

**Wednesday
7 January 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 7 January 2026

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.

House of Commons

Wednesday 7 January 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I want to pay tribute to Karen Hodsdon, who died unexpectedly during the Christmas recess. Karen worked for the House for almost 30 years, having started in January 1996. Most recently she was the service delivery co-ordinator, supporting Members and staff in Portcullis House and Parliament Street, but over the years she held numerous roles, including in the Members' Tea Room and the Terrace Cafeteria. My thoughts are with Karen's family, friends and colleagues.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Public Services

1. **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on improving public services. [907062]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): May I associate myself with your tribute to Karen, Mr Speaker? I also wish you, your team and the whole House a happy new year.

The Secretary of State and I regularly meet Executive Ministers. I recently met the Education Minister, Paul Givan, to discuss integration in our schools. We have provided a record settlement of £19.3 billion for Northern Ireland to improve public services. I look forward to working with all Ministers in Northern Ireland as they deliver on their priorities in 2026.

Dr Sullivan: Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

This Government have delivered the largest funding settlement to Northern Ireland since devolution. In addition to that record support to Northern Ireland, and across the United Kingdom, what discussions is the Minister having on sharing best practice with Northern Ireland and across the wider United Kingdom?

Matthew Patrick: My hon. Friend is right to mention that record settlement, but it is not just a question of cutting a cheque and walking away; it is also about working and sharing best practice, as she mentioned. I have had conversations with the Northern Ireland Health Minister about how we can share best practice as part of our 10-year NHS plan, and I am confident that we can continue to work together to deliver better outcomes.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Can I press the Minister on the discussions he is having with the Executive on digital services? Dublin has just produced a very innovative digital services plan for public services. I urge the Government to talk closely with the Executive to ensure that Northern Ireland keeps pace with Dublin in that area.

Matthew Patrick: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I am very happy to ensure that that features in our conversations with Executive Ministers. Northern Ireland is leading the way in so many of these areas, so I will continue to have those conversations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Policing numbers in Northern Ireland are at their lowest ever level. Both the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Policy Exchange have warned that reopening cases from the troubles will place a huge additional financial burden on the police, which would mean risks for both policing numbers and national security. Is the Minister happy with that situation? Will he let it happen, or will the Secretary of State be compensating the PSNI for the decisions made by his Department?

Matthew Patrick: A number of the cases are actually being taken away from the police service if the families refer those cases to the commission. As I mentioned in a previous answer, with a record settlement for Northern Ireland, it is for the Executive to determine how that money is spent, including how they are funding their police force.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that the Finance Minister yesterday, in an ill-considered way, published his budget—not an agreed budget—for consultation. The Minister will know the pressures associated with that decision and he will know the challenges that brings for politics in Northern Ireland. One thing that has been absent from the lexicon of politics in Northern Ireland over a number of years is the fiscal framework. Can he update us on where his Government are on negotiations with the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Executive?

Matthew Patrick: I am pleased that, as part of that consultation, there is a record settlement of £19.3 billion to fund those services. The negotiations that the right hon. Gentleman mentions are continuing.

Gavin Robinson: The Minister will also know of the pressures that affect our health service in Northern Ireland. Alarming, we understand that the European Union is going to ban the sale of antimicrobial drugs without prescription. Although that should not apply in Northern Ireland, it will. Some 60,000 products are sold over the counter. Our health service could not facilitate 60,000 additional GP appointments. This is an alarming development and I would like to hear the Minister indicate that he not only understands the severity and impact of it, but is going to take steps to address it.

Matthew Patrick: I am aware of the reforms that the right hon. Gentleman mentions. The Government share the EU's ambition to take action against antimicrobial resistance, but I am also aware of the potential impact on Northern Ireland's health service, particularly the demand for GP appointments, as he mentioned. We have raised this, and I will be happy to write to him with an update in due course.

Northern Ireland Troubles Bill

2. Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): What steps he has taken to engage with relevant stakeholders on the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. [907064]

9. Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): What steps he has taken to engage with relevant stakeholders on the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. [907071]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I regularly meet a variety of stakeholders to talk about the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, including veterans groups, political parties in Northern Ireland, and victims and families who are still living with the effects of those decades of terrible violence.

