government about a defence growth zone for Wales, which will take a share of £250 million. There are opportunities in south Wales, in particular using some of the floor plates and infrastructure around the General Dynamics site. I am happy to talk to her more about that.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister knows that, as a former armoured infanteer, I have a keen interest in this topic, but I want to touch on the wider issue of Ajax as it relates to 3rd (UK) Division. If Ajax cannot be fixed, then potentially we will not have a formation recce capability. As it stands, we do not have one, because the vehicle is not deployable. If it cannot be fixed later on, that will be a longer-term issue, particularly as Scimitar is now out of service. Warrior goes out of service in 2027, and Bulldog goes out of service in 2030, with no replacement identified. The Ares platform is fundamentally not an infantry fighting vehicle, and although the Minister has assured us before

that he is restoring the armoured infantry capability to 3rd (UK) Division, it is not a like-for-like replacement. Will the Minister look at the current ORBAT—order of battle—for an armoured infantry battalion and how the Ares cannot replace Warrior? A non-stabilised .50 calibre machine gun does not replace a 30 mm cannon. This urgently needs to be looked at, because the Army seems to be chopping and changing its mind and not to know what it wants from its armoured capability.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman does himself a disservice by saying that he has only a keen interest. He is by far the best parliamentary questioner of the Ministry of Defence, and that keen interest is felt upon my desk with 30 parliamentary questions every single day. I appreciate his keen interest in the area. He raises a serious issue. In reshaping the Army's capabilities to increase its lethality, as the Chief of the General Staff is seeking to do, there is a necessity to replace old platforms with new and to adjust how the Army fights. That is in particular using a greater combination of deeper fires, drones and other capabilities. There is a role, though, for armour and the different variations of armour from light to heavy, and that will be what we buy, as will be set out in the defence investment plan that will be published in due course.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): More than 30 soldiers fell ill, so I place on record our thanks as a House to Army Medical. Does my hon. Friend agree that when it comes to the forthcoming defence investment plan, Army Medical, of which 2 Med Group is headquartered in my constituency, will stand to benefit from that plan and that we will learn the lessons from this Ajax incident?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for talking about Army Medical and 2 Med Group in particular. The strategic defence review set out how we need to invest in our enablers, and that includes Defence Medical Services, ensuring that as we move towards warfighting readiness, we maintain the ability to treat any of our personnel who may be injured or need medical attention. That work is ongoing, and he should expect to see investment in the defence investment plan.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): This is not the Minister's fault, but it is his responsibility. This issue has gone from Labour to a coalition Government to a Tory Government. It is now back with Labour, and we have a system that is nine years late, has cost £6 billion and has just injured a further 30 of our service personnel. GD is a US prime. Does the Minister think for one second that the US would allow themselves to get messed around by a UK prime in the same way? Does he have any indication that he can share with the House about defence contingency planning if he has to press the button to cancel this project, in terms of the CV90 or Rheinmetall Lynx?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Member is right that we need to end this saga. It has gone on for too long, and I am not happy with any of our equipment being used by our service personnel if it is not safe. Since I became a Minister, I have taken a number of decisions to pause the use of certain equipment because I had safety concerns about it. I did so again with Ajax, because the

safety of our people is a priority for me. That is something I feel strongly, as a representative of a military city and coming from a military family. It is too early, until I see the reports, to look at what may happen next, but I reassure him that when we get to that stage, we will report to the House.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): The Ajax vehicle was ordered in 2014, and was due to be delivered in 2017. It has now been delivered eight years late, in a state of service that is completely unusable by our personnel. This is a catastrophic failure by MOD procurement. As we increase spending as we respond to the war in Ukraine, how is the Minister ensuring that MOD procurement is fit for purpose, so that we do not have another disaster like this?

Luke Pollard: It is important that we look at what in particular happened with Ajax and the Ajax family of vehicles, to see what lessons we need to learn and what decisions we need to take as a result. However, the wider point that my hon. Friend raises about defence reform is valid. Defence procurement takes too long. It is the system that we inherited in 2024. It is too expensive, and it does not allow for spiral development in the way it needs to. The procurement of Ajax was a novel form, where the platform was procured and brought into service, with iterations then retrofitted on to each platform. I am looking at whether that model and that type of procurement is right for the platforms we are looking to buy.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is hard to think of a comparable disaster without going back to perhaps the early 1960s and the cancellation successively of Blue Streak and Skybolt. I worry that if and when the decision has to be taken that this platform is not fit to be issued to our armed forces, there will be a huge legal stand-off between the MOD and the company as to who is responsible for picking up the bill. Has thought been given to sharpening the pencils of the MOD lawyers?

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman is inviting me to speculate on what could be a decision made after the report comes back. The Defence Secretary and I are clear about the fact that all options remain on the table. We are looking into the causes and what lessons can be learned on the basis of the three reviews that I mentioned earlier. I hope that those who work in the sector and may be sharing information with members of the media will also share their insights and experiences with the ministerial review, so that we can take their concerns on board and ensure that when a decision is made, once the reviews have reported, it is the right decision for our armed forces and, perhaps most important, for the safety of our service personnel.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his response to the urgent question, and also for his unshakeable commitment to putting the safety of service personnel first. Can he tell us when the Ajax programme was last paused before this incident?

Luke Pollard: The programme was paused under the last Government when problems were identified in relation to noise and vibration, and I think it was right that they

[*Luke Pollard*]

made that decision to pause it in order to understand what had happened. They then commissioned work to establish what had gone wrong and what mitigations were required, and it was on the basis of much of that work that I was given an assurance that the platform was safe. In view of the injuries sustained by our service personnel, we are looking at what has been provided to us, in terms of accuracy and timeliness but also to understand what has happened in relation to this incident. I shall be able to say more in due course, when the reviews report.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Under the last Government, the Conservatives signed a contract for £1.5 billion with Boeing to order five E-7 Wedgetail aircraft. The order reportedly circumvented the MOD's established procurement system, and the RAF is still without an operational platform. The Ajax scandal has dragged on for even longer, and last week a General Dynamics manager used social media to ridicule Army leadership and those personnel who had suffered from excessive noise and vibration while using the Ajax platform. What is the Government's contingency plan in case this £6.3 billion investment collapses, and, regardless, will they launch an inquiry into both platforms?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said about Wedgetail. There was a very good debate in Westminster Hall only a few months ago during which a number of the issues relating to the Wedgetail procurement were raised, and the first test flight happened shortly after that.

As for Ajax, it is right for us to take an evidence-based approach that involves looking systematically at the experience of both the vehicles that were potentially causing injuries and those that were not, so we can understand what has happened, and on the back of that we will make a decision on how to proceed. I think that that is the right approach, to be taken calmly and coolly but also professionally. I want the engineering reports to be the priority, and I want those who are working on them to have the time that they need to produce a thorough set of recommendations in respect of what has happened and what needs to happen next.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the action that he has taken on Ajax. As other Members have said, this relates not only to issues in that programme but to long-running issues in defence procurement, which, as I know from businesses in my constituency, is often too slow and too expensive and fails to deliver the effective kit that our men and women in uniform deserve. Once the investigations are concluded—as mentioned by the Minister—how will the lessons be taken forward into the implementation of the Defence Industrial Strategy and other action to ensure that our courageous service people get the right kit, at the right price, at the right time?

Luke Pollard: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are not waiting just for the output of these reviews to make substantial reforms to our procurement system. We know it is too slow, and we know it is too expensive. In the Defence Industrial Strategy that we published a few months ago we set out our ambition to cut our

contracting timelines, to have more iterative development, to invest more in skills, and to deliver more of that increasing defence budget to British companies. We will of course look at what the reviews say, and I can reassure the House that if decisions are required, the Secretary of State and I will be making them.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Given the issues surrounding Ajax and the operational gap that this leaves in the Army, is the Minister confident that no capability and usability issues with Boxer or the Project Hunter alternative individual weapon system will come out of the woodwork? On Friday I met representatives of a local defence business who shared some of their concerns with me.

Luke Pollard: I thank my constituency neighbour for her question. If there is a local defence business in the hon. Lady's constituency, it is not far from mine, and I would be very happy to speak to her about that. First of all, we are looking at what has happened, and then we will make a decision based on the evidence. That is the right approach here, but I am very happy to look at this issue. Boxer is a good platform that has not had the issues that Ajax has had. I have seen Boxer under construction in Stockport and Telford, and I have seen the dedicated workforce who are delivering that. There is the potential for more to happen there.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): While the problems with the Ajax programme are familiar, what we have heard today is quite extraordinary, because both the Minister and the shadow Defence Secretary have said from the Dispatch Box that they have been misled by officials. That raises questions for this House, because we should be able to rely on what is said by Ministers in good faith from the Dispatch Box. Has the Minister discussed this issue with the Cabinet Secretary? I agree with the Chair of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi): Members from across the House do not think that these problems apply only to this programme; they are more systemic. What the Minister and the shadow Defence Secretary have said is extremely important to how this House operates and whether individuals are held to account. What action will the Minister take with the Cabinet Secretary to address that?

Luke Pollard: I deliberately did not use the same words as the shadow Defence Secretary because I have not seen the evidence of what has happened in this case. I am reserving judgment about the advice given to me, but I am asking for a review into the accuracy and timeliness of it to ensure that the information given to me is right. However, I am aware of the Sheldon review, which highlighted concerns in the past. I have spoken to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), and I shall seek to speak to further Members from across the House and, indeed, to former Members who have experience in this area, because it is vital that we can have confidence in the equipment that we are asking the men and women of our armed forces to use. In order to make a decision on the use of that equipment, we need to have absolute certainty that it is safe. That is the decision that I will be taking with the Secretary of State once we have seen the reports, but I am very happy to have further conversations

on a cross-party basis to understand the concerns and to make sure that our defence procurement system is accurate and timely and, importantly, keeps our people safe.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Defence innovation is vital in adapting our armed forces to the drone age and the war in Ukraine, but also to the Government's economic strategy. What confidence can the country have in the MOD's ability to deliver, given the debacle with Ajax?

Luke Pollard: Every single day, brilliant people in defence companies large and small deliver incredible capabilities for the UK's armed forces. In many cases, we are using faster procurement and new permissions for our friends in Ukraine. There are lessons that we are learning from the experience of supporting our friends in Ukraine, including on speeding up the delivery of systems. We are also looking at how we can reduce the contracting time and enable platforms to be spiral-developed faster than what we have today. There are lessons to be learned, and the defence industrial strategy sets out a number of them. We will look carefully at the reviews to see what lessons can be applied to the Ajax platform, and if there are wider lessons that need to be learned, we will take them seriously.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Civilians talk tactics and veterans talk logistics. Although the MAN trucks might not be as sexy as Ajax, their loss, however temporary, will be keenly felt. Can the Minister outline what practical steps are being taken to make sure that the wheels are not coming off—so to speak—any other mission-critical equipment?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of logistics. I am reminded that without Colonel James Sunderland—a logistics colonel who sat on the Conservative Benches—the House is slightly light on that expertise at the moment. It is important that we look at whether the system is working properly. When faults were identified in the MAN support vehicle, the correct mitigations were put in place and

then rolled out. I make a clear distinction between understanding what has happened and knowing what mitigations are required and how we will roll those out. That is how the system should work, but with the Ajax we are not yet certain what has happened. We have a number of investigations that will hopefully soon provide us with the clarity and the answers that we require.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers, and for his clear commitment to do better and to solve the problems. We appreciate his honesty in this House. It is understood that some 6,000 vehicles, some of which have been in service for two decades, are being fitted with replacement parts and that some were fitted incorrectly. These vehicles are used to get food, fuel and supplies to the troops. What steps will the Minister take to look at other Army vehicles to ensure that there are no improper parts in them, so that this does not create a knock-on effect on essential supplies getting to troops in the battle zone?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Member for his question. The Army has a number of vehicles that, as we have heard in this discussion, have been in service for a long period. In refreshing our capabilities, it is not just the Ajax platform that we as a nation are seeking to update, but the Land Rovers and a whole host of other platforms. We are seeking to do so to provide the men and women in our forces with the equipment they need to increase our warfighting readiness.

Sitting behind that, we need to have systems that procure faster and better than we have seen in the past, and that provide more value for the taxpayer, even though we are spending more on defence than ever before, because I want to see increased value for the taxpayer. We are making sure that we deliver a safe working environment for all our service personnel, because when we ask them to do extraordinary things, I want to have confidence that the equipment and vehicles I am asking them to do those things in are as safe as they possibly can be.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for his responses.

Child Poverty Strategy

5.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): With permission, I will make a statement on the Government's child poverty strategy.

Tackling child poverty is a proud Labour tradition. It goes to the heart of the values we have and the beliefs we share—above all, that background must be no barrier to success, that opportunity is for every child and that the freedoms that for too long few of our children enjoyed must today be extended to them all. This Government see child poverty not simply as the absence of material goods from the lives of our young people, but as the absence of their agency—their freedom—in the decisions that shape their world.

As Labour Members know well, it is not merely wealth and opportunity, but power that must be in the hands of the many, not the few. That clear political principle lay behind not merely the determination, but the success of the last Labour Government in lifting 600,000 children out of poverty between 1997 and 2010. However, after Gordon Brown left office, that progress was reversed by a combination of deliberate cuts to public services, economic stagnation and a deep cost of living crisis.

There are now 4.5 million children in poverty—900,000 more than in 2010. This means that, in a typical classroom of 30 children, about 10 are experiencing poverty. Two million children are in deep material poverty, lacking even the basic essentials, such as a warm home and healthy food, which no child should grow up without. We know that growing up in poverty has enormous consequences for children's health, their education and, more broadly, their life chances. It is equally damaging for our country—not merely for our public services, social cohesion and the chances of economic growth, but for the sort of society we wish to build and the sort of future we can promise our people.

That is why we made a manifesto commitment to develop an ambitious child poverty strategy. Shortly after the election, the Prime Minister announced a child poverty taskforce to deliver this, which I have been proud to co-chair. This has been a cross-Government taskforce, recognising that the causes of child poverty are wide-ranging and deep-rooted. The taskforce has visited towns and cities across the UK; talked to over 180 stakeholders, including charities, academics and think-tanks; and, most importantly, listened directly to the experiences of children and families living in poverty, putting them at the heart of our work.

I am proud that the reduction in the number of children living in poverty because of this strategy will be the biggest ever reduction in child poverty recorded by any Government in a single Parliament. Our strategy sets out the action that we are taking and will take to help families by boosting incomes, saving money on essentials and strengthening local support.

This will build on the urgent action we have already taken since entering Government to tackle both the root causes and the symptoms of child poverty, including the best start for every child through our Best Start family hubs that will deliver the early intervention and support that new parents need to set up their children for future success in life, along with our extension of the

holiday activities and food programme. Our expansion of free school meals, announced in July, will lift 100,000 children out of poverty by the end of this Parliament, reaching half a million families who receive universal credit. Our new crisis and resilience fund, worth £842 million a year, will reform crisis support by enabling local authorities to provide immediate support to those on low incomes who encounter a financial shock. Those commitments come on top of the wider change our Government are bringing to the lives of families in this country, which includes expanding free breakfast clubs, boosting the national minimum wage for those on the lowest incomes, and supporting 700,000 of the poorest families through our new fair repayment rate on universal credit deductions.

But we had to go further. On the Labour Benches, we believe that the social security system should be at once a springboard for opportunity and a safety net when times are tough. Any of us can fall on hard times. Any of us can become unwell, fall out of work or lose a loved one. The security for working people of knowing that when things go wrong, the state will be there for you and your family is one of the greatest achievements of the labour movement, not just here in Britain but around the world. That belief, which motivates that struggle against insecurity, applies above all to our children. Our system of support for families should never penalise children for the actions—not even necessarily the choices—of their parents. The third child in a family has just the same value and worth as the second and the first. What we believe is the right support for the first in the family is right for her sisters and her brothers, unto this last. None of us, none of our children, should lose out simply for the number of our siblings.

Failing to act on child poverty will cost Britain far more than investing now. Every pound we spend lifting children out of poverty saves much more in future health, education and welfare costs—and builds a stronger economy. We cannot afford to sit on our hands and pick up the greater costs of failure further down the line. Poorer children are more likely to have serious mental health difficulties. They are more likely to have poorer employment outcomes and to earn less. By age five, children eligible for free school meals are already five months behind. By age 16, that gap has widened to over 19 months.

No one has felt those consequences more than the children themselves. That is why we announced that we will remove the two-child limit in universal credit from April 2026. Reinstating support for every child will alone lift 450,000 children out of poverty by the end of the Parliament and end the cruel policy that is currently affecting 1.6 million children. It is estimated that in 2029-30, there will be 550,000 fewer children in relative poverty as a result of the whole set of measures set out in our child poverty strategy.

With the decisive action the Government are taking today, we are investing in the future of our children and investing in the future of our country. It is sometimes put to Ministers, not least by Members on the Opposition Benches, that removing the two-child limit rewards parents for staying out of work. We reject that, because the evidence rejects that. Almost 60% of households affected by the two-child limit are in work. Almost 50% of the households affected were not claiming universal credit when any of their children were born. Parents are doing what they can to keep a roof over their children's

heads. Parental employment rates are already high. But with almost three quarters of children in poverty being in a working family, too many parents find themselves in jobs where they still struggle to support their families, while those not in work face extra barriers to entering the labour market at all.

One of the biggest barriers is childcare. That is why we have expanded the 30 hours of funded childcare for working parents, saving eligible families using all 30 hours up to £7,500 per eligible child per year; why we are extending eligibility for universal credit up-front childcare costs to parents returning from parental leave to ease the difficult transition back to work; and why we are providing universal credit childcare support to help with the childcare costs for all children, instead of limiting this to two children, to help parents who have larger families, too. We know that there is much more to do, which is why we are committing to a Department for Education-led, cross-Government review of access to early education and childcare support to deliver a simpler system that is better for children and parents alike.

Too many children are spending years in temporary accommodation at a point in their lives when they need space to play and develop, nutritious food to thrive and access to education. We are putting in place specific interventions to mitigate the harm living in temporary accommodation can inflict on children's health, development and educational outcomes, which includes a commitment to ending the practice of discharging newborn babies into B&Bs or other unsuitable shared accommodation. Together, all this represents a strong start, but we do not underestimate the scale of the challenge to build a society where every child grows up in a family filled with love and is safe, warm and well fed—not held back by poverty, but helped forward by Government.

We will monitor our progress using two main metrics. First, we will use the internationally recognised and well-established relative low income after housing costs metric to monitor overall child poverty. Secondly, we have developed a new measure of deep material poverty to assess families' abilities to afford everyday essentials, taking account of more than just income by including the cost of essentials, a family's overall financial situation and the support they receive locally. It is not only the number of children in poverty that matters, but the depth of that poverty. We will continue to have a dedicated team in Government that works with the wider public, private sector and civil society to keep focus on tackling the stain of child poverty with oversight from Ministers across Government.

For over a century, Labour Governments have worked to deliver opportunity and security. This strategy will build on those proud foundations, delivering on our opportunity mission to break the link between background and success. We will continue to work nationally, locally and across all four nations of the UK and we will continue to be ambitious—to match the ambition of our children—to build a Britain where no child goes hungry, every child has opportunities and every family has power and choices in life. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.47 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I will start with something we can all agree on: none of us wants to see children grow up in poverty. We all know something of what that looks like: some hon. Members have lived it themselves; for others, it is part of the bread and butter of constituency work. Even in the wealthiest constituencies there are pockets of poverty, where children spend months living in bed and breakfasts, their meals coming from the local food bank, not knowing when they will have a bed in a room they can call their own and worrying about their mum—and it is usually their mum—and how she will pay the bills. None of that helps kids to succeed in life. Of course this Government should be working on how to improve the lives of children, as we did before them, but nothing I have heard from the Secretary of State today—however well intentioned—gives me any confidence that they are going to fix the problem.

Last week, the Prime Minister grabbed the headlines by saying that the Government will change how supermarkets display baby formula and give customers loyalty points—hardly the groundbreaking fix for child poverty that we have been promised. At the Budget, the Government crowed about how they will lift so many children out of relative poverty by lifting the two-child cap, and that will, of course, help with the stats on that one metric, just like the free taxpayer-funded breakfasts. However, ditching the two-child benefit cap will raise taxes on working people, including those on the poverty line, and disincentivise work.

For a measure that the Prime Minister now speaks about with such pride, I am surprised that it took the Government 18 months to bring it in. In that time, the Prime Minister and Chancellor rejected many demands from their Back Benchers to lift the cap, arguing that the policy was unaffordable; in fact, the Prime Minister was so committed to the cap that he removed the Whip from the brave Labour rebels who voted to lift it. But then, as rivals for the Labour leadership circled, the cap indeed went. Chopping and changing policy based on political pressure is no way to govern, and it is certainly no way to solve child poverty.

There is a way to boost the prospects of the country's children. It is through plentiful, well-paid jobs. That way people can provide for themselves and their families, pay their rent or mortgage, do their weekly food shop and afford school uniforms for their kids. The Centre for Social Justice found that children in workless households are four times more likely to be materially deprived. Under this Government, the number of children growing up in workless households has seen the fastest increase on record, rising to 1.5 million children.

Contrast that to our record, which saw the number of children in workless households—[*Laughter.*] Labour Members can laugh, but honestly they should listen to what makes a difference to children's lives. Contrast that to our record, which saw the number of children in workless households decrease year on year from 2014. With unemployment now going up month on month, the number of children in workless households is sadly likely to keep going up.

There is something even more fundamental that helps to stave off poverty. It is the family. Some 44% of children in lone-parent households live in poverty, compared with 25% of children who live in households with a

[Helen Whately]

couple. Strong, working families raise children who are less likely to be in poverty—it is as simple as that. Yet the Government's poverty strategy ignores that fact entirely. Rather than tackling the root causes of poverty, the strategy concerns itself with vouchers for formula milk. How many children will be brought out of poverty thanks to those vouchers? Why is there nothing in the strategy on parenting skills, which we know are key determinants of child outcomes? Why do the Government insist on using the misleading metric of relative poverty instead of measures that reflect real living standards?

With Labour's Budget slapping thousands of pounds of extra taxes on hard-working and hard-up families, how many families are going to be plunged into poverty because of their tax rises? How many more households will now be eligible for universal credit? If the Government truly believe that lifting the two-child benefit cap is essential to reducing poverty, why did it take the Prime Minister 18 months to do it, and why did he remove the Whip from his own MPs who voted for it? Perhaps the Secretary of State will tell us the real reason. Was it actually about the Prime Minister saving his own skin?

I know that the Government are well meaning, but this strategy is all wrong. Tackling poverty is about decent jobs, lower taxes and a stable foundation for every child. Throwing money at the problem to improve the statistics is not the answer, and they will certainly not lift children out of poverty by making the whole country poorer.

The policies in the strategy and the Budget risk trapping families in long-term dependency instead of lifting them out of it. This strategy is so far from the bold action that Labour is making it out to be and that this country needs to break the cycle of worklessness for families on benefits, give children the best start in life and give taxpayers a fair deal—fair to those who pay in, as well as those who get help. The fact is—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The shadow Secretary of State has taken even longer than the Secretary of State and is well over her time limit. I call the Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson: The shadow Secretary of State started by saying that none of us wants children to grow up in poverty. We, as the party in Government, will lift children out of poverty. The Conservatives pushed nearly a million children into poverty. That is the difference between our parties.

The Conservatives knew when they introduced the two-child limit that it was a political dividing line. They sought to create an artificial divide between families in work and families not in work, yet all the evidence shows us that the children and families who have suffered are working families. That is what the evidence shows, and that is why we have acted.

In suggesting, that they will bring back the two-child limit, as the Conservatives have done in the media over many days, the shadow Secretary of State is showing that she is committed to pushing 450,000 children back into poverty and reintroducing the repulsive and dehumanising rape clause that saw women forced to talk about sexual violence in order to have enough money to support

their children. They should be deeply ashamed of such a punishing and dehumanising regime that saw women and children suffer.

We will never stand for it. We will not allow for children to be punished because of the circumstances of their birth. The Conservatives' record is a shameful and abhorrent one. We will heal the scars that they inflicted on children across our country, and we will heal it once and for all.

We are also a party that believes in the power of education to spread opportunity. Speak to any teacher across the country and they will say that poverty limits our children's learning and the life chances. In ending the two-child limit, we are investing in education, raising standards, and giving children a better start right across our country. That is not the limit of our ambition, because we know that there is much more to do, but we have so far achieved an enormous amount. We are acting to raise the minimum wage for the lowest earners and bringing back Sure Start for a new generation through our Best Start family hubs with more support for parents. We are opening new breakfast clubs and expanding Government-funded childcare, and we are introducing new school-based nurseries to give parents work choices and children life chances.

The cost to children can last a lifetime, but the cost to society can echo for generations—in worklessness, poorer health, and lost prosperity for our country. That is why this Labour Government will not stand by as working families struggle—not just for the sake of parents and children but for all of us. We promised to tackle child poverty, and we are doing it so that every child in our country has the best start in life. The price of doing nothing is too high for children, families and our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I warmly welcome the publication of the child poverty strategy, which builds on the steps that the Government have already taken, including expanding access to free school meals and introducing free breakfast clubs. I particularly welcome the removal of the two-child benefit cap. All the evidence is clear that that has been one of the biggest contributors to the shameful increase in child poverty that we have seen in recent years. My Committee, along with the Work and Pensions Committee, will undertake detailed scrutiny of the strategy and play our part in ensuring that its implementation is as effective as it can be.

I welcome the focus on temporary accommodation. Where children sleep and the safety and security of their home environment have a huge impact on their life chances. However, I note that the measures in the strategy are limited to pilots. This work is badly needed across the country, so when does the Secretary of State expect to roll out the work to eliminate the use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation for families everywhere, so that no child's life needs to be scarred by the trauma of living in temporary accommodation?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that temporary accommodation is linked to worse outcomes for children and that there are deep consequences for those who are forced to endure living in B&Bs and other unsuitable accommodation. We are working with

the 20 local authorities with the highest usage of B&Bs to bring those numbers down, and we are backing up this work with investment. That runs alongside the £39 billion investment we are putting into social and affordable housing. We also have our homelessness strategy coming forward in due course, which will set out the further steps that the Government will take. I look forward to discussing this further with my hon. Friend's Committee next time I am before it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Every child, no matter their background, deserves the opportunity to flourish and fulfil their potential. The Liberal Democrats welcome any and all efforts to reduce the number of children in poverty, because we believe that investing in our children and young people is one of the most important investments a Government can make. That is why we welcomed the Chancellor's announcement at the Budget that the Government will lift the cap on universal credit for families with more than two children. It was a cruel policy put in place by George Osborne and the Conservatives when they were left to their own devices in government.

This strategy includes a smorgasbord of existing proposals, but it is very light on any new measures that we urgently need to tackle the scourge of child poverty. Even the Government's own numbers suggest that the strategy will leave nearly 4 million children stuck in poverty. The Government need to go further. The Secretary of State could start by properly funding the very welcome expansion in free school meals and, crucially, automatically enrolling children on to the scheme, so that no child slips through the cracks and misses out on a hot, healthy meal. The Education Secretary could also set a cap on the cost of branded school uniform, so that hard-pressed parents do not have to suffer over-inflated prices as a result of her short-sighted policy to cap the number of branded uniform items.

We know that one of the biggest determinants of outcomes is housing. Like many other London MPs, I regularly see families in my surgery who are suffering the devastating consequences of being shoved into temporary accommodation many miles away from their schools and wider family. If the Government are serious about ending the use of B&B accommodation, they must focus on building social housing. We need to build 150,000 social homes every year in order that local people can genuinely afford to live in their area, with local services to meet their needs.

Finally, the Secretary of State rightly pointed out the long-term costs of material poverty. The same can be true of those children suffering a poverty of love and care. That is why her failure to reverse the cuts she imposed earlier this year to the adoption and special guardianship support fund by finding just £25 million—a drop in the ocean of Government spending—is so egregious and short-sighted. Why will she not think again, to ensure that our most vulnerable children can access the therapy they desperately need to have a best second chance in life?

Bridget Phillipson: This is an ambitious strategy, which will see the largest ever reduction in the number of children growing up in poverty in a single Parliament

since records began. No one can accuse us of lacking ambition when it comes to driving down those numbers. While I note the hon. Lady's reference to the introduction of the two-child limit, I would observe that it was after 2010—under the coalition Government—that we saw, for example, the mass closure programme of Sure Start centres right across our country, even though the evidence was clear about the outcomes that they delivered and the difference they made to families. That is why I am proud that this Labour Government are bringing back Sure Start for a new generation with Best Start family hubs to ensure that all families and children get the support they need.

Running alongside that, as I have set out, we are investing £39 billion in social and affordable housing, the single biggest uplift in support in a generation, to build the social and affordable homes that people in London and across our country desperately need. That runs alongside all the measures in the Employment Rights Bill, the changes around universal credit and the expansion of free school meals; we are putting an extra £1 billion into supporting families. This Labour Government are investing to deliver the brighter future that all our children deserve.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Official figures show that over 4,000 children in my constituency are living in poverty, and many of those families have one parent in work. I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's child poverty strategy and all the work that she and her colleagues have done, as well as the lifting of the two-child limit, but would she agree that what we now need to see is children and families not needing to use food banks?

Bridget Phillipson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that she did in the Department for Education and for all that she continues to do to champion the life chances of children in her community and across our country. She contributed a lot to the work that has gone into the strategy; I am grateful to her for that.

I agree with her: I want to live in a country where families have enough money to go to the shops to buy the food that they want for their children and to make the decisions that are right for them. I pay tribute to the amazing volunteers in our community organisations and churches who give their time freely to run the food banks, but I hope that in the years to come we can shut down those food banks and make sure that all families have a good level of income and do not have to depend on the good will of strangers to get by.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Last year, the Secretary of State, her Front-Bench colleagues and pretty much everyone behind her voted against lifting the two-child benefit cap—[HON. MEMBERS: “No, we didn't.”] Those who rebelled had the Whip withdrawn. What would she say to those rebels now? What has changed since that vote last year?

Bridget Phillipson: I have long campaigned on child poverty, and I have led this taskforce together with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and with the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), who is now the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology.

[Bridget Phillipson]

We were always clear that we would look at all the evidence—at the most effective ways that we could lift the greatest numbers of children out of poverty—and we have done precisely that. The only people who have been playing politics with children's lives and children's futures are the Conservatives.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I speak to teachers in Harlow on a weekly basis, and they tell me that poverty is a huge barrier to young people's education, and as a former teacher myself, I can absolutely testify to that. Could the Secretary of State touch on how these policies will make a huge difference to young people in Harlow and to their educational outcomes, and on how they will support teachers to get the best outcomes for those young people?

Bridget Phillipson: I have heard from so many school leaders, teachers and staff across our country about the impact that child poverty has on their ability to do their jobs. They do amazing things to support the children and families in their care, whether by helping with temporary accommodation, washing clothes or even sometimes putting their hand in their own pocket to provide financial support for families who are struggling, but they should not have to do that; it is not sustainable. That is why the investment that we are making in lifting children out of poverty is also an investment in children and their life chances and in education. The evidence is clear not only that big gaps open up in attainment for children who are on free school meals but that those who have experienced child poverty are more likely to be unemployed or in low-skilled or lower-paid jobs as adults. This is about the difference we make for our children not just in the here and now; it is a long-term investment in our education system, our teachers and our staff, and it is an investment in making sure that we have a stronger and more resilient economy.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): In the year 2000, half of children in poverty lived in workless families, but now almost three quarters of children in poverty are in working families and millions of universal credit recipients have a job but suffer from low wages. Can I ask the Secretary of State how that has shaped the new strategy to end child poverty in rural and coastal communities, like North Devon, where many parents' wages are very basic?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Member is right to say that the majority of children in poverty are living in working families. It is an artificial political dividing line to suggest anything other than that; the evidence is clear for anyone who wants to look at it. There are a number of reasons for this situation. Low pay is one of them, and that is why we are increasing the national minimum wage. Access to childcare has also been a big barrier, particularly for many single parents, over a long period of time. One key element that we considered during the development of the strategy, alongside lifting the two-child limit, was supporting more second earners in two-earner households into work or into working more hours, as that would be one of the most effective ways to lift more children out of poverty. That is why we are investing £9 billion next year in expanding Government-funded

childcare, creating new school-based nurseries and rolling out free breakfast clubs nationally to make sure that parents have better choices at the start of the school day.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I am honoured to represent Bracknell in this place. It is a relatively prosperous community, but still one in five children are growing up in poverty after housing costs. Bracknell food bank gave out 8,000 food parcels last year, 3,000 of them to children. Does my right hon. Friend agree that poverty affects all communities across the UK, with children living in poverty in every constituency, and that that is why it must be our moral mission to stamp out child poverty wherever we find it?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to say that child poverty blights the life chances of children right across our country, including in communities that might otherwise appear affluent. There will always be children who are enduring the hardship and injustice of poverty, and I am grateful for his support and everything that he does to champion the life chances of children in his community. The strategy that we are setting out will deliver real changes to children, not just in Bracknell but across our country.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Despite assurances to the contrary, children in my constituency have had their school courses cut and parents across the UK have lost their jobs because of this Government, with over 180,000 jobs lost over the past year. If unemployment and taxes continue to rise, how many more children does the Secretary of State expect to grow up in poverty—or is this just the price that the welfare party expects families to pay?

Bridget Phillipson: There we are: the true face of the Tory party, describing people who are in work in that kind of way. We will always back working people. I would just point out to the hon. Gentleman that there are 329,000 more people in work than was the case a year ago. We are tackling poverty and supporting parents back into work, and we will reform our welfare system alongside that. He and the Conservative party should have the good grace and the humility to accept that their decisions have pushed hundreds of thousands of children into poverty, including in his community. Maybe he should go and speak to them and see what they say to him.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I warmly welcome the publication of the child poverty strategy, in particular the lifting of the two-child benefit cap, which will lift 1,560 children in Paisley and Renfrewshire South out of poverty. But 100,000 children in Scotland remain stuck in homelessness accommodation, and that is on the SNP's watch; it has control of that in the Scottish Government.¹ What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me that she will work with colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure that every lever of power is exerted so that constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire South get the same opportunities as those across the rest of the UK?

Bridget Phillipson: This is a UK wide-strategy, and we will continue to work with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to bring down poverty in all of our four nations. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the staggering and appalling record of the SNP Government in Scotland,

1.[Official Report, 9 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 4WC.](Correction)

particularly when it comes to homelessness, and to highlight the impact that temporary accommodation and homelessness have on children's life chances. She will know as well as I do that this Labour Government in Westminster delivered a record settlement to the SNP Government in Scotland. They have choices about how they take this forward, but of course, if they fail to do so—if they fail to take the decisive action that people across Scotland need—perhaps it really is time for a new direction for Scotland with Anas Sarwar.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is nice to hear the Secretary of State acknowledging that child poverty in Scotland is lower than it is in England, and that it is reducing. Scotland is the only part of the UK where child poverty is going down—that is according to the graph in the Government's own document.

The document is 113 pages long: 34 are blank or just references and 25 contain an explanation of the problem, so less than half of those pages are about what the Government are going to do. Of the policies included in the document, almost every single one has already been announced. Why have we waited a year and a half for a child poverty strategy that is frankly unambitious? The published strategy has no evaluation criteria, other than just the two headline measures that the Secretary of State mentioned. When the "Best Start, Bright Futures" policy document was published in Scotland, it had evaluation criteria alongside it. Will she lay out the evaluation criteria that she will use to ensure that these changes make a positive difference for people?

Bridget Phillipson: When the hon. Lady stood up, I thought she was about to congratulate the UK Government on lifting the two-child limit—something I have heard her talk about a lot in this House, and rightly, so where was the welcome for the change we are bringing today? Of course, the SNP Government could effectively abolish the two-child limit in Scotland, but they have sat on their hands and, sadly, all the evidence suggests that they are about to miss their child poverty targets.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on the introduction of the child poverty strategy, particularly the lifting of the two-child limit, which will make a measurable difference to hundreds of thousands of children's lives. Child poverty does not just blight educational attainment and employment prospects; it is also a key indicator for population health and health inequalities. May I press my right hon. Friend on targets in this regard? For example, reducing child poverty by 35% by 2033 would result in 291 fewer infant mortality deaths, 4,700 fewer looked-after children and 33,000 fewer emergency admissions for children. Will she look at those targets so that we know we are on the right track?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, who has long campaigned on the important relationship between poverty and health inequalities. Through the development of the strategy and through the taskforce, we took evidence from experts in this area. I give her the commitment that we will continue to consider the impact on health, including health inequalities, of poverty.