Luke Akehurst: No matter what unit they served in, veterans in North Durham are particularly concerned about the impact of the new legislation on those who served in the special forces. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that he has met the Special Air Service Regimental Association and is responding to its specific concerns?

Hilary Benn: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I did indeed meet the Special Air Service Regimental Association recently, as part of the discussions that I and my colleagues in the Ministry of Defence are having with veterans. We are listening to the concerns being expressed and, as I have said to the House on a number of occasions, we want to ensure that the legislation responds to them.

Mr Foster: Under the previous Government's unlawful Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, the Police Service of Northern Ireland was required to shut down more than 1,000 investigations, including 225 investigations into the deaths of soldiers and veterans. Will the Secretary of State please assure the families of murdered British armed forces personnel that, should they wish to approach the reformed commission, it will consider their case and may be able to provide them with the answers that many of them have long sought?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to one of the implications of the 2023 legacy Act in shutting down all those investigations. He is right that families are perfectly free to refer cases to the commission. I know that the commission is keen to investigate as many cases as come its way, in order to provide answers for those families, who have waited so long.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Engaging with and listening to stakeholders is good, but there needs to be a positive outcome to both. There

also needs to be specific and clear references in the Bill to paramilitaries not being permitted to serve on the victims and survivors advisory group. Will that be the case?

Hilary Benn: I have already given the House that assurance from this Dispatch Box. When we consider the Bill in Committee, we will have the opportunity to debate the Bill in its current form and the many amendments that I can see have already been tabled.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): The Secretary of State has stated many times that the previous Government's legislation in this area had no support from political parties in Northern Ireland. Can he tell the House which political parties support his legislation?

Hilary Benn: All the political parties in Northern Ireland that expressed their profound opposition to immunity have welcomed the fact that immunity will go under the legislation that we have brought before the House—that includes the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), the DUP leader, who supports its removal. That is a sign that the Government have been listening to views in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the Legacy Act failed to do that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Over Christmas, seven former senior SAS officers wrote in *The Telegraph*:

"In this Troubles Bill, the Government is complicit in this war on our Armed Forces."

A few days later, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, appointed by this Government, said that the Bill treats veterans "worse than terrorists" and is

"eating at the very fabric of the Armed Forces".

Can the Secretary of State tell the House which former senior officers support the Bill?

Hilary Benn: I do not agree with either of the characterisations that the hon. Gentleman just referred to. I am confident that the protections, which we have designed specifically for veterans, will change their experience in relation to the legacy process. However, as I have said to the House, we continue to talk to veterans and veterans organisations. I want to produce a Bill that can offer the reassurance they are looking for: that we have a fair and proportionate system that recognises their service to the country.

Alex Burghart: I note that the Secretary of State was unable to give a single example. There is, I am afraid, an ostrich-like complacency in the Government's approach to this legislation. Senior representatives of our armed forces are telling this House that the legislation is impacting on morale and effectiveness. In November, nine former four-star generals argued that this "morally incoherent" Bill poses a

"direct threat to national security".

Those generals tell us that highly trained members of special forces are already leaving the service, and by definition these men are very, very difficult to replace. No wonder *The Times* has said that

“a fundamental lack of political and military understanding lies at the heart of this Bill.”

Why do the Government think that they know better than our armed forces?

Hilary Benn: The Government had to do something about the previous Government's failed legacy Act, which had no support in Northern Ireland. If one is seeking to help the people of Northern Ireland to deal with the continuing consequences of the troubles, the legislation has to have that support, and the previous Government failed to do that. On the impact on recruitment, as the hon. Gentleman will have heard when the Minister for the Armed Forces answered the urgent question on Monday, inflows continue to improve. Indeed, inflow is up by 13% this year compared with September 2024.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

The Secretary of State was sitting alongside the Minister for the Armed Forces on Monday, when I asked him whether he was listening to the concerns of veterans regarding the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. The Minister convinced me that he is listening, and we just heard the Secretary of State do likewise, but is anyone acting on those concerns? Before Christmas, at the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State promised to write to me detailing which veterans groups he had met, but I have heard nothing since. I also wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to request a meeting to discuss veterans' ongoing concerns, but I have heard nothing since. Will the Secretary of State please detail all the veterans groups he has met, and meet me to discuss their continuing concerns?

Hilary Benn: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman that he has not received the letter to which he referred, and I assure him that I will remedy that very promptly. Defence Ministers and I have met a large number of organisations, and I would just point out that none of the six protections that the Government have put forward were contained in the previous Government's legacy Act—not a single one. We intend to continue to listen, and to respond to the concerns that have been raised.

European Convention on Human Rights: Belfast Agreement

3. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the UK's membership of the European convention on human rights on the Belfast agreement. [907065]

5. **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the UK's membership of the European convention on human rights on the Belfast agreement. [907067]

7. **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the UK's membership of the European convention on human rights on the Belfast agreement. [907069]

11. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the UK's membership of the European convention on human rights on the Belfast agreement. [907073]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The European convention on human rights underpins not only the Good Friday agreement, but key international agreements on trade, security and migration. The Government are committed to the ECHR. We also remain determined to uphold the Good Friday agreement and human rights in Northern Ireland.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. The Good Friday agreement was indeed a proud legacy of the last Labour Government, so does he agree that the reckless approach adopted by Opposition parties towards the ECHR risks undermining the huge progress made since 1998?

Hilary Benn: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and it is clear that those advocating leaving the ECHR have not given any serious consideration to the implications for the Good Friday agreement. Indeed, when pressed on that in the summer, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) noted that it could take

“years and years to solve, so that will not be at the forefront of what we do.”

I would simply say that that is not good enough, and that those who advocate leaving the ECHR need to reflect on what they are arguing for.

Peter Lamb: Given the chaos around the world that is being experienced by politicians playing fast and loose with international law, it is deeply concerning that Conservative and Reform MPs are speaking so flippantly of the risks of violating the Good Friday agreement by leaving the European convention on human rights. Will the Secretary of State give his assessment of the risk of that?

Hilary Benn: As I have told the House before, I think it would be extremely irresponsible. As the House needs no reminding, the Good Friday agreement was very carefully negotiated between several parties, and it would be reckless for one party to march in and seek to remove one of its founding pillars.

Jacob Collier: The European convention on human rights is foundational to the Good Friday agreement. Given that Reform and the Conservatives want to crash us out of the convention, does the Secretary of State agree that that would put at risk the Good Friday agreement and that they really ought to think again?

Hilary Benn: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need to remember that it is the Human Rights Act that gives all of us access to the rights and protections contained in the European convention on human rights. To leave it would put us alone in Europe, in the company of Russia and Belarus. Is that really where the Opposition want to be—welcomed with a pat on the back by President Putin?

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Our predecessor Committee took evidence that said that leaving the ECHR would have implications for policing in Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State agree that calls to leave the ECHR would add to the challenges faced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland? What assessment has he made of the potential impact?

Hilary Benn: I agree that it could have very wide-ranging implications for Northern Ireland in particular, as well as for the rest of the country. I have not made such an assessment, because that is not a policy that the Government advocate. It is for those proposing to leave the ECHR to answer the very fair question that my hon. Friend has just raised.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is plain wrong to say that the survival of the Belfast agreement is dependent on the ECHR. Why is the Secretary of State so selective in his Belfast agreement allegiance? It was he who implemented the jettisoning of the agreement's cornerstone of cross-community consent when he invited the Northern Ireland Assembly to continue the imposition of the Windsor framework without cross-community consent. Is it only nationalist consent that matters to him under the Belfast agreement?

Hilary Benn: The steps that I took in relation to the vote on the renewal of the Windsor framework arrangements were absolutely in line with the provisions that were put in place by this House, and Lord Murphy produced his report as a result. The hon. and learned Gentleman will have seen the practical steps that the Government are taking in response to Lord Murphy's very sensible recommendations.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): How will the Secretary of State respond to troubles stakeholder groups that say that the rights of their members under articles 6 and 8 of the ECHR are being impugned by his maladroit Northern Ireland Troubles Bill?