We see the development and publication of the strategy as part of a long-term, 10-year strategy for lasting change. The monitoring and evaluation framework that was published alongside the strategy sets out our plans to track progress. This will include a comprehensive programme of analysis, focusing on the drivers of child poverty and on the impact of specific interventions. We will continue to publish more data so that my hon. Friend and others can continue to hold Ministers to account on the progress we want to make towards bringing down the number of children in poverty.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for infant feeding.

The Government's response to the Competition and Markets Authority's report into infant formula, which aims to give parents the confidence to choose any brand of formula regardless of price point, because they are all nutritionally equivalent, is a welcome first step as part of the child poverty strategy, but without tackling and enforcing the marketing legislation so that formula companies cannot continue to use intangible claims on their packaging, the Government's announcement will not protect all parents. Will the Secretary of State please tell me when we can expect the legislation to be reviewed, as committed to in the Government's announcement last week?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the work she does in this important area. As she knows, parents will save up to £500 a year as a result of the plans we have set out for action on baby formula so that parents can make the right choices for themselves. Of course, we know that it is also important to put in place support for parents who wish to breastfeed, and that is why we have also extended and expanded the national breastfeeding helpline, which runs alongside support that will be available in Best Start family hubs to ensure that mothers have choices about the right approach for them to make. I will ensure that a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care writes to the hon. Lady to update her on the issues she has asked about.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The removal of the two-child limit is welcome news, and in my constituency it will lift well over 4,000 kids out of poverty. I saw at first hand how 14 years of austerity left families in Stoke-on-Trent and Kidsgrove in crisis. Early support was taken away, and we now have among the highest numbers of kids living in poverty anywhere in the country. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must also start to build back that local, personalised family support—for example, through our family hubs, which were absolutely decimated under the previous Conservative Government?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I know from previous conversations that he worked in a Sure Start centre and was involved in the delivery of those services. Best Start family hubs will draw on what we know works from Sure Start. The evaluation evidence is incredibly clear about the impact they had on children's life chances, on admissions to hospital and on the increase in exam grades that we saw of children who lived near to a centre. That is why we have committed to funding

[Bridget Phillipson]

all local authorities to deliver Best Start family hubs, backed up by £500 million to help families in every part of the country. That roll-out will create 1,000 Best Start family hubs nationwide by the end of 2028, supporting parents and backing children. That will ensure that we reduce the longer-term impacts we see when parents do not have the support they need and when children have to wait too long for the support they deserve, and it will reduce all the devastation that has followed from that short-sighted decision taken back in 2010 by the previous Government to remove funding from Sure Start.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Plaid Cymru has led the charge in Wales against the two-child limit, so we welcome the fact that scrapping it is a cornerstone of this strategy. As Members will know, 34% of our children in Wales live in poverty. There is a catch, however, because the benefit cap remains in place and around 10% of the children in Wales who are currently hit by the two-child limit will not see any improvement. On top of that, another one in 10 households could find themselves capped for the very first time. Will the Secretary of State build on the child poverty strategy by removing, or at least raising, the benefit cap?

Bridget Phillipson: It is a Labour Government who are lifting the two-child limit and who will ensure that children in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland get the support they deserve. The hon. Member references the benefit cap, which limits the total amount of benefits a working-age household can receive. Of course, that applies only to families in which there is not someone in work. It is right that we support people into work and ensure that we have incentives that back that, but alongside that in England we are delivering a big expansion in childcare, because we know it is important to support families. Of course, it was the Welsh Labour Government who first introduced free breakfast clubs—which I am proud to be introducing here in England.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I recognise that we should not take any lessons from Opposition Members, because they do not seem to understand that lots of families in work are affected by the two-child cap. Their priorities seem to need a rethink, because they are arguing against lifting the two-child cap before subsidising private school fees. They will go to the wall for some kids to play the Eton wall game, but not for all children to be able to eat.

I welcome the Secretary of State's plans for a review of early years funding. Right now, we know that 20% of those taking up the 30 hours of free childcare are on the lowest incomes. The role of the DWP is critical, because 1 million women in this country are out of work owing to their caring commitments. I would love for the DWP to be in Sure Start centres working with mums, so that they know about tax-free funded childcare and the changes to universal credit. Will she meet me and others who are concerned about this, to discuss bringing those systems together, so that those 1 million women are not forgotten but supported under this Government?

Bridget Phillipson: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further. A key commitment that we made, through the development of this strategy, was to

make the system of childcare support and early years education much simpler and more straightforward for families to access. We know that it is a complex system that has built up, changed and developed over time. I want to make it easier for families to get the support they need. We have already taken action on the expansion of the 30 hours of Government-funded childcare, on universal credit cost caps and on up-front childcare costs. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is ensuring that work coaches in jobcentres can provide additional assistance for families on the support available. I wholly accept that there is more to do, however, and I would be delighted to discuss it further with my hon. Friend.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact on child poverty of the Government's rather blanket approach to changing local government funding and taking support away from rural councils? Westmorland and Furness council stands to lose 13% of its budget, which will not only exacerbate child poverty and reduce educational and life chances for children in my constituency—one in five children in Kendal already live in poverty—but undermine the Government's plans to regenerate the town of Barrow, which underpins the UK's nuclear deterrent and defence capability. Will the Secretary of State, at this last moment, urgently get involved and talk to Cabinet colleagues to prevent those deeply damaging cuts, which will exacerbate child poverty and put the country at risk?

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has made his views known to Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I will ensure that they are passed along. Lifting the two-child limit, expanding access to childcare, expanding free school meals, increasing the national minimum wage and expanding rights at work are big changes that will make a real difference to children and families in his constituency.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): It is obvious from their absence just how interested our Conservative friends are in eradicating child poverty. It is a moral duty of any Government to remove every single child from poverty. I say a massive thank you to the Secretary of State from the 3,000 bairns in my constituency who will benefit so much from the withdrawal of the two-child cap last week. However, we must continue and go further. Will she reassure me and my constituents that, in talks to further eradicate child poverty, discussions will take place about the roll-out of universal free school meals so that people in Blyth and Ashington get what people in other regions get?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that poverty scars the life chances of children. It has always been the moral mission of the Labour party, and it always will be the moral mission of the Labour Government, to end child poverty and reduce the hardship and injustice that it brings—not just the long-term outcomes that children suffer, but the deep injustice and sense of hopelessness that poverty causes children and families. I am delighted that we have taken action to lift the two-child limit, which will benefit thousands of children in his constituency. Alongside that, in expanding free school meals to all families in receipt of universal

credit from next September, we will lift 100,000 more children out of poverty. We all know that, in a constrained environment with a tough set of circumstances around the public finances, we operate under challenges and constraints, but we have taken the decision, as a Labour Government, to prioritise investment in our children, in their futures, and in our economy.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): In my constituency, as in so many others, we face the particular challenge of significant affluence in one part and extreme poverty just across the road. In some areas, one in three children are living in poverty, despite the great work of many local organisations. What measures in the strategy will address that challenge specifically?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise that even in more seemingly affluent communities there can be pockets of deprivation, and many children can still be living in poverty. It is right that we tackle child poverty wherever it occurs. The measures that we are setting out, both in the child poverty strategy and in the Budget, will make a big difference to the hon. Lady's constituency, be it by freezing rail fares, freezing prescription charges, increasing the national minimum wage, improving rights at work, providing 30 hours of Government-funded childcare, creating new free breakfast clubs, or providing free school meals for all families on universal credit. It is a very long list, and I could say a lot more about the difference that we are making, but I will leave it there.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the strategy, particularly the work on the new measure of deep material poverty—that will be important for understanding the experience of children. For how long will the holiday food programme be extended, and how quickly will family hubs be rolled out?

Bridget Phillipson: We are investing £500 million more to ensure that we expand Best Start family hubs to local authorities that do not have that provision. By the end of the Parliament, 1,000 hubs will have been rolled out. That will make a huge difference to children and families across our country. As my hon. Friend says, that runs alongside the holiday activities and food programme. We have confirmed over £600 million for that programme for the next three financial years. That multi-year settlement will give clubs and local authorities greater certainty so that they can plan. We heard directly from families during the development of the strategy about the challenges that they face during the holiday period. I put on the record my particular thanks to Changing Realities, which worked with us to ensure that the views of parents and children living in poverty were heard during the development of the strategy. I am very grateful for all the support that it gave so that those at the sharp end of poverty were able to influence Government decision making and shape the strategy.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I welcome the Government's roll-out of free school breakfasts in every primary school. However, I recently visited a local school that is part of the early adopter scheme. Staff there shared their concerns that the funding is not enough to provide a full breakfast for each child. In some cases, children go without anything. I want to ensure that every child receives a free, fresh and nutritious breakfast, so will the Secretary of State confirm that

schools are receiving enough money to ensure that children are getting a proper breakfast, and not just a snack or nothing at all?

Bridget Phillipson: In launching the first phase—the early adopter phase—of our plan for 750 free breakfast clubs, we wanted to ensure that we covered schools in a range of different communities and contexts with different cohorts of students. We have been able to learn from that in setting out how we will deliver funding for the next phase, from April 2026. We are making changes to the daily rate and the per-pupil rate, but I encourage the school in the hon. Lady's constituency to share its views with the Department, because we are keen to learn from the experiences of staff on the ground. Views can also be shared through the peer network that we have established, so that schools can share experiences and good practice.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on family hubs, I am pleased that Best Start family hubs are at the heart of the strategy, and that the strategy values a fresh approach rooted in place, community and partnership across sectors. This could be a watershed moment that finally breaks the cycles of disadvantage and inequality. The family hubs APPG represents a diverse collective of organisations that are already doing just that—innovating through partnerships rooted in communities. I thank the Secretary of State for her Department's excellent engagement with our sector's collaboration. Will she ensure that that continues, and does she agree that empowering all families with frictionless, integrated support is key to building a fairer, stronger and more responsible society that gives each and every person the freedom to thrive?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is doing tremendous work in that area through the APPG. I would be more than happy to ensure that the Department—through officials or Ministers—continues to work with the APPG as we roll out Best Start family hubs and learn from the best evidence on how we can continue to support parents and families. Our new Best Start family hubs will offer universal open-access services for babies and children, with a real focus on the under-fives—we know that we can make the biggest difference to children's life chances at that age. Best Start family hubs will be funded in every local authority and open to all families, but the focus will be on locating them in disadvantaged communities, where we know that the need for support is greatest.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State and the Labour Government for their statement on a strategy to reduce child poverty. The announcement on the two-child benefit cap is welcome, and it will potentially take 103,000 children out of poverty in Northern Ireland. However, as the Prime Minister said, it is important to remember that three quarters of children in poverty are in working families. I respectfully ask the Secretary of State to advise on the specific measures in the child poverty strategy that will protect children with working parents, who face a rising cost of living, frozen tax thresholds and childcare costs—costs that they will still struggle to pay.

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman will know, as I have previously told him, that I also visited Northern Ireland through the work of the child poverty taskforce

[Bridget Phillipson]

to meet campaigners, charities and parents to understand the challenges they face. Some of those challenges are shared, such as those of the social security system, and lifting the two-child limit will make a big difference in Northern Ireland.

Of course, in some areas, these are questions of devolved policy, but while I was there I discussed with Ministers the education system, access to childcare and the developments led by the Northern Ireland Executive on child poverty, and we will continue that work through the taskforce and the strategy.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I urge colleagues to be short, as we have just 15 minutes remaining.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for this strategy, which is what I came into politics for. I also thank her for the roll-out of Best Start family hubs. I appreciate that it is impossible to do everything all at once, given the state of our inheritance, but even with the measures announced, children in Shildon and Crook—two towns of 10,000 people in my constituency with high levels of child poverty—will not have a Best Start family hub. Will my right hon. Friend meet me, or ask the relevant Minister to do so, to discuss what we can do for those children?

Bridget Phillipson: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I know he has done an incredible amount to champion the life chances of children in his community, which covers many towns and villages and a big rural population. That presents some unique challenges, and perhaps we could discuss that further and how we can ensure that more of his constituents benefit from family support services. The lifting of the two-child limit will make a huge difference, alongside the wider measures on childcare.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Following 14 years of Tory austerity, harsh cuts to public services and a cost of living crisis, more than half of all children in my Manchester Rusholme constituency are living in poverty. My right hon. Friend has shown excellent leadership through this strategy, but given the dire condition in which the Tories left the country, may I encourage her to look at measures to prevent the causes of poverty and to go further, so that we can end child poverty for good?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes. Like my hon. Friend, I am always ambitious to do more to lift more children out of poverty and to create better conditions to tackle the root causes of poverty. This ambitious strategy is an incredibly strong start that will see the biggest reduction in child poverty numbers in any Parliament since records began. That shows the scale of our ambition, and this 10-year strategy will ensure that fewer children suffer the injustice and the deep moral scar of growing up in poverty, but there is, of course, always more to do.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the enormous amount of work she is putting into developing this comprehensive child poverty

strategy and determining which single measures will have the greatest impact. It is in that context that I very much welcome the removal of the two-child benefit cap. What assurance can she give that her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions are making available the necessary staffing levels and training so that the enhanced payments reach families without any delay or complications?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has a long-standing commitment to tackling child poverty. It was clear through the strategy that lifting the two-child limit is the single most effective way to lift the greatest number of children out of poverty, alongside the wider measures we are taking to tackle the root causes of child poverty. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions intends to bring forward legislation in the new year.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Over 23% of children in my Penistone and Stocksbridge constituency are living in poverty. This is unacceptable. We know that children growing up in poverty are less likely to be in work and will earn 25% less than their peers by the time they are 30. Scrapping the evil two-child benefit cap will benefit 1,140 children in my constituency. Contrary to what the shadow Secretary of State says, this is an investment in their future. Given that it is the moral mission of this Government to break the devastating cycle of child poverty, will the Secretary of State work with me to look at opportunities for a family hub in Chapeltown in my constituency that will also serve Burncross and Ecclesfield?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, of course I would be happy to discuss this further with my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right that child poverty does not just have a deep and lasting impact on the individual children and families concerned. There is a clear link to worklessness, poorer health outcomes and lower attainment at school, and that flows through into the very high numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training. That is why the measures we are taking are the right thing to do both for children and our society.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The child poverty strategy includes welcome measures for families in Bedford and Kempston, from removing the two-child limit to expanding free school meals, childcare support and family hubs. These are all fantastic, but one of the most urgent issues affecting children's wellbeing is the rise in families living in temporary accommodation that is anything but temporary. Will the Secretary of State set clear targets to ensure measurable progress in reducing the number of children living in such unsuitable conditions?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes. Through the strategy, we are taking action on the unacceptably high number of people living in temporary accommodation that we inherited from the party opposite. We have made progress in the last year, with numbers falling by over 40% since June, but there is more to do. That is why we are investing more in the local councils that see the biggest use of temporary accommodation such as B&Bs. That runs alongside the £39 billion of investment going into social and affordable housing to ensure all children have a secure roof over their head.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I welcome the child poverty strategy and all that this Government are doing to undo the cruel policies of the Tories, through which children in Kettering paid the price. Investing in a child early on in life is key to success in adulthood. Can the Secretary of State explain how this strategy will mean that young adults who break the cycle of poverty are the norm, not the exception?

Bridget Phillipson: It was wonderful to visit a breakfast club in my hon. Friend's constituency recently to see the difference it will make to children's outcomes. The evidence is clear about the impact on educational outcomes, and on how it supports more parents to work the hours that suit them, and often to take on more hours, too.

Child poverty has devastating long-term impacts for our economy and for society, and we know that the long-term impacts mean that children are more likely to end up workless, less likely to do well at school and more likely to have long-term health outcomes. That is something this Labour Government are determined to change.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her leadership on the two-child limit, and for always carrying the kids who did not eat last night in her heart.

Last week, I was at Sacred Heart school in Tipton in my constituency, where the school council and the teaching staff spoke to me about how children living in temporary accommodation on the Hagley Road in Birmingham have to get two or more buses and trains to school every morning. Their parents get them there by hook or by crook, but they are often late, which has an impact on their lives. Can the Secretary of State tell us a little more about what she will do to ensure that our youngest children, in particular, are out of bed-and-breakfast accommodation as soon as possible?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful for everything my hon. Friend has done over many years to campaign on both child poverty and housing. We have announced an ambition to cut the number of school days lost by children in temporary accommodation, because she is right that it often means children arrive at school late or not at all, which has a long-standing impact on their life chances. We are investing more in the local authorities that make the biggest use of B&B accommodation, and we are making progress on bringing down those numbers. Alongside that, we are investing in more social and affordable housing.

I also thank the many campaigners, charities and others that have shaped this strategy by working with us to develop the best case for lifting children out of poverty. I particularly pay tribute to the Child Poverty Action Group and Save the Children, which have provided enormous support in making the case that this is not just necessary for children's life chances but essential for our society.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that my right hon. Friend has heard of Zarach, a Leeds-based charity formed by teachers who found that some children were too tired to learn at school because they did not have beds. Today, I was at Holy Name Catholic voluntary academy, where some parents

cannot afford for their children to take part in the Rocksteady band. What will my right hon. Friend do to poverty-proof schools against such issues, as well as in relation to digital equipment or anything that creates the inequality in schools that we need to eradicate?

Bridget Phillipson: We know that children who are hungry or living in temporary accommodation are not in a position to learn effectively, and that has a long-term impact, including on teachers and support staff. I am interested in some of the approaches that have been taken around poverty-proofing, including in my own region, the north-east. For example, we are bringing down costs for parents by capping the number of branded items that schools can insist on for students. Children should be smart at school, but that should not cost their parents the earth.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If questions are long, I will not be able to get everyone in, so I need colleagues to be respectful of other Members.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. When the removal of the two-child benefit limit is considered chronologically, alongside the expansion of Best Start hubs, support for childcare, free breakfasts, free school meals and now the youth guarantee, does the Secretary of State agree that through the fog of deprivation, it is now possible to make out a ladder of hope from cradle to career for the children from our poorest backgrounds?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend has always stood up for children in his community. It is through his election to this place, and the election of a Labour Government, that by the end of this Parliament, we will see the biggest reduction in child poverty numbers since records began.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the strategy, which will mean that 5,500 children in Derby South will be lifted out of poverty. I particularly welcome changes around temporary accommodation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that no child, whether in Derby or anywhere else in the country, should be brought up in a bed and breakfast?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree absolutely. That is why we are taking action to bring those numbers down, to build more social and affordable homes, and to give parents and young people the skills that they need to get good, well paid jobs.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her statement. Following my debate in June, I welcome the recognition of children with no recourse to public funds as part of the strategy, and its commitment to ensuring that vulnerable migrant children receive the support that they require, regardless of their immigration status. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what assessments have been undertaken to assess the impact of the recent proposals to extend pathways to settlement to 15 years, 20 years or even 30 years? That will inevitably impact children, so will she meet me to discuss those issues?

Bridget Phillipson: Important safeguards currently exist within the system to ensure that vulnerable migrant children are protected. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets the meeting with the relevant Minister that she requests to discuss her concerns further.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Representing a city that has 20,000 children living in poverty, I strongly welcome the crucial fact that the strategy is not just about the poverty of the family budget, but the poverty of ambition. Too many of those 20,000 children have parents who are in low-paid, insecure work. Will my right hon. Friend tell us what the strategy will do to lift ambition for apprenticeships and skills, changing not just the lives of those children, but the lives of those parents as well?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that my hon. Friend cares passionately about ensuring that we have good routes into careers through technical and vocational education, and more apprenticeships for young people in Peterborough. I have been working with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Pat McFadden), on our ambitious post-16 strategy, to ensure that young people, at the start of their careers, have great options when it comes to academic, technical and vocational routes, and today we have been setting out how we, as a Government, intend to deliver more apprenticeship opportunities for young people in Peterborough and beyond.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the child poverty strategy, which will take 2,500 children in Dartford out of poverty by the end of this Parliament. As has been said, growing up in poverty hugely increases the likelihood of poor mental and physical health, and hugely reduces the chance of holding down a better paid job or going into further and higher education, so does she agree that the strategy is not just about reducing the numbers in poverty, but about making an investment in the UK's future and that of its people?

Bridget Phillipson: It is an investment in our children, their futures and our society and economy. The strategy addresses some of the big challenges that we see, and sets out the important ways that we will tackle the structural and root causes of why so many children in our country are growing up in poverty, whether that is skills, access to work or childcare, all of which we, as a Government, will take action on to support families.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Thanks to this Government, 3,150 children in my constituency will be lifted out of poverty. Free breakfast clubs are starting to be set up and Sure Start centres are being revived. Under Tory Governments, poverty goes up, but under Labour Governments, it always comes down. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that this Government continue to drive down poverty and support families?

Bridget Phillipson: By rolling out breakfast clubs, expanding free school meals, expanding childcare and much more besides, this Labour Government back families and back children to succeed. We will ensure that far fewer children are growing up in poverty at the end of this Parliament than there were at the start—the biggest reduction since records began.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Before I came to this place, I assumed it was a shared fundamental principle that all hon. Members wanted to ensure that today's children had more than they had. The Conservatives do not want to talk about the 900,000 children they plunged into poverty. I commend the Secretary of State for her strategy that champions the life chances of children in Redditch, rather doing what the Conservatives did: using them as cheap, dehumanising political slogans for their own ends.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right that too often children have been used as pawns in a political game, using political dividing lines, where the evidence simply does not back up what the Conservative party says. Children in poverty and their families do not lack ambition or aspiration. Those families want the best for their children and they want better life changes than they enjoyed themselves. This Labour Government will ensure that children in Redditch, and across our country, get those opportunities.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Children across my Shipley constituency see at first hand the impact of child poverty in their schools and communities. I recently visited the Shipley school uniform hub, run by the Salvation Army, which provides pre-loved uniforms to families who can barely afford the essentials. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the publication of the child poverty strategy. It is bold and morally right, addressing both the causes and consequences of child poverty. Does she agree with me that delivering on this strategy will not only require action across Government, but working in partnership with communities, in particular faith communities?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes. The taskforce heard evidence from faith communities, churches and others about what they are seeking to do to support families. I commend the amazing volunteers and those who work in our communities to support children and families. I also heard loud and clear from many of them that if children and families were not enduring such hardship and poverty, those volunteers and community workers could dedicate more time to important projects around issues such as loneliness and support for residents who are experiencing real disadvantage. They would much prefer to focus their efforts on areas where they can make a big difference. They should not have step in where Government fails, and that is why today's publication of the strategy marks an important step forward in the Government's responsibility to support children and families, working alongside our faith leaders and churches too.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I was a child who received free school meals when my both my parents were working. Free school meals gave me a helping hand, not a handout. Now 4,000 children in Telford are looking for the same, so that they can contribute proudly to this country and its future. Will my right hon. Friend tell me one reason why she believes that the Conservatives wants to plunge 4,000 Telford children back into poverty?

Bridget Phillipson: The Conservative party, as they have done over many years, since they introduced many of the punishing changes around social security, are using our children as pawns to make a political argument that is not borne out by the evidence. Children in my

hon. Friend's community will benefit from the difference that a Labour Government are making, whether through lifting the two-child limit, expanding free school meals or improved childcare for families. It is through his election to this place and through securing a Labour Government last July that we are seeing this difference.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Some 174,000 children live in temporary accommodation, at a cost of £2.2 billion, so I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to reducing those numbers. However, even if they were reduced dramatically, a lot of children would still face safeguarding problems. Eighty children died while living in temporary accommodation last year, so will she outline how she will facilitate better information sharing between services and local authorities, specifically with regard to children in temporary accommodation?

Bridget Phillipson: This is an enormous challenge, as my hon. Friend identifies. We announced a clear pledge to prevent deaths caused by gaps in healthcare. We know some of the terrible outcomes for children caused by poor-quality accommodation. We are investing more and we are determined to bring that down. It will require a lot of us, right across Government, to work on this issue. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will shortly be setting out its homelessness strategy, with further measures to bring down the use of temporary accommodation and to support families.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I greatly welcome the child poverty strategy. More than 2,000 children in my constituency and close to 100,000 children in Scotland will benefit from the abolition of the two-child benefit cap. However, it is a shocking reality that 10,000 children in Scotland are languishing in temporary accommodation this Christmas. The SNP has declared a housing emergency but has done very little to address it. Will my right hon. Friend outline what steps she can take to work with the Scottish Government if necessary to try to tackle this crisis head on?

Bridget Phillipson: We have worked with Governments rights across the UK in the development of the strategy, but my hon. Friend is right to highlight the shocking and appalling legacy of years of SNP failure. That is why it is time for a new direction for Scotland with Anas Sarwar and Scottish Labour.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): When I visited Sacred Heart Roman Catholic primary school recently, I asked the children in the assembly to put up their hand if they had two or more brothers or sisters, and a forest of hands went up. Does the Secretary of State agree that those kids are among the 5,000 kids in Rochdale who will benefit very directly from a Labour Government?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all that he has done over many years to champion children's life chances and to tackle child poverty. No child should suffer the consequences or the punishment of the two-child limit for decisions beyond their control, and I am pleased that those families in his constituency and at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic primary school will see a big difference to their life chances thanks to this Labour Government.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): When I was growing up in the '90s and '00s, I had never heard of a food bank; they simply did not exist. There are now more than 3,000 in the country, including Hope for Belper in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the Conservatives talk about cutting £47 billion from public expenditure, that would hit the poorest worst? May I also urge her to work at pace on the curriculum review? One of the best levers we have to get people out of poverty is ensuring that they have the skills and resilience to succeed in the world of work.

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, I give my hon. Friend that commitment. In paying tribute to the amazing people who volunteer in our food banks, community groups, churches and community organisations right across the country, let me say that I look forward to the day when, as a Labour MP, I visit a food bank not to open it, but to close it down.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her leadership and all her hard work in getting us to this point. The extent to which child poverty increased under the last Government, and the fact that it shifted so heavily towards children in working families, ought to be a source of shame for the Conservatives—if only they were here to hear it. On behalf of the 2,430 children in Mid Cheshire who will benefit from the lifting of the two-child cap, may I thank her for having the courage to pull that lever and make a huge and immediate difference to them and their future? Some 174,000 children are living in temporary accommodation. Can she say more about how the forthcoming homelessness strategy will ensure that no child is accommodated in a bed and breakfast for longer than six weeks?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes. We know that a stay in temporary accommodation is linked to worse outcomes for children's health, education and futures. We will introduce a temporary accommodation notification system requiring local housing authorities to notify educational institutions, health visitors and GPs when a child is placed in temporary accommodation to ensure that families get the support that they need, but we need to go further in bringing down the numbers of people living in temporary accommodation. We have made progress, but there is more to do, and the homeless strategy will follow shortly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We are saving the best until last. I call Josh Fenton-Glynn.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): From loss of earnings to poor health outcomes, in 2023 the Child Poverty Action Group estimated that had child poverty continued to rise as it was, it would have cost the economy £40 billion by 2027. I am proud that not only have we stopped that rise, but we will see 550,000 fewer children in poverty by 2030, giving young people better futures. Can the Secretary of State assure me that we will continue to invest in wiping out the root causes of poverty and not just invest in cleaning up the mess that it leaves?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, we will address the short-term challenges we face, but we will also address the long-term structural challenges that have led us into the situation

[Bridget Phillipson]

where so many children see their life chances blighted by avoidable poverty. We are investing in the future of our children. Some people and the Conservatives say that we cannot afford to act, but we must act now; the consequences and the cost to our society are just too great.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the statement, I asked about the evaluation measures that will be used. The Secretary of State said in response that I had not welcomed the removal of the two-child cap; in fact, I did so explicitly and at length during my speech on 27 November in response to the Budget. Can you advise on the ways in which I can get an answer on how the child poverty strategy will be evaluated, rather than statements being made about stuff I did not say but did actually say?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As an experienced Member of Parliament, the hon. Member will know that she can seek advice from the Speaker's Office and the Clerks. That is not a point of order, but she has most definitely got her point on the record.

Employment Rights Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we move to consideration of the Lords message, I can confirm that nothing in the Lords message engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 1

RIGHT TO GUARANTEED HOURS

6.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I beg to move,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendment 1B but proposes amendments (a) and (b) to the Bill in lieu of that amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendments 23 and 106 to 120, does not insist on its amendments 120C, 120D and 120E, and proposes amendments (a) to (f) to the Bill in lieu of Lords amendments 23 and 106 to 120.

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendments 23 and 106 to 120.

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendment 48B but proposes amendments (a) and (b) to the Bill in lieu of that amendment.

That this House does not insist on its amendment 72C in lieu of Lords amendments 61 and 72, but disagrees with the Lords in their amendments 72D to 72H in lieu and proposes further amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of the Lords amendments.

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendment 62, but does not insist on its amendment 62C in lieu and proposes further amendment (a) to the Bill in lieu of the Lords amendment.

Kate Dearden: I am pleased to return to the Employment Rights Bill for the consideration of Lords amendments for a third time.

The Government's plan to make work pay, on which we were elected and in which we committed to deliver the Employment Rights Bill, will bring employment rights legislation into the 21st century, extending the protections that many British companies already offer to their staff to all. By doing so, we will endeavour to end the unfair market competition in which some firms seek to beat their competitors not by better quality or increased value, but by cutting the pay and conditions of their workforce. That is why this Bill is truly pro-business and pro-worker, pro-growth and pro-competition, and contributes to the creation of a fair and flexible labour market.

This Bill is a win-win for employers, employees and a more competitive British economy. By delivering this change together, we will back businesses that do the right thing while giving hard-working people the job security and opportunities that they deserve. That is why we must press ahead with delivery. Too many workers are waiting too long to feel the benefits of these reforms, and too many businesses face the uncertainty of when this Bill will become law and want clarity on its implementation. The Government are seeking the support of this House so that we can secure Royal Assent and finally be able to move towards implementing change.

First, I will speak to the Government amendments in lieu, which relate to unfair dismissal. In late November, I convened a series of constructive conversations between trade unions and business representatives, and I am extremely grateful for the positive and productive contribution of both sides of industry to that dialogue. It is a testimony to their leadership, and I thank them for it.

I am pleased to report that we have come to a workable agreement with trade unions and business representatives on the unfair dismissal provisions. The Government's amendments in lieu will reduce the qualifying period for unfair dismissal from 24 months to six months, while maintaining existing day one protections against discrimination and automatically unfair grounds for dismissal. The implementation road map sets out that the changes related to unfair dismissal will come into force in 2027. That is the timeline that businesses have been working towards.

It is also important to limit the time that employees must wait for their rights to be strengthened while implementing changes in a way that is manageable for business. That is why I am pleased to tell the House that the six-month qualifying period for unfair dismissal protections will be brought in from 1 January 2027.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): My hon. Friend has done a remarkable job with this Employment Rights Bill. However, it would be remiss of me not to ask her a question. The new deal for working people stipulated quite clearly that employment rights from day one were sacrosanct, then a manifesto pledge in 2024 said categorically to the British people that we would have day one rights for working people. Why has that changed?

Kate Dearden: My hon. Friend will know that this Bill is extremely close to my heart, as it is close to the hearts of many Members in the Chamber today. It is something I have worked on for many years alongside trade union colleagues and, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). Achieving the best possible deal for working people is the reason I am in this job, and it is why I wanted to ensure that trade unions were consulted at every step of the way, along with the excellent business leaders who are crucial to delivering the growth our country desperately needs. Our amendments in lieu will deliver on our promises for working people up and down this country, while ensuring that the Bill is not stuck in parliamentary limbo for another year.

7 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the work she has personally done on the Bill. I think we would all agree that it has been stuck in limbo for some time, and we very much want to get it through. I met representatives of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers last week—not people at the top of the ladder, but the shop stewards who are literally on the shop floor. They are really keen for the Bill to get through as soon as possible and they feel that these measures provide the right compromise. Does the Minister agree?

Kate Dearden: We reached this agreement with the unions in the room, and no one knows better than them what their members need. This is a significant step forward to put the Bill into practice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Under Lords amendment 1, the duty would be shifted to the employee to request guaranteed hours, as opposed to it being down to the employer to offer hours. That means that the employee can request hours, and then the employer can cancel them at the last minute. Can the Minister reassure me that provision will be made to protect workers, ensuring that if they are given hours, they are compensated in the right way?

Kate Dearden: I will speak to zero-hours contracts later in my contribution. This is about rebalancing power—giving workers access to guaranteed hours if they need and want them.

Let me return to the unfair dismissal protections that we will bring in from 1 January 2027. Our intention is to adopt a commencement approach that would extend protections immediately from that date to employees who already have six months' service or more. For example, under this proposal, someone employed from today will gain protection against unfair dismissal on 1 January 2027. That is almost a full year earlier than under the current law. Other employees will gain protection once they reach six months' service; for example, someone who starts work on 1 November 2026 will qualify for protection from unfair dismissal on 1 May 2027—International Workers' Day—which is 20 months earlier than under the current law. This approach was taken in 1999, when the qualifying period was reduced from two years to one. This approach will prevent a two-tier system, in which some people would remain on a two-year qualifying period while newly hired employees were subject to a six-month qualifying period.

The commencement of the unfair dismissal provisions will be set out in commencement regulations, as is standard practice. I am happy to commit to making those regulations early next year, implementing our commitment to commencement on 1 January 2027. This change will benefit millions of working people, who will gain greater security at work, and it will offer businesses and employers the flexibility to ensure new hires can do the job, get the skills to match, contribute to business success, and build a stable and secure working life.

To further strengthen these protections, the Government amendments will also ensure that the unfair dismissal qualifying period can only be varied by a future Government through primary legislation, and will remove the compensation cap. I know that some businesses have expressed concern about the agreement to lift the compensation cap; I can tell the House that we want to remove the scope for employment tribunal cases to be more complex and convoluted than they need to be. We need a tribunal system that works for employees and employers alike—one that is not gummed up by process and unnecessary delay nor bedevilled by bogus claims. Our aim is to make the tribunal system work more effectively and efficiently for all, so that those judged to have been unfairly dismissed get the compensation they deserve, the system works to resolve cases more speedily and unfounded claims are dismissed more urgently.

As we review the tribunal system, in the spirit of partnership, we will work with businesses and trade unions to create a tribunal process that is fairer and faster. No committed employee should lack the protection they deserve, nor should any reasonable employer fear the consequences of an unsubstantiated claim. For several

[Kate Dearden]

other employment rights, the amount of compensation that can be awarded by a tribunal is limited by cross-referring to the unfair dismissal cap, so our amendments will ensure that these consequential issues can be considered and dealt with effectively through secondary legislation.

We know that security of work is critical for working families, and we are also acutely aware of the challenges businesses face. That is why we are committed to open and constructive dialogue with all stakeholders. If these changes are to create the conditions for lasting, fair and flexible labour laws, dialogue and co-operation must be our watchwords. I hope the other place can attach similar importance to that co-operation, and that it will let this Bill—the product of a general election mandate and the good will of both business and trade unions—proceed to Royal Assent. These discussions and the workable compromise highlight the importance of participation, and I urge those listening to today's debate to engage with the consultations set out in the implementation road map.

I will now speak to the Government amendments in lieu that relate to zero-hours contracts and the right to guaranteed hours. We have tabled amendments that will create a statutory duty to consult on the length of the initial reference period and the length and timings of subsequent reference periods before exercising the relevant powers. These amendments will ensure that vital stakeholders can have the opportunity to contribute before the lengths of the reference periods are determined by regulations that work for worker and employer alike. By delivering this change with the input of stakeholders, we will provide a fair and balanced approach.

Let me turn to the Government amendments in lieu of Lords amendment 48B, which relate to seasonal work. In order to help address fluctuating demand, the Bill allows guaranteed hours offers to take the form of limited-term contracts where reasonable. The Government have tabled amendments that place a statutory duty on the Government to consult before making any regulations to specify what counts as a temporary need. This means that before any such regulations are introduced, employers, trade unions, and other parts of civil society with an interest in seasonal work, will be fully consulted.