Hilary Benn: It is for all those who wish to argue about the rights that they feel the ECHR and the Human Rights Act give them to do so. I simply say that, in bringing the Bill forward, I as the Minister responsible have certified that the Bill complies with the European convention.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Is it not the case, as a matter of international law, that the United Kingdom could withdraw from the ECHR while at the same time ensuring that equivalent rights and protections are preserved in our domestic law?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that it is possible for signatories to the convention to withdraw, but it is a very bad idea and the Government do not support it.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Does the Secretary of State not agree with expert opinion that says that while we remain signatories to the ECHR, we will not be able to protect our veterans from vexatious litigation?

Hilary Benn: As I have said many times in the past, there is no such thing as vexatious prosecutions. The ECHR protects the rights of all our all citizens, including the veterans who served with such distinction in Operation Banner.

Economic Impact of Government Policies

6. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Government policies on the economy in Northern Ireland. [907068]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): Northern Ireland's economy is one of the strongest of any part of the United Kingdom: it has the lowest unemployment and its economic growth outpaced the rest of the UK in the year ending the second quarter of 2025. That performance is being supported by this Government's policies, including significant investment in economic development and a record settlement for the Executive.

Jerome Mayhew: Mr Speaker,

"a continuing cost-of-living crisis and a recent budget that failed to support workers, families and businesses in a meaningful way".

It is not often that I agree with the First Minister but, with absolutely no action to address lagging productivity, she is right, isn't she?

Hilary Benn: The Northern Ireland Executive have very considerable responsibilities in respect of the Northern Ireland economy. I note that the Finance Minister has published a draft three-year budget; the fact that we had a three-year spending review has given the Northern Ireland Executive the opportunity to do the same for the first time in a number of years. As the Minister said, there are choices that the Executive have to make—that is true of all Governments around the world—and I look forward to seeing the Executive come forward with a proposal for a balanced budget.

Northern Ireland Executive

8. **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): What recent engagement he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive. [907070]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): Since becoming a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, I have met Executive Ministers, building on the extensive engagement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Our discussions have been wide-ranging, and have included discussions on economic growth and transforming public services.

Claire Hanna: The Minister will be aware that for a number of months, I have been raising concerns about the local growth fund and its impact in Northern Ireland. Just before Christmas, organisations got the devastating news of a large cut to the local growth fund, which will devastate a number of support jobs and work done to help vulnerable people into meaningful employment. What steps will the Northern Ireland Office take to prevent the loss of those crucial support jobs, and to help put in place services to tackle our low productivity?

Matthew Patrick: I pay tribute to the great work done by the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. I know that this has been a difficult time, which is why our engagement with the sector has been so important. I can assure my hon. Friend that that engagement will continue to be important, especially as we launch the local growth fund, which provides £45.5 million a year to support growth in Northern Ireland.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): As we have just heard, Northern Ireland is operating under considerable budgetary constraints, and the local growth fund will cause huge damage. What can the Minister do to assure my constituents in Lagan Valley and people across Northern Ireland that he will listen to our concerns and act on them?

Matthew Patrick: We have put a record settlement of £19.3 billion into Northern Ireland. Obviously, that money can be used to support people. The local growth fund has been built for a year; it has been set aside to make sure that we can support the groups mentioned, and I will continue to engage with them.

2025 Budget

10. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2025 on Northern Ireland. [907072]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): This Budget provided Northern Ireland with an additional £370 million, on top of the record settlement of £19.3 billion each year on average over the spending review period. The decisions we have taken will ease trade within the UK, and will ensure that families across Northern Ireland benefit from help with the cost of living, through policies such as cutting energy bills and lifting the two-child benefit cap.

Catherine Fookes: The £370 million for the Northern Ireland Executive in this year's Budget, which the Secretary of State mentioned, and the £505 million for Wales, on top of the settlements announced at the spending review, show that this Government take supporting the devolved nations seriously. Does the Secretary of State agree that co-operation between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and other devolved nations, is crucial to pulling children out of poverty, improving public services and kick-starting growth across the UK?