I will now address the issue of political funds and the related Government amendments in lieu of Lords amendments 72D to 72H. The Government remain committed to the repeal of the Trade Union Act 2016. That includes reinstating the long-standing practice that existed for 70 years before that Act, whereby new union members are automatically included as contributors to a political fund unless they choose to opt out. This will return us to arrangements that worked well for decades, removing bureaucratic red tape on trade unions that works against their core role of negotiation and dispute resolution in the interests of working people. We have heard the concerns about how opt-out notices would take effect, and we believe our amendments will refine that process.

Under the pre-2016 legislation, an opt-out notice could only take effect on 1 January of the year after it was given. Under the Government's amendment, opt-out notices will now take effect on either 1 January of the following year or on a day specified or determined by the rules of the union, whichever comes first. We are

aware that in practice, prior to 2016, unions generally gave effect to opt-out notices before the subsequent 1 January date anyway; amendment (a) in lieu affirms that flexibility in the legislation. We have also tabled amendment (b) in lieu, which places a statutory duty on the Government to issue guidance within three months of the clause coming into effect. That guidance will set out the kind of provision that unions should include in their rules about the timing of giving effect to opt-out notices.

Finally, I will address the issue of industrial action ballot thresholds and related Government amendments in lieu of Lords amendment 62. As I have said, this Government want to end disputes and conflict in the labour market; we also want more trade union members to have a say in decisions about escalating disputes where they arise. We will repeal the 50% threshold and—as we have previously stated—align this with the establishment of non-postal balloting, including e-balloting, so that decisions about industrial action keep pace with the communication channels of modern life.

Our amendment (a) in lieu cements that intention by requiring the Secretary of State to have regard to any effects of the introduction of non-postal balloting, including e-balloting, on the proportion of those entitled to vote in industrial action ballots who actually do so. In having regard to the effects of e-balloting, the Government will monitor and assess the practical impact of non-postal balloting on rates of participation in industrial action ballots, so that we will be confident that modernising the means of balloting increases member participation. In addition, we have tabled amendment (b) in lieu, which will place a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to lay a statement before Parliament that demonstrates how the Government have had regard to non-postal balloting before making regulations to repeal the 50% threshold.

I urge hon. Members to support the Government motions before the House today, including our amendments in lieu. Together, they form a package that strengthens workplace rights, reflects the value we place on fair and flexible labour markets, and demonstrates the Government's willingness to listen to concerns and act on them. We place a premium on dialogue and compromise as key components in modern labour relations; we want to consign the narrow, partisan, party political prejudice of previous decades to the dustbin of history, and build instead a modern industrial relations framework that values partnership, dialogue, flexibility and fairness for all sides. Our amendments in lieu fully reflect that approach, and in that light, I commend them to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Colleagues should note that the debate will have to conclude by 7.55 pm, so only a couple of Back-Bench Members will get in. A speaking limit of eight minutes will apply to Back Benchers. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Two weeks ago, the Chancellor stood at the Dispatch Box and delivered a Budget that contained not a single measure to support growth. Today, in moving the motion to disagree, the Minister has signed the warrant for a

war on jobs. She is at the Dispatch Box representing the Government, but everyone knows that it is the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who is calling the shots. We discovered this morning that Labour Together is already auditioning for the Prime Minister's replacement. Perhaps the Minister has an outside chance at the job, but my money is probably more on the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne. Perhaps the Labour party could have its first female Prime Minister just before the Conservatives have our fourth. Given all that job insecurity, it is no wonder that Labour Members seem so keen on employment rights.

This is not a Bill for employment rights; it is a charter for a jobless generation. Thanks to measures in the Bill, thousands of young people will struggle for opportunities because the rungs of the ladder have been sawn off. Since Labour entered office, 144,000 payrolled jobs have been wiped out. Manufacturing, the oil and gas sector, construction and hospitality are all unable to make ends meet due to high energy and employment costs. The unemployment rate has been higher every month of this Government. Half the jobs lost belong to the under-25s.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Griffith: I will happily give way if the hon. Member wants to talk about the jobs lost in his own constituency.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: Will the hon. Member acknowledge that employment under this Labour Government is higher than it was under the last Conservative Government, with an average of 75%? Will he therefore apologise for his comments?

Andrew Griffith: Under the Conservative Government, we improved the number of people in work and unemployment fell to a record level. Since the current Government have taken office, unemployment has been higher every single month. Half the jobs lost belong to the under-25s. Does anyone want to talk about the youth unemployment rate under this Government? It is now 15%, and the number of young people not in education, employment or training has gone up by 25,000 on their watch—before the impact of this disastrous Bill.

The Government claim to support workers, but their first legislative achievement will be to make more young people unemployed. How could any Member of the House possibly support that? So, who is the Bill really for? As I have said before, the clue is in the text: it mentions maternity rights just three times, but it mentions the word “union”—no Labour Members have declared their interests—478 times. It includes: the union right to roam; scrapping the turnout threshold on union strike ballots; more paid time off for union reps; and automatic deductions of union political funds. It also orders businesses to hand out Government-written pro-union propaganda.

Strikes will become far more common. But don't take do not take my word for it—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State is chuntering from a sedentary position, but perhaps he would like to listen to his colleague the Health Secretary, who just last week said that he had “had it” with the unions and that

“the last thing patients need this winter is strike action”.

Back in July, the Health Secretary was citing the silent majority of doctors who did not vote for strike action. My colleagues in the other place merely request that a strike ballot requires a turnout of 50% of the workforce. By rejecting Lords amendment 62, the Minister is allowing minorities to shut down hospitals, educational establishments and public transport while the silent majority of members are ignored.

We should take a moment to welcome the fact that the Government have U-turned on day one rights. After months of relentless campaigning, and a complete clear-out of departmental Ministers, the Government finally listened. There is no shame in that—I told them it was unworkable, and business told them it was unworkable—it is just a shame that it took so long. Just hours before the U-turn, the Prime Minister's official spokesman was telling journalists that the Government would overturn all attempts to water down day one rights. A Prime Minister without a backbone who does not know his own mind has caused a year of uncertainty for employers and workers alike.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): On that point, will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will happily talk about the Prime Minister's lack of backbone.

Mr Rand: The shadow Secretary of State speaks of uncertainty for workers. I gently point out that Conservative Ministers promised more than 20 times to deliver an employment Bill, and having broken their promise to working people, perhaps he would like to talk a bit more about that and about the constituents in insecure work he speaks to, for whom his Government did nothing, while this Government act.

Andrew Griffith: I say respectfully to the hon. Member that if acting is to raise unemployment, to cost young people their jobs, to ensure that employers are not hiring and to have the worst graduate market for a generation, then bring that on. If that is what he came here to do, I would be surprised at that.

7.15 pm

Let us keep the U-turn in perspective: it removes just one paragraph on just one page, so instead of a 330-page bad Bill it is now a 329-page bad Bill. Instead of the chainsaw that was needed, the Government have wielded a pair of toddler safety scissors.

There is more. The removal of long-accepted caps on awards that can be made by employment tribunals has been inserted with no impact assessment and no prior consultation. It is the most last-minute of last-minute additions—completely irregular, and disrespectful to this House and to the other place. It will be ruinously expensive for small businesses and in the public sector it will leave the taxpayer on the hook for huge payouts for managers' failures at the expense of frontline services. The independent Growth Commission has reported today that that alone could have an additional £15 billion cost to the economy. I look forward to seeing what the Office for Budget Responsibility thinks of that when it next downgrades productivity.

As the Minister said, the employment tribunal already has a two-year-long backlog. This provision will make it a whole lot worse. Employers are all too familiar with

being held to ransom by spurious claims. If people thought that one woman's £50,000 payout after being compared in the workplace to Darth Vader was expensive, they should wait until the Chancellor finds out what her colleagues have been saying about her. Dan Pollard, a partner at law firm Charles Russell Speechlys, said:

"This development is frankly bonkers. The change would undoubtedly make the UK a significantly less attractive place to base staff within Europe."

The measures in this job-killing Bill have been written with absolutely no understanding of how business actually works. Therefore, as well as voting against the motion that moves to infinite employment tribunal payouts, the Conservatives will today be voting in favour of flexible hours, in favour of seasonal work, against removing the turnout threshold on strike ballots and against a subscription trap for workers on union political funds that no Labour Members would accept in any other private sector domain.

The Bill is nothing less than a charter for national decline. It is a "back to the 1970s" Bill that will do precisely that. It sacrifices the job prospects of our children and grandchildren just to help rattle the donation tin with Labour's union paymasters. The Government have U-turned once, admitting that their day one fantasy was a disaster, but changing one measure does not salvage this devastating Bill. The Minister must know the damage she is doing to business and the economy. The Secretary of State must stop bowing to the left on the Labour Benches, start listening to the job creators who provide the jobs we need, and shelve this unemployment Bill today.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): To the shadow Secretary of State's point, of course I declare an interest as a trade union member. Like millions of people who have been wanting this Bill for many years—as my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) said, the Conservatives failed to deliver following promise after promise—I am really pleased that we have got to this point. I am frustrated by the delay we have had, so I welcome what my hon. Friend the Minister said in her contribution, and I welcome her and the Secretary of State getting us this far. Hopefully, Conservative Members will no longer frustrate what was a key manifesto pledge for us.

We have seen the decline, and we can tell which side the shadow Secretary of State is on—it is clear. We have been really clear that we are pro-business and pro-worker, and there are many good businesses here in the UK who welcome the Bill and recognise the importance of giving people job security and fairness at work. If someone is on a zero-hours contract, they cannot plan for the future and do not know what is going to happen from one week to the next. That is not fair or reasonable for many workers in the UK. I say to the shadow Secretary of State that I met more businesses that absolutely understand that there has to be a fair balance. I think we have struck the right deal.

I welcome the changes that have been brought forward, especially to timescales. Of course, because of the complexities, the original deadline was October 2027. With the changes, which have been welcomed by trade unions and business, we can now bring that forward, so that, instead of the measures being frustrated, people can have the rights that they absolutely deserve and need.

In that context, on Lords reason 120F, Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu, which reduce the qualifying period for workers to gain protection from unfair dismissal for six months, I know that Ministers faced difficult decisions and difficult discussions with employers and worker representatives, but I strongly believe that the work that has been done has been necessary and that we should now be able to move forward. I thank the Minister for her work on that.

To those in the other place, I say that there is now no more time to waste. Vested interests worked with the Tories and the Lib Dems—cheered on by Reform and backed by the Greens—to resist the manifesto on which we were elected. Now there can be no excuses. We have a mandate for a new deal for working people, and we must and will deliver it. That includes replacing exploitative zero-hour contracts with an offer of guaranteed hours. For low-paid workers, the security of knowing what they will earn is not just a "nice to have"; it is the basis on which they can plan their lives. I know that the Minister will have them foremost in her mind when considering the low-hours threshold and definition of regular work.

Those rights will operate not just on paper, but in practice. That is why we need robust fines for employers who illegally deny unions the opportunity to meet with workers or lawfully seek recognition. We must ensure that they cannot simply defy the law and shrug off a paltry fine.

It has been a battle to pass this Bill, but progress is always a struggle that we fight for. Its passage will be a historic achievement for this Labour Government. It will benefit working people now and in the future. Now is not the time to blink or buckle. Let us not waste a minute more. It is time to deliver.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

As this Bill has progressed through Parliament, the Liberal Democrats have welcomed many of the principles underpinning it, and we are keen to see it progress. We welcome the fact that the Bill increases support for carers, boosts statutory sick pay and gives workers on zero-hours contracts more certainty. There is a lot in the Bill that we support in principle and that moves us in the right direction. However, we are also clear that the changes must happen in a fair and practical way that truly benefits workers, small businesses and our economy as a whole. That is very much how we are approaching the amendments in today's debate.

First and foremost, we are glad to see that the Government have finally agreed to set the qualifying period for unfair dismissal claims at six months. That is a fair and sensible shift that will equally benefit workers and business. Employers have finally been given the necessary clarity to make hiring decisions with confidence, and we have avoided the danger of unnecessarily slowing down the labour market even further, which would have deprived so many people of vital employment opportunities. We are proud that Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords were instrumental in securing that crucial improvement to the Bill.

However, it is disappointing that the Government have effectively hijacked that breakthrough to abolish the cap on compensation for unfair dismissal at the last minute. The Minister will be well aware that abolishing the cap was not agreed in recent negotiations between employer groups, trade unions and the Government. Most businesses would have been happy for the cap to have been increased, but completely scrapping it, without any consultation or negotiation, has understandably left employers feeling deeply worried and facing yet another nasty surprise. There is real worry among businesses that doing away with the cap, which currently stands at £118,000, risks undoing much of the progress achieved by the six-month compromise, creating open-ended liabilities and encouraging litigious behaviour. I expect the Minister would agree that no one wants to see failed water company bosses jamming up the already-strained tribunal system, seeking eye-watering payouts.

More broadly, one has to reflect on how the Government's approach to this last-minute change affects the relationship between Government, businesses and workers. Does the Minister not understand that springing the change on us at the 11th hour undermines business confidence and unnecessarily strains labour relations? The Liberal Democrats had hoped that today we could support the Government in setting the qualifying period at six months, but in the light of this abrupt change, it simply is not possible to support the motion in its current form. At the very least, will the Minister listen to concerned businesses and commit to setting a new, higher cap through secondary legislation following consultation with all relevant stakeholders?

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): I am perplexed and confused by what I am hearing. Does the hon. Member appreciate that by moving the goalposts once again, and delaying this crucial Bill once again, she is leaving an open goal for unscrupulous employers?

Sarah Olney: Nobody is keener to see the Bill pass than the Liberal Democrats, and we have repeatedly worked with the Government to try to express our concerns. We would support the motion were it not for the lifting of the compensation cap being snuck in at the last minute. This last-minute change has not been part of any conversation that we have had with Ministers in the other place. That is why we will abstain on the motion.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): The hon. Member seems to be under the misapprehension that the lifting of the cap was not agreed as part of the negotiation on the compromise. It was. Perhaps she would like to revise her remarks.

Sarah Olney: I will not revise my remarks. We have been speaking to many business groups that were in the room with the Minister, and they have told us that it was not part of the agreement. That is why the fact that it is in this motion has taken everyone by surprise, and why we will not be supporting it today.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The hon. Lady just said that she has been informed by business groups that were in the negotiations that this measure was not agreed. Will she name them?

Sarah Olney: I will not name them, but the Minister will know who was in the room with her. That is what they have told us, and that is what I am reflecting in my comments today.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that it would have been helpful if an impact assessment had been carried out, so that everyone could see exactly what the impact of removing the cap would be?

Sarah Olney: I would agree, but my point is that this last-minute change has been sprung on us and the business groups that engaged in good faith with the Government on these measures. This is a last-minute change that we and the business groups were not expecting, and that is why we will not be supporting it.

Kate Dearden: With respect, I was in the room as part of the negotiations with business representatives and trade unions, and I thank them again for the constructive dialogue and leadership that they showed throughout the numerous days of conversation. I can confirm that the compensation cap was discussed and agreed in the room, so I ask the Liberal Democrat spokesperson to reflect on her comments. I was in the room; with due respect, she was not. That is a true reflection of what was discussed and agreed.

Sarah Olney: I take the Minister's comments. What I would say is that we were not expecting to see this measure in the motion, and that is why we will not support it.

Turning to zero-hours contracts, Liberal Democrats strongly believe in giving all workers security over their working patterns, and we are deeply concerned that too many struggle with unstable incomes, job insecurity and difficulties in planning for the future. However, we have repeatedly reminded the Government that adaptability in shift patterns is often hugely valuable, for example to those balancing caring responsibilities or their studies alongside work. It is therefore important to strike a balance that ensures workers can have both security and flexibility.

Since the Bill's introduction, many small businesses have highlighted that having to offer employees fixed-hours contracts on a rolling basis could impose significant costs and administrative burdens on their limited resources, compounding other challenges, such as the increase in employer national insurance contributions, charging national insurance on salary sacrifice schemes and the fallout from the previous Government's damaging Brexit deal. While we advocated for what we think would have been a fairer and less onerous system based on giving workers a right to request fixed hours, the Liberal Democrats are pleased that the Government have at least moved in the right direction through amendment (b). Requiring the Secretary of State to consult businesses and relevant stakeholders on the length of the initial guaranteed hours reference period will at least give affected businesses and workers a stronger voice in designing the new system.

7.30 pm

Mr Rand: The hon. Member has talked about the potential for an added burden on employers by scrapping exploitative zero-hours contracts, which Liberal Democrat

[Mr Rand]

peers in the other place also made reference to in debates there. Will she reflect on the huge burden on workers from exploitative zero-hours contracts and the financial uncertainty and insecurity that such contracts bring to their lives, including the lives of some of her constituents?

Sarah Olney: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but that is why we need the balance. We need to ensure that workers have the right to request a permanent contract if that is what works for them, but it may be onerous for businesses to have to track hours over a period of time, when the employee themselves may value the opportunity that the zero-hours contract offers. That is precisely what we would tackle with this amendment.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I represent a seat with one of the highest levels of zero-hours contracts and insecure work in the country. I am not sure how that compares to the hon. Member's constituency, but if someone in my constituency requested a full-time contract, but that was turned down because they have only a right to request, how would that deliver them justice?

Sarah Olney: We are trying to create a balance, managing the burdens on employers in creating jobs. We have to ensure there is employment in the first place before we can ensure people's rights. I entirely accept the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but placing these burdens on employers to track the hours that numerous employees are working will add to the costs that employers incur in taking people on. That is precisely the sort of thing that discourages employers from creating jobs.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Olney indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I assume the intervention will be short. We have we only got 30 minutes left in the debate, so I assume that Ms Olney is coming to a conclusion soon.

Chris Bloore: I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for letting me intervene. She must realise that it is macroeconomic conditions, not improving employment rights, that affect a company. What is certain is that when people have zero-hours contracts, they cannot pay their mortgages when downturns and recessions happen, because they cannot get in the money that they need. She talks about the burdens on businesses, but what about the people who cannot even pay their basic bills because of the exploitative contracts they are on?

Sarah Olney: The goal of the Employment Rights Bill should be to strengthen the economy for all so that we can get better employment conditions for everybody. I strongly believe that we need to strike the right balance so that we can support the economy as a whole.

Michael Wheeler: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Olney: I will make some progress, bearing in mind what Madam Deputy Speaker just said.

Zero-hours workers and businesses need far more clarity. Can the Minister at least clarify on the Floor of the House what the Government's intended duration is for subsequent reference periods? I hope that after scrapping compensation caps, the Government will be a bit more transparent with stakeholders when it comes to flexible work.

One amendment that I am happy to welcome is on seasonal work. Many businesses, such as in the farming and agricultural sector, depend on recruiting the right people at the right time. Any obstacles to hiring seasonal workers can have a significant impact, exacerbating the long list of challenges they already face. Hospitality firms such as pubs, cafes and restaurants also often rely on seasonal workers and are particularly vulnerable to any regulatory changes that make it harder or more expensive to access the talent they need. All those employed as seasonal workers, whether in farming, hospitality or elsewhere, deserve reassurance that their work will not dry up. Last time the Bill was debated in the Commons, I spoke in favour of measures that would improve the clarity of the legislation on seasonal work, and I am glad that the Government have made progress. We are glad to support Lords amendment 48B, which would ensure that businesses relying on seasonal work and bodies representing seasonal workers will be properly consulted when secondary legislation is drawn up.

Businesses across the country, especially our SMEs, are struggling with unprecedentedly high costs, such as the Government's unfair national insurance rise, sky-high energy bills and a broken business rates system. Struggling businesses means fewer jobs and lower pay, so it is clear that we must look for ways to support local businesses and all who rely on them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The speaking limit is now five minutes.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): May I first declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the donation from USDAW trade union, as well as my membership of the GMB and Unite trade unions? I declare an interest as someone who represented working people before I came into this place and as someone who wants to see this Bill come into law. I also declare an interest of someone who wants to see my constituents get some decent protections at work after so long.

This has to be it. This has to be the line in the sand. This Bill was introduced more than a year ago, and the delays have been so long—it was in the Lords for nine months—that even our modest statutory sick pay proposals are at risk of being delayed. The message to the Lords has to be, "This is enough." This Bill was a clear manifesto commitment, and it pains me that we have had to jettison part of it to get it over the line. I understand why that had to happen, and I commend the Minister for finding a way through, because this legislation matters to my constituents. What she said about employment tribunals is important, too. We need to do an awful lot more work to ensure that people enjoy real justice.

The Lords cannot keep coming back because they do not like what is in this Bill. It is a promise we made to the British people, and we have to deliver on it. We have

to let democracy win. If the Lords block the Bill again, let them explain to the 7 million people who still have to go into work when they are ill that they cannot get the day one SSP rights because the Bill has been delayed. Let the Lords explain it to the father whom they have denied day one rights to paternity leave, if he has a child after April, by blocking the Bill again. Let the Lords explain why we cannot have a fair work agency, which is something even the Tories used to promise they needed to deliver. Let us meet every day until Christmas, if the Lords block this Bill again. Let us keep going back. Let us show some steel. Let us show that we will not let this Bill lie in the sand for too much longer. If the Lords complain about having to work extra hours, let us advise them to join a trade union.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill is the foundation for good industrial relations in this country and the best uplift to workers' rights in a generation? Does he therefore agree that it is surprising that not a single Scottish National party Member is in the Chamber to debate workers' rights in this country?

Justin Madders: We can always have a dig at the SNP, but the real enemies have been the Greens, the Liberal Democrats, the Tories and the Reform Members who have voted against this Bill consistently. They are the ones who have brought us to this point.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Justin Madders: I will not give way anymore, because we have not got much time. I will pick up on what the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) said about compensation. I accept what the Minister said at the Dispatch Box. I hope that when the Lib Dem spokesperson checks back, she will be able to instruct her Lords that this measure was part of the deal and they should not block the Bill any longer. It is also telling that she has only spoken to businesses, not trade unions, about what was agreed. That shows which side the Liberal Democrats are on.

It has to be pointed out that unfair dismissal compensation limits are not operated that often. Most people's claims are much lower than that. Most people who have been unfairly dismissed who would benefit from the measure tend to be much older workers who sadly do have not any employability in the job market. They are the ones who will benefit from the uplift in compensation, not bad water bosses, because to qualify people have to be unfairly dismissed. I suspect many water bosses would struggle to show that they had been treated unfairly.

Let us ensure that we get this legislation delivered and maintain vigilance across the whole agenda. That means proper meaningful access, not people being stuck in a shed somewhere far away from where the workers are, and serious fines linked to turnover for those who do not play by the rules. It means no loopholes and proper deterrents on fire and rehire so that companies do not think it is even worth going there. We do not want to see those P&O scenes repeated anywhere. It also means holding firm on some of the nonsense that we are still

hearing today about zero-hours contracts. People seem to have a problem with fixed-term contracts and zero-hours contracts being completely different things. There has been a lot of conflation there, I am sad to say.

What comes next is important, because the Make Work Pay agenda is not just about this Bill. Let us get this Bill over the line and delivered, and let us get all the important regulations implemented, but there are so many other important things that we need to tackle in our workplaces in this country, particularly, bogus self-employment. That is going well beyond the gig economy; in fact, it is an epidemic, and it is important that we tackle it. The Bill will level the playing field, allowing good employers to compete fairly, and create more security at work. Employing people with proper terms and conditions may even lead to a greater tax take.

Further down the line, we must tackle unfair dismissal law, which is half a century old and desperately needs updating, but that is for another day. We have debated the Bill for over a year, and it is about time the Lords accepted the democratic mandate and accepted that we must deliver it. Let us get it over the line, and let us start delivering for working people in this country.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I wish to draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, my membership of Unite, and the kind support of ASLEF and the GMB for my election campaign.

This Employment Rights Bill is our promise to working people on its way to being fulfilled, thanks in no small part to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders). I am glad to see that Ministers have tabled amendments that reflect the constructive negotiations between themselves, unions—including my former employers at the TUC—and business associations, because that is how we roll in the labour movement. We get round a table, we talk, we come to a deal and we move forward. That is the right way to do things when people do not agree.

To be clear, unions negotiated this deal with the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), and it has my support. Today I will not let the best be the enemy of the good. Cutting the qualifying period for unfair dismissal from two years to six months will benefit 6.35 million workers—disproportionately, young workers, ethnic minority workers, and an astonishing 36% of hospitality workers. New figures based on Government data have been produced today to tell us about the impact that the Bill is going to have. Removing the cap on unfair dismissal compensation means that workers will be able to get what they deserve, and bad bosses cannot price in the cost of ignoring the law.

I was also glad to hear my hon. Friend's clarity about the timing. Our opinions have not changed, and our opinions on the principle have not changed. What is needed now is practicality to ensure that the Bill moves forward—and as we take it forward, Members should be sure to notice who opposes it. I would expect nothing less of the Tories. I would expect the Lib Dems to remember their total opposition to the Trade Union Act 2016, including their opposition to changes in the political fund rules and their opposition—at that time,

[*Antonia Bance*]

but apparently no longer—to the undemocratic ballot thresholds that create a higher bar for trade unions than for anyone else in society. I would gently remind their spokesperson, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), that the right to request worked so well for flexible working that flexible working does not work—we are having to fix it with this Bill—and yet she proposes to bring in an unworkable right to request, instead of a guaranteed right to a decent hours contract. I will take no lectures from the Greens—what a shame that they are not here—who are letting their peers vote whichever way they want on something as important as this. As for Reform UK, they pretend to be the representatives of working-class people, but vote against their interests at every turn.

I say to those in the other place: it is time to pass this Bill to make work pay and to deliver the rights that were promised in our manifesto and voted for—the rights that millions have waited far too long to see.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to support from trade unions, of which I am proud.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) that this is a transformational piece of legislation, but it has been weakened. My motion would restore day one rights on unfair dismissal. I tabled a motion to reject the Lords amendments, since when the Government have tabled a motion to adopt a six-month qualification period. I commend the remarks of Lord Collins about issues relating to unfair dismissal. He said:

"These are areas clearly linked to our manifesto commitments, which the Government have an electoral mandate to deliver... we remain committed to delivering unfair dismissal protections... day-one protection from unfair dismissal will not remove the ability of businesses to dismiss people who cannot do their job or pass a probation period, but it will tackle cases of unfair dismissal in which hard-working employees are sacked without good reason."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 November 2025; Vol. 850, c. 561-62.]

That was a very good speech, made just a short time ago.

7.45 pm

After the Budget, the Government rapidly announced that they would not deliver their clear promise of day one protection. There may be debate about other manifesto pledges, but on this the breach is unmistakable. Shadow Ministers, now Ministers—including the Prime Minister—called day one rights the foundation of the largest uplift in employment protections for a generation, but that promise is now being set aside. We are told that the shift from two years to six months reflects a negotiated balance between unions and businesses, with Ministers standing back, but I do not accept that characterisation. Unions were effectively told to accept six months or face years of delay to every other day one right and to the fair work agency, while the House of Lords obstructed the elected Government's programme.

The Salisbury convention applies. The unelected Chamber should not block mandates, and the Government should not capitulate to such pressure. Given a majority of this scale, the authority lies in this House. Ministers

who can intervene overnight to save the steel industry—quite rightly—can intervene to honour a manifesto commitment. We on this side campaigned for the full package. We would vote for all provisions of the Employment Rights Bill, without any dilution.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): We have worked on this legislation for more than 20 years. I just want to put it on the record for my constituents that I wish to abide by the manifesto commitment of day one rights, and I believe it is breaking a promise not to do so. However, other matters will be consulted on now. Some in the House of Lords may take confidence from the Government's acceptance of this; can we send them the message that we will not in any way compromise any further on this legislation, that we will dig in, and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders) has said, we will sit for as long as possible, if necessary, to see it through?

Andy McDonald: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. I think that this episode highlights, again, flaws in the upper House, but even with the convention of double insistence, the concession goes too far.

Ian Lavery: My hon. Friend was one of the authors of the new deal for working people, which insisted that the most critical part of this Employment Rights Bill would be employment rights from day one. Does my hon. Friend agree with me on that point?

Andy McDonald: Absolutely, and no decent employer should fear any of these measures. Rogue employers were warned that exploitation and arbitrary dismissal would end, but under the compromise, a bad employer may still dismiss someone without reason or justification.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The point that my hon. Friend is making is that this is not about fair dismissal, but about unfair dismissal. Does he agree that the people who will experience the most discrimination will be disabled workers, young workers and ethnic minority workers?

Andy McDonald: That is absolutely right, but under this compromise, a bad employer may still dismiss someone without reason or justification. A worker could leave secure employment in good faith, only to be summarily dismissed with no protection or explanation, months into a new role.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Andy McDonald: No, I will carry on.

This debate has been muddled by talk of probation. We never proposed abolishing probation periods—they are proper and necessary—but no system should allow dismissal without cause for blatantly unfair reasons. At present, workers can still be dismissed without cause nearly two years into a job. Under this compromise, they can be dismissed almost half a year in, when they might have a mortgage to pay and a family to support. This climbdown casts doubt on the Government's resolve and determination to deliver all the elements of the new deal for working people in full.

Worse still, emboldened opponents of the workers' rights reforms will return for more. They will undoubtedly attempt to weaken the Bill through secondary legislation. Major businesses are already signalling that they will use consultations to soften, delay or carve out core protections. Their language of "burdens", "balance" and "flexibility" is not commentary, but a co-ordinated push to reshape the settlement.

I say to my colleagues on the Government Front Bench that they should be bold and take heart. The thing that was missing from this Bill was the status of workers' rights reforms. If we were to take courage in our hands and deal with that issue, we would resolve matters by collecting uncollected tax and national insurance to the tune of £10 billion per annum, as well as giving people security in employment. Think about the lack of a pull factor for people to go into the black economy.

If this legislation is to deliver a new deal for working people, this House must ensure that the back door is not opened to dismantling it. I urge Ministers, even now, to reconsider, because they are making a profound mistake.

Kate Dearden: I only have a few minutes, so I will try to respond as quickly as I can to comments from colleagues across the House. I thank everybody for their reflections today.

To respond to the shadow Minister, I do not recognise the figures he mentions, and I urge hon. Members to reflect carefully on the figures that he mentioned in the debate. I would have thought that he had learned the terrible lessons from his former boss, Liz Truss, and I know my constituents are still paying the price for the impacts of her mini-Budget. He is now quoting the Growth Commission, which has Liz Truss as an adviser. I will leave it at that.

The Tories had 14 years to adapt to the way the world of work has changed, but they did nothing to tackle exploitative zero-hours contracts and barely acknowledged the existence of the gig economy. They saw the impacts of covid on our key workers and the limits of statutory sick pay, and decided to do nothing. The world of work has changed an enormous amount in the last 20 years, and the Conservative party seems to be telling us that the system is working as intended, but I say that it is not. I say it needs change, and it needs this Bill.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for her leadership, and for all her work on the Bill and on our wider package for working people. I know she is keen to see the time that employees must wait for fair rights to be shortened, and we share her desire for employees to benefit as soon as possible from this Bill, which is why it is so important that we get it on to the statute book and implemented as soon as possible. I thank her for her remarks and reflections today.

The Government amendments in lieu are a result of dialogue and compromise. Business and unions have preferred to go the extra mile to find solutions, rather than insisting on their own positions and disregarding all other perspectives. I thank my colleagues for their reflections, and I am pleased that we have been able to provide a workable agreement with trade unions and business representatives on the unfair dismissal provisions.

Richard Burgon: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Kate Dearden: I have two minutes left, so I need to proceed.

I have talked in detail about our intentions behind this legislation. I know that my hon. Friends' suggestions are well intentioned, but I stress that, as a package, our amendments reflect the agreement reached between business representatives and trade unions in a collaborative and constructive process. We want to bring this Bill to a conclusion so that it benefits millions of British workers, who will benefit from the new rights that it will deliver from April next year. We are extending statutory sick pay and parental leave and setting up the fair work agency, so that it has the enforcement rights that it needs and businesses can start preparing for implementation with certainty.

I thank again all Members for their contributions today. Sadly, despite the persuasive arguments from my colleagues, I know that some Members from across the House will continue to oppose better rights for working people. However, after 14 years of the Conservatives letting workers' rights rot, the economy stagnate and living standards fall, I am proud to be showing what Labour in power looks like: the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation; a relentless focus on growing our economy and making working people better off; and rising living standards in every corner of the country. Whereas Reform—its Members are not here—and the Conservatives show themselves to be two sides of the same anti-worker, anti-growth coin, Labour is fixing the foundations of our economy.

The Government are making work pay again in a way that suits the 21st century. This Bill restores the rights that have been lost in a manner that is fit for the future. It will create security and opportunity for everyone, no matter their background. It is of paramount importance that we get this Bill on to the statute book, so that it can start delivering for businesses and workers as soon as possible. I urge all Members on both sides of the House to carefully consider the amendments we have proposed, and I hope they feel able to support our position.

7.55 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, 15 September).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83G).

The House divided: Ayes 327, Noes 96.

Division No. 381]

[7.55 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Adley</i>)	Athwal, Jas
Abbott, Jack	Atkinson, Catherine
Abrahams, Debbie	Atkinson, Lewis
Adam, Shockat	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Bailey, Olivia
Akehurst, Luke	Baker, Richard
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Ballinger, Alex
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Bance, Antonia
Anderson, Callum	Barker, Paula
Anderson, Fleur	Barron, Lee
Arthur, Dr Scott	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Asato, Jess	Baxter, Johanna
	Beales, Danny
	Beavers, Lorraine

Begum, Apsana	Evans, Chris	Kumar, Sonia	Pennycook, Matthew
Bell, Torsten	Falconer, Mr Hamish	Kumaran, Uma	Phillips, Jess
Benn, rh Hilary	Farnsworth, Linsey	Kyle, rh Peter	Phillipson, rh Bridget
Berry, Siân	Fenton-Glynn, Josh	Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Betts, Mr Clive	Ferguson, Mark	Lake, Ben	Pitcher, Lee
Billington, Ms Polly	Foody, Emma	Lamb, Peter	Pollard, Luke
Bishop, Matt (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Fookes, Catherine	Lammy, rh Mr David	Powell, Joe
Blake, Olivia	Foster, Mr Paul	Lavery, Ian	Powell, rh Lucy
Blake, Rachel	Foxcroft, Vicky	Law, Noah	Poynton, Gregor
Bloore, Chris	Foy, Mary Kelly	Leadbeater, Kim	Prinsley, Peter
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Francis, Daniel	Leishman, Brian	Race, Steve
Bonavia, Kevin	Frith, Mr James	Lewell, Emma	Ramsay, Adrian
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Furniss, Gill	Lewin, Andrew	Rand, Mr Connor
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Gardiner, Barry	Lewis, Clive	Ranger, Andrew
Bryant, Chris	Gardner, Dr Allison	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Rayner, rh Angela
Buckley, Julia	Gelder, Anna	MacAlister, Josh	Reader, Mike
Burgon, Richard	Gemmell, Alan	Macdonald, Alice	Reeves, rh Ellie
Burton-Sampson, David	German, Gill	MacNae, Andy	Reynolds, rh Emma
Butler, Dawn	Gilbert, Tracy	Madders, Justin	Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Byrne, Ian	Gill, Preet Kaur	Malhotra, Seema	Rhodes, Martin
Byrne, rh Liam	Gittins, Becky (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Martin, Amanda	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Cadbury, Ruth	Glindon, Mary	Maskell, Rachael	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Caliskan, Nesil	Goldsborough, Ben	Mather, Keir	Rigby, Lucy
Campbell, Irene	Grady, John	Mayer, Alex	Robertson, Dave
Campbell, Juliet	Greenwood, Lilian	McCarthy, Kerry	Rodda, Matt
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Griffith, Dame Nia	McCluskey, Martin	Rushworth, Sam
Carling, Sam	Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	McDonald, Andy	Russell, Sarah
Carns, Al	Haigh, rh Louise	McDonald, Chris	Rutland, Tom
Charalambous, Bambos	Hall, Sarah	McDonnell, rh John	Ryan, Oliver
Charters, Mr Luke	Hamilton, Fabian	McDougall, Blair	Sackman, Sarah
Chowns, Dr Ellie	Hamilton, Paulette	McEvoy, Lola	Sandher-Jones, Louise
Collier, Jacob	Hardy, Emma	McFadden, rh Pat	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Collins, Tom	Harris, Carolyn	McIntyre, Alex	Sewards, Mark
Conlon, Liam	Hatton, Lloyd	McKenna, Kevin	Shanker, Baggy
Coombes, Sarah	Hayes, Helen	McKinnell, Catherine	Shanks, Michael
Cooper, Andrew	Hayes, Tom	McMahon, Jim	Siddiq, Tulip
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Hazelgrove, Claire	McMorris, Anna	Simons, Josh
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hendrick, Sir Mark (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	McNally, Frank	Slaughter, Andy
Costigan, Deirdre	Hinchliff, Chris	McNeill, Kirsty	Smith, Cat
Cox, Pam	Hinder, Jonathan	Medi, Llinos	Smith, David
Craft, Jen	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Midgley, Anneliese	Smith, Nick
Creasy, Ms Stella	Hughes, Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Mishra, Navendu	Smyth, Karin
Crichton, Torcuil	Hume, Alison	Moon, Perran	Snell, Gareth
Curtis, Chris	Hurley, Patrick	Morden, Jessica	Sobel, Alex
Daby, Janet	Hussain, Mr Adnan	Morgan, Stephen	Stainbank, Euan
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Hussain, Imran	Morris, Grahame	Stevens, rh Jo
Darlington, Emily	Ingham, Leigh	Morris, Joe	Stevenson, Kenneth
Davies, Ann	Irons, Natasha	Mullane, Margaret	Stone, Will
Davies, Jonathan	Jameson, Sally	Murphy, Luke	Strathern, Alistair
Davies, Paul	Jarvis, Dan	Murray, Chris	Streeting, rh Wes
Davies, Shaun	Jermey, Terry	Murray, Katrina	Strickland, Alan
Davies-Jones, Alex	Jogee, Adam	Myer, Luke	Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Dean, Josh	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Naish, James	Swallow, Peter
Dearden, Kate	Johnson, Kim	Naismith, Connor	Tami, rh Sir Mark
Denyer, Carla	Jones, Gerald	Nandy, rh Lisa	Tapp, Mike
Dickson, Jim	Jones, Lillian	Narayan, Kanishka	Taylor, Rachel
Dixon, Anna	Jones, Ruth	Newbury, Josh	Thomas, Fred
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Jones, Sarah	Niblett, Samantha	Thompson, Adam
Dollimore, Helena	Joseph, Sojan	Nichols, Charlotte	Thornberry, rh Emily
Doughty, Stephen	Kane, Chris	Norris, Alex	Tidball, Dr Marie
Dowd, Peter	Kane, Mike	Norris, Dan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Onn, Melanie	Toale, Jessica
Eagle, Dame Angela	Khan, Afzal	Opher, Dr Simon	Tomlinson, Dan
Eagle, rh Maria	Khan, Naushabah	Osborne, Tristan	Tufnell, Henry
Eastwood, Colum	Kinnock, Stephen	Owatemi, Taiwo	Turley, rh Anna
Edwards, Lauren	Kirkham, Jayne	Owen, Sarah	Turmaine, Matt
Edwards, Sarah	Kitchen, Gen	Pakes, Andrew	Turner, Karl
Efford, Clive		Patrick, Matthew	Turner, Laurence
Elmore, Chris		Payne, Michael	Twist, Liz
Entwistle, Kirith		Peacock, Stephanie	Uppal, Harpreet
Esterson, Bill		Pearce, Jon	Vaughan, Tony
			Vince, Chris

Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia

Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jake Richards and
Imogen Walker

NOES

Allister, Jim
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Mims
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Lamont, John

Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
Mak, Alan
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdoch, James
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendment 1B but proposes Amendments (a) and (b) to the Bill in lieu of that Amendment.