Hilary Benn: I do agree with my hon. Friend. That is why the Government's decision to lift the two-child benefit cap was widely welcomed in Northern Ireland. I would also point out that Northern Ireland is being funded slightly above its level of need; it gets 24% more than equivalent spending in England, meaning that the Executive have more money to make their decisions with.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): When the Executive were restored two years ago, a fund was set up for the transformation of public services. As of yet, that money has not been fully allocated. Will the Secretary of State use his offices to encourage the Executive to deploy that transformation fund to transform Northern Ireland's public services?

Hilary Benn: The public services transformation fund is a very important demonstration of the partnership between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. As the hon. Member will be well aware, the first six projects have been funded, and good progress is being made on them. The transformation board is currently considering bids that are coming in for the next phase of funding. Of course, we are keen—as are the Executive—to see that money spent on transformation of how public services are delivered in Northern Ireland, which is hugely needed.

Support for Veterans

12. **Sarah Pochin** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): What steps he is taking to support Northern Ireland veterans. [907074]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The whole House will agree that we owe our Operation Banner veterans an enormous debt of gratitude. That is why the Government are introducing six protections for veterans involved in legal processes relating to their service. We are confident that this will change their experience and ensure that the process is fair and balanced.

Sarah Pochin: Does the Secretary of State agree with the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner that the troubles Bill treats our brave veterans more harshly than terrorists?

Hilary Benn: I do not agree with that assessment. I have had many discussions with the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, and if one looks at the facts, including at the prosecutions that have taken place, there have been more prosecutions of paramilitary terrorists than of soldiers. Indeed, there has been one conviction of a soldier for a troubles-related offence in the past 27 and a half years.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I extend a warm welcome to the President of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands and his delegation, who are with us in the Gallery today.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [907077] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 January.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I begin by saying that I hope all colleagues had a happy Christmas. It probably feels quite a long time ago now, but not for Reform, of course, because today is the day that they celebrate Christmas in Russia.

On Monday, I visited Reading, where I met people who will benefit from the first freeze in rail fares for 30 years. That is on top of other measures we are taking to tackle the cost of living—£150 off energy bills, more free breakfast clubs, and raising the minimum wage—and there is much more to come this year, as we turn the corner.

Yesterday, I stood side by side with our European and American allies and President Zelensky at the coalition of the willing meeting in Paris. We made real progress on security guarantees, which are vital for securing a just and lasting peace. Along with President Macron and President Zelensky, we agreed a declaration of intent on the deployment of forces in the event of a peace deal. We will set out the details in a statement at the earliest opportunity. I will keep the House updated as the situation develops, and were troops to be deployed under the declaration signed, I would put that matter to the House for a vote.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Ruth Cadbury: Leaseholders in my constituency and across the country are being fleeced by freeholders and managing agents. They need relief from both, and we need to end the feudal leasehold system, so can the Prime Minister confirm when the leasehold and commonhold reform Bill will come to Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. We are taking serious action to deliver the homes that the country needs, and to provide homeowners with greater rights, powers and protections. We will publish the draft Bill as soon as possible, and I will update the House. More protections are already coming this year, of course, because we passed the Renters' Rights Bill, which provides stronger protection for 9 million renters and abolishes no-fault evictions. That is the change we are delivering, and who voted against it? The Tories and Reform.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister's efforts to advance peace in Ukraine, and his joint statement on Greenland? The last few days have seen significant international events, with the US operation in Venezuela, threats towards Greenland, and an agreement to put British troops on the ground in Ukraine. It is therefore frankly astonishing that the Prime Minister is not making a full statement to Parliament today. No Prime Minister—Labour or Conservative—has failed to make a statement to the House in person after committing to the deployment of British troops. His comments about making a statement in due course are frankly not good enough. It shows a fundamental lack of respect for all of us here, and for the people we represent.

The United States is Britain's closest military ally. However, we are clear that the sovereignty of Greenland is sacrosanct, so can the Prime Minister tell us what influence he is bringing to bear on the United States Administration to ensure that that is respected?