Clause 23

**RIGHT NOT TO BE UNFAIRLY DISMISSED: REMOVAL OF
QUALIFYING PERIOD, ETC**

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendments 23 and 106 to 120, does not insist on its amendments 120C, 120D and 120E, and proposes amendments (a) to (f) to the Bill in lieu of Lords amendments 23 and 106 to 120.
—(*Kate Dearden.*)

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 96.

Division No. 382]**[8.9 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Buckley, Julia
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah

Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gibson, Sarah
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Glendon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair

McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy

Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry

Allister, Jim
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinanage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John

Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Jake Richards and
 Imogen Walker

NOES

Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdock, James
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shanon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Sultana, Sarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom

Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

After Clause 26

DEFINITION OF SEASONAL WORK

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendment 48B but proposes Amendments (a) and (b) to the Bill in lieu of that Amendment.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

The House divided: Ayes 395, Noes 98.

Division No. 383]

[8.21 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Aquarone, Steff
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie

Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carling, Sam
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Carns, Al
 Chadwick, David
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Collins, Victoria
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, Daisy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Bobby
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doogan, Dave
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Foody, Emma
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica

Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Logan, Seamus
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)

Maskell, Rachael
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter

Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony

Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln

Williams, David
 Wilson, Munira
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Jake Richards and
 Imogen Walker

NOES

Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdock, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr Andrew Snowden and
 Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 59**REQUIREMENT TO CONTRIBUTE TO POLITICAL FUND***Motion made, and Question put,*

That this House does not insist on its amendment 72C in lieu of Lords amendments 61 and 72, but disagrees with the Lords in their amendments 72D to 72H in lieu and proposes further amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of the Lords amendments.—
(*Kate Dearden.*)

The House divided: Ayes 326, Noes 162.

Division No. 384]**[8.34 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna

Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny

Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred

Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Jake Richards and
Imogen Walker**

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aqarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria

Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Mims
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Franklin, Zöe
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah

Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast
by Bobby Dean*)
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben

Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:

**Gregory Stafford and
Mr Andrew Snowden**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 65

INDUSTRIAL ACTION BALLOTS: TURNOUT THRESHOLD

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendment 62, but does not insist on its amendment 62C in lieu and proposes amendment (a) in lieu.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

The House divided: Ayes 327, Noes 162.

Division No. 385]

[8.46 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie

Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Anderson, Callum

Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna

Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah

Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie

Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Swards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz

Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia

Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Imogen Walker and
Jake Richards

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby

Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert

Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua

Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregory Stafford and
Mr Andrew Snowden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ian Lavery: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I intervened on the Minister earlier, I should have declared an interest with regards to my support from the trade union movement, of which I am extremely proud. For that, I humbly apologise.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for having corrected the record and for putting his interests on the record.

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I can confirm that nothing in the Lords message engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 51

DELEGATION OF PLANNING DECISIONS IN ENGLAND

8.59 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I beg to move,

That this House does not insist on its disagreement to Lords amendment 33, but proposes amendment (a) to the Lords amendment.

Today is a pivotal day, because, subject to agreement from this House—and, in due course, the other place—on a single remaining issue, the Government's landmark Planning and Infrastructure Bill will have completed all its stages and will therefore shortly become law. That moment will be a hugely significant one for our economy, because this legislation will facilitate a step change in the delivery of the new homes and critical infrastructure that our country so desperately requires.

Let me briefly remind the House again why this Bill is so important. When it comes to house building and the provision of major economic infrastructure, the status quo has demonstrably failed. The process of securing consent for nationally significant infrastructure projects is far too slow and uncertain, and is constraining economic growth and undermining our energy security. The current approach to development and the environment too often sees both sustainable house building and nature recovery stall. In exercising essential local democratic oversight, planning committees clearly do not operate as effectively as they could, and local planning authorities do not have adequate funding to deliver their services. The compulsory purchase order process is patently too slow and cumbersome, and development corporations are not equipped to operate in the way that we will need them to in the years ahead. It is abundantly clear that the lack of effective mechanisms for cross-boundary strategic planning mean that we cannot address development and infrastructure needs across sub-regions as well as we otherwise might.

We can and we must do things differently, and this Bill will enable us to do so. That is why we have been so determined to ensure that we can make use of its provisions as soon as possible, and why I am delighted that, following today's debate, it is expected to return for a final time to the other place before becoming law. To that end, I hope hon. and right hon. Members will lend their support to Government amendment (a). Before I turn to the detail of that amendment, let me put on record once again my profound thanks to Baroness Taylor for so ably guiding the Bill through its stages in the House of Lords and for undertaking such broad and extensive engagement with peers throughout its passage.

Lords amendment 33 seeks to make the first set of regulations for the national scheme of delegation subject to the affirmative procedure, and Government amendment (a) seeks to give effect to that change. In the debate on consideration of Lords amendments on 13 November, I argued that the affirmative procedure was unnecessary in this instance, in the light of the

multiple rounds of consultation that would take place before the relevant regulations were laid. However, I acknowledge the strength of feeling in the other place on this matter, and we have therefore tabled an amendment to give effect to the intention of Lords amendment 33, ensuring that the first set of regulations for the national scheme of delegation is subject to the affirmative procedure. I thank Lord Lansley for his engagement on this issue, and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for his contributions to previous debates on these regulations.

Government amendment (a) simply removes the unnecessary provisions in Lords amendment 33 in respect of future regulations, for which there are already powers in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Set alongside the existing safeguards built into the legislation, including a duty on the Secretary of State to consult on the draft regulations before they come into effect, I hope the House will agree that Government amendment (a) will ensure that an appropriate amount of parliamentary scrutiny and engagement is able to take place on these provisions ahead of implementation.

I urge the House to support Government amendment (a), and I look forward to receiving the support of Members.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a privilege to present some of the Opposition's final words on what I am sure the Minister will agree has been an extensive effort on both sides of the House to debate, scrutinise and amend the Bill. In the light of that, I particularly wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) for his efforts; he has worked tirelessly to push the Government to make this Bill fit for purpose. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who has made invaluable contributions throughout the whole process, both in this place and in Committee. Finally, I congratulate the Minister on seeing the Planning and Infrastructure Bill through its parliamentary journey, although I am hesitant to pour too much praise on many of the aspects of the Bill itself.

When we last came to this House to consider the Lords message a couple of weeks ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner outlined the Opposition's key concerns regarding the Bill, not least that it fails to satisfy the three tests that we have consistently used to judge how it could help to unlock the housing market, make the necessary reforms to administrative and bureaucratic burdens, and create a dual incentive for communities and developers to embrace more homes and infrastructure. As will now be abundantly clear to the Minister, it is the continued position of His Majesty's Opposition that the Bill fails on all three counts. His boss, the Secretary of State, knows this, having admitted today that the Government will need a sharp increase in their current run rate if they are to meet the target of 1.5 million homes that they promised in their manifesto—a target that, according to his Department's own figures, they are currently missing by a long way.

Some improvements to the Bill have been made during the parliamentary process, including the Government's concession on Lords amendment 33, which we are

[Gareth Bacon]

discussing today. We are grateful that the Government have moved on this question, and we will not seek to divide the House on it this evening.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Everybody recognises the importance of 1.5 million houses being built, given the need for social housing that many people have and the need for houses that people can afford with a mortgage. However, does the hon. Gentleman feel that to move forward in the correct way, there must be discussion with communities to ensure that community integration can take place—discussion about how building houses will affect people, and how infrastructure will affect local farms and landowners? Does he feel that has been achieved in the Bill?

Gareth Bacon: No I do not—not fully; I will return to that answer in more detail in a couple of moments.

As a prime example of what more could have been done, the Bill could have addressed the democratic deficit it creates. It strips powers away from elected councillors and gifts them to unelected planning officers, as well as giving more powers to the Secretary of State. That, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg when we consider the clear contempt shown for local democracy as the Government prepare to cancel yet another round of local elections. The Bill also fails to support both those building and buying homes—no amount of centralisation in the Bill will counter the Chancellor's failure to meaningfully support growth and cut costs. This is despite clear warnings from the Home Builders Federation that the Government must provide help for first-time buyers and reduce taxes on new homes if they are to achieve anything close to the tally of 1.3 million homes by the end of the decade that was predicted by the Office for Budget Responsibility in March.

Let me turn to nature—something I know many MPs have received emails about. The Bill still lacks the clarity and the answers that nature lovers seek to legitimate questions about how we reconcile the delivery of new homes and infrastructure with the need to protect our natural environment. This is most evident when we consider the Government's focus on removing legal protections on green-belt land. Ripping up the green belt is not the answer, which is why my colleagues and I have called for the swifter redevelopment of brownfield sites. This is not least because, according to CPRE, in a substantial number of local authorities there is enough brownfield land with planning permission to meet the targets set by the Government's standard method for calculating housing need for at least the next five years. This is something that the Bill and this Government have failed to explore. Across two Secretaries of State, several junior Ministers and almost a year of parliamentary time, the Government have pushed these measures through using their majority, but without using their common sense.

Many provisions in the Bill still leave the market, home buyers, developers and local communities wanting. The triple blow—with a Chancellor running our economy into the ground while hiking taxes and a Government cutting demand-side policies to support first-time buyers—has left the country without a clear pathway to the lofty promise of 1.5 million homes. Don't just take my word

for it: throughout this process, the OBR, the Home Builders Federation, the National Federation of Builders, Britain Remade, the Countryside Alliance, Professor Paul Cheshire, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and many more industry experts and organisations, have raised concerns, either about the Bill or about the Government's ability to meet their housing target more widely.

The Government had the chance to fix this Bill, to support infrastructure projects, to back community voices and to deliver the homes that the British people need, but they have not done so. The Housing Minister recently declined to rule out further planning legislation in this Parliament. If that comes to pass, let us hope that next time, he and his colleagues listen to industry, the voices in this House and our local communities, and do what he knows to be right.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I am not certain whether I or the Minister will be more relieved at the conclusion of debates on this legislation. I welcome the fact that the Minister has tabled an amendment to the remaining proposal from the other place; I support Government amendment (a), and welcome the additional parliamentary scrutiny it brings. Once again, this legislation is in a better place than it was the last time it came in front of us, and I welcome the fact that Ministers have committed to environmental delivery plans being initially focused on nutrient neutrality and that further EDPs will be preceded by a statement in this House presenting the evidence for them.

I want to reflect briefly on further evidence that has come before us since our last debate on the Bill. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has published an assessment of England's biodiversity that found substantially more indicators of our nature in decline than going in the right direction. The Environmental Audit Committee, on which I sit, published its report on environmental sustainability and housing growth in which it called for an end to "lazy" narratives and scapegoating of nature. New polling has also found that more than two thirds of voters think politicians are out of touch with the public's values on nature.

We are still a long way from a planning system that delivers genuinely affordable homes and social justice, values democracy and reverses the decline of England's nature. I hope that, with the conclusion of this Bill, we can move forward to some more positive progress.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): When the Bill was presented to the House, the Liberal Democrats outlined three main concerns: accountability to Parliament, accountability to communities and accountability for our environment. Lords amendment 33 would address—to an extent—accountability to local communities and the importance of their role in planning, but it does not go as far as we would like. We are disappointed with the thrust of the legislation, which takes powers away from planning committees and gives them to the Secretary of State. We continue to oppose that measure, but we welcome the Government's compromise in the form of amendment (a), which gives Parliament some say over those regulations. We will not oppose it.

Planning committees are important to all the key aspects of planning, including national policy statements for the biggest projects in the country, and I recognise

that the Minister has reached agreement with the Chairs of the Select Committees on how national policy statements will be drafted. Planning Committees are also important to nature. Local people know their natural and local environment best and are best placed to understand it and make decisions about it. Lords amendment 33 would therefore be particularly important.

The Liberal Democrats are bitterly disappointed that the Conservatives did not support our efforts and amendments to include in the Bill statutory protection for chalk streams. I urge the Minister to follow up on his commitment to ensure that chalk streams appear in the national planning policy framework, and in its glossary, as an irreplaceable habitat. It is really important that these vital habitats, which we must protect, are established as an irreplaceable habitat. The UK has 85% of the world's unique chalk streams.

As I said, local communities know their environment best, and they are best placed to help deliver on the environmental delivery plans. We are concerned that the environmental delivery plans are being given to Natural England, which will act as a decision maker, fee taker, and judge, jury and executioner—without necessarily leaving a role for some small companies such as those in my constituency that have been delivering phosphate credits successfully and enabling development to go forward. I hope that the Minister and the Government will enable a continuing role for small and medium-sized enterprises in this field. It is vital that it is not just left to the monolith of Natural England to deal with that—in part because it is not very good at it. In 2022, it committed to releasing 40,000 homes with phosphate credits in the first year of its activity, but so far it has delivered only 4,000 homes under that programme. It is not necessarily most practical to assume that Natural England will dig us out of this crisis.

The Liberal Democrats want to work constructively with the Government. We want environmental delivery plans to succeed, and to deal robustly with nutrient neutrality and phosphate pollution. We want to see the pollution in the Somerset levels and moors special protection area dealt with successfully through an EDP, but that must involve local communities and local companies and businesses, which are already doing really strong work in this field.

This is not the Bill that we would have introduced. We believe that what is needed to build the homes the country needs is a massive council home and social home building programme. We propose 150,000 homes per year, with that being the focus of delivery, without watering down the planning process or the planning system, or removing the rights of communities as the Bill sadly does. However, we will work constructively with the Government on the Bill's implementation. We are pleased to have won, through my noble Friend Baroness Parminter in the other place, an amendment to the Bill, via the Government, on the mitigation hierarchy so that nature is placed at the top of the tree in such decisions. We welcome the changes to the Bill so far and will not seek to divide the House on the motion.

9.15 pm

Matthew Pennycook: With the leave of the House, I will close what has been an extremely brief but nevertheless necessary and important debate, which has moved us

another step closer to the Bill becoming law. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken for their contributions. In the time I have available to me, I will seek to respond to the points that were made.

The concerns expressed by the Opposition and Liberal Democrat spokesmen have generally been well rehearsed throughout the passage of the Bill, and I do not expect that I will convince them of the merits of its main principles. There is still time for them to change their minds and recognise the benefits that the Bill will bring in terms of productivity, prosperity and economic growth across the country, but the Bill has been debated at length, so I do not intend to comment too widely on those general points—and there is, of course, only a single amendment before us. However, I will make a couple of comments on some points that were raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) referred to the commitment that we made in the other place, and he is absolutely right. On 24 November, during consideration of Commons reasons and amendments in the House of Lords, the Government made it clear that

“the first EDPs will address nutrient pollution only”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 November 2025; Vol. 850, c. 1158.]

and that Ministers would return to the House once those first EDPs are in place to issue a statement on their progress. Only at that point would the Secretary of State be able to take forward any other EDPs on environmental issues.

I made, and stand by, the commitment that chalk streams will be explicitly recognised in national planning policy. The hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) will not have to wait long to find out what that will entail, but I take on board his points about what he expects to see on chalk streams.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the private sector, which was well made, we recognise the importance and increasing role that the private sector, including land managers, habitat banks and ecological consultancies, must play in supporting nature's recovery. Such businesses also play a crucial role in the planning system more generally. The Bill has been drafted to enable delegation and partnership working with third parties. That may apply both to the development of EDPs, including ecological surveys and impact assessments, and in the undertaking and monitoring of conservation measures. EDPs obviously also represent an opportunity for growth in nature service markets and revenue diversification for farming and land management businesses. I hope that he is somewhat reassured on that point.

On the substantive issue of the national scheme of delegation, we absolutely agree that planning is principally a local activity. Decisions about what to build and where should be shaped by local communities and reflect the views of local residents. That is why the Government are determined to ensure that every part of the country has an up-to-date local plan that is developed through significant resident engagement, and why the Government of course believe that planning committees have an integral role in providing local democratic oversight of planning decisions. However, it is vital that in exercising that democratic oversight, planning committees operate as effectively as possible, focusing on the applications that really warrant member input and not revisiting the same decisions.

[Matthew Pennycook]

As hon. Members know, we have undertaken a technical consultation on the national scheme of delegation. We got a significant response: nearly 600 responses from local planning authorities and developers alike. Broad support was expressed for the tiered approach that we have proposed, but we will take all that feedback into account in drafting the regulations to come, which we expect to lay in the spring. Just to make it clear once again, the draft regulations will be subject to public consultation, and we will respond to the technical consultation at the same time as we publish the draft regulations for consultation.

This landmark piece of legislation will enable us to overturn a failing status quo that has hampered the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure, and thereby impeded progress towards greater prosperity and rising living standards. I am immensely proud of having developed the Bill and taken it through Parliament. As I argued on Second Reading, 14 years of Tory failure

“left the country with a belief that nothing works, that nothing gets built, and that Britain can no longer do big things. This Government refuse to accept the stagnation and decline we were bequeathed. We were elected on the promise of change, and we are determined to deliver it. Through the measures introduced by this...Bill, we will get Britain building again, unleash economic growth and deliver on the promise of national renewal.”—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 745.]

It would be remiss of me to conclude my remarks without thanking those who have made a vital contribution to the Bill. I express my gratitude to all hon. and right hon. Members and peers in the other place who engaged with the Bill throughout its passage. The expertise and insight that has been brought to bear in both Houses has strengthened the Bill in a number of important respects. I thank the shadow Front-Bench teams for the constructive way in which they approached scrutiny in Committee and throughout all stages.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for her unwavering support in the Bill’s early stages, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), the Secretary of State, for his firm support over recent months. I thank all stakeholders, including

a wide range of development industry experts and organisations and environmental non-governmental organisations, which have engaged extensively with my Department to shape the Bill.

Finally, I thank all the talented officials in my Department who have devoted considerable time and energy to this landmark piece of legislation. I particularly thank the Bill team, ably led first by Alex Bush and now by Holly Harper; expert officials, including Will Burgon, Alicia Ford, Guy Skelton and Andrew Short; and past and present members of my private office, including Jim Carroll, Grace Doody, Josh Gray, Gabe Allason and Matt Davies, for helping to deliver the Bill in record time.

The imminent prospect of this Bill receiving Royal Assent is obviously only a beginning. Once the Bill becomes law, we need to implement its provisions. In that regard, the House should be in no doubt that we intend to move quickly, so that we can realise the full benefits of this legislation for productivity, prosperity and living standards across the whole UK. I very much look forward to working with hon. and right hon. Members, as well as stakeholders, as we progress the Bill’s implementation over the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

MENTAL HEALTH BILL [LORDS]: PROGRAMME (NO.2)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Mental Health Bill [*Lords*]:

Consideration of Lords Message

(1) Proceedings on the Lords Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

Mental Health Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Legislative Scrutiny: Mental Health Bill, HC 601, and the Government response, HC 1217.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I confirm that nothing in the Lords message engages Commons financial privilege.

Schedule 2

NOMINATED PERSONS

9.23 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 19B and 19C.

It is a privilege to return to the Mental Health Bill in this House for what I hope will be the final time in its passage. Thanks to the constructive and collaborative approach from Members across this House and noble Lords in the other place, we have been able to reach an amended and improved version of the Bill so that we can begin our vital work on the code of practice. In particular, I pay tribute to my ministerial colleague, Baroness Merron, for her outstanding work on this Bill.

The Bill sits alongside the 10-year plan, which sets out our ambitious reform agenda to transform the NHS and make it fit for the future. We know that there is much more to do to improve outcomes, to tackle unacceptable waiting times for care and to fully meet the needs of the population in a tailored, personalised and timely way. We will overhaul how mental health support is delivered in England to drive down waits and improve the quality of care, backed by a whole-of-society approach to preventing mental illness and to intervening early.

Last week, we announced the launch of an independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism. We are launching this review to understand the rises in prevalence and demand on services, to ensure that people receive the right support at the right time and in the right place. People who need it will access high-quality and compassionate mental health support at an earlier stage, and more people will recover or live well with mental illness.

We will go further to improve the quality and transparency of care, working with experts and people with lived experience. We will publish a new modern service framework for severe mental illness, setting consistency in clinical standards across the country so that patients and families get the best-quality, evidence-based treatment and support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I welcome what is coming forward. I ask for clarification on something that has been brought to my attention. I seek the Minister's advice and support. Lords amendment 19B relates to the appointment of a nominated person where no local authority holds parental responsibility for the patient. Does the Minister agree that there must be more emphasis on the voice of the child in the legislation, and that the child should have some preference when it comes to representation?

Stephen Kinnock: Yes, we absolutely do agree. As the hon. Gentleman will hear as I proceed with my speech, we have three options in respect of what will happen in exactly the scenario that he has mentioned, and that has been very much the spirit of the amendment on which we have agreed with the other place.

We will put patient feedback and outcomes front and centre by improving the transparency of reporting across in-patient and community mental health services. We will introduce an early warning system so that we can intervene earlier, using patient and staff feedback and clinical information to identify services that are at risk of providing poor-quality care. That is alongside our commitments to roll out mental health support teams in schools and colleges to full national coverage by 2029, to employ an extra 8,500 mental health workers by the end of the Parliament, and to pilot new 24/7 neighbourhood mental health centres across the country. Once implemented, this long-awaited and transformational Bill will give patients greater choice and autonomy and enhanced rights and support, and will ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect throughout their treatment.

Let me now briefly outline some of the commitments made by my ministerial colleague Baroness Merron in the other place. In response to the amendment tabled by Baroness May, the Government announced plans to launch a consultation on emergency police powers of detention. The consultation will look at in particular, but will not be limited to, sections 135 and 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983, as well as exploring joint working approaches across organisations. We have committed ourselves to working with stakeholders as we define the scope of the consultation.

In the other place, following engagement with Baroness Berridge, the Government tabled amendments in lieu regarding the appointment of a nominated person for a child under 16 who lacks competence. The amendment states that if no local authority has parental responsibility, an approved mental health professional—an AMHP—must appoint a person who has parental responsibility, a person named in a child arrangements order as a person with whom the relevant patient is to live, or a person who is a special guardian. If there is no suitable person with parental responsibility who is willing to act, the AMHP must consider the child's wishes and feelings when deciding whom to appoint.

This amendment clarifies whom AMHPs should appoint as the nominated person, and gives priority to those with parental responsibility. We intend to use the code of practice to outline what factors and nuances an AMHP should consider when making the appointment decision. If the AMHP later discovers that another of those on the list is more suitable to act as the nominated person, the legislation allows him or her to terminate the appointment of the nominated person and appoint the special guardian instead.

I thank Members on both sides of the House for their support for the Bill, and look forward to hearing their contributions.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I have talked about roads and bridges throughout the duration of the Bill. We have now reached the end of the long road that was, of course, embarked on by Baroness May in 2018 with the independent Wessely report, which was the foundation of this legislation. It constitutes a cross-party,

[Dr Luke Evans]

cross-departmental look at how we can improve the lives of people with the most serious mental health issues.

I was pleased to hear the Minister start to talk about the difference between mental health and mental wellbeing. That is fundamental when it comes to dealing with our policies and how we will take the country forward, because while not everyone has a serious mental health problem, everyone has problems with their mental wellbeing. Ensuring that we have that distinction worked out will be vital to providing the right support for the right people in the right place, and, ultimately, that is what the Bill is dedicated to doing. I have talked in the House about why that is so important. This Bill, above all others, deals with the most vulnerable people in society—those who are seriously mentally unwell—so I am pleased that we have reached a stage at which we can take it forward and put it into law.

I was also pleased to hear the Minister comment on the amendment from the other place, and the concerns raised by Baroness Berridge. I understand the points that he has tried to make and the clarifications that the Government have tried to introduce in relation to the amendment. He has said that he will look at the code of conduct in respect of the seriously difficult positions in which mental health professionals might find themselves during an evening of dealing with a parent who is contesting with a child the question of who is to be the nominated person. I am glad that the Government are looking at the code of practice, and we will not be dividing the House tonight.

That being said, as with the 10-year plan that the Government have brought forward, there is a synergy here. The synergy is this: Members on both sides of the House agree with the thrust of the 10-year plan and this Bill, but the problem is that there is no delivery chapter. That was the Opposition's concern when the Government were taking the Bill forward. As the Minister conceded in Committee, it will be a challenge, but without a delivery plan it becomes very difficult.

9.30 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Before I was elected, I ran mental health and complex needs services for five years. I saw a landscape that had pretty much been devastated under the Conservatives, and one way in which it had been devastated was through the loss of Sure Start. The Institute for Fiscal Studies produced a report this year that showed that Sure Start led to a 50% reduction in hospitalisations for 12 to 14-year-olds. The shadow Minister talks about the ways in which we can deliver better mental health. Does he agree that Labour's roll-out of a revamped Sure Start is just one of the many ways in which we are helping to improve children's mental health?

Dr Evans: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, but he has also missed the point. He gives me the opportunity to point out that one way in which the previous Government dealt with this issue was by bringing forward the mental health investment standard, under which the proportion of spending on mental health had to mirror the spending on physical conditions. That was starting to lead to real change. Alas, under this Government,

there is a concern that the standard has not been met. We know that the proportion of mental health spending has fallen under this Government, according to the written ministerial statement that they put out.

That leads me on nicely to the point that I wanted to raise: how will we fund the models that are coming forward? That is the crux of the matter that people outside the House will be looking at; it is a direct question, and it is the only one that I have in this debate. We on this side of the House have raised this issue in the debates we have had on both palliative care and mental health, and I raised it with the Minister only last week. The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), has raised this question again and again. Are the Government committed to the investment standard or not? Is it something that they have dropped? The House and the wider public need to know, so that we can plan for service provision. If the Government are dropping it, that is on them, and they need to explain the reasons why they are doing so. Maybe there is alternative investment, but as a starting point, the investment standard will be crucial in dealing with the mental health challenge, which is growing despite the pandemic and all the investment that has already gone in.

Tom Hayes: I have written more mental health investment standard funding applications than I care to remember. Although investment is obviously important, one major challenge with that stream of funding was that I had to apply on an annual basis. There was no certainty around multi-year settlements, so I was repeatedly setting up projects for which I could not find the funding to keep them going. That created more disruption in mental health support. We need to have stable, continuous funding settlements that actually meet the need that has been identified by the data and patient experience. That is what the Government are delivering, and to latch on to a particular funding stream and claim that somehow it is not being provided with support, when actually there is the wider of goal of tackling mental health through different methods—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman will know that there is ample opportunity for him to contribute to the debate. That was a very long intervention.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for stepping in on that basis. We have had plenty of chances to debate this Bill, both in Committee and many times in the mental health debates that I am partial to. We could go through why the last Government changed the interventions of NHS England and brought in integrated care boards to allow for a joined-up structure to be put in place. We now see a new iteration coming forward but, yet again, we do not know how much it will cost to get rid of NHS England. We do not know the redundancy packages for the ICBs and how much they will cost. That is fundamental.

One thing we do know is that, as the chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists has said, the change to the investment standard alone will cost the sector £300 million. That is investment that could have made a difference to mental health provision. I do not want to get into the heated politics any further, and I do not

want to delay the House any further this evening, but the Government's position on the mental health investment standard is crucial when it comes to delivering this Bill.

I thank the Minister for his constructive approach, and for the way in which he has taken ideas forward and looked through the Bill in fine detail. I know he cares deeply about getting this right, as do many Members of this House. It is imperative to ensure that compassionate, modern care is delivered to those who need it most when it comes to dealing with serious mental health conditions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I thank Members across the House for the constructive way in which they have all contributed towards this long-awaited Bill. In the last 40 years, attitudes to mental health and the treatments available have changed significantly, so these reforms and updates are very much needed and very much supported by everyone here.

On Lords amendment 19B, we welcome the important addition. All children and young people deserve appropriate care and support when undergoing treatment for mental health problems, including the safeguarding of a nominated person. Each and every child going through the system deserves to be properly represented by a responsible adult, so we are grateful for the amendment and we are pleased to lend it our support. While we understand that the remit of this Bill very much focuses on in-patient mental health care, we cannot ignore the wider context in which this Bill needs to operate. Even the best in-patient system will struggle if we fail to invest in the preventive and early intervention services that keep people well in the first place.

The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) mentioned the difference between mental wellbeing and mental health issues, and ensuring that we protect people's mental wellbeing before they go on to develop mental health issues. If we are serious about preventing people from reaching crisis point, we need to ensure that the many community-based initiatives, which the Minister and others have spoken about, are strengthened. That is why we will continue to champion walk-in mental health hubs, having a mental health professional in every school and a sort of mental health MOT check-up at key points in individuals' lives.

It has been an honour to contribute to this Bill. I want to thank the Minister for his meaningful engagement with all Members across this House for the best part of a year. My one ask of him tonight is to again consider restoring the suicide prevention grant to voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations, because I keep meeting charities and organisations that have benefited from it. It is really important that we support community organisations that can help identify when someone is reaching crisis point, because so many people who take their own lives are not in contact with NHS services.

Finally, I pay tribute to all the frontline workers in mental health in clinical and community settings. Nurses, counsellors, psychiatrists, doctors, therapists, support staff, carers and charities prop up a system that is complicated, underfunded and challenging to work in, and we want them to know that we appreciate all the

efforts that they continually make. The Liberal Democrats will keep pushing until mental health is given the same urgency, care and attention as physical health.

Stephen Kinnock: With the leave of the House, I will make some brief concluding remarks. I am very grateful to Members of this House for their contributions both today and throughout the passage of this Bill. I believe that by drawing on the lived experience of both Members and our constituents, we will be able to strengthen the intended impact of this legislation on people with serious mental illness and their loved ones. The passage of this Bill has seen the best of parliamentary commitment and co-operation, and the conduct of Members and peers has been collaborative and well-intentioned throughout.

For too long, mental health reform legislation has sat on the shelf. This Government made a manifesto commitment to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983, and we have delivered that within our first Session, providing an opportunity to transform the way we support those with severe mental illness and providing patients with greater choice and autonomy. I am reminded of what a patient in the 2018 independent review said:

"I felt a lot of things were done to me rather than with me".

This Bill takes forward many of the changes put forward by the independent review, the recommendations of which were rightly shaped by the views of patients, carers and professionals.

Many have asked about next steps and implementation. Post-Royal Assent, our first priority will be to draft and consult on the code of practice. We will engage with people with lived experience and their families and carers, staff and professional groups, commissioners, providers and others to do that. The code will go to public consultation, as well as being laid before Parliament before final publication. Alongside the code, we will develop the necessary secondary legislation. We will then need time to train the existing workforce on the new Act, regulations and the code. We estimate full implementation will take around 10 years due to the time needed to train the workforce and the need to ensure that the right community support is available. This timeframe necessarily spans multiple spending review periods and multiple Parliaments, so we are limited in the detail we can give about future spend and timelines. But we have committed to an annual written ministerial statement on implementation. This commitment will last for the 10 years or until the Bill is fully implemented, whichever is sooner.

Dr Evans: I appreciate that the Minister cannot commit to a financial spending envelope now, but is it not the case that the mental health investment standard is something that the Government could commit to?

Stephen Kinnock: Yes, I was just coming on to that, because the hon. Gentleman raised it in his speech. We are protecting the mental health investment standard in real terms, as it will rise in line with inflation. Our position is quite straightforward. We feel that for far too long the NHS has been run by a series of input-based targets which micromanage frontline leaders, while failing to ensure improvements in patient experience and care. We are bringing the era of command and control to an end, setting frontline leaders free to innovate and run their services as they know best.

[Stephen Kinnock]

I also remind the Opposition spokesman that we are investing £473 million in capital funding in mental health nationally over 2026-27 to 2029-30. That funding will: support the establishment of a 24/7 neighbourhood mental health service; deliver mental health emergency departments, known as crisis assessment centres; expand neighbourhood mental health services; eliminate inappropriate out-of-area placements; and increase crisis accommodation for people with learning disabilities and autism. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that when we see a rising tide lifting all the boats, we are connecting our mental health spend to that rising tide. We are then seeing a rise in real terms on what this Government are spending on mental health across the board.

I am very happy to again meet the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, and look at that particular issue. He raised it in Committee. I hope that some of the things I have just set out will help very much on the tragedy of suicide in our country. We are very conscious of how much we need to do to combat that.

I put on record my thanks to all Members and noble peers who have paid such a close interest in the development of the proposals, along with the officials and parliamentary staffers who have supported us to do so. The officials involved in the Bill are too many to mention, but I would like to pay tribute to colleagues in my private office, Emily Cowhig and Penny Sherlock, who have done such sterling work on the Bill, supporting me and the entire team throughout.

Transforming mental health care for the most vulnerable patients with serious mental illness requires the Bill to pass into statute. I am therefore grateful to hon. Members for their support in enabling us to do so.

Lords amendments 19B and 19C agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PAYMENT SCHEME

That the draft Infected Blood Compensation Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 30 October, be approved.—(*Jake Richards.*)

Question agreed to.

MODERNISATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Chris Elmore, Sarah Coombes and Chris Vince be discharged from the Modernisation Committee and Daniel Francis, Rachel Hopkins and Leigh Ingham be added.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Dan Aldridge be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Pornography and violence against women

9.44 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): We are approaching the end of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence as I rise to present this petition. I am very pleased that I am not alone in this place in calling for reform of pornography legislation, as we have seen an explosion in the availability of increasingly graphic pornography—content that is often procured through coercion and is fuelling sexual violence and violence against women and girls. The petitioners from my constituency

“therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography...online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith,

Declares that pornography use is fuelling sexual violence; violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography; and sexual coercion is inherent to the commercial production of pornography.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003142]

Self-employed Adoptive Parents: Statutory Support

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

9.45 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this Adjournment debate on statutory support for self-employed adoptive parents. Self-employed adopters are currently excluded from any statutory parental pay. For far too long, this exclusion has been overlooked as too niche a problem, but in fact it exposes a much deeper inconsistency in the way our parental leave and pay system works—one that affects not only adoptive families but the wider functioning of the adoption system in England.

This debate comes at an especially challenging time for adopted children and adoptive families. Demand for post-adoption support is rising, including for mental health services, therapeutic help and emotional support, while the availability of those services has become more uncertain, uneven and under-resourced. A recent investigation by the BBC uncovered systemic issues within post-adoption support, highlighting challenges I will cover later in my speech, and which we will no doubt hear about from other Members.

First, though, I would like to address the issue that has led to this debate. There is currently a deep inconsistency in the way our parental leave and pay system works for adoptive families. At present, employed birth parents can access statutory maternity leave and pay; self-employed birth parents can access maternity allowance, which is equivalent to maternity pay; and employed adopters can access statutory adoption leave and pay. Self-employed adopters, however, cannot access any form of statutory adoption leave or pay. The consequence is that self-employed adoptive parents face a uniquely disadvantaged position, with no statutory mechanism enabling them to take time away from work to support a child entering their family—a child who we know is more than likely to have experienced trauma, loss or disruption.

Self-employment now makes up a large part of the workforce, with around 4.4 million people working for themselves across the UK. It is estimated that self-employed adopters make up 10% of adopters annually; given that just over 3,000 adoptions took place last year, that means that hundreds of families a year are being left with no statutory financial support at the moment that they take legal and parental responsibility for a child.

It is important to be clear about what adoption pay is actually for and why it exists. Unlike maternity provision, which has historically been justified by the Government on health and recovery grounds, statutory adoption pay exists for a different purpose altogether. In 2022, the previous Government stated in a written answer that statutory adoption pay is essential to the success of an adoption placement in order that an adopter can take time off work to care for and, most importantly, to bond with their child.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate; I spoke to her beforehand to ask her permission to intervene and to very quickly give her a Northern Ireland perspective.

In Northern Ireland, shared parental leave and pay—SPL and ShPP—are entitlements as financial support for adoptive parents. If one adopter qualifies for statutory adoption pay, couples may share leave or pay under SPL, but that presumes employment under a qualifying employer. Does the hon. Lady agree—I think this is what she is trying to achieve—that under all legally binding work contracts, all employers should be incentivised to ensure that employees can qualify for shared adoption leave, and that there should in fact be an onus on them to do just that?

Rebecca Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and particularly for highlighting the case in Northern Ireland. Parental leave and shared parental leave for adopters was something that the previous Government fought hard to bring in, so I agree that that is something that should apply across all our isles. Ultimately, though, that will be for the Minister to talk about; I am guessing it is probably a devolved issue, but no doubt it will come up in his remarks a bit later.

As I was saying, in 2022 the previous Government stated that it is essential to the success of an adoption placement that the adopter takes time off work in order to care for and bond with their child. That principle must be fairly applied regardless of whether a parent is employed or self-employed.

For self-employed adoptive families, the negative consequences of this disparity are clear. Evidence gathered by Home for Good and Adoption UK through the all-party parliamentary group on adoption and permanence found that 60% of self-employed adopters reported that the absence of financial support directly limited the amount of leave they could take at the start of adoption, and in some cases it prevented them from taking leave altogether following the adoption. In practical terms, that means returning to work within days or weeks of placement, despite being advised by professionals that it is best for them to take time off work to be able to support their child once they are placed. One self-employed adopter summed up the pressure, saying:

“We have been through two separate adoptions. The second time I had no choice but to keep working. I sometimes took my son with me. It was very hard.”

The APPG’s research also found that around two thirds—63%—of prospective self-employed adopters said that the lack of statutory provision played a major role in delaying or preventing them from proceeding with adoption in the first place. Nearly half of self-employed adopters said that it prevented them from adopting again, while others explained that they could not consider adopting their child’s sibling because the financial impact of taking extended time away from work was simply too great. As a result, children are being unnecessarily separated from their siblings. One family said:

“We have already been approached to adopt another sibling and had to say no because there was no financial package available to help.”

Further research from the APPG found that the majority—59%—of self-employed adopters reported stopping work altogether for a period once a child was placed with them. They did so not as a lifestyle choice, but because the intensity of needs made continued self-employment impossible.

[Rebecca Smith]

For many families, the absence of statutory provision creates profound pressure at precisely the moment the emotional and practical demands of adoption are at their highest. As one parent explained:

“Not having an equivalent to maternity allowance meant the pressure on us was increased, at a time when the pressure on our family was already very high. We didn’t have access to the kind of mental or financial ‘breather’ that a secure income for a set period might have given us. Inevitably it made the whole early placement period more stressful.”

That strain is reflected in reported anxiety levels among prospective self-employed adopters, who on average rated their financial worry during the adoption process a seven out of 10. Established self-employed adopters also report elevated anxiety, rating it a six out of 10, showing that stress does not end once placement is secured but often continues long afterwards in the absence of statutory support. Those findings must be understood within the broader context of adoption pressures; it is not just about parental leave.

As of September this year, 2,940 children with a placement order were waiting to be matched with an adoptive family in England, and average waiting times from entering care to placement with a family exceeded 20 months. If Government policy is deterring capable families from coming forward to adopt, this does not only disadvantage adopters themselves but, most importantly, directly affects the life prospects of children, who remain in temporary care arrangements for longer than necessary. That is in part because the system has made permanency through adoption unaffordable for too many who would otherwise open their home.

As I said at the start, the lack of statutory support for self-employed adopters cannot be considered in isolation from the adoption system as a whole. I am concerned that adoption is still treated as something that ends at placement, rather than as a responsibility that continues for a lifetime. Nearly all adoptive families say that more must be done to ensure that children feel safe and secure as they grow up, and over half report that support drops away once the adoption order is made.

There is cross-party recognition that adoption cannot be treated as a single moment in a child’s life. It is not simply a legal process that ends with an order; it is the beginning of a lifelong journey for both the child and the family that welcomes them. When we reduce adoption to a one-off placement, we overlook the ongoing needs that often emerge long after the order is made.

If we are serious about giving adopted children the best possible start, we must be honest about the nature of adoption itself. It is a lifelong commitment that requires consistent, compassionate and accessible support. Families should not have to fight for the help that allows their children to flourish. Adoption should be backed by a commitment from all of us to stand with these families not just at the beginning but throughout the years that follow.

Current practice too often fails adopted families at moments of vulnerability. Many adoptive parents report long waits for mental health services, difficulty accessing meaningful support, inconsistent local authority approaches and a lack of trauma-informed provision in schools. We need an adoption system that sticks with adopted children and their families over the long term and is flexible and

responsive to their changing needs as they face challenges across these areas. These problems affect all adopters, employed and self-employed alike, but their financial impact is unevenly distributed. All of that is being compounded by the sudden and unexpected changes to the adoption and special guardianship support fund announced in April, which significantly reduced the post-adoption support many adoptive families rely on, including families in my constituency, contributing to a growing sense of uncertainty and a weakening of trust towards the system.

For families who cannot afford private help, the situation becomes even more difficult, and the financial strain quickly grows. Many simply have no way to cover the costs of therapy on their own. For the self-employed, the pressure is even greater because this burden arrives at the same time as the lack of statutory pay, leaving them with fewer options and even less stability. For self-employed adopters, the impact is even heavier, because any time taken away from work to help support children can immediately affect their income. When post-adoption support is withdrawn, they cannot rely on payroll to cushion the loss. Instead, they absorb it through missed work, reduced earnings and unpaid days spent trying to manage crises on their own.

Self-employed adopters are navigating a range of interconnected pressures that overlap, intensify each other and shape every part of their experience. Local authority practice reflects the same fragmentation. Support for self-employed adopters varies wildly depending on where families live. Freedom of information requests reveal that one third of councils have no policy in place at all to support self-employed adopters, and the remaining councils referred to using a means-tested approach to assessing the need for financial help. In those council areas, 90% of adopters were not informed that local support might be available. This produces an arbitrary system in which families adopting can experience different outcomes depending on postcode rather than need.

This Adjournment debate follows a recent Westminster Hall debate brought about by an e-petition on maternity and paternity pay, where Members, including me, explicitly raised the position of self-employed adoptive families. The Government have indicated that a review of parental leave and pay is under way and that the issues raised through the recent parliamentary debate will inform this process. If that review is to be taken seriously by adoptive families, it must look properly at the position of self-employed adopters, rather than letting their needs disappear into maternity and paternity reform more generally. Clarity is essential.

Adoption pay cannot be an optional extra. It ensures that adopters can establish stability, attachment and routine with a child who may have experienced disruption, neglect or loss. It enables parents to be present, rather than forced to divide their attention between the urgent demands of work and the equally urgent demands of care.

I know that the Minister cares deeply about these issues, which is why this debate is a good opportunity to raise them. First, will the review formally assess the position of self-employed adopters as a distinct category within the parental leave and pay review? Secondly, will the Government evaluate the introduction of a statutory entitlement equivalent to maternity allowance for self-employed adopters? Thirdly, can he provide an indication

of the timescale for publication of the review's findings? Finally, I urge the Government to reverse their disastrous decision to reduce the funding available through the adoption and special guardianship support fund. Policy choices must support adoption and adoptive families. Enterprise and self-employment should also be encouraged. Self-employed adoptive families should not be penalised. The removal of avoidable barriers to adoption, while enabling business to flourish, must be a priority.

9.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for securing this debate and highlighting these important issues. Having spoken to her in our first week in this place as newly elected Members of Parliament, I know she cares deeply about these issues, and I welcome her bringing them to the attention of the House in this Adjournment debate.

I will open my remarks with a word of special thanks to everybody in our country who has stepped up to adopt children. It is an extraordinary act that makes a transformational difference for children and families right across this country. I recognise that self-employed adopters do not have access to statutory adoption pay. I appreciate, too, that they do not qualify for statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Josh MacAlister: I am pleased that the parental leave and pay review is looking at these issues as part of its work, and I encourage Members to engage with the review as it continues.

The Department for Education's statutory guidance is clear that where self-employed adopters do not qualify for any statutory payment, local authorities can consider making a payment that is equivalent to the maternity allowance.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The Minister mentioned the review and said that it is under way. He did not mention how long it will take, and I note that the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) asked for some guidance on the timeline. I would be grateful if he could give that and, further, if he could use his good offices to encourage local authorities to let potential self-employed adopters know that their discretionary funds exist because, as the hon. Lady mentioned, most do not.

Josh MacAlister: I thank the hon. Member for those questions. I will directly answer the questions that the hon. Member for South West Devon asked in a moment, but I take the broader point about encouraging local authorities to ensure that adopters in their area are aware of the support available to them.

As I was saying, local authorities can consider making a payment that is equivalent to the maternity allowance. That allows authorities to target adopters most in need

of financial support, though I take the hon. Member's point—a point powerfully made—on the inconsistency of that offer across England at the moment.

To answer the hon. Member's questions directly, first, the parental leave review started in July and is expected to last 18 months, so we should be able to work back from there on when we expect its conclusions and publication. The review has a wide scope, but specific work on adoption support is firmly within that scope.

Finally, I turn to broader adoption support, which the hon. Member also asked me about. The Department for Education does make wider support available for all adoptive families. This year, £50 million was made available to support adopters and adoptive families through the adoption and special guardianship support fund. I appreciate that the changes we made to the ASGSF in April have been very difficult for some families, and I have listened carefully to what families have told me about those changes. I speak regularly with adopters and those working in the adoption system. We will start a formal process of engagement on long-term decisions in the new year. Details of the ASGSF from April 2026 will be made available once departmental business planning decisions are completed, and I expect that to be very soon.

So far this year, we have approved applications to support over 14,000 families through the fund. We have also invested £8.8 million this year into Adoption England for services across the country. Adoption England is doing a huge range of work to develop support for families through regional adoption agencies—for example, a new core offer of support for the first 12 to 18 months of a match between a child and a family.

Fundamentally, beyond adoption leave, the Government are taking bold steps to transform the entire children's social care system. That is set out in our recently announced Families First Partnership programme. We have upped the funding to take it to £2.4 billion over the next three years. That change is fundamental to the whole system because it will reset the system—in a way that many Members across the House have for years argued for—away from late-stage crisis intervention and towards earlier, more intensive support for families, of all shapes and sizes, and that should be the bedrock of the future children's social care system. In parallel, the investment and changes going into the NHS to ensure that health services can respond to the mental health needs of families and children—particularly the most vulnerable—will also act as a bedrock. We recognise, however, that adoptive families have special support needs.

I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon for securing the debate and for her speech. I welcome her acknowledgment of the difference that adopters make across the country. I also welcome the attention of the parental pay and leave review to this area of work. I look forward to engaging in the new year with adopters and Members from across the House, as well as with stakeholders who work in the adoption system, including my Department's adopter reference group, as we work to confirm the long-term arrangements for adoption support.

Question put and agreed to.

10.5 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 8 December 2025

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Digital ID

[Relevant documents: oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee on 18 November, on Harnessing the potential of new digital forms of identification, HC 986; and written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, on Harnessing the potential of new digital forms of identification, reported to the House on 18, 11 and 4 November and 25 October, HC 986.]

4.30 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 730194 relating to digital ID.

It is a pleasure to introduce today's e-petition debate under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to open it on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank all the organisations and individuals I have met in preparation for the debate.

Nearly 3 million people have signed today's petition. It is the fourth most signed petition in the history of parliamentary e-petitions, comparable only to the recent petitions calling for a general election. It is obvious why the plans to bring in digital ID have provoked such outrage: they are fundamentally un-British and they strike at the core political traditions of this country. Colleagues of all parties are opposed to these measures: the Conservatives, the Greens, Reform, Lib Dems, Labour Back Benchers, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, independent MPs and colleagues from Northern Ireland. In fact, even several Ministers in this Government have, in the past, voiced their opposition to compulsory identity documents.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): For the avoidance of doubt, I am on this side of the Westminster Hall Chamber only because it is so packed that this was the only remaining chair. I have not defected to the Labour Party and I never will—nor to anyone else. Can my hon. Friend confirm that this policy was not in Labour's general election manifesto, so it has absolutely no electoral mandate to extend the surveillance state over the people of this country with this gimmick?

Robbie Moore: I cannot agree enough. It raises the question: who is actually in favour of these proposals, other than the Prime Minister?

Despite the consistent opposition to identity documents, this is not the first time that they have been forced on the British public. The first ID card in this country came during the second world war: police officers could demand of the public that they show their cards and they were subject to six months' imprisonment if they did not. Despite promises in 1939 that the ID cards would be a temporary wartime measure, they were used throughout the post-war Attlee Government; they were ended only by the Conservatives in 1952. Some 50 years later, no longer fighting German spies but the war on terror, the Blair Government tried to bring ID cards back,

and they succeeded. Once again, it took the Conservative Government—this time in coalition with the Lib Dems—to stop them.

Sadly, the Conservatives are not wholly innocent either when it comes to ID. In 2021, the Government introduced the first digital ID in the form of the covid passport, which I proudly voted against. Thankfully, those documents lasted only a short while before restrictions were lifted. That brings us to the modern day and the latest excuse for ID cards: tackling illegal immigration and delivering Government services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. As you may have noticed, there are huge numbers of Members trying to speak. I will have to impose a three-minute speech limit. We will try and get everybody in, but the more interventions there are, the more people simply will not get in. Perhaps you could all bear that in mind, please.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I will keep my intervention very short, Sir Edward. An unheard-of 4,400 of my constituents signed this petition. They are very clear that they do not want the imposition—which is what it will be—of digital ID. As we heard from my hon. Friend's history lesson, time and again it has been the Conservatives who have said, "No, we do not want this. The British people do not want it." Is it not time that this Government sat up and listened to the public for a change?

Robbie Moore: That is exactly why this Conservative party is saying no to digital ID once again. The latest guesstimate of how much this is going to cost us all is a whopping £1.8 billion.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My hon. Friend articulates the case powerfully. I know my constituents will agree that we could be doing much better things with £1.8 billion than wasting it on a project like this.

Robbie Moore: I entirely agree, but here we are with the latest Government excuse to introduce mandatory digital ID. I can just see the communication advisers in No. 10 looking at today's polling, dusting off the old ID card plan and slapping "Stop the boats" on the cover. There is no doubt in my mind that if the No. 1 issue of today had been tackling potholes, the very same press release would have come out of No. 10 claiming that digital ID is now the essential solution to tackling the national problem of potholes. I say that in jest, but to point out that it seems that any excuse—however unjustified and unevicenced—will do to push policy through.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Robbie Moore: I give way to the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Dame Chi Onwurah: There are many who seek the right and the ability to identify themselves, but who do not have it as it stands. We all have constituents who are experiencing that. My Committee has seen evidence

[*Dame Chi Onwurah*]

that the figure cited by the hon. Gentleman is not recognised by the Secretary of State; it has been put forward by the Office for Budget Responsibility. The Secretary of State will be writing to us to set out what costs she envisages and when they will be realised. It is also important to recognise that the level of digital hygiene across Government is not such that it could support a mandatory digital ID scheme, in my view.

Robbie Moore: Therein lies the explanation and the reason why so many Members of this House are opposed to the plans brought forward by the Prime Minister.

Here is the question that the Government hope nobody will ask: if the real target is people who are here illegally, why on earth do 67 million British citizens who already have national insurance numbers, passports, driving licences and birth certificates need to be dragged into a brand-new compulsory database as well? What exactly is it about stopping the crisis of inflatable dinghies in the channel that requires your son, your daughter, your dad or your 90-year-old grandma to hand over their data and facial geometry to the Home Office server?

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): My constituents in Epping Forest are deeply concerned about the prospect of digital ID cards. Many have written and spoken to me, and over 5,600 have signed the petition. Rather than improving the delivery of public services, this scheme risks wasting billions on a complex, intrusive and potentially very insecure system that will not help anyone. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour Government must now listen, take on board the public concerns and scrap this flawed policy?

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is not about stopping the boats at all; it is about more Government and state control.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The mover of the debate must make progress.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): I will be very brief. My constituency is in rural Wiltshire, where a huge number of residents have taken part in this petition. Does the hon. Member agree that digital exclusion is a reality in areas like mine?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree that digital exclusion is a reality for all.

I ask everyone in this place and those watching at home, no matter their political persuasion, to imagine their worst ever Government: the one that keeps them awake at night and that they would march against in the streets. For many, I am sure that that will be this Government, but for some it may have been previous Governments. This single piece of digital infrastructure will hand that Government, whoever they may be, the key to our life. Once that digital infrastructure is set up, we cannot go back. Once digital ID comes into force, no political party can promise that its intentions will stay good forever. Put simply, an ID card gives the state permanent control, and I say no.

The slippery slope argument is so common in debates about civil liberties that it is almost a cliché, but once the digital identities infrastructure is in place, it will become so much harder for a well-meaning Minister to resist the idea that they can fix areas of public policy by tracking and controlling, at an ever finer level, how a population behaves.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): We have a Government who could not even keep their own Budget under wraps. What hope do they have with our personal data?

Robbie Moore: That is exactly what a constituent of mine emailed me about—a constituent who voted Labour in 2024. They said, “If they can’t even control the leakage from the Government, how on earth can they control our data?”

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Like many Members, I have been inundated with messages. My Hartlepool constituents are hugely concerned. Does the hon. Member agree that part of the problem is that we got an announcement without the detail? I have written to the Minister with a number of questions that my constituents have put to me. Does the hon. Member think that Government Ministers owe our constituents answers about the detail of what they are proposing?

Robbie Moore: I could not agree more, but I suspect that the Minister will come out and reiterate the lines from the Prime Minister that he was given before the debate.

Just look at the social credit system in China. Facial recognition linked to ID penalises people. Blacklisted citizens cannot buy train or plane tickets, book hotels or apply for certain jobs. This Government have already indicated that migration work and renting will be tied to ID, but how long will it be before future Governments push further and accessing state services is brought under the control and monitoring of digital ID?

We are already seeing signs of such a framework in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, the Online Safety Act 2023 and the One Login system. Combined with a formal digital ID, those frameworks would create a world of control for Whitehall and a soulless dystopia for the rest of us. Together, they replace the honesty and decency of human-to-human interaction with an opaque, mechanical “computer says no” future. The scary truth is that control and ID cards hold an appeal for anyone who has access to power. It takes a conscious effort by every one of us to resist the temptation. Power does corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if bad employers are not prevented from taking people on without national insurance numbers or passports, they will not stop at taking someone on without digital ID?

Robbie Moore: I agree. The attitude of control strikes at the very heart of our political traditions. We are a representative democracy, not a command-and-control state. A Government exist by the will of the people, not the other way round. Put simply, we are not a “papers, please” society.

One of the most terrifying elements of the Government's proposals is that these IDs are to be digital. The national database on which our identities are to be held is a true honeypot for hackers all over the world. To those who say that it will be secure, I say, "Name me a company or Government body that has not had a hacking crisis in recent years." The NHS, the Co-op, Jaguar Land Rover—I could go on. Even Estonia's Government lost 280,000 digital ID photos in 2021.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concerns that the scheme could put constituents' most sensitive data into the hands of private, perhaps overseas, individuals who might have neither our constituents' nor our country's interests at heart?

Robbie Moore: I completely agree. In the case of One Login, cyber-security specialists were able to infiltrate and potentially alter the underlying code without being noticed by the team working on the project. In fact, the existing system could be compromised as we speak. We are assured by advocates of digital ID that clever technology will protect the data, but as I have outlined, the temptation to further integrate data within the system will be extremely strong. How long before someone suggests that security features be removed to make the system more efficient?

Digital data brings me back to consent. I will finish on this point: digital ID is an ever more intrusive evolution of traditional ID cards—one that promises to be more oppressive. Coupled with the powers of digital databases, increasing widespread facial recognition, digitalised public services and the looming prospect of a central bank's digital currencies, digital ID threatens to create an all-encompassing digital surveillance state that even George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four" could not predict. In every aspect of public life, we give over our data with consent. Yet digital ID turns that notion on its head, insisting that we hand over data to simply function in society, and potentially for reasons to which we cannot consent in advance.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does he agree that this is just the latest example of this Labour Government trying to push through something that was not in their manifesto, and that this House must therefore do all it can to stop it becoming a reality?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree. Who else but the Prime Minister really wants to drive this through? If the Government expand the scope of digital ID after its initial implementation, I doubt that they will be kind enough to offer an opt-out clause to anyone who has signed up. People up and down the country, 3 million of whom have signed the petition, can see that this scheme is a disaster waiting to happen.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As the Chair of the Petitions Committee, I thank the hon. Member for his excellent speech. Three million signatures! I want to apologise to hon. Members for the fact that there is not enough space in this Chamber for everyone who has turned up. I thank them for turning up, and I think it poses a question for the House to settle in future.

Robbie Moore: I could not agree more. It shows the strength of feeling on this issue. Thousands of people are deeply offended by the intrusion on their civil liberties; thousands are sceptical about whether Whitehall will be able to pull off such a complex scheme; and thousands are digitally excluded, terrified of a "computer says no" future. The Government should give up now, because we on the other side of the debate will never give up.

Whether today's identity cards are stopped before they are implemented or whether they last a few months, as they did in 2010, or over a decade, as they did in 1939, the British people will fight them, we will stop them and we will overturn them. As I said to the Government on the day they announced this policy, I am not a tin of beans and I do not need a barcode.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I will have to impose an immediate three-minute limit. The more interventions there are, the fewer Members will get in.

I can see a number of senior Members in the "standing room only" section. If you are standing and want to speak, you must put your hand up. If called, you must come forward to a microphone and try to find a place—I can see Damian Hinds putting his hand up, very helpfully. I call Melanie Onn.

4.47 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Edward. I will not take up much time.

Over 6,500 of my constituents signed the petition. Clearly, there is a great deal of angst and concern around the proposals, and it is imperative that the Minister address the concerns that have been laid out. While I welcome initiatives to stop illegal working and workforce exploitation, I share some of those legitimate concerns, particularly around the cost of roll-out, the necessity of the legislation, and data security. However, I recognise that we are living in a digital age in which we all give up our personal data to corporations, both domestic and international, with barely a second thought, and without knowing what those who sit behind the corporations will do with our data or likeness.

Can the Minister please offer reassurances that any proposal would present value for money? The total cost of rolling out a national system would be significant, and it is right that we understand how this compares with strengthening the forms of identification that we already have, because they are plentiful.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Melanie Onn: I will not give way—I am sorry.

There is also real interest in how personal data would be protected. Trust is very fragile when it comes to digital systems, so can the Minister give clarity that any digital ID would come with the strongest safeguards, transparent oversight and guarantees that data cannot be misused or accessed without consent?

4.49 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): In the previous year, 100,000 people were claiming asylum. The Labour Government were talking about ID cards to tackle illegal immigration, but they soon started talking about using them to tackle all sorts of other things as well. In time, it became apparent that there was a huge amount of disagreement among Ministers, and that the Government had not really thought it through and did not know the full cost. The year I am talking about is 2003, not 2025.

Eventually, 15,000 ID cards were issued under the previous Labour Government's plan. However, it ran into massive technical issues and cost over-runs. Eventually, they ditched the idea of cards but kept the overbearing database, which is what we see being resurrected today.

Yes, there are pull factors in illegal immigration, and work is one of them. However, Italy has ID cards. It also has one of the world's highest rates of illegal arrivals by sea. Here, employers are already obliged to do identity and right-to-work checks. By the way, if someone who is a legally resident person signs up to deliver food and then subcontracts that job to someone here illegally in exchange for cash, I fail to see how an ID card or a digital ID would interfere with that at all.

Ministers say that there would be no penalty for not carrying a card and that there would be no stop and search, but it is very hard to see how digital ID or physical ID cards address illegal immigration unless it is possible to demand the card from somebody in the street or in a workplace. And that is precisely the "papers, please" society that we do not want.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Over 5,400 of my constituents in Runcorn and Helsby have signed this petition. I have also received many, many emails objecting to it. Does the right hon. Member agree with my constituents who all understand that this new digital ID card will not solve the problem of illegal working in this country?

Damian Hinds: I will add that 4,000 of my constituents have signed this petition. I have also heard directly from hundreds of them by email in response to my own petition. We should listen to all these voices.

A lot has changed since 2003, but not my opposition to digital ID. The Government say that it would be non-compulsory, but in practice it would become so. They already talk about opening bank accounts and accessing childcare or benefits with digital ID; of course, in time there will be many more applications for it. It will be one more thing that we will need a smartphone for. That is bad enough in itself, but if digital ID is to be given to children as young as 13, as the Government are consulting on, that will make things far worse again.

Most of all, the worry is about the concentration of data. Yes, we already have massive databases in the private sector, and we all already have a number for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, NHS numbers and all the rest of it. The big change here is the single index term—the single identifier that links all these databases together. However much the Government say that the main database will be federated and access-limited, that cannot take away from the fact that all the databases will be linked. If they were not all linked, it would not be a digital ID system.

4.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have scanned the Labour manifesto, in which ID cards do not feature, and I have sought the evidence that ID cards prohibit illegal working, but there is none. Yet we are told that digital ID is the way forward.

I understand the argument about the data in the pocket, the convenience, everything in one place, and data checks for work and rental accommodation. However, this project is not about holding information about ourselves on our phones for our own convenience. It is about data—big, augmented data from different places and different sources, intersecting someone's health records with their records in the Department for Work and Pensions, or Home Office records with HMRC or local government, about where we live, where we work and where we are. Mix them together with facial recognition technology, run the algorithms and see what we get.

Of course, this Government would not dream of doing such a thing, but a future one might—indeed, a future one would. Following the passing of the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, academics have shown that aggressive actors will have access to this data and therefore we have to be warned about data theft and identity theft, which are not uncommon today.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I will just press on.

If DWP data and NHS data are in the wrong hands, social security will become insecurity; if Home Office data contains someone's location, then the ICE teams will find them. This could be our future. Behind our screens, the datasets that researchers use for good will be used by others for ill.

Of course there is interest in digital ID. We see the revolving door of those from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and people from his former office; there is Larry Ellison of Oracle; after all, he already has 185 contracts with the Government. He recognises the power, the money and the opportunity, which is why we cannot afford to go there.

We have already heard about the scale of the money. However, I must say that the interest in this project will only expose us all to the risks of future Governments and what they might do with our data. It will not then be just about each one of us individually, but about that knowledge being used to determine each one of our futures, including our mortgages, our social security, our health and our economics. Let us not forget that the insurance companies are also eager to lay their hands on this data.

Technology may be agnostic, but it will have behind it people who most certainly are not and will be using its power, augmented for their own gain and opportunity. This House cannot go into this space. Parliament needs to wake up to the reality that it is not about what is on our phone, but about the data behind that and how it will be misused in future. I beg the Government to stop. The fact that this was not in the manifesto is enough to tell us all that it does not have public consent and therefore should not proceed.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Jeremy Corbyn. Can you come forward to a microphone, please?

4.55 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Edward. The number of Members here and the demand for the debate show two things: first, it should be held in the main Chamber, not here, and secondly there are massive levels of public concern over the statement made by the Prime Minister. I will refer to two quotes that I have received from constituents and that summarise the situation very well. One states:

“Digital ID is a deeply illiberal idea that threatens privacy, autonomy, and the open society we should be standing for. It risks creating a two-tier Britain, where access to basic services—healthcare, housing, employment, even voting—depends on whether someone has the right app, paperwork, or digital trail.”

The second states that such measures

“entrench a presumption of suspicion, not trust, and put disproportionate burdens on the most vulnerable: migrants, the digitally excluded, the disabled, the elderly, and those without stable housing or documentation.”

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very good case. I am utterly opposed to digital ID, as are many of my constituents. One of them has made the point that in fact our great liberty, our great freedom, which is that the state has to prove that a person is guilty of a charge—innocence before guilt—is reversed by this, such that almost everybody on an ID card is assumed to have guilt until they have discharged themselves as innocent. Does that not go against all our freedoms?

Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. Member makes an important point. The huge number of people who have signed this petition indicates to me that many in this country are deeply concerned about the direction in which we are travelling. ID cards are one thing; restricting jury trials is another. Facial recognition at tube stations and now even in supermarkets is something that people find deeply disturbing. Across the country there is a whole vein of thought where people are feeling a quite reasonable sense of paranoia about the levels of surveillance that they are under at the present time. Members of Parliament would do well to try to understand that.

This attack on civil liberties—that is what it is—means that utterly vast amounts of information on all of us will be stored, as they are already in the health service. Unfortunately, the Government are now making that available to private healthcare interests at the same time. There is a huge issue here about our data, our information and our privacy, which we would do well to remember.

The last point I want to make is that the debate on this issue is being pushed by commercial interests that will make a great deal of money out of providing the necessary technical equipment to set up this surveillance system. They will do very well out of it, and we are being pushed into agreeing it by them. It is time for Members of Parliament to listen to what people are saying, listen to the concerns, have a proper debate in the main Chamber about this and say no to the Government, as we have said no before.

4.58 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I am pleased that through this Westminster Hall debate we are giving much-needed attention to the question of digital ID. Many of my constituents in South Derbyshire contacted me to share their views ahead of the debate. That includes well over 400 comments on a Facebook post in which I asked people for their views on digital ID—good, bad and perceived bad. Although there is a wide variety of opinion, many of my constituents have expressed concerns and it is my responsibility to communicate these here today.

Let me start by recognising that about a third of South Derbyshire constituents who have been in touch on digital ID were supportive, which is almost unique—people rarely contact me to tell me that they are pleased with what I am doing. There are some significant practical advantages: the ability to prove identity quickly for work; the potential to bring together passport, driving licence and national insurance details in a single secure format so that people would not need to faff around with a utility bill to prove their address anymore; and the benefits for people who currently lack traditional forms of ID. As things stand, digital ID would be mandatory only for those accessing work, although I recognise that many constituents have concerns over mission creep, which I will come back to.

Martin Wrigley: Will the hon. Member give way?

Samantha Niblett: I will not, I am afraid. I want to rattle through my speech.

Estonia, Denmark, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands already operate digital ID systems that make everyday tasks simpler and more efficient. For some, digital ID is a natural progression for a modern, digital economy. One constituent told me:

“We already use our phones and banking apps—this would simply streamline it”.

If done well and offered for free, digital ID could make employment checks and even voting more accessible, but it is equally important to reflect that roughly two thirds of responses from my constituents expressed serious concerns. That has unfortunately been intensified by fearmongering, some of which have heard today from certain parliamentary colleagues, but my constituents’ message was clear: we need trust, privacy and inclusion to come first—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Samantha Niblett: I will not give way, I am sorry. I am rattling through my speech.

Many fear that digital ID could pave the way, however unintentionally, to increased Government surveillance or the type of social credit-style monitoring that understandably alarms people. Others raise cyber-security concerns. One constituent said:

“If it can be hacked, it will be—and then what happens to our data?”

I am sure lots of tech companies would be delighted to get hold of our NHS data.

South Derbyshire is a rural constituency, and there are significant particularities when it comes to digital access and inclusion. Many older residents have raised

[Samantha Niblett]

concerns about their confidence in getting online and using smartphones. However, on this occasion, digital ID would thankfully be mandatory only for people accessing work.

There are also concerns about costs and priorities. Many people are asking why, at a time of stretched public services, the Government would invest in a new ID system that is mandatory for workers when we already have passports, licences, national insurance numbers and so on for that purpose.

Wendy Morton: Will the hon. Member give way?

Samantha Niblett: I will not.

The public need to feel confident that digital ID is secure, inclusive and underpinned by strong, transparent safeguards, so I look forward to hearing more from the Government about how they intend to build trust, engage openly with the public and guarantee that no one will be left behind as this technology evolves. It must also have a brilliant user experience.

5.1 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I apologise for the fact that I may not be here for the wind-ups because of the business in the main Chamber.

I begin by restating my firm opposition to the introduction of mandatory digital ID. I opposed it in this Chamber only a month ago, and the public response has been remarkable. The clip of my speech on social media has now been viewed more than 2.5 million times—not because of any great oratory on my part, but because people across the country are deeply worried about the direction the Government are taking. They are worried about privacy, freedom and the steady expansion of state power without consent.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Gregory Stafford: I am afraid I will not; sorry.

I want to raise a specific issue that was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), but that is often missed in this debate: the provisions in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that would mandate the NHS number as a single unique identifier for every child in England—namely ID cards, but on the sly. Ministers have confirmed in the House that that identifier will become mandatory. Wigan is already piloting multi-agency data sharing using it, but Members of this elected Chamber have not been given the evidence, the governance frameworks or the risk assessments that would justify such a change.

The Government have produced no credible reassurance that the NHS number will not become a gateway to expanded datasets or new intrusive linkages. There is no clear plan to prevent accidental disclosures that could put vulnerable children at risk, for example by revealing the address of a family fleeing domestic abuse or exposing confidential adoption records. Those are not theoretical concerns; they have occurred in practice. We have seen the warnings from Wales, where NHS numbers were extracted centrally and sent to local authorities with no direct care relationship with the children concerned.

The 2024 consultation was highly critical. The British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners and children's organisations all warned that such policies risked pushing marginalised families away from healthcare entirely.

Wales's own child's rights impact assessment warned of possible breaches of articles 12 and 16 of the UN convention on the rights of the child. It even warned that children could lose their article 24 right to health if families disengaged from GP registration. However, Ministers insist that the NHS number is not sensitive data. The General Medical Council has already rejected that argument. All patient information attracts the common-law duty of confidentiality. There is no such thing as a harmless identifier.

Practically speaking, the Department for Education's own research warned that mandating NHS numbers would require significant investment, long-term planning and phased roll-out. None of that groundwork has happened. Pilots are under way before Parliament has approved the principle. When trust in Government is already scraping the floor, the worst thing Ministers can do is force through more mandatory digital ID for adults or children, something the public neither asked for nor consented to.