The Prime Minister: Let me be very clear about what was agreed yesterday. Military plans were drawn up some months ago, and I have updated the House in relation to that. Yesterday's was a political declaration that sits under those military plans. If there were to be deployment, there would have to be a legal instrument. Deployment would only be after a ceasefire, to support Ukraine's capabilities, to conduct deterrent operations,

and to construct and protect military hubs. There will be a statement to the House at the earliest opportunity. [HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] There could hardly be an opportunity—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members claim that they want to know about this, and they are trying to shout me down.

If there were a decision to deploy under the agreement that was signed yesterday, I would put that matter to the House for a debate beforehand and for a vote on that deployment. That is consistent with recent practice, and I will adhere to that.

Mrs Badenoch: Why is today not the earliest opportunity? The truth is that the Prime Minister does not want everybody in this House to be able to ask him questions, so he leaves that just to Prime Minister's questions, which last for half an hour. At least on Monday his Foreign Secretary stood up to speak for two hours and 15 minutes. It was a non-event, but at least she did that. The Prime Minister is scared of our being able to ask him questions—six questions. [*Interruption.*] Yes, he is here—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have also requested an early statement; the House should always be informed first. I do not like the chuntering; let the questions continue.

Mrs Badenoch: Someone said, "He is here." The Prime Minister has no choice but to be here for Prime Minister's questions. That is why he is here. We know that if he could skip this, he would.

Let us return to the matter in hand. All of us, or at least most of us, agree that NATO is the bedrock of our security. The future of Greenland is of fundamental importance to the future of the alliance, and I am sure that the Prime Minister agrees that it is essential for NATO leaders, including and especially the United States, to meet. Will he call for an urgent meeting of NATO leaders?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition says that she wants to hear about Ukraine. She has six questions, and she is not even asking a second question about what we did yesterday. She has the opportunity.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I help the Prime Minister? He does not need to worry about responsibility for the questions from the Opposition. That is their job.

The Prime Minister: NATO is the single most important and effective military alliance that the world has ever seen. In the 18 months for which we have been in power, I have done everything in my ability to strengthen NATO. We had one of the strongest NATO meetings last year at the summit, when we had more members of NATO and more unity. When I arrived back at the House to make a statement, which of course the Leader of the Opposition had asked for, her position was that I should not have missed Prime Minister's questions; I should have empty-chaired the NATO summit. That is how serious she is about NATO.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister did not answer the question. I asked him whether he would call for an urgent meeting of NATO leaders. We can all see that the situation is moving rapidly. I also note that the

Prime Minister has still not had a call with President Trump. That is concerning, four days after the events in Venezuela.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced that Britain and France had signed a political agreement to put troops on the ground in the event of a peace deal in Ukraine. Given that he is not making a statement about that deployment of British troops abroad—one of the most serious decisions that a Government and a Parliament can take, irrespective of what he says—can he at least tell the House how many troops would be sent to Ukraine, and whether they would be in a combat role?

The Prime Minister: I was with NATO allies yesterday all day, and we were discussing security in Europe, and particularly security guarantees for Ukraine. We made significant progress, and I am glad that the right hon. Lady has welcomed that. Of course I will speak to President Trump. I spoke to his senior advisers yesterday—we were with them all day.

She asks me about the deployment. We released the statement yesterday. It is clear from that, but I will be clear with the House that there would only be deployment after a ceasefire. It would be to support Ukraine's capabilities, to conduct deterrence operations, and to construct and protect military hubs. The number will be determined in accordance with our military plans, which we are drawing up and looking to other members to support. I would put the number before the House before we were to deploy, but I would do more than that: if we got as far as the legal instrument to deploy, which would be necessary, I would have a debate in this House, so that all Members could know exactly what we were doing, and could give their points of view, and then we would have a vote in this House on the issue, which, to my mind, is the proper procedure in a situation such as this.