Nearly 3 million people have signed the petition and more than two thirds of my constituents oppose it. Digital ID will not fix illegal migration, but it will supercharge state intrusion. The public deserve clarity, honesty and, above all, consent.

5.4 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): My assessment is that the most important issue facing this country is inequality. Will mandatory digital ID help to close inequality?

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My Tiverton and Minehead constituency in west Somerset has the lowest social mobility in the whole country. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that mandatory digital ID will give a better quality of life to any of my constituents?

Brian Leishman: I have a lot of time for the hon. Lady, but she needs to exercise just a smidge of patience; I was coming on to that. Introducing digital ID means the likelihood is that millions of people, including those living in poverty, many disabled people and older people, will end up facing digital exclusion. That will add to inequality, and I therefore cannot support the policy.

Inequality is impacting people from all over the UK, and the cost of living crisis is creating deeper poverty for millions of people. The truth is that introducing digital ID is a distraction from what the Government really should be doing. We need to redistribute power, wealth and opportunity to the millions who have been victims of chronic austerity—to those most impacted by the deterioration of public services and by the social cost of political decisions and what they have meant for their communities.

I have said who will not benefit from introducing digital ID, but who will? It is obvious: it will be corporate interests, shareholders and their dividends. Realistically, it could also be a future Government with an ideological agenda of selling data to private capital.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The Government are consulting on their proposals to implement digital ID, which is important for respecting democracy and hearing the concerns of our constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that such a consultation needs to be detailed, comprehensive and given proper time, so that the views of our constituents can be properly taken into account?

Brian Leishman: I agree. The minimum baseline of what the Government should be doing is listening to our constituents. After all, whichever party we represent—or do not represent—that is why we are here.

I touched on the possibility of a future Government with an ideological agenda. There is no doubt about it: that would create further inequality. Perhaps they could even be a Government whose reason for being is scapegoating people. Let us not kid ourselves that it is beyond the realms of possibility to have some sort of dystopian future Government in power, one that looks to use such technology for its own end, which is the exclusion of people from services or even—dare I say it—our country. If digital ID is introduced, it will be a big step in that awful direction.

5.7 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): As someone whose constituency has had reports of Russian spies infiltrating through our harbour, one might think that I would be very much in favour of digital ID. However, it will clearly do nothing about the Russian threat, the small boats crossing the water or fraud in the workplace. I thank the more than 6,000 residents in Torbay who signed the petition: we are in the top 10 of those who object to mandatory digital ID. I hope the Minister will see this massive petition as a red card to these proposals, which did not appear in the Labour party's manifesto.

The cost of the policy is massive: £1.8 billion, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility. Previously, when Tony Blair tried to trot this out, it was £4.6 billion—money that we can ill afford. For me, one of the nubs is that, when I go out and knock on doors in Torbay, I am always shocked at how many older folk in my deprived constituency do not have access to a smartphone or even a computer. This is digital exclusion on another scale, as we saw when the Conservatives excluded people for not having appropriate photo ID to vote. I strongly encourage the Minister to think again and reflect.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Quite apart from the excellent points made by my hon. Friend and by Members on all sides of the Chamber, Singapore has a population that is 10 times smaller than ours, and it took it over 12 years to develop its system. How long would it take us to develop ours: 100 years?

Steve Darling: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point.

I will conclude by saying that there are malevolent powers in power across the Atlantic, and many of us are shocked at what we are seeing emanating from the Oval Office. Let us not give a future Government powers that could be ill used.

5.10 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I think I am the first person to speak today who is a supporter of digital ID. However, I agree with

many of the objections raised by some colleagues; they are reasonable arguments and echo what many of my constituents have told me. Simon from Stowmarket wrote to say that he is worried about the state using digital ID to micromanage people's lives, John from Bury St Edmunds said that digital ID could exclude those without smartphones or a fixed address, and there are many more who are concerned about the security of their data.

Martin Wrigley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Prinsley: I will not just now.

I agree with all those arguments, but why do I support digital ID? Because I believe that those arguments are about the practicalities of how we implement digital ID, as opposed to the principle of whether we should have digital ID in the first place.

It should be entirely possible for a great country like ours to modernise the way in which its citizens interact with the state while preserving civil liberties and privacy. That is entirely the Government's intention. No one will be stopped in the street and asked for digital ID, data will be stored on personal devices, and it will be the individual's decision to share it or not. There will be alternative routes for those who cannot use smartphones.

Nevertheless, I know some Members will think this is a slippery slope, but that, again, is a practical argument. It is up to us, as legislators and as a Government, to ensure that digital ID is implemented with safeguards against bureaucratic creep. But we should not forgo the incredible benefits of digital ID because of the hypothetical chance that something we are against, and that we can prevent, might happen.

The benefits would be incredible. Before entering this place, I was a surgeon for many years, and the biggest problem I faced on a daily basis was accessing basic information about patients, which is stored in piecemeal fashion across myriad organisations. We could use digital ID to create a unified record and give control of it to the patients. That would revolutionise the national health service, and that is just one potential use—I have not mentioned the benefits for other public services and in reducing illegal working. People say that this is hugely expensive; I say that digital ID would pay for itself through reduced fraud. Privacy, inclusivity, civil liberties and a modern, streamlined state—I believe in all those things.

5.12 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. This Government are trying to create a Big Brother Britain. We had the ramping up of facial recognition and 30 arrests a day for social media posts, and they are getting rid of trial by jury in most cases. We also have children being radicalised in our schools by left-wing teachers. Now this Government are trying to force digital ID on to us all, and the excuse they are using is that it will stop illegal migrants working. If the Prime Minister was really serious about stopping illegal migrants working, he would detain and deport every single illegal migrant that crosses the English channel, but of course he will not. This is a gimmick. It is a pathetic attempt by a weak Prime Minister who has totally lost control.

[Lee Anderson]

Over 5,000 of my constituents signed this petition, and they do not want this Government poking their nose into their private lives. My constituents are not illegal migrants. They did not break into this country. They are decent, hard-working people whose fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought in two world wars to secure our freedoms. Every single working person in Ashfield will now be penalised because of the failures of this Government.

No one needs a digital ID to work in this country. They need a national insurance number, backed up by a driving licence, passport or some photo ID. My message to the Government is quite clear: you allow undocumented men into our country with no ID at all; you pick them up and place them in luxury hotels with no ID at all; you then give them a free asylum claim and free legal aid with no ID at all; yet you are ordering my constituents in Ashfield to get digital ID, and then you have the cheek to call us fascists. That is what they do. Just leave my constituents alone and concentrate on clearing up the mess that you lot have created.

5.15 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): This is a watershed moment for our country, and not a good one. The argument for digital ID is that it will help tackle illegal working, but sadly the evidence does not stack up. Across Europe, nations with long-standing ID card systems—Germany, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Greece—have not seen reductions in irregular migration as a result of ID cards. In fact, some have larger shadow economies than our own. Estonia, the poster child for digital ID, actually has a bigger underground economy than Britain. Assuming that this new system will somehow suddenly make rogue employers obey the law, when they have ignored the paper checks for some time, is for the birds.

That argument aside, the real fear here is that we will be building an infrastructure that can follow us, link our most sensitive information and expand state control over all our lives. The Minister must understand why people are concerned. This policy does not arrive in a vacuum. It sits alongside a worrying pattern: the accelerated roll-out of facial recognition, attempts to weaken end-to-end encryption, and data laws that strip away privacy protections.

We must remember that Britain has no constitutional right to privacy. Parliament can, in a single vote, grant or remove protections that people in other democracies take for granted. When we think of building a nationwide ID system capable of linking health records, education data, housing history and even information about crimes that people have suffered, we should stop, because once that architecture exists, any future Government could misuse it, and we would have very little power to stop them.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): My constituents in Stratford-on-Avon are deeply concerned as well. Does the hon. Member agree that if millions of people need to rely on a Government-built identity tool to access work and services, the risks of data and privacy breaches and of errors will be considerable?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree. We have seen the consequences of reckless data sharing already. All too often, migrant victims of domestic abuse, rape and trafficking have been frightened to report crimes because police forces routinely pass on their information to immigration officers. The harm is real: the offenders go unpunished and communities are less safe.

Even if we set aside the civil liberties concerns, there is a basic practical problem here: UK Governments, of all stripes, do not have a good track record of keeping our data safe. The number of serious cyber incidents is rising year on year. Critical institutions from the British Library to the Legal Aid Agency to the One Login platform have already been criticised for major security flaws.

Sarah Edwards: My constituents have also raised concerns, particularly around cyber-security. One of my constituents was told by the DWP that they were defrauding the child benefit system when they were not, because they had had data stolen. I am concerned that our Government systems need to be far better, so that if such a thing happened, someone could demonstrate that they were the genuine holder of that data.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend is spot on, and we all have constituency stories that replicate her experience.

Finally, there is the question of exclusion. As we have heard, millions of people in Britain do not have reliable digital access, and millions more do not have the basic digital skills required to navigate systems like this. Introducing mandatory digital ID risks shutting people out of work, housing, healthcare and public services, so I urge the Minister: for the sake of our rights, our safety and our democracy, drop this plan.

5.19 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Edward. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for granting this debate, which could not be more timely. People in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton have been talking to me about digital ID for months, and more than 5,300 have signed the petition. I want to put their concerns and mine plainly on the record today.

A mandatory digital ID tied to a smartphone is the wrong way to go. It answers none of the real problems that we face and risks creating a whole set of new ones. Let us be clear: Labour never mentioned this in its manifesto—not once.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Mandatory digital ID, abandoning trial by jury—neither is in the Labour manifesto. There is a whiff of authoritarianism about this Government, is there not?

Alison Griffiths: There is certainly no mandate for either. If a Government wish to change something as fundamental as how we prove who we are, they need to be up front about it; they need to win consent for it. Attacks on our privacy and personal freedom must be debated in depth, not sneaked in through the back door.

Over two thirds of the respondents to my local survey told me they opposed digital ID entirely. Many have little confidence that their personal data will be kept safe.

They worry about who will hold their information, what else it could end up being used for and what will happen to those who do not have a smartphone at all.

There is also the basic fairness test. Ofcom believes that about 4.5 million people in the UK do not own a smartphone, and many more struggle with digital access or confidence. We should not be building barriers for people, especially not those who already find public services hard to navigate.

Ministers have said that digital ID will help tackle illegal working and benefit fraud, but we have never been told in clear terms what the new scheme would do that our existing tools cannot already manage. If there are gaps in the system, they should spell them out. I want illegal working to be dealt with, and I want public services that work smoothly, but not at the expense of civil liberties, not by weakening data security, and not by shutting out the very people who need support.

I cannot support a mandatory digital ID scheme. If it comes to a vote, which it should, I will vote against it.

5.21 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the petitioner, Mr Sutcliff, and I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening the debate.

The issue of digital identification has certainly added to my postbag in recent months. Many of my constituents' concerns are real, legitimate and understandable. They include data security, the cost of the scheme, the potential for infringements of the right to liberty, the creation of a "papers, please" society, the chance of ID theft and fraud, and concerns about accessibility for all, as about 1.5 million people in this country are digitally excluded.

Martin Wrigley: Will the hon. Member give way?

Tony Vaughan: Not at the moment.

Six per cent of the population do not have access to smartphones. Pensioners, the disabled and the homeless could be particularly affected. I believe it is vital that the Minister and the Government listen carefully to those concerns and that they be heard during the public consultation, which will begin in the new year. I will be making my representations; I urge my constituents to do so too.

I want to make two points about why, in principle, I support the idea of digital identification. First, I believe that a digital credential has the potential to make an individual citizen's day-to-day life easier and more convenient. In a world where we already pay, bank and travel digitally, book and manage GP appointments digitally, file our tax returns digitally and access many public services digitally, the argument for secure, universal digital credentials to replace multiple forms of verification is highly appealing. It would be more secure than many citizens' existing password systems. My dad would remember his early attempts at passwords, such as "password123", later improved to "Sausages123"—with a capital S for added security.

The most important point is that I believe that digital ID will strengthen right-to-work checks. One reason why that is important is to fight back against the epidemic of

organised crime across our country. I was in one high street in my constituency a couple of weeks ago where three vape and tobacco shops have sprung up over the last few months selling £5 packs of cigarettes, which are obviously illegal. I was told that it takes His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, trading standards and the police to shut one of them down, and that even when they do, it reopens in a few hours.

We should be making it easier for the state immediately to verify a person's right to work. If the police need to probe someone's right to work, they have no ability to do so on the spot. We need to make it easier for the state to check someone's right to work.

Wendy Morton: Does the hon. Gentleman think that mandatory ID would realistically stop these problem shops on the high street?

Tony Vaughan: If it is possible for the police to verify, in that moment, whether a person has a right to work, that will assist. The details are not there, but I am making the point that it is open to consultation. I am not here to defend the position of the Government; I am here to say that, in principle, the position has not been set out, because they are consulting on it.

Let me come back to the point, because it is really important, and the Conservative party is not engaging with it at all. If the police do not have access to right-to-work data in the moment, it makes it harder to close down these entities. No one is explaining that there is a power, because there simply is not.

Martin Wrigley: Is the hon. Member proposing that the police should have the right to demand access to the digital ID to prove right to work on the spot? [*Interruption.*]

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The Doorkeeper must remove that person from the Public Gallery immediately. [*Interruption.*] Don't just stand there!

Martin Wrigley: Perhaps I misunderstood, but I think that the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) has just asked for the police to have the right to demand digital ID on the spot—therefore, "Papers, please."

Tony Vaughan: I am afraid that that is not the scenario I was setting out. I was trying to be helpful by identifying the fact that, if a vape shop is selling £5 cigarettes, they are obviously unlawful, so there is reason to probe further, but the police do not have the ability to verify right to work. Obviously the state should, in that scenario, where there is already a basis to look further—but I am not trying to say that this scheme is entirely fine.

I started my speech by identifying the legitimate concerns of my constituents and many other people. It is vital that we look at the details of everything that is proposed and ultimately have a consultation that listens to the concerns expressed, so that the policy ends up reflecting the positive benefits that I think we can get from such a system—if we get the details right.

5.27 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley

[Sir Ashley Fox]

(Robbie Moore) for introducing this debate on behalf of the nearly 3 million people who signed the petition to stop digital ID. Some 5,300 of them were from my constituency, and I thank them for participating. From the emails that I have received, I am in no doubt that my constituents are opposed to the measure.

We all know why this proposal was introduced. It has nothing to do with well-thought-out policy and everything to do with the Prime Minister being in trouble. He saw a policy that, according to his focus groups, enjoyed broad support, so he announced it as Government policy without much thought as to the consequences. Not only did the Prime Minister's anti-Midas touch annoy a lot of Labour supporters, but for the first time in 15 years it has caused serious scrutiny of such a policy.

Mandatory ID, be it physical or digital, fundamentally alters the relationship between the citizen and the state. It changes us from a country where the citizen is at liberty to do whatever he pleases, unless it is prohibited, to one where the citizen needs the permission of the state to do certain things. That is a serious shift in the balance of power between the citizen and the state, and not one that should be rushed through as a gimmick to help this most unpopular of Prime Ministers.

The Government claim that digital ID will help crack down on illegal migration and illegal working. Is there anyone on the Labour Benches who seriously believes that nonsense? All employers already have a legal duty to conduct a right-to-work check on people they employ, and those who break the law now will continue to do so. What is lacking is the will of this Government to enforce the existing law and deport illegal migrants.

While the Government say that this ID scheme will not be mandatory, it will effectively be compulsory for everyone in the workforce. The Minister responsible for delivering this policy is reported to have told his Cabinet colleagues that digital ID could transform people's experience of the state, indicating his intention that it would become integrated with all public services. Any expansion of the use of digital ID for other services will see the scheme become mandatory in all but name for all citizens.

This policy was not in the Labour party manifesto. It has not been voted for by the British people. It is authoritarian, expensive and un-British, and on behalf of my constituents I shall resist it.

5.30 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): About 5,000 people from my constituency of Ashford have signed this petition. I recognise the benefits that the national digital identity scheme could bring; they have been debated in the media and elsewhere. However, if the Government are to go ahead with the scheme, Ministers must ensure that it is inclusive, secure and useful for everyone. Additionally, if the scheme is to be successful, Ministers will have to respond to the legitimate concerns raised by our constituents.

My constituents have expressed concern that a national digital ID scheme could become a tool for surveillance or a mechanism of state control. In recent years, we have seen an increase in distrust of the Government as an institution. It is important that any digital ID scheme

does not further erode trust. Can the Minister reassure the House that if the Government go ahead with digital ID, strict safeguards will be in place? Would my hon. Friend also say what action the Government will take to ensure that digital ID cannot be used to infringe on individual freedoms or civil liberties?

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sojan Joseph: I need to carry on; I am sorry.

Constituents have also raised concerns about the security of a national ID scheme. This year, we have seen the impact that cyber-security breaches have had on some well-known brands. My constituents have expressed worry that a similar breach of a national ID database could expose sensitive personal information on a massive scale. Can the Minister reassure me that there will be robust encryption and continuous security monitoring? What actions will be taken to ensure the highest data security standards? Another related concern is the ownership of data. Will the Minister confirm that any scheme will be designed with clear rules and with transparency, so that personal information can never be exploited for commercial or political purposes?

Concerns have been expressed to me that adopting digital ID will lead to digital exclusion. Not everyone has access to a smartphone or reliable internet, especially in some rural parts of my constituency. If digital ID becomes the only option for accessing Government services in the future, what proactive action will be taken to prevent vulnerable groups from becoming marginalised? The Government have an opportunity in this debate to respond to these and other legitimate concerns that our constituents have raised regarding digital ID. I look forward to the Minister's response to the points that have been made. I ask him to reassure our constituents that, if digital ID is to go ahead, their concerns will be listened to and addressed.

5.33 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I cannot tell you how uncomfortable I feel sitting on the Government side of the Chamber, but I could not find a spare seat anywhere else, which is a testament to the fact that this subject is contested extremely passionately and that arguably it needs to be debated in the Chamber.

Digital ID is the biggest step towards a surveillance state that this country has faced in my lifetime. If any Government want access to every detail of our lives, they are the ones who should be feared. We live in a country where the state cannot even run a basic IT system without losing data or leaking personal details. Digital ID will not last a week before a mountain of sensitive personal data is left at a bus stop in Kent again.

I do not trust any Government. I certainly do not trust this Government. Let us remember: once the Government get a new power, they never give it back. It expands and evolves. Digital ID will not stop at proving who we are. It will creep into travel, banking, housing, benefits and even voting. Today, it is voluntary; tomorrow, it will be required for security reasons. The day after that, we will not be able to access basic services without it—all for our own good, remember.

Britain is supposed to be a country in which the Government serve the people, not the other way around. It is a country built on privacy, liberty and trust. British people just want the Government to leave them alone and get out of their lives—to build a business, raise a family and live in peace. Digital ID treats every citizen as a suspect. It assumes that the state has the right to look over our shoulders. We defend against it by severely limiting the power of the state, not radically expanding it. Abolishing jury trials, cancelling elections, implementing facial recognition—and now this. This incoming dystopian future must be resisted.

I will be holding my own protest against this creeping move towards George Orwell's "Animal Farm". I will simply not comply. I will not be downloading a digital ID and I urge other MPs to commit to doing the same. The solution is obvious: I will just have to reinvest in a Nokia—I preferred the simplicity of that anyway. The sound people of Great Yarmouth do not want digital ID.

5.35 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my fellow member of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), on introducing the debate.

I want to address the 5,092 people from Sunderland Central who signed the petition. I hear and respect their concerns, and that means no mandatory digital ID. While I recognise that there is scope for the use of digital credentials to improve the services that citizens receive from the state—and personally I may well apply for a digital credential on an optional basis, and would expect it to make my life easier and more secure than the myriad of current different logins and documents—this debate is not about those of us who would choose that path. It is about those who hold strong and sincere beliefs against mandatory digital ID.

Fundamentally, I believe in government by consent. On digital credentials, that means that there must be no mandatory requirement—whether explicit or de facto—to apply for digital credentials, and that access routes to employment and public services must be maintained for all British citizens. I believe that the legitimate aims of the Government—making services work better, reducing cost and tackling illegal working—can be met by an approach that sees digital credentials used optionally by people who choose to do so, while maintaining alternative routes for citizens who choose not to.

The Home Affairs Committee has an open inquiry about the potential uses of digital ID. We recently heard evidence from tech advocates such as the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and techUK. The views that they expressed to the Committee further strengthened mine. As techUK said:

"We need to meet UK citizens—UK populations—where they are and where they feel comfortable".

I agree. There are huge upsides for a digitally enabled society, one in which everyone feels able to participate and has a sense of agency and safety. I believe that many people will choose to take up digital credentials if they are introduced carefully, with the right design safeguards and process. We should do that by having a gradual introduction and demonstrating the benefits, while being explicit that this will always be an optional opt-in process.

I really hope—and I think I believe—that there has been significant reflection from the Government on the manner in which the announcement was made in September. Those of us who believe in modernising and digitising the state need to do so with care, consent and respect for those who hold significant concerns. I hope that the consultation that will take place in the new year, and which I am sure that the Minister will talk about, will be done in that spirit.

5.38 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for magnificently introducing this petition on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I also thank the more than 4,000 local residents in the Scottish Borders who have signed the petition.

This issue cuts to the very heart of the relationship between our constituents and the state. I am completely against digital ID. It is expensive, intrusive and will be completely ineffective. It was not in the Labour Party's 2024 election manifesto, so this is not something that anyone has voted for. Putting that to one side, this Labour Government do not seem to understand why digital ID is needed or what it is for. The Prime Minister initially claimed that it was an essential part of cracking down on illegal migration. Illegal migrants are making long, dangerous crossings over the channel; I hardly think the requirement for a digital identification card is going to deter them. Realising that this argument was not persuading anyone, the Government now claim that it is about simplifying access to Government services. Government services do need to be simplified, but we do not need digital ID to achieve that.

Whatever the actual reasons behind the policy, we are inevitably going to see mission creep. I was particularly concerned to hear the Minister for Children and Families, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), say that the Government are

"starting with this issue of right to work check first, but there are loads of other applications for digital ID".

What will be next? Will digital ID be needed to access NHS services, to get a school place for someone's son or daughter, or even potentially to go to the pub?

The policy puts the personal data of all our constituents at risk. It would be a honeypot for cyber criminals and foreign state actors at a time when we are under increasing threat. I implore the Government to, for once, listen to the people and to the genuine and principled concerns of Members across the House. There is no deep need for digital ID. People do not want it and the Government have no mandate to introduce it. It fundamentally changes the relationship between the state and its citizens. We must say no to digital ID. It must be scrapped.

5.41 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am here because I have been contacted by countless residents who are deeply concerned about the Government's announcement on the introduction of digital ID to provide the right to work—that was a mouthful. Their concerns are legitimate, reasonable and deserve to be heard in this place.

[Mr Bayo Alaba]

My constituents have raised a number of issues. First and foremost is privacy and data security; residents have referred to recent hacks at M&S and Land Rover. The question is simple: if cyber systems have been hacked before, why should constituents trust that their most sensitive personal information will be safe? They ask whether the Government can truly guarantee resilience against cyber-attacks, system failures or misuse of personal data.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Alaba: I am sorry, but I will carry on.

There is also a question of practicality. In reality, will digital ID prevent employers from hiring individuals who do not have the right to work, or will it simply introduce another layer of bureaucracy without addressing the roots of the problem?

Many constituents are concerned about inclusion. What happens to those who struggle with digital technology or do not have access to a smartphone? Will they be able to rely on their passport or driver's licence? We must not leave behind people who, through no fault of their own, cannot immediately sign up for digital ID, or let that prevent their right to work. Ultimately, constituents have a right to know that their information will be safe, protected and free from unnecessary intervention or misuse.

I do, however, recognise that digital ID could bring real benefits if it is implemented properly, safely and transparently. A well-designed national digital identification system has the potential to enhance security, reduce fraud and streamline how citizens interact with public services. It could consolidate the right to work, healthcare, immigration status and other essential services into a single secure and accessible platform, reducing paperwork and improving efficiency. Law enforcement could benefit from quicker, more reliable identification processes, helping to curb illegal employment. It could provide a form of identification to those who currently lack traditional documents, empowering disadvantaged or marginalised groups—I have to emphasise that, because I think it has been missed in this debate.

I am not opposed to digital ID in principle. It could be an asset for the future, but it has to be done right. If digital ID for the right to work is to be introduced, it must be implemented safely, fairly and transparently, so that the benefits that it promises can be felt by everyone in our society without compromising the rights and protections that our constituents rightly expect. I urge the Minister to listen carefully to the concerns raised by residents in my constituency and across the country.

5.44 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Thank you for your excellent chairing, Sir Edward. I hope the Government have been given serious pause by the 2.9 million signatures on this petition, over 5,000 of which were from constituents in Brighton Pavilion. So many people are right to be so concerned, because such a scheme carries extreme risks to our privacy.

If this scheme is introduced, it seems impossible that we can be protected from any future Government who are determined to utterly disregard a lot more of our basic human rights. This iteration of digital ID could, through a unique identification number, link our most sensitive biometric information to our names, ages, nationalities, addresses, medical information and housing and criminal histories, enabling a detailed profile worthy of the Chinese Government to be put together, which utterly undermines not only our right to privacy, but many other things. We ought to be protected from the state having access to and control over all that information.

I hope that the Minister understands that private citizens are already starting to gain perspective on how unsafe our data is in the hands of private companies. The reaction to digital ID shows that we are now very concerned about the difference when a state has access to all that information and what a future state might do. We have already seen issues of data sharing between police forces and immigration enforcement. Migrants have been scared to come forward and report basic crimes around their right to safety because of that kind of overreach. The eVisa scheme has caused awful failures—people stranded at airports; people losing job opportunities because of the failures of the basic IT—but this is far more serious than that.

Right hon. and hon. Members owe it to our constituents to protect them from not just this Government, but what all future Governments might do. Combined with the recent clampdown on protest rights, the proposed removal of trial by jury and the capacity of the state to track and identify us through facial recognition, this adds up to a toolkit for authoritarians that we must not give away. It must be stopped. It is a house of dynamite.

Tom Gordon: Will the hon. Lady comment on the polling around digital ID? This summer, there was net support: over 30%. When the Government announced that they were picking it up, that collapsed to minus 14%. Will she give her thoughts on why that might be?

Siân Berry: People might have heard the Government claiming that other countries have had digital ID for many years and then heard about the security flaws in the Estonian system or the hackers in Estonia, India, Norway and Poland who have created enormous data breaches. I have dwelled a lot on state power, but let us not forget that creating such a database is an enormous risk. All the eggs are in one basket when it comes to criminally inclined people who would take our data and hurt us that way.

I was wrapping up when I was intervened on, and I will try not to use too much more time. The risk management calculations here are so clear. The consequences of things going wrong—whether it is state intrusion, criminals taking away the data, errors or data theft, so that people lose their identities to somebody else—become much higher when something like this, where everything is linked together, is created. I said that it was a house of dynamite and a toolkit for authoritarians. It is hugely expensive, and I hope the Minister will clarify the final cost. According to the OBR, £1.8 billion is only the beginning of the cost.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Siân Berry: I cannot.

This is the expensive leopards-eating-faces party of policies. It must be stopped. It is too risky to go ahead with. The Government need to answer so many questions to make anybody happy with it.

5.49 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. Hon. Members should note that, in the interests of time, I do not intend to take any interventions.

I have had hundreds of emails from constituents about digital ID. Some are entirely supportive, some are completely against it, but most lie somewhere in between. Many who fall in that category are hesitant because they are uncertain why digital ID is being introduced, what it will look like, when they will use it, how information will be stored and how their data will be protected. I know that colleagues and the Minister have been working hard on developing the framework for what the roll-out of digital ID will look like. However, my inbox reflects a broader point.

Since the announcement of digital ID in late September, there has been much misinformation and a lack of information, which has led to two things. First, people are left without a clear understanding of how digital ID will be used and why such modernisation is important. Secondly and more worryingly, some people have been left fearing the worst: that digital ID will be used for surveillance, tracking and authoritarian crackdown rather than the positive case, as the Government suggest, for enabling people to start work more quickly, for better control of our borders, and for people's own convenience. My 18-year-old son shares my youthful looks, so he is glad of his digital proof of age because it lets him go to the pub now that he is at university without any issues. And my younger son would have welcomed digital ID this weekend when he was turned away from a cinema because he could not prove that he was over 15.

However, if the implementation of digital IDs is to be effective and well received, I ask the Minister to provide assurances to my constituents in Amber Valley that the concerns that have been raised today, particularly surrounding data protection and security, will be addressed. I welcome the fact that the Government's announcement made it clear that there would be public consultation on digital ID, so please can the Minister today confirm when the consultation will be open and how people can take part, so that my constituents in Amber Valley can make their views heard on this incredibly important matter?

5.51 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

"Why are they needed when we already have secure ways to identify ourselves?"

"This is being pushed under the façade of security."

"The cost to the taxpayer would be prohibitive."

"This system would be incredibly vulnerable to hacking."

Those direct quotes from my constituents get to the heart of the point: unnecessary; overreach; vulnerable; and expensive. Nearly 5,000 people in South Northamptonshire

signed the petition to oppose the Government's plans for digital IDs. This Government really are the living embodiment of the famous phrase:

"Those are my principles, and if you don't like them...well, I have others."

First, they sold the measure as a means of tackling illegal migration, but that principle has barely been mentioned in recent weeks. Now digital IDs will become the requirement for right to work checks in the UK, which may require children as young as 13 to be involved. Talk about the creeping hand of the state!

Tony Vaughan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Bool: If time permitted, I would happily take an intervention from any Government Member on where it was in the Labour manifesto that such a measure would be included, or if any member of the Government could actually tell us how much the scheme would cost. But I will save them the trouble, because it was not and they do not know.

The OBR has said that there has been no specific funding identified for the scheme, and it is forecast to cost £1.8 billion over the next three years. We have a Government drowning in Budget leaks and accidentally releasing prisoners left, right and centre, so how can they be trusted to create a system of ID? Any such system requires absolute buy-in from all our constituents, and we can see that the very reason we are having this debate today is that the Government have not secured that buy-in. This is a really dangerous gimmick from the Government. The devil is in the detail, and without that detail the devil is at play and the British public will pay.

5.53 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. As we rightly modernise the way people interact with public services, introducing a new digital credential offers real opportunity. I can envisage it making everyday tasks much more convenient, whether that is proving your age, opening a bank account or completing right-to-work checks, and I can see it doing so in a more tailored and personalised way. I can also see there being quicker remedies if things go wrong, with the possibility of current credentials being lost or stolen. If we had a digital credential, it could be revoked and reissued more quickly.

I would, however, like to raise two concerns that have come through quite strongly from my constituents. The first is about the security of data that people will be required to share. One constituent told me that they are fearful of their data being put at risk, particularly through the creation of a honeypot for hackers and foreign adversaries. My constituents rightly want to know that only essential information would be shared in each transaction; that data would be encrypted and securely stored; and that the system will be able to keep pace with the many evolving cyber-threats out there.

Caroline Voaden: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I will make progress.

People are right to be cautious about handing over their personal data, and they are right to expect a firm commitment that Government will do everything in their power to protect them. Can the Minister provide some reassurance on that point?

[*Laura Kyrke-Smith*]

Secondly, I have heard from people who believe that introducing digital credentials is the right step, but who are concerned that their elderly relatives, people with disabilities or people without smartphone access, for whatever reason, will not be able to participate. Can the Minister also provide some reassurance that no one, regardless of whether they own a smartphone or have internet access, will be left behind in this scheme?

I know that other countries have rolled out digital credentials very successfully. Estonia's model is very interesting; users still have a lot of control over their data, and they can see what it is being used for and who has accessed it. As we look at our options, I hope that we will learn from what works in other countries and ensure that we put the same protections in place so that people can remain in control of their personal data as best they can.

I know that we have a long way to go with the consultation, but I really welcome the fact that it is happening. I encourage my constituents to feed in their concerns, and it is really important that this policy lands in the right place. I welcome the Minister's feedback on the points that I have raised about data privacy and security, as well as digital inclusion.

5.56 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my right hon. Friend—sorry, my hon. Friend—the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) on his excellent speech. I am sure he will be right honourable in no time.

Some 4,500 of my constituents signed the petition. I thank not only them, but the 3 million petitioners across the country who have made sure that their voices are heard today. Before I discuss the fundamental issue, I want to address a point made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) and other Government Members.

The reality is that no system in the world is secure enough to protect data; my constituency is the home of Jaguar Land Rover, and we have to be honest with our constituents about that. When I was the Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy, I looked at this issue, and I know that our current system is one in which we voluntarily give up our data. The fundamental issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley highlighted, is that consent is being taken away.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but are we not at risk of ignoring another threat: the Government themselves? It has not been that long since the Police Service of Northern Ireland published the data of every serving officer and member of staff, as a result of which people had to leave their homes. Once we allow the state to aggregate our data, is that sort of thing not inevitable?

Saqib Bhatti: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point that we have to take into consideration. The Minister will not be able to give anyone the reassurance they deserve, which is why many of our constituents are so upset about this.

Let us be very clear about the reason we are here. The fundamental issue is that a beleaguered Prime Minister has rolled out this gimmick as nothing more than a way to stop the boats. The fact of the matter is that since Labour came into government, we have had 62,000 illegal crossings. The ID that we have in place already has not stopped them, and neither will digital ID. This gimmick has not fooled voters, and it did not fool the 3 million people who signed the petition. They can see clearly through it. First and foremost, our constituents require honesty. This will not stop the boats.

I also want to address a point made by the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) about shops selling illegal vapes. Mechanisms for IDs are already in place, but that is still happening, so digital ID will not stop it either. What he was arguing for, whether he knew it or not, was overarching powers of intervention for the police into the private accounts of private individuals. That is the only way in which they will be able to intervene. What they need to do is investigate, like they always do.

Tony Vaughan: My specific example was about where an individual has a £5 packet of cigarettes that is obviously unlawful. The police have no power at all to demand right-to-work checks in that situation. Why do the Opposition oppose that principle?

Saqib Bhatti: Let me address that point. The problem that the hon. Gentleman poses will not be solved by digital ID—I fundamentally disagree with him about that—because HMRC already has the powers to investigate people selling illegal cigarettes, as do the police. That is why the Government have lauded the fact that there were raids just a few months ago, and closures of some of these shops. He is creating a straw-man argument that is not solved by digital ID.

Let us be under no illusion about this proposal. It opens the door to tyranny, whether it is tyranny today or tyranny tomorrow. The Minister cannot confirm that a future Government—a future Labour Government, perhaps, if that is even possible—will not take advantage of digital ID.

Martin Wrigley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Saqib Bhatti: I am going to make some progress, if that is okay.

I and others have made the point that digital ID would fundamentally reframe the relationship between the individual and the state. It would turn us into a “papers, please” society. Responsibility for proving that someone was guilty would be shifted away from the state, and individuals would, in essence, be required to prove that they were innocent.

I visited Estonia when I was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Tech and the Digital Economy. I saw the system there, and I came away with a conclusion very different from the one that others have reached. The Estonians' system works for them because they have the Russians on their border.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Saqib Bhatti: I will not take any more interventions.

If Estonia were invaded, the Estonians might have to pick up sticks and move all their records over. That is why digital ID works for them, even though they have one of the largest black economies in the world and have had quite significant data breaches. Our economy and society are much more complex than Estonia's. Mandatory digital ID does not work for our economy and our society.

Time and again, I am asked what this Government stand for. The last few weeks and months have been telling, with the cutting of jury trials, the introduction of a mandatory digital ID and the arrest of comedians for errant tweets. I ask the Minister: why are this Government so afraid of British citizens living their lives freely and in liberty?

6.2 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Like many Members who have spoken today, I have received a lot of representations from constituents to speak in opposition to digital ID. It would have been easy enough, given my own personal level of comfort with digital ID, to have let today's debate pass me by. As my constituents will know, this is a point of personal conviction for me, rather than a blind defence of something. As they will also know from the events of this past week, as well as from my travails against the imposition of imaginary geographies on Cornwall's devolved governance, I have no problem speaking up against policies without a predefined mandate.

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

However, we do have a mandate to improve our public services, to increase digitalisation and to deliver the best outcomes for our constituents. We also have a mandate to make decisions that are not necessarily the easy option, but the right option. That is the courage of a serious Labour Government—not necessarily to do what is easy, but to do what is right and what will clearly contribute to our much-needed mission of national renewal.

We cannot have a debate about digital ID without beginning from a common factual base, so let me bust some myths from the outset. The scheme will be voluntary, it will be free, it will not require some form of card and it will be secure. Above all, it will make the lives of people in our country easier.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The hon. Gentleman says that this system will be free. I believe the OBR says that it will cost the taxpayer £1.8 billion; I do not believe that that is free.

Noah Law: I will turn the question back on the hon. Gentleman. What is the cost of not doing this? What is the cost of inaction? I have heard very little today from Opposition Members about how much a digital ID scheme will alleviate the costs currently associated with some processes, but I would welcome such input.

On a personal level, I have lived in a country with a digital ID system that works well, is widely supported and has had very few issues. Just because I can log in here on my phone does not mean that there is some pesky Finn from the Suojelupoliisi out there logging in to watch my every move. That is not quite how these

things work in practice. I know some people might well find this difficult to believe, given the dystopian way of the world today, but this scheme is no conspiracy.

Caroline Voaden: Many of my constituents have raised concerns about cyber-security risks. Centralising so much information in one place creates an attractive target for hackers and hostile actors. Does the hon. Member agree that Government systems are not immune from such risks?

Noah Law: The hon. Member makes an important point that such systems are by no means immune, but I argue that the systems that we have in place at the minute are hardly secure.

Caroline Voaden: Exactly, and why would this be better?

Noah Law: This scheme presents a much better opportunity to ensure that we have the correct security procedures in place, versus some of our current insecure measures.

Luke Myer: Although I appreciate the merits of the scheme, as my hon. Friend has set out, surely the fundamental question facing us today is one of public consent. Some 4,800 of my constituents have signed this petition. Does my hon. Friend agree that such a scheme cannot be introduced without clear consent from the public?

Noah Law: I wholeheartedly agree. That is why it is important that in the months ahead and through the consultation, this scheme is introduced on a voluntary basis, just as we have set out, and remains that way. I know some might find this difficult to believe, but this really is no conspiracy. If we are not concerned about the huge threats involving the vast amount of personal data that is held by private companies—they must, of course, be regulated too—why is this scheme such a cause for concern? Although I appreciate that two wrongs do not necessarily make a right, and that many of my constituents no doubt long for an analogue world—as do I, on occasion—that is not the world we live in.

6.6 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on behalf of the 4,000 people from my constituency who have signed the e-petition. They are deeply alarmed by the Government's plans to introduce mandatory digital ID. They would rather see action on the issues that really matter: they want our NHS fixed, the cost of living crisis addressed and public services improved. At a time when GP waiting times are still sky-high, social care is in crisis and our NHS is stretched beyond breaking point, it is extraordinary that the Government are prioritising an enormous centralised database of everyone's personal information.

For decades, the British public has consistently rejected mandatory ID schemes, and with good reason. In an increasingly tech-driven world, the Government must work to empower individuals and give us more control over our own data and privacy, rather than empowering the state to gather, centralise and exploit ever more information. Handing over unprecedented volumes of

[Liz Jarvis]

personal data is a recipe for intrusion and future abuse. Criminal gangs and unscrupulous employers—those that the Government claim to be targeting—would continue to bypass the rules. It is simply naive to suggest that mandatory digital ID is the fix to tackle the shadow economy. As we know, 5% of the UK population does not have internet access and there is a real risk of digital exclusion, which will hit older people, disabled people and those on low incomes.

I also have concerns about how a mandatory digital system could lead to profiling and the real risk of function creep. Although the Government may try to reassure us that this scheme is limited in scope, the technology could have the capacity to fundamentally change the relationship between the individual and the state.

Last year, in his first speech to the British public, the Prime Minister promised that the Government would tread “lightly” on our lives. It is hard to think of a proposal that contradicts that promise more starkly than a mandatory digital ID scheme. I urge the Government to scrap this ill-judged plan and turn their attention to the reforms that will genuinely improve lives. Mandatory digital ID will not fix our public services, get our economy going again or address the real challenges facing the country.

6.9 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): There is a reason why millions of people have signed this petition, making it the fourth largest in the history of this place. At the heart of this debate is an attack on our most fundamental and protected of rights: our freedom. We live in a free country, and we do not need a nanny state indirectly spying on its citizens.

A compulsory digital ID or a national ID card scheme is not a small administrative tweak that will make lives slightly easier for people; it is a fundamental shift in the relationship between the citizen and the state. Like many others in this place, I have serious concerns about what that means for civil liberties, for privacy and for equality in this country. No Government should ever hold a master key to every part of a citizen's life, and we cannot pretend that such power could never fall into dangerous hands.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, as usual. Does he agree, from the clear argument across the Chamber, that constituents are overwhelmingly unconvinced by the proposed benefits of this scheme and overwhelmingly concerned by the disbenefits; and that therefore the Minister should commit today to ensuring that at the end of the consultation, the Government have the option of not taking this any further?

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a reason why millions have signed this petition. The Minister should commit to scrapping it today, but I am not sure he will.

As is the case for many hon. Members, thousands of my constituents have quite rightly signed this petition because they know that they are already at the sharp

end of state systems that do not always treat them fairly. Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, migrants, older and disabled people, those on low incomes and those who are digitally excluded—these are the people who will feel the impact first if we rush headlong into a digital ID system without thinking through the consequences.

We have already seen how data can be misused, both in our country and across the world. In the wrong circumstances, information given in good faith to access childcare, education, healthcare or support can end up being misused. Frankly, trust in our institutions has been eroding for years now.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The hon. Member is making a passionate, excellent speech. Talking of trust in the Government, we have just seen the BBC documentary on the Camelford water poisoning scandal in my constituency—a potential Government cover-up. How on earth can my constituents trust the Government with all their important data? Does he agree that this is the wrong priority? The Government hope to save half a billion pounds with the family farm tax, yet they are prepared to splash £2 billion on this—something that, it seems from this debate, none of our constituents actually want.

Imran Hussain: I have already said that I believe the policy should be scrapped. The hon. Member has his own reasons, and I have outlined mine. One thing we are both agreed on is that trust in institutions is eroding, and families do not feel they can engage even with basic services. If we create a centralised digital identity system, we risk increasing that harm and mistrust. As the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said, we risk creating a two-tier system.

It is completely absurd that the Government are going above and beyond to connect information that is siloed for very good reason. Governments do not need the ability to casually track their citizens, but that is what the policy will effectively do. We have heard much today—we have been told that this is about efficiency and modernisation—but we must ask: at what cost?

Once the infrastructure for mass identification is built, the pressure to expand its use grows over time. What starts as a way to prove a person's identity quickly becomes a tool to track where people go, what they access and even who they are with. That is a road that we should be wary of travelling down.

The UK has rightly rejected national ID schemes under successive Governments in the past, so again I urge this Government to announce concrete measures—actually, I want them to scrap this scheme today, because I am afraid that it is another one on which they will eventually have to do a U-turn. Three million people have signed a petition, and I think the Minister should announce the scrapping of this dangerous scheme. We should be investing in digital inclusion, strengthening existing verification systems and putting strict limits on data sharing, not introducing the scheme before us today.

Time not permitting any further comment, I want to put on record today my position. Hon. Members may already have gathered what that position may be, but just

to be absolutely clear, I stand with the constituents of Bradford East, as I always do, and I will be opposing this dangerous policy.

6.15 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I thank the almost 3 million people who have signed this petition, and in particular those in the Public Gallery who have managed to stay for the whole debate—well done. In my constituency, 5,166 signed it. That is an unprecedented number in Aberdeenshire North and Moray East. Every week I meet my team, as so many other hon. Members probably do, and I ask, “What is the biggest thing in my inbox this week?” This is it: digital ID is the No. 1 thing in my inbox.

I will not repeat everything that has been said so far in this superb debate, but I want to amplify a couple of points. Many Labour Back Benchers have referred to digital ID schemes in other countries, and we have heard some references to others. I will mention a few: India, Estonia and Australia. The point about those countries is that they asked for a mandate from the electorate before they introduced the scheme. That has not occurred here. This policy was not mentioned in the Labour party’s manifesto.

I want to draw out further a couple of those examples. In India, the scheme resulted in technical failures and exclusionary practices, whereby people were excluded from public services by the thousand. Estonia has been mentioned by some hon. Members; in 2021, 300,000 identity photographs were stolen there. I am sure the Minister heard me when I said that—300,000. This is not about dealing with little problems and sorting out tweaks here and there. It is about a fundamental flaw in the proposal.

I am old enough—as are some others in this Chamber today—to remember when there were two channels on the TV. They might remember a programme called “The Prisoner”, filmed in the beautiful port of Portmeirion, and the late, great Patrick McGooohan saying, “I am not a number.” He was Number Six in the programme, which I did not understand when I watched it as a wee boy. Later on, when I read George Orwell’s “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, I understood exactly what was going on there.

Labour has no mandate for this proposal. The OBR estimate of £1.8 billion was queried by the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), and she was right, because £1.8 billion will not do it. When I worked in the health service, IT projects were commonly regarded as the graveyard of many careers, and £1.8 billion will not touch the sides on this one. Will the Minister address that in his speech, please?

I am speaking on behalf of my party and my colleagues here in Westminster. We do not support this.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The hon. Member is speaking on behalf of his party, but also from a devolved nation point of view. Does he agree that this is one of those unusual circumstances in which this Government have managed to unite every party in Northern Ireland on a single issue, and in opposition to the proposal?

Seamus Logan: I have remarked on the breadth of the parties speaking out against this. My party does not support it. We do not think that it will address the issues; indeed, we think that it will cause more problems than it solves. And we do not think that that amount of money will do it. That will double in size. I therefore oppose this proposal and so do my colleagues.

6.19 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Ms Furniss. The historian AJP Taylor said:

“Until August 1914 a sensible, law-abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the state...He could travel abroad or leave his country for ever without a passport or any sort of official permission.”

Sounds great, does it not? Yet the world wars that followed changed all that. By the second world war, we had a national identity card—as has been mentioned—and that requirement only ended in 1952. However, individual registration numbers remained, and do so to this day, for national insurance and the NHS. When the NHS was being formed, many people said, “Oh no—not the socialist state that is taking over all our lives.” Yet so many of us depend on it to this day.

It would be wholly wrong to claim that there has been no need for the state to provide a system to verify a citizen’s identity, either for national security or for the right to access public services. If someone had asked me 20 years ago, the last time a national identity service was being properly considered, I would have had my doubts as to whether it was really necessary.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Kevin Bonavia: I will not, I am afraid.

I am now convinced that it is necessary. Why is that? It is because today, identity checks are not a novelty; they are a necessity across all our lives. Why is it that a company such as Amazon can do far better handling our data than the national health service? My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), a respected doctor, explained how we cannot, as individuals, access the services that we need.

Why is this seen as so un-British? Is it not British to be ambitious for our people? If we think that other countries can do it, but we cannot because we are so rubbish at such things, why should we not discuss that?

Saqib Bhatti: Will the hon. Member give way on that point?

Kevin Bonavia: I am afraid I will not.

I welcome the Government giving us an opportunity for a national debate through this consultation. It is time that we have this debate. I am so pleased that so many Members are here today and that so many people have signed this petition. It is right to look at their concerns. There are legitimate concerns about whether ID should be mandatory and, if so, in what circumstances, and about those people who cannot access this system and whether the proposed scheme can really make the improvements that we hope it will.

[Kevin Bonavia]

Digital ID is not a panacea. I say to anybody who claims it will be a panacea for ending illegal immigration that it will not be. But will it be better? That is the question before us. We must not talk about a dystopian future when so many of our neighbours are already going through the process. Why do we not learn from our neighbours and think the best of our country, rather than talking it down—as we have heard so much in this debate? I ask the Minister to answer those questions today.

6.22 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. It was Harry Willcock, a Liberal party activist, who started the successful campaign to get rid of physical ID cards. After being stopped and asked for his cards by the police, he threw his papers on the floor and said, “I am a Liberal and I am against this sort of thing.” That is because as Liberals we believe that the state exists to empower its citizens rather than endlessly monitor them. What we have before us today is yet another example of this Labour Government announcing a grand, attention-grabbing idea without really having a plan for how to do it.

The proposal for a mandatory digital ID system is set to drain at least £1.9 billion from the public purse—and if history tells us anything about major Government projects, it is that that figure is likely to rise substantially. At a time when every pound counts, it is astonishing that Ministers believe that this is the right priority. The reality is that this digital ID proposal risks becoming an enormously expensive distraction, absorbing money, time and political energy that should instead be directed towards the things that people actually rely on: police on our streets, timely NHS care, functioning local services and funding border security.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): In respect of the figures, the last time this was tried it was said that it would cost the Government £5.4 billion. Then, when independent organisations came to look at the actual figures, some said that it would cost up to £19 billion. Does the hon. Member agree that inflation goes up, not down?

David Chadwick: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to question whether or not this is a good use of Government time and money. The 4,500 constituents of mine who have signed this petition would much rather the Government spent their time and money on trying to fix other data governance issues. For example, one big data governance issue in Wales is that, when patients go over the border to Hereford, they often cannot retrieve their health data. It would be much better if the Government prioritised spending money on that.

Some 75 years on from Harry Willcock saying that he was a Liberal and against this sort of thing, I reiterate the same principle. I am a Liberal, and we remain against this sort of thing.

6.25 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on

digital identity, and in the past I have audited algorithms and processes that developed identification systems. With that in mind, I worry about a couple of issues. Before the Government announced their digital ID policy, 30% of people were in favour of digital identification, but that dropped, which is interesting. There has been an issue with scaremongering and arguing to extremes, particularly from the party that brought in voter ID when it was in government, which I find very interesting. I do, however, agree that it should not be mandatory, but we need to de-couple that argument from right-to-work checks in particular, as I remind Members that they are already mandatory.

For a digital ID scheme to work, we need to have trust in it; we need to have control, and we need to have choice. I therefore ask that the scheme not be mandatory. People should have the choice of whether to use it or not. I believe that a well-designed system would offer benefits; people will see that for themselves, and they may then make their own choices. I agree with other Members on that.

Martin Wrigley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Gardner: I will, as the hon. Gentleman has been trying to intervene for the whole debate.

Martin Wrigley: The hon. Lady is very kind. Is she aware that the Government papers also describe using digital ID for the right to rent as well as for the right to work?

Dr Gardner: The hon. Member makes an interesting point. I recently applied for a mortgage, and I received a link via email to a provider that requested that I upload my bank statements, my utility bills, and copies of my passport and driving licence—I am lucky enough to have those two pieces of photo ID. I trusted that it was a registered provider, but I did have a slight worry about scamming. When I applied for a car loan, I did so on paper, and I had to provide three bank statements, several utility bills, and copies of my driving licence and passport. It got so ridiculous that I asked whether the company wanted to know my bra size as well.

I was very concerned about ID theft in those processes, hence I am a proponent of secure digital ID and digital wallets, which would give me control over how I share my data. Having all my credentials, including Government-minted credentials such as my driving licence, in my digital wallet would allow me to send a one-time-only link to providers, which would allow them to view my data but prevent them from downloading it. There are ways of designing such a system, and I ask the Minister to think about how to integrate that level of choice in the platform that is developed. My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) outlined how citizens would be able to see who is asking for their data and would even be able to control who can access it. They would know what data has been asked for and why, and they can then give the thumbs up. How we implement the digital ID system is really important.

We already have the digital identity and attributes trust framework, which is delivered by 43 private providers, with 11,000 members of staff. We should not argue to these extremes, and we should not scaremonger. We should have a calm consultation and debate on how

digital ID could improve people's lives by making them safer and more secure. I look forward to hearing the Minister deal with all the issues that have been rightly raised.

6.29 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. Some 4,497 of my constituents signed the petition, and I thank the many who took the time to write to me to explain their concerns. They believe that a mandatory digital ID threatens our right to privacy while doing nothing to address the Government's stated aims of immigration enforcement. The huge response to the petition should give the Government pause for thought. It is not too late to listen to the concerns and to think again.

We operate in a world in which ownership, control and manipulation of data is central to our lives. A real concern is that mission creep will lead to more and more online actions requiring a check, creating a digital treasure trove about each and every one of us that could be misused by the state and other actors. As one constituent put it:

"Do we want every single thing we attempt to do to require a check that 'yes, you are a British citizen, let me just link this to you as well'?"

Many constituents pointed out that documentation is already required to work legally, but that is flouted by those operating in the dark economy. My constituents do not believe that a new ID system will solve the issue. They see it as a distraction or a diversion of money and effort from the real solution, which is better investment in enforcement. I agree: an ID scheme would cost billions, which is money that could be better spent on processing centres to clear the asylum backlog. That would do far more to restore public trust in the immigration system, if that is the issue, and still leave money to fix the public services so damaged by the previous Conservative Government.

My constituents are also concerned about the safety of our data, especially with a rushed implementation. If we create a platform that stores millions of people's personal ID, we create a target for those who would illegally access and misuse that data. One constituent urged me to vote against digital IDs until the Government can

"show that the data of its citizens, who it claims to represent, will be safe".

I doubt that any such guarantee will be forthcoming.

Many were concerned that the work would be outsourced to a third-party company. When we interact with a commercial service, we make a choice; mandatory ID would give up that choice. With more time, I could talk about the worries for the digitally excluded, who already face higher costs for commercial services. Will they now also miss out on Government support and services?

Digital tools should empower individuals, not give Government more control. A mandatory ID scheme in which people have no choice is totally at odds with Britain's long history as a liberal democracy.

6.32 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The scale of the response to this petition—almost 3 million people—should cause us all to pause. This rash proposal has clearly

touched a deep-seated opposition among our constituents to anyone interfering with their personal data and personal details. Almost 5,000 of my constituents are among that number, and I well understand and support their opposition.

Yes, digital ID might be convenient and it might be expedient for some people to have all their data in one location that they can share, but the key issue here is that the Government are choosing—without a mandate—to make it mandatory. It would be a different matter if the Government were coming to this House to say, "We are going to provide a facility whereby, if you wish, you can have the convenience of this: if you want to take the risk of being hacked, we will provide the facility," but when they say to the citizen, "You must," or, "We will impose," they have crossed a line that no self-respecting Government should cross and that no self-respecting people should tolerate.

That, for me, is the critical component: this is a Government who think they know better and who will impose it, and we will be left with no choice as citizens. That is so illiberal, so fundamentally an assault on our personal freedoms, that no one in this House should be entertaining it, least of all the Government.

Mr Mohindra: The hon. and learned Gentleman is making an excellent contribution, as always. If this is such an important issue, why was it not in the governing party's manifesto at the last general election?

Jim Allister: That is a question that I obviously cannot answer, and it is one that I doubt the Minister will answer, but it is well posed. Why, oh why, if the Government were going to impinge on the personal liberties of their citizens, would they not, in asking for their votes, tell them that that was their agenda?

Jamie Stone: As Chair of the Petitions Committee, I must of course be fair minded and impartial at all times, but the hon. and learned Member might be acquainted with the fact that I represent the most remote mainland constituency in the whole of the UK. Let me just put this point: we do know what digital exclusion is.

Jim Allister: As I represent North Antrim, I know of many parts of my constituency where people cannot get the digital connections that are supposedly promised, and I know what digital exclusion is in that regard as well. This proposition is flawed no matter which way we look at it, but most fundamentally flawed in the compulsion that it brings.

The final point that I want to make to the Minister is this: whatever happens on this subject—I trust the idea will be ditched in its entirety—and whatever the ultimate outcome is, it has to be a nationwide outcome. Too often, I have seen differences of treatment in my part of the United Kingdom that add to the already obnoxious situation in which we are partitioned by an Irish sea border. We do not want to be partitioned by a digital border as well.

6.36 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the more than 4,200 people in my constituency who signed the

[Rebecca Paul]

petition opposing digital ID. I very much share the concerns that many of my constituents have raised with me. The Government's intention to roll out a mandatory digital identification scheme is a serious mistake; it will prove expensive and intrusive, and it will ultimately not move the dial on the key challenges that we face as a country.

We have repeatedly been told that this scheme will help to tackle illegal immigration. Frankly, I find that insulting to the intelligence of the British public. Channel crossings will not be stopped by a QR code on a smartphone. I only wish it were that easy. They will, however, be stopped when the Government have the courage to implement real deterrents and confront the lawyers and activist judges who continue to undermine our borders and throw obstacles in the way of every attempt to tackle this crisis.

The British public have always rejected the idea of ID cards, and I believe they are right to do so. We are not a nation of "papers, please", in which people must prove their identity simply to access everyday services or interact with the state, yet we risk creating exactly that kind of society under this policy. We must remember that we are here today as representatives of the British people; we must listen and proceed with caution when nearly 3 million of them feel so strongly about an issue that they sign a petition.

Let us also not forget that this issue was never put before the public in a manifesto. If the Prime Minister wanted a mandate for such a fundamental change to the relationship between citizen and state as that which would come with digital ID, he should have had the courage to ask for one at the ballot box.

Hon. Members from both sides of the House have spoken today to send the Government a very simple message: mandatory digital ID is not needed to deliver excellent online public services. We already have quick, simple digital applications for passports, driving licences, and right-to-work checks. Those do not require a single state-mandated digital identity card, nor should they.

6.38 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I want to begin by thanking the 4,337 constituents in Chester South and Eddisbury who have expressed their opposition to the introduction of mandatory digital ID cards. The British public, including my constituents, are concerned not only by the principle of mandatory digital IDs, but by the manner in which the Government have attempted to introduce them: without a timeline, without a clear financial cost, without a plan and without a mandate.

When the Government first briefed their intention to pursue mandatory digital ID, my inbox was inundated with concerns. Because of the clear salience of the issue, I launched a survey asking my constituents for their views. I am grateful for the hundreds of responses, more than three quarters of which were opposed to a mandatory ID scheme.

The truth is that this petition should never have been necessary. A policy of this magnitude, with profound implications for civil liberties and for the relationship

between citizen and state, ought to have appeared in a party's manifesto. I am also deeply concerned by the Government's so-called justification that this will solve the small boats crisis. Before the election, Labour promised it had a plan to smash the gangs, stop the boats and tackle illegal migration. We can all see how that plan is going, so how would this policy make any difference? Is it not just another cynical attempt to distract from the failure of this Government to address illegal migration? If the Minister has confidence in the proposal, can they clearly set out how much the Government expect illegal crossings to fall as a result and what cost they expect the taxpayer, our constituents, to bear?

Time is short, but I want to raise one further concern: rural communities that remain digitally isolated would face significant challenges under these plans. I have spoken many times about the digital exclusion facing so many in Chester South and Eddisbury. Progress was being made under the previous Conservative Government, but I am concerned that Ministers are now pushing ahead with a digital ID scheme without first ensuring digital connectivity, which risks leaving rural communities even further behind.

Mr Mohindra: My hon. Friend is making an excellent contribution, as always. One issue that I recently learned about in the Chamber is that the roll-out of gigabit broadband throughout the country has been delayed by a further two years from 2030 to 2032. Does she share my concerns that the void between the proposed digital inclusion and the constituents who do not have access to gigabit or wi-fi signals will be an even more manifest issue?

Aphra Brandreth: My hon. Friend makes such an important point. The money that will be spent on mandatory ID needs to be spent on ensuring that all our constituents are connected. The £9.5 million strategy to tackle digital exclusion is inadequate.

To conclude, this policy is an attempt to distract from the Government's failures and has absolutely no mandate. I therefore stand with the many thousands across Chester South and Eddisbury in opposing any plans to introduce mandatory digital ID.

6.42 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. More than 3 million people—a figure similar to the population of Wales—have signed this petition opposing the Government's plan to introduce a mandatory digital ID scheme, including nearly 3,500 of my constituents.

My constituents have frequently raised valid concerns about the introduction of this type of scheme. One of those concerns is about data privacy, because a large database of private and sensitive information could be vulnerable to data breaches, hacking and other criminal activity. The hacking of the Legal Aid Agency is a recent example.

Increased state surveillance is another concern. Constituents are worried about the creation of detailed, individual profiles and about the sharing of information across state services. Digital exclusion is also a concern, especially in a rural constituency such as mine. Nobody should be unfairly disadvantaged by the state due to being without access to digital technology or the means to navigate it.

What I hear most, however, is that people are struggling to heat their homes and put food on their tables. None the less, the Government want to spend billions on identification schemes.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): When the last ID card scheme was cancelled by the Liberal Democrats in coalition in 2010, it had already cost £4.6 billion. Does the hon. Member share my view that the £1.8 billion cost associated with digital IDs could be much better spent?

Llinos Medi: I totally agree. I was previously the leader of a local authority, so I know that our public services are on their knees after 14 years of austerity. This money needs to go back into public services, instead of a digital ID scheme, and serve the people of this country.

The scheme was first framed as a way of combating illegal working, so it would apply only to workers. Then it was framed as a scheme to streamline services and potentially be applicable to people as young as 13. Will the Government set out what problem the digital ID will actually solve? As we have heard in this debate, nobody seems to know.

Given that the Government cannot provide a convincing argument for a costly, intrusive and unpopular scheme, they would do well to listen to the millions of people who have made their views known and focus instead on the real issues that matter to people. Plaid Cymru opposes the proposal to introduce digital ID.

6.44 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): Thank you for saving me until last, Ms Furniss. With Christmas around the corner, the squats from bobbing will come in very handy.

The proposal to introduce digital ID represents one of the most significant changes to the relationship between the individual and the state in modern British history. The measure cannot be taken lightly; nor can it be brushed aside as a simple matter of convenience or administrative efficiency.

Britain already operates with a substantial set of identification systems—birth certificate, passport, driving licence, national insurance number, NHS number and the electoral register—none of which is optional in practice for law-abiding citizens. The Government's own digital ID webpage confirms that none of those existing documents will be replaced by the new proposal, which creates a logical fallacy: if digital ID is optional and does not replace any of the existing documents, it cannot simplify the existing system.

It is also written in the very first paragraph of the digital ID webpage that the data held on digital ID will be limited to four pieces of information: name, date of birth, nationality or residency status, and a photograph. What does that tell us? It tells us that it is not a system really built to simplify domestic life; it is a system built to manage immigration status. Here we have another logical fallacy, because this does nothing to tackle the root cause of the immigration crisis, or anything to strengthen or enforce any of the right-to-work restrictions already in place.

I would add a third logical fallacy, which was somewhat innocently referred to earlier: if digital ID is optional, it can serve no purpose in a “papers, please” scenario. Thankfully, that is probably the better of the two scenarios, despite the cost of nearly £2 billion.

Britain operates on a simple democratic logic: we are born free, and the state may intrude only where necessary, proportionate and agreed by the public. Digital ID risks inverting that principle. I will point out that there was no mandate for this in the Labour manifesto.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): The hon. Gentleman and I represent different political traditions, but I am glad to know that we are bound together by a shared sense of what a liberal society looks like. The only purpose of having an ID of this kind—a mandatory ID—is to enable people to ask for it. When we enable the conditions to be asked to prove our identity in society, we swiftly move from the freedoms he talks about to a permissions-based society, which should concern us all. Does he share that concern?

James McMurdock: That is a good point very well made, and it brings me to another point, which has not been raised in this debate: although the Government state that digital ID is optional—at least, at this stage—for the taxpayer, the cost is not optional. If they go ahead with it, we are all paying for it whether we like it or not, and whether we use it or not.

Even if the intentions today are benign, the power created has the potential to long outlive those who introduced it. I am of the view, therefore, that digital ID offers only the potential to inconvenience law-abiding citizens, while also creating the foundations for a powerful new mechanism capable of controlling banking, travel, property ownership, employment, public services, and daily activity into a single, state-managed system. Even if one trusted today's Government, and many do not, no Government should ever have that level of centralised control over their citizens' private lives.

The Government's own website already suggests that digital ID would introduce access to social services, we have mission creep already, whether we like it or not. The digital ID webpage also states that the digital ID will be free. Of course, that is not entirely true, because the cost is £1.8 billion. In addition to the above we have the inevitable security risks and the fact that millions of people will struggle with digital access.

The Government talk liberal, but act authoritarian. Prison sentences for bad language and the proposal to reduce an eight-centuries-old right to jury trials are only two examples of this. Coupled with the digital ID white elephant, it paints an unpretty picture. I am against this measure.

6.49 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss.

I do not know how the Government can go ahead with this scheme, when there is strong cross-party consensus that it is ill thought out. MPs from across the House and from basically all the parties have presented not only their legitimate concerns, but those of thousands of their constituents. Almost 3 million people have

[Victoria Collins]

signed the petition, and that number of people who are concerned does not include those who are digitally excluded because it is an e-petition.

Noah Law: If there is so much consensus among MPs and constituents, why is it that the members of the public who were more supportive of digital ID were more likely to be Liberal Democrat voters, at least when they were polled some time back?

Victoria Collins: This debate has shown a clear consensus that this is not the right scheme. We are pushing back on the fact that this is essentially a mandatory digital ID for anyone who wants to work in this country. What choice or control is left in that scenario?

As Liberal Democrats, we believe in upholding freedom. This digital ID erodes long-held civil liberties, and the seemingly changing use of immigration enforcement and the slippery slope does not uphold freedom. As Liberal Democrats, we believe in individuals having more control, as do many of our supporters. This does not give individuals more control; indeed, it gives the Government more control.

We have heard loud and clear across the Chamber today about the attack on civil liberties. The Government said that this is not about checking papers, but that is exactly what is being introduced. They talked about the right to work and someone needing to check papers, so it is about checking papers. The Resolution Foundation says that 91% of the working-age population will be employed at some point in their life. This is essentially mandatory for the whole population.

The slippery slope—the mission creep—has been mentioned today. The right to rent has been mentioned in Government papers. I am sure that what the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) said came from a good place, but the fact that we are talking about whether the police can check these things shows that there is a slippery slope before digital ID has even been implemented.

Whether digital ID will be for 13-year-olds has been discussed. There is a terrible hypocrisy in the fact that there is a massive discussion nationally about the impact of smartphones on young people, yet the Government are saying, “Actually, we should give them all digital ID,” when it is clear that that ID will be on a smartphone.

Civil liberties are important. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) talked about a two-tier Britain. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said that some will use digital ID for good and some will use it for ill. The hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) talked about the many countries in which digital ID has not helped to tackle illegal immigration. So what is it for? Leon from Tring in my constituency says:

“The idea of a ‘Papers Please’ Britain is appalling.”

He says it insults our history and undermines civil society. Claude from Markyate says it is a curb on our freedom and privacy. How exactly will this system stop illegal working? How can the Minister guarantee that it will not undermine fundamental freedoms under this Government or the next? He cannot. Once Pandora’s box has been opened, it cannot be closed again.

Digital inclusion is so important to so many citizens. As hon. Members across the House have said, it is not only about having the choice not to be online; it is about skills. Access to telecoms has been mentioned: in my constituency, just 30 miles from London, we have some of the worst data access in the country. Of course, there is also the cost. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) tabled an amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill for the right to non-digital ID. The Government rejected that amendment because, as the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), assured us, people would be able to use physical ID “in every circumstance”. Where is that option in this scheme, under which people have to have digital ID to work? Where is the choice in that? Where is the alternative “in every circumstance” that does not require digital ID?

The hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) talked about inequality. That is very important. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) asked the important question about how the scheme will help her constituents, who are some of the most digitally excluded in the country. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) talked about how it will impact BAME communities. All of those are essential questions that raise the big question: why are the Government pushing ahead with it?

It is such a shame that the Government have undermined and halted progress on e-government, which could be improving our public services. Today’s debate and the cross-party consensus that this proposal has eroded trust are fundamentally important. We have seen flip-flopping and retrofitting of a policy that was first announced as being about immigration, and then suddenly in the Chamber came out as “Oh, no: this is about improving public services.” No one is buying it. That is why almost 3 million people have signed this petition; that is why we are all here today; and that is why there were not enough seats in this Chamber. People realise that this is a retrofitted policy undermining any progress on online government.

A quite important point is that we already have voluntary online services that need improving. They are not doing very well. The gov.uk wallet definitely needs improving, and the gov.uk One Login—a voluntary system at the moment—has many flaws. Should we not be spending money on that? The Government have already invested £100 million in it. There are systems that need improving; the Government should do that, rather than spend £1.8 billion on a system that clearly does not have the support of our citizens or many MPs across the House.

I respect the efforts of the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) and many others to talk about service improvement, but we can modernise without mandating, and that is essentially what this is. What are the Government doing to improve systems such as the Government One Login? Why are the Government conflating digital ID and e-services? That will not improve our public services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) and the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) highlighted, this is the “anti-Midas touch”. I am so angry about that, because the Government have undermined progress in improving our services and increasing trust in them, which are both so important.

This debate has highlighted the importance of trust in data. Cyber incidents have increased by 50% since last year. A 2025 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology survey highlighted that almost 300,000 British businesses have been victims of cyber-crime in the past 12 months. The Legal Aid Agency has had cyber leaks, the armed forces have been affected, and as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned, police in Northern Ireland had their personal details released. How can we trust the Government with our data at this point?

One of my constituents, Jamie, from Wheathampstead says:

“My concern is with the broader principle of trust. I simply do not have confidence that any government, now or in the future would implement digital IDs in a way that is safe, proportionate and free from mission creep”.

That reflects the Government’s track record in oversight and protecting their own systems as critical national infrastructure. Yet as I understand it, public administration is not within the scope of the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill. Given the Government’s proposals on digital ID, that is quite an oversight.

A cost of £1.8 billion has been projected. My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) and many others said that this figure will rise. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) mentioned, this comes at a time when our public services are breaking and when a Budget has just asked many people to pay more in tax, pushing up that bill by £67 billion in the next several years. With around 10 million taxpaying families paying more, how can the Government justify this £1.8 billion cost when their IT projects have already cost the taxpayer more than £31 billion overall? This will just add to that.

All this is to say nothing about the impact on business costs. Who will pay for smartphones for those who need them? Who will pay for data for those who need it? And who will pay when citizens cannot work because this failed system does not work for them?

That brings me to my final questions and closing remarks. Will the Minister set out the data security protocols that would apply to this system, including whether a digital ID would be treated as part of the UK’s critical national infrastructure? Will he look at publishing a digital exclusion impact assessment before any further steps are taken? Can he clarify the status of the gov.uk One Login and confirm how much of taxpayers’ money has already been spent on that?

The Government have no mandate for these proposals. Across this Chamber today, we have seen Members of different parties and from across the UK speak up, and nearly 3 million people signed the petition—as I said, that is just those who are able to sign it. At a time when millions are struggling with the cost of living crisis, £1.8 billion being spent on digital ID cards is wasteful and indefensible. That money should be spent on fixing GP waiting lists, not funding Blair-era fantasies.

Digital ID is not about empowerment in this sense, but about control. Today, we have heard about the end of end-to-end encryption and the end of trial by jury, and this is the worrying next step. Mandatory digital ID crosses a red line and hands the state more power over citizens while stripping people of their freedoms and choice. That is something that the Liberal Democrats cannot and will not accept.

7 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his powerful introduction—he is certainly no tin of beans. He highlighted that this debate has united every party in this Chamber, including the Labour party against the Labour leadership. I commend hon. Members for the powerful contributions that they have made. I have to confess that I disagree with nothing that was said by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), which is a unique thing—people will fear a coalition again. I even have some admiration for the glorious fence-sitting of some of the Labour MPs who still harbour some ambitions under this Government.

We are here because so many of our fellow citizens are demanding that the Government abandon their dodgy plan for mandatory digital ID. This is one of the best-supported petitions ever—nearly 3 million people are asking, very simply, for their relationship with the state not to be fundamentally rewritten without their consent. At the instigation of no one—apart from, perhaps, Tony Blair—the Prime Minister sprung his sneaky ID scheme on us in September in what by now has become a familiar pattern. A gaping hole emerges in Labour’s handling of an issue—in this case on migration, but it could equally be justice or the economy—at the same time as they are running some kind of personnel meltdown, such as a Deputy Prime Minister ducking tax or a Chancellor leaking a Budget. And voilà: out shoots from Downing Street some cack-handed policy announcement to get us all talking about something else.

Before we know it, we are hurtling toward mandatory ID, fewer jury trials, a horrible menu of new taxes on working people, and, who knows, maybe soon our return to a customs union on whose rules we will have zero say. That is why today we find ourselves debating the imposition of a mandatory ID, despite it being a platform on which no Labour MP in this Chamber was honest enough to stand, and a hapless Minister is left to field questions about the dead cat that his leader just threw on to the table, which is now getting smellier.

Dr Gardner: I acknowledge the strength of feeling from the people who signed the petition, but I have a genuine concern that we are not giving the correct level of information for people to say no to. Conflating digital IDs with issues such as jury trials and taxation is doing people no favours; we need to have a calm, rational debate about this one issue so that we can have a reasoned outcome.

Julia Lopez: One challenge is that we have had so few of the facts, because this is such a thin plan. The other challenge is that although there are people who support digital identity as a concept, this is about choice and the fact that this Government have no mandate for what they are doing. I do not think that the hon. Member and I are coming from that different a place, in so far as it should be people’s choice whether they have digital identity verification or not. This Government are proposing to rob them of that choice, and that is why the people in this Chamber are united.

Saqib Bhatti: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way; she is being ever so generous. It is not us scaremongering, or 3 million people being conspiracists; the fact is that the Prime Minister rolled out this scheme to deal with an issue that it will not solve, and everyone can see through that.

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he spoke powerfully in his contribution. I am sure that today we will hear no answers from the Minister, because behind this policy sits no plan at all. No Minister has any idea how much it will cost—the OBR reckons it will be £1.8 billion.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the thousands of people across Bromley and Biggin Hill who signed the petition that at a time of rising taxation and spiralling debt, the fact that the Government cannot even tell us how much this wretched device will cost exemplifies their irresponsible approach to our economy?

Julia Lopez: I completely agree. On the one hand, the Government claim there is no money left. On the other hand, they can suddenly find billions for bizarre schemes or the Chagos islands, or create policies on the two-child benefit cap that they could not previously deliver. They are just so intellectually inconsistent.

The OBR, as I say, reckons the scheme will cost £1.8 billion. Privately, Ministers are briefing that that is completely inaccurate. We have not even begun scoping it yet. I am told the Treasury and the Cabinet Office are now in a stand-off with one another about who will pay for this dreadful thing. Neither wants it, particularly as the Cabinet Office will then have to make cuts to other, much more effective digital projects, the kinds that would actually deliver better services.

No one will answer straight questions about how secure the digital ID will be, or into which areas of our lives it will creep. The Prime Minister tells us that digital ID will be mandatory only for anyone who still wants to work in Labour's welfare Britain. Yet in the next breath he suggests that childcare, welfare and wider service access will all require it. This is precisely how state overreach begins: with reassurance in one sentence and expansion in the next.

It was very interesting to hear hon. Members making points about the police being able to access digital ID, or even about people needing it to go to the cinema. There have been no answers on the robustness of the Government's cyber-security. This Government could not even keep their own Budget secret, and now they want us to trust them with this new system. Ministers point to Estonia and India as models, yet Estonia has suffered repeated breaches. India's system, the largest ID system in the world, led to the largest ever data breach in the world, with citizens' data sold on the dark web for the equivalent of £5 or £6. AI is now giving cyber-attackers the upper hand.

We have been given no sense of the extent to which digital ID will stem illegal migration, which was the Prime Minister's excuse for introducing the idea in the first place. Ministers cannot even give an estimate, and that is for a simple reason: because it will not reduce migration. Can Ministers explain why those who enter the country by dodging the rules will suddenly become

models of civic compliance, or why European ID schemes have done so little to stem illegal migration on the continent?

Mr Adnan Hussain: On the topic of migration, does the hon. Member agree that the Government's claim that digital ID will curb immigration is made a farce by the Afghan data loss, a catastrophic failure of data security that ended up expanding resettlement on a large scale, which shows exactly why centralising identity data can backfire?

Julia Lopez: The hon. Member makes a powerful point. The truth is that channel crossings will continue until the Prime Minister puts in place a real deterrent and accepts that the "smash the gangs" plan is nothing more than a slogan. By pretending that his ID scheme is the answer, he fuels public distrust. When the crossings continue but law-abiding British citizens are allocated a mandatory ID, people will feel, rightly, that it is one rule for them and another for rule breakers—a loss of liberty for everyone because of a group of people who have no right to be here.

At least Ministers seem to recognise the emptiness of the migration argument, because none of them seems to use it any more. To add to the despicable dishonesty of the plan, it is now being presented as a benevolent effort to improve online services—no more rummaging for utility bills. The Prime Minister's chief of staff even insists it will be a matter of choice whether to have a digital ID. How disingenuous! First, to oppose digital ID is not to oppose the modernisation of Government. It is not to oppose great online services for people. It is to say that we do not need a monopolistic Government ID scheme, which is mandated if people are to have those online services, and nobody should be suggesting otherwise.

The Association of Digital Verification Professionals has called what Labour inherited from our party

"a world-leading model for...data sovereignty"

that digitises liberty rather than dilutes it. In government we were able to provide trusted, simple and secure services without everyone being mandated to have a digital identity. Paper options were retained. Nobody was forced down the digital route. Privacy-preserving private identity providers, now absolutely hopping mad about Labour's plan, are recognised as a way of giving citizens choice when it comes to digital credentials and dispersing central power.

Let us turn to the idea of choice and consent. If a Government-issued digital ID is mandatory for anyone wishing to work, then if someone wants a job they have no choice but to have one. At a time when Labour has made it more expensive and much riskier to employ people, they now want to add an extra hoop for everyone to jump through. Never mind the digital divide, either. Thousands of adults do not have smartphones. Labour has deprioritized gigabit rollout; its digital inclusion plan is a £9 million fig leaf. It is not bridging the digital divide, but widening it.

Conservatives oppose the Prime Minister's mandatory ID plan in principle and in practice. It would alter the balance between citizen and state in a way that this Government have no mandate for. Conservatives believe that Government should empower citizens, not the other way round.

Before this House takes another step down this path, I ask the Minister to answer the following questions clearly and directly. Will the Government bring this matter before the House for a vote, and when can we expect digital identity legislation to be put before us? How much will this scheme cost? If the true figure is not £1.8 billion, what is it? Are Ministers creating a single centralised database—yes or no? Who will be forced to have a mandatory ID and from what age, because we hear that it could be mandatory from the age of 13? What personal information will be collected? Will biometrics and addresses be included? What security guarantees will the Minister put his name to when it comes to the robustness of this system? Nearly 3 million people want answers to those questions and more.

This Government have delivered nothing of what they said they would deliver—growth, political stability, competence—and delivered plenty that they never sought permission for. They are a Government who do not have the competence to run a bath, let alone a secure national identity scheme. It seems that many Labour MPs, including those in this Chamber today, now agree. Every day, they are openly jostling and gossiping about the Prime Minister's demise. If they had any sense, they would make sure that this scheme dies with the expiry of his leadership and that any of the thrusting leadership contenders make a clear promise not to resurrect it.

The Prime Minister's plan is unimplementable and utterly unloved, and it will be totally useless in delivering against its own objectives. So, before Labour sprays inordinate amounts of political capital and taxpayer cash on this digital ID dodo, it must wake up to that reality.

7.12 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing this important debate today; I hope that it is the first of many such debates to come, including in the main Chamber. Also, I apologise to the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for briefly having to step out of Westminster Hall during her speech. I will check the record and make sure that I am across all of what she said.

I thank hon. Members from all parties for the thoughtful and respectful manner in which they have spoken in this debate. I will refer to some of the contributions during my speech. However, I will not take interventions, as I have limited time, and a lot of important questions have been asked, which I will endeavour to answer.

Damian Hinds: You have 18 minutes.

Josh Simons: I am told that I have 11 minutes.

I want to do three things today, as I endeavour not to be hapless: first, to explain why we want to build this new national digital credential and the principles that will guide us as we do so; secondly, to debunk some of the nonsense and myths surrounding this debate; and thirdly, to make some commitments regarding how I as the Minister and we as a Government will work with Members and their constituents going forward.

Let me start by saying why we are introducing this scheme. So often, my constituents in Makerfield, in Wigan, come to me with stories about how they have to fight against the system to do things that should be easy: dealing with the social care system or the special educational needs and disabilities system, registering for a school place, or ordering a new bin; paying taxes, or accessing benefits; opening a bank account, or buying a home. When millions of working people feel exhausted by making their household finances work, or by dealing with antisocial behaviour in their town, the last thing they need is to feel that they are being passed from agency to agency, from call centre to call centre, and from one form to the next.

It does not have to be that way. All over the world, countries have introduced national digital credentials that give people more control over their public services, ensuring that everyone can access those services more easily. It puts the state in someone's pocket, as with everything else that we do online: banking, shopping, organising community events and supporting our kids at school. Although the Government Digital Service has done phenomenal work over the last decade, the UK needs a step change to make the state and public services work harder for people and fit around them, instead of forcing people to fit around those services.

Labour Governments have a proud history of transforming our state and making it serve ordinary people. After the second world war, the Government built new public services such as the NHS from the ground up. Harold Wilson grasped the white heat of technology to modernise the state. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown brought public services into the 21st century. Now we are doing the same, building the digital foundation of the British state and public services for decades to come.

I am proud that we are building this vital public good for our country, not outsourcing it and not leaving it to private companies. Done right, it can leave a legacy of which we will be proud in the years ahead—but doing it right, as several hon. Members have said, is vital, and my job is to make sure that we do it right. That is why, since becoming the responsible junior Minister, I have introduced three clear principles that will guide the system we build.

The first principle is “inclusive”. We will leave no person and no place behind. This is a public good, so it must be universally accessible. The people most excluded from our society, whether digitally or because they have not had a passport, are those we will work hardest to reach. We are under no illusions: this is a great challenge. It will take a lot of hard work and a massive digital inclusion drive. But do not forget that the status quo—

Sarah Bool: Will the Minister really not give way?

Josh Simons: I will not. I have loads more to cover.

Millions of people right now are digitally excluded. That is not a status quo that we are prepared to accept. We will need help to meet this challenge. Civil society, businesses, trade unions and community groups across the UK will be our partners. That is why we are consulting on how to do this. If we get this right, we will empower the most vulnerable—people experiencing homelessness, the elderly and people with special needs, but also veterans and people without access to the internet. This programme

[Josh Simons]

will empower them, because we will invest resources to reach and to include them. They will not be left behind any more.

Our second principle is “secure”.

John Lamont: Will the Minister give way, please?

Josh Simons: He will not.

We are working with the UK’s leading national security experts, including the National Cyber Security Centre, to build a system with cutting-edge protections against cyber-attacks and identity fraud. Let me be specific: we are not creating a centralised master database.

John Lamont: On a point of order, Ms Furniss. Could you clarify how long the Minister has left to speak? By my understanding, he has until 7.29 pm so as to give the proposer of the motion a minute to respond.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): We are running quite well at the moment. We will be finishing completely at 7.30 pm, but the Member who moved the motion wants a minute to wind up, which he has a right to do. So the Minister has a bit longer should he need it.

Josh Simons: I was told that I have 11 minutes, and I have about 10 more minutes of my speech. I will not be taking interventions, so the hon. Member can sit down and stop asking.

If we get this right, we will empower the most vulnerable: those experiencing homelessness, who are currently left behind. We will not accept the status quo. That point leads me on to the second principle. The National Cyber Security Centre will work closely with us to implement cutting-edge protections against cyber-attacks and identity fraud. I want to be specific about what exactly that means.

We are not, as many Members have asked, creating a centralised master database. The new system will be federated. Specifically, that means that there will be strict legal firewalls on what information can be shared where and a strong principle of data minimisation. People will have more control over their data in this system than they have now, because people will be able actively to control what information is shared about them and by whom. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) said, in other countries around the world, such as Finland or Estonia, citizens are massively more empowered to control their data. Their consent is placed at the centre of the system—*[Interruption.]*

Julia Lopez rose—

Damian Hinds rose—

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): Order. The Minister has every right to speak, just as everyone else has had the right to speak. He does not have to take interventions.

Josh Simons: Those countries are placing their citizens’ consent at the centre of the system, and that is what we will build here in the UK.

That takes me to our third principle: it will be useful. I want to build a credential that our constituents want to have because having it makes their lives easier. In our economy and our society, technology has dramatically improved how we go about our daily life. I want Government to have the tools to move at the same pace. Whether it is applying for a new passport, accessing support for your children or proving who you are for a job, the state should be working as hard as possible to make these things easy for you, not making you do the hard work.

Our consultation will give the public the opportunity to have their say about how they would like to be able to use this credential, and what kind of future public services they would like to see. I want to build a system that helps people with the daily struggles they tell us about, not the system that Whitehall thinks is best.

There is also a lot of nonsense flying about in this debate, some myths that we have failed to rebut and some outright lies, so following a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), the second thing that I would like to do this evening is briefly debunk some of those myths.

First, this programme will involve a massive digital inclusion drive, rejecting the status quo in which millions are excluded both digitally and from having IDs, and investing resources and time to ensure that everyone can access the online world and digital public services through post offices and libraries—physical spaces in communities up and down the United Kingdom.

Alison Griffiths: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): Please sit down.

Josh Simons: Secondly, nobody will be stopped and asked for this new digital credential by the police. No card, no papers, no police.

Seamus Logan: On a point of order, Ms Furniss. Is it in order for the Minister to indicate that contributions in this debate contained lies?

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I have to say that I could not hear him say that, mainly because everyone else was making so much noise, like now. *[Interruption.]* I did not hear him say that.

Josh Simons: To clarify, I was not saying that contributions from other Members were lies. I was saying that there are lies out there in the country about this system. I would like to put that on the record.

We want a system that people want to use to make their lives easier, so that they no longer have to fill out forms multiple times or fight against agencies to transfer information.

Thirdly, as I have said, there is—and there will be—no centralised master database. The new system will be federated, meaning that data will stay where it already is, stored securely and separately, using only the minimum data necessary for ID verification and information sharing. Privacy-preserving questions and answers will be communicated across datasets, with strict firewalls between them enshrined in law, and only where people consent,

so people will control what data is shared and where, as they do in other countries, with more control than they have now.

Fourthly, this system will be a public good. I want to build this system because it will benefit ordinary people, not because I am under the grip of some international elite or globalist diktat, as someone said earlier, which is quite the antisemitic trope to throw at a Jewish Minister. Yesterday, I was in the pub in Hindley, talking to a bloke who was trying to transfer basic information from Bolton council to Wigan council. I want that to be easier—to make the state work harder for him, not the other way around. That is why we are doing this.

Fifthly, there will be legislation establishing the credential, on which Parliament will vote. Parliament will control what this credential can be used for. We will establish a clear legal framework to prevent scope creep. Our goal is to make life easier for people and give people more security and control over their data than they have now. That is the test I will set.

Sixthly and finally, we are a proud liberal parliamentary democracy. We will never have a social credit system. We will not be tracking anyone's life. Existing data protection laws will apply. Someone's use of gambling sites will not be allowed to impact their entitlement to healthcare, nor will their speeding ticket affect who they can marry, as in China—a country with no elections, no Parliament and no rule of law. I wrote a book about making sure that democracy controls data, not the other way around. That is what I intend to do.

I will end by making a few promises to Members in the Chamber and to anyone in the public who is watching. The consultation, which will be launched in the new year, will be a major public undertaking. I am determined that we will engage in a different way. I will be travelling up and down the country to listen to people and hear how they want this credential to work and how they think it can make their lives easier.

As with all public goods, we cannot build this or roll it out alone. We want to work with communities, not do this to communities—working arm in arm with grassroots groups, digital inclusion organisations, local authorities, combined authorities, mayors, civil society, trade unions and businesses small and large across the United Kingdom. If Members, their constituents or their organisations are in any of those camps and would like to get involved, I encourage them to get in touch.

I understand the anxiety of many hon. Members in this Chamber and of many members of the public. In fact, I share some of those anxieties. I know that it is my job, and the job of the Government, to persuade. Liberal parliamentary democracies around the world have or

are developing a national digital credential. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, India—the list goes on. We will take a principled approach to building this new system. “Inclusive”, “secure” and “useful”: these principles are non-negotiable, and how we apply them will be led by our major public consultation next year.

My background is in technology and AI. Part of why I came into politics is that so often the way ordinary people encounter technologies is determined solely by private imperatives and not the public good. I do not want the future of our state and economy to be driven by a desire to addict our children to TikTok videos or pornography. I want it to be driven by a willingness to roll up our sleeves and do the hard graft of building infrastructure that will last for generations. That is what a new national digital credential is: a vital public good. I am proud that this Government will build it.

7.27 pm

Robbie Moore: There we have it. This is how the Government of the day is going to be engaging with people—stating from the Dispatch Box that they are willing to listen, yet not taking one intervention. May I remind the Minister that Members of Parliament in this House have been elected to represent their constituents? Three million people have signed this petition. Not to have taken one intervention when dealing with matters that have been brought to this House is not only embarrassing for the Minister, but completely discourteous to the Members of Parliament in this Chamber. What a disgrace!

Colleagues have spoken, and I thank Members who have spoken on behalf of their constituents. I also thank the 3 million people who signed the petition, because they have demonstrated that digital ID is not something that they want this country to move forward with. It is expensive, it is unwanted and it is intrusive. It was not included in the Labour party manifesto. It was not promoted as something that would be brought forward by this Government.

The voice of this Chamber has been heard. It is just incredibly disappointing that the Minister did not have the courtesy to reflect that in his remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 730194 relating to digital ID.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 8 December 2025

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Day 2026

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): The Minister of State in the House of Lords, my noble Friend Lord Coaker, has made the following written statement:

I wish to inform the House that Rushmoor borough council has been selected to host the Armed Forces Day national event in 2026.

Aldershot and Farnborough have a long and proud history with our military and are often referred to as the home of the British Army. Communities there have played a vital role in supporting, shaping and honouring our armed forces over many decades. Hosting the national event in the borough offers a chance to build on those deep connections, bringing the armed forces, the local community and wider society closer together. We congratulate the people of Rushmoor, the local council and the local MP, Alex Baker, for their successful campaign.

The national event is part of our wider commitment to renewing the nation's contract with those who serve, and a whole-of-society approach to Defence, as set out in the strategic defence review.

Under our Government, Armed Forces Day will therefore become bigger and bolder. The day will continue to be about gratitude but also about deepening people's knowledge of what the armed forces have to offer.

By working closely with local authorities, MPs and communities, we will better demonstrate the contribution that our armed forces make to national prosperity, to technology, skills and innovation, as well as to security.

While the national event will take place in Rushmoor, Armed Forces Day is a celebration for the whole of the United Kingdom. We expect hundreds of smaller events to take place in towns and villages across the country. To support this, applications for grant funding for local events will open in January, and I encourage local authorities and community groups to apply.

Ultimately, this is a moment of national significance to recognise the service and sacrifice of our armed forces community: our serving personnel, veterans, cadets and the families who support them. We owe them our gratitude for their dedication to keeping this nation safe.

In Britain, we are fortunate to have the very finest armed forces. Our Government are committed to ensuring that our forces, our veterans and their families know that this Government and nation are on their side—and not just in armed forces week, but all year round.

Preparations for the event are now under way, and the Ministry of Defence will work closely with Rushmoor borough council to deliver a successful programme. I will keep the House updated as plans progress.

[HCWS1134]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): I am today announcing that Campsfield immigration removal centre in Oxfordshire has opened. Detention plays a crucial role in maintaining effective immigration control and securing our borders. It is right that those with no right to remain in the UK are removed if they do not leave voluntarily.

Campsfield IRC will be operated in line with the statutory framework established by the Immigration Act 1971 and the Detention Centre Rules 2001. The centre will provide safe and secure accommodation for up to 160 men. Healthcare provision has been procured by NHS England, and there will be no impact on primary healthcare services provided within the local community. Further expansion will provide an additional 240 male beds.

Campsfield IRC is the first of several new detention facilities planned under this Government, with expansions at this site and Haslar IRC to provide 1,000 additional bed spaces. Every additional detention bed space translates to more offenders and illegal migrants removed from our country as we restore order and control to our borders while providing sanctuary to those genuinely fleeing danger. This expansion will mean thousands more enforced returns of foreign national offenders and failed asylum seekers per year, sending a clear message: if you come here illegally, you will not be able to stay.

The Home Office has dramatically intensified enforcement action since July 2024. Returns and deportations of illegal migrants have soared to the highest levels in nearly a decade, with nearly 50,000 returns and enforced returns up 24%. It comes alongside the sweeping asylum reforms, which include resetting article 8 to prioritise the deportation of foreign criminals, and introducing a streamlined appeals process to stop endless legal challenges.

We are committed to ensuring the proper protection and treatment of vulnerable people in detention. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of residents is at the forefront of the new facility. The new contract to operate the centre takes into account the findings of all external reports and reviews of standards in detention, including increased staffing levels.

[HCWS1135]

UK Anti-corruption Strategy

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today the Government have published the UK anti-corruption strategy 2025, setting out the Government's response to tackle the harm that corruption causes to our growth, security and democracy over the next five years.

Corruption harms the UK and its citizens directly. Corruption makes people in the UK poorer and less safe. It undermines confidence in public institutions, damages the UK's reputation as a trusted place to do business, distorts markets and deters investment. It threatens our national security: corrupt insiders can facilitate organised crime at our borders and in our prisons, and kleptocratic elites overseas seek to exploit our open economy and institutions. In this context of geopolitical instability and accelerating technological change, a clear and concerted strategy is necessary to protect the UK, support long-term economic growth and uphold the integrity of public life. Corruption is a transnational threat that harms our international partners and international interests while fuelling instability overseas: increasing crime, illegal migration and other threats back in the UK.

The strategy is organised around three pillars:

First, it combats corrupt actors and their funds in the UK and overseas. We will strengthen enforcement by expanding the City of London police's domestic corruption unit and continuing to support the international corruption unit and the international anti-corruption co-ordination

centre housed at the National Crime Agency. We will expand the use of sanctions against corrupt actors and their enablers, improve the system-wide response to professional enablers, and pilot the use of artificial intelligence to speed up complex investigations, including within the Serious Fraud Office. We will explore opportunities to reform the UK whistleblowing framework, including through potential financial incentives. We will champion beneficial ownership transparency, including in the UK's overseas territories and Crown dependencies, to support asset recovery and target corrupt funds.

The strategy also includes reform of the UK's anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing supervisory system, consolidating the anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing supervisory functions of 22 professional services supervisory bodies. The Financial Conduct Authority will assume responsibility for the supervision of professional services firms, strengthening the UK's defences against illicit finance and corruption, supporting sustainable growth and simplifying a complex regulatory system.

The second pillar of the strategy tackles vulnerabilities to corruption within UK institutions and systems. We will raise standards in public life by establishing a new ethics and integrity commission, strengthening the business appointments regime and improving the transparency of political donations, including enhanced due diligence requirements. We will bolster integrity in local government through a new statutory local audit office in England and, subject to collective agreement, introduce a mandatory code of conduct for elected local government officials with meaningful sanctions. Across the public sector we will improve vetting, information sharing and insider risk controls in high-risk areas such as policing, borders and prisons, and enhance training and guidance on corruption and procurement.

Thirdly, the strategy sets out plans to deepen our international partnerships aimed at building global resilience to corruption and broader illicit finance. We will host a UK countering illicit finance summit to galvanise collective action against this shared threat; expand our overseas illicit finance network; provide support to partner countries to prevent corruption and implement international standards; and protect and empower civil society and investigative journalism to expose corruption and hold the corrupt to account. We will work multilaterally to protect and enhance implementation of international standards designed to combat corruption and illicit finance.

Delivering these measures will make the UK a harder target for corrupt actors and their funds, improve trust in public life, support investment, and strengthen our national security. These actions will reinforce the UK's position as a partner of choice for international counterparts sharing our commitment to tackle corruption and illicit finance. The strategy commits the Government to publishing a new anti-money laundering and asset recovery strategy in 2026, alongside the countering illicit finance summit, to complement and extend this work.

Implementation of the strategy will be overseen by Ministers across the Home Office, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and HM Treasury, supported by the Prime Minister's anti-corruption champion. We are committed to transparent updates and scrutiny of delivery:

We will publish annual progress updates on gov.uk and provide a written ministerial statement to Parliament each year;

We will undertake and publish two in-depth progress assessments at years 3 and 5 of the strategy; and

We will provide updates on progress to an external engagement group, chaired by the anti-corruption champion, and including civil society, academia, business and parliamentarians.

The UK anti-corruption strategy 2025 has been laid before Parliament as a Command Paper (CP 1454) and is available in the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

[HCWS1136]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025: Codes of Practice

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I, alongside Public Sector Fraud Authority Ministers, would like to advise the House that today the Government have launched two public consultations on the codes of practice associated with the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025. One is led by the Department for Work and Pensions and the other by the PSFA. These will consult on the following codes:

Public Sector Fraud Authority: Civil penalties.

Department for Work and Pensions: Eligibility verification notices, recovery of debt via direct deduction order and disqualification from driving and obtaining information to support fraud investigations in the welfare system.

The 2025 Act includes a statutory obligation for the PSFA to issue a code of practice on the administration of civil penalties, and for DWP to publicly consult on the codes for the eligibility verification measure and debt recovery measures before the powers are used for the first time. In terms of the code relating to the information gathering powers, the Secretary of State Work and Pensions similarly has a duty to consider representations on the draft code under section 3 of the Social Security Fraud Act 2001.

As we made clear through the passage of the Act, these codes are important safeguards that will support effective and proportionate application of these powers. They are necessary pieces of departmental guidance and will guide the operation and management of the new powers by outlining, in more detail, how the powers taken through this Act should be delivered, reflecting the newly passed legislation.

The powers granted through the Act will allow the Department to better identify, prevent and deter social security fraud and error and enable the better recovery of debt owed to the taxpayer. The launch of today's consultations is another step towards delivering the Government's manifesto commitment to safeguard taxpayers' money and demonstrates that this Government will not tolerate fraud or waste in public services.

This Government are committed to full and thorough consultations to allow input from a broad range of perspectives, which will help to inform the final versions of the codes. Consequently, the consultations on these codes will take place over 12 weeks. This means that the code for each measure will be published ahead of the relevant measures commencing implementation.

During the passage of the Act, a statement was made during Committee in the House of Commons that the DWP codes would be laid in Parliament for a minimum of 40 sitting days prior to formal publication. Considering

the extensive engagement that our officials had with stakeholders throughout the passage of the Act, which will continue through these consultations and beyond, we no longer believe that this is necessary.

In addition, we have made previous draft codes available on request to parliamentarians since 23 May 2025. This has provided ample opportunity for Members to review the draft codes, and Members will be able to consider these further during the consultation period. This approach will allow us to begin the important work of exercising these powers sooner to deliver the estimated benefits of £1.5 billion by 2029-30, as scored by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility.

The consultations will launch today, Monday 8 December 2025, and run until Friday 27 February 2026. These consultations can be found on www.gov.uk. The codes will be officially laid once the consultation, formal response and final versions are complete.

[HCWS1133]

Safeguarding: Department for Work and Pensions

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): I wish to update the House on the actions my Department has taken following the conclusion of the safeguarding review, and consideration of consultation findings.

This fulfils a commitment made by the Department in response to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry on safeguarding vulnerable adults in July 2025.

Safeguarding is a serious issue that demands transparency, accountability and collaboration across Government. I reaffirm my Department's commitment to safeguarding and our responsibility to protect individuals from harm, abuse and neglect wherever we encounter it in the course of our work.

Actions taken since the Committee's report

I thank the Committee for its thorough inquiry and for its recommendations, which have shaped next steps. Since the Committee's report, we have:

- assessed our safeguarding approach, defining safeguarding in line with key legislation including: Care Act 2014, Domestic Abuse Act 2021, Children Act 1989, and Human Rights Act 1998;

- developed an approach built on three simple steps: Recognise, Respond and Report—a standard approach to safeguarding used by other organisations;

- checked our approach against statutory standards, with support from an independent safeguarding expert;

- listened to safeguarding professionals and the public through the "Pathways to Work" Green Paper consultation, and selected roundtables;

- run a Department-wide safeguarding survey, as recommended by the Committee.

This assessment found some good practice, but also variation in awareness, skills and accountability. That is why we need a consistent, joined-up approach.

Delivering improvements

Safeguarding must be part of everything we do. As I stated to the Committee on 19 November, it should be systems based. Put simply, safeguarding should be a central part of how we deliver our services, making safeguarding everyone's business.

Our multi-year strategy starts with strong leadership and clear accountability. We have an executive lead, a dedicated safeguarding team, and clear governance.

Year one—which starts now—will focus on raising staff awareness of safeguarding responsibilities, building capability through training, and strengthening relationships with local authorities, health services and voluntary organisations. Year one deliverables include:

- continue rolling out level 1 safeguarding training for non-clinical roles;

- continue mandatory level 3 safeguarding training for clinical teams;

- set out and communicate safeguarding roles and responsibilities so everyone in DWP understands the role they play, explained through internal guidance and communications;

- enhance our existing processes so colleagues can more consistently recognise, respond to and report safeguarding concerns;

- strengthen escalation routes for colleagues with safeguarding concerns;

- review and strengthen existing internal process review processes to enhance clinical learning;

- ensure our clinical workforce are recruited in line with NHS standards which includes undertaking an enhanced security check every three years;

- by the end of year one, publish a DWP safeguarding policy framework which will set out our comprehensive approach.

From year two, work will focus on how safeguarding is being built into how the Department operates and assess how well the initial steps are working.

Over years three to five, we will focus on continuous improvement. We will explore digital solutions to capture safeguarding activity and further embed a learning culture that ensures safeguarding remains integral to everything we do.

Statutory safeguarding duty

Our immediate priority is to make safeguarding everyone's business, with clear steps to recognise, respond to and report concerns. The Department remains open to adopting a statutory duty to refer safeguarding concerns appropriately. Our priority is to ensure that our internal safeguarding approach is robust, consistent and fully integrated across the Department.

Safeguarding must be a system-wide endeavour. It requires transparency, accountability, and collaboration across Government and with partners.

We have a clear way forward. We have recognised the gaps, we have identified solutions, and we have begun to deliver.

[HCWS1138]

Support for Young People

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Today I am announcing the expansion of the Government's youth guarantee and the next phase of the growth and skills levy.

This announcement is backed by more than £1.5 billion of investment over the next three years, funding £820 million for the youth guarantee to support young people to earn or learn, and an additional £725 million for the growth and skills levy.

Through the expanded youth guarantee, young people aged 16 to 24 across Great Britain are set to benefit from further support into employment and learning. This includes:

Support to find a job

For young people on universal credit who are looking for work, we are introducing a new youth guarantee gateway, which over the next three years will offer nearly 900,000 16 to 24-year-olds a dedicated session, followed by four weeks of additional intensive support with a work coach. This new support will identify specific work, training, or learning opportunities locally for each young person and ensure they are supported to take those up.

Further expanding youth hubs

This support could be delivered at a youth hub. We are establishing youth hubs in over 360 locations so that all young people—including those not on benefits—can access opportunities and wider support in every local area of Great Britain. Youth hubs will bring together partners from health, skills and the voluntary sector, working closely with mayors and local authorities to deliver joined-up, community-based support.

Creating 300,000 opportunities for workplace experience and training

We will create up to 150,000 additional work experience placements and up to 145,000 additional bespoke training opportunities designed in partnership with employers, known as sector-based work academy programmes—SWAPs. At the end of each SWAP, employers offer a guaranteed job interview to participants.

An ambition to support 50,000 more young people into apprenticeships in England

We are fully funding apprenticeship training costs for all eligible 16 to 24-year-olds, by removing the need for non-levy paying employers to co-fund these learners. We are also expanding foundation apprenticeships into sectors such as hospitality and retail, where young people are traditionally recruited. We will make available £140 million to pilot new approaches to better connect young people aged 16 to 24—especially those who are not in education, employment or training—to local apprenticeship opportunities.

Guaranteeing jobs

For long-term unemployed 18 to 21-year-olds on universal credit, the jobs guarantee scheme will provide six months of paid employment. This will reach around 55,000 young people over the next three years. We know that young people need support quickly, and that is why we will begin delivery of the jobs guarantee in six areas from spring 2026 in: Birmingham & Solihull, the East Midlands, Greater Manchester, Hertfordshire & Essex, Central & East Scotland, and South-west & South-east Wales. We will deliver over 1,000 job starts in the first six months. This will be followed by the national roll-out of the jobs guarantee across Great Britain.

Preventing young people from becoming NEET

We are making it easier to identify young people who need support, by investing in better NEETs data sharing, further education attendance monitoring, and new “risk of NEET” data tools, giving local areas more accurate insights to target support where it is needed most. We are also investing in work experience opportunities for young people at particular risk of becoming NEET, focused on pupils in state-funded alternative provision settings—education provided outside mainstream or special schools for children who cannot attend a regular school, often due to exclusion, health needs or other circumstances.

This builds on measures announced in the post-16 education and skills White Paper earlier this autumn. To make sure that young people move smoothly from school into post-16 education or training, we are working with schools to improve support for transitions and piloting automatic enrolment at further education providers for those without a confirmed place. This will make it easier for young people to stay on in education and succeed later in life.

The youth guarantee is part of a new social contract with young people, with opportunity matched by responsibility. Young people who can work will be expected to engage with the support offered. If the support is declined without good reasons, existing benefit sanction rules will apply.

[HCWS1137]

Written Correction

Monday 8 December 2025

Ministerial Correction

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Local Media

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Local Media on 3 December 2025.

Jim McMahon: I get the Government's intention, which I strongly support, and I credit the Minister for the work that he is doing, but none of us would accept a member of the public going into a newsagents, taking a newspaper off the rack and walking out without paying for it, yet that is exactly what is taking place with these online giants. They are taking the news off the rack without any payment, commercialising it and making billions in the process. That is what we need to consider. I hear the arguments about whether local authorities should continue with statutory notices—I have a different view; I am not sure that we should hold on to something

from the past if it is not adding real value that can be demonstrated from the public investment—but we need to move to a modern way of funding a sustainable local press. Surely that requires a bigger intervention from the Government.

Ian Murray: I will come on to that, because the AI copyright issue is a key part of what we are trying to determine. As my hon. Friend will know, under the legislation, the Government are preparing to publish the report and impact assessment required by sections 135 and 136 of the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025. That must be laid before the House by 12 December... That assessment will be reported to the House by Christmas.

[*Official Report*, 3 December 2025; Vol. 776, c. 388WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray):

Ian Murray: I will come on to that, because the AI copyright issue is a key part of what we are trying to determine. As my hon. Friend will know, under the legislation, the Government are preparing to publish the report and impact assessment required by sections 135 and 136 of the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025. That must be laid before the House by **18 March**... That assessment will be reported to the House by **the spring**.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 8 December 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
WORK AND PENSIONS	1	WORK AND PENSIONS—continued	
Child Poverty	8	Skills England.....	12
Commercial Sexual Exploitation	12	Support into Work: Health Conditions	16
Motability	7	Support into Work: Mental Ill Health.....	15
NEET Young People	6	Topical Questions	17
Pensioner Poverty	10	Unemployment Levels	3
Post-16 Skills Education	13	Welfare Spending: Economic Impact.....	1
Review of Carer's Allowance Overpayments	10		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 8 December 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	4WS
Armed Forces Day 2026	1WS	Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025: Codes of Practice	4WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	1WS	Safeguarding: Department for Work and Pensions.....	5WS
Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre	1WS	Support for Young People	6WS
UK Anti-corruption Strategy	2WS		

WRITTEN CORRECTION

Monday 8 December 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTION	1WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTION—continued	
Culture, Media and Sport.....	1WC	Local Media	1WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Monday 15 December 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 8 December 2025

List of Government and Principal Officers and Officials of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

Restriction of Jury Trials [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(Sarah Sackman)

Maccabi Tel Aviv FC: Away Fans Ban [Col. 36]
Answer to urgent question—(Sarah Jones)

Ajax Armoured Vehicle [Col. 46]
Answer to urgent question—(Luke Pollard)

Child Poverty Strategy [Col. 59]
Statement—(Bridget Phillipson)

Employment Rights Bill [Col. 84]
Lords message considered

Planning and Infrastructure Bill [Col. 121]
Lords message considered

Mental Health Bill [Lords] [Col. 129]
Lords message considered

Petition [Col. 136]

Self-employed Adoptive Parents: Statutory Support [Col. 137]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Digital ID [Col. 1WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Written Correction [Col. 1WC]
Ministerial correction