Mrs Badenoch: It is clear that the Prime Minister either does not have the detail or does not want to give us the detail, but this is important. He should be calling an urgent meeting of NATO leaders. He should have spoken to President Trump by now. This is important, because if any such peace deal is breached, we would be in direct conflict with Russia. If the Prime Minister is committing troops, he must give more detail on how he intends to ensure that our armed forces are fully resourced. Before the Budget, the Prime Minister said it was his "ambition" to spend 3% of GDP on defence in the next Parliament. That could be as late as 2034. It is time to move from ambition to commitment. We have had the Budget, so can the Prime Minister now tell us in what year the UK will spend 3% of GDP on defence?

The Prime Minister: On the serious issue that the right hon. Lady puts to me in relation to security guarantees, the American role and our dialogue with the Americans, I can assure the House that I spoke to President Trump twice over the Christmas period in relation to this specific issue, along with members of the E3 and European allies. That has been a constant in the course of our discussions. There is no question of acting on this without full discussion with the Americans. Their senior negotiators were there yesterday at President Trump's request and on his instructions, and they were talking to him during the course of yesterday as we negotiated. To assure the House—because it is a serious

position that she puts to me—on the question of security guarantees, there is nothing between the UK and the US, and we have been constantly discussing this over many, many weeks and months. We have made huge progress, and I have personally spoken to President Trump about this on two occasions since we were last in this House. I want to reassure her and the House in relation to that really important issue.

On defence spend, I am proud that we are investing to keep our country safe. We have increased the defence spend; that is provided for in the Budget. It is the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war, and that means better kit and better housing for our forces, and better defence as an engine for growth. Compare that with the Conservatives' record. Ben Wallace, who was on the radio this morning—the longest-serving Conservative Defence Secretary—admitted that on their watch, the armed services had been, in his words, "hollowed out". Our defence—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Mr Cartlidge, you expect a lot. I expect something back, and that is silence.

The Prime Minister: Hon. Members shout "shame!"; I will pass that on to Ben Wallace. The defence spending that we have put in place comes in three years earlier than the unfunded plan that the Conservatives left behind at the last election would have done.

Mrs Badenoch: I heard what—[*Interruption.*] Wait for it—wait for it! What Ben Wallace said was that spending had fallen under all Governments. The last time spending was at 3% was under a Conservative Government. Yes, while we welcome the increase—something that we supported—can I remind the House that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a man who sat in the shadow Cabinet and tried to make Prime Minister a man who said we should not even be in NATO at all? I do not need to take any lectures from him. The world is changing. We need to spend more on defence. He did not answer the question about when we will get to 3%, yet he knows up until 2031 how much he is going to be spending on welfare. He does not know. That is in the Red Book; the Red Book has no money allocated for defence. We need to move from ambition to commitment.

This is important because it is not just about money. If the Prime Minister is deploying troops to Ukraine, those troops need to know that we have their backs. Last week, seven former SAS commanders warned that Labour's Northern Ireland Troubles Bill will "wreck" our special forces. It was not me who said that; it was the SAS. In November, nine retired four-star generals warned that his Bill was

"a direct threat to national security".

Even his own Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner has said our veterans are being treated "worse than terrorists". Is it not madness to be putting veterans in the dock for serving their country at the same time that he is deploying today's soldiers into Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: That was embarrassing. The Leader of the Opposition said that Ben Wallace was talking about all Governments. The Conservatives were in power for 14 years, and they "hollowed out" our armed forces—copyright Ben Wallace.

The Leader of the Opposition talks about the shadow Cabinet. She has in her shadow Cabinet a shadow Attorney General who is advising Abramovich at the same time as we are imposing sanctions on Russia and trying to use that money to support Ukraine. How can someone sit in her shadow Cabinet advising someone trying to escape sanctions, and pretend that their policy is to support us on sanctions?

When it comes to Northern Ireland, the Conservatives are the party that gave immunity to IRA terrorists—terrorists who killed British soldiers. Their flawed Act was struck down by the courts, which left our veterans with no legal protection whatsoever. We are introducing a fair and transparent process, with a package of rights and protections for our veterans. There is no equivalence between our armed forces, who fought bravely in Northern Ireland, and terrorist groups. If the Leader of the Opposition wants—if her position is—to go back to their old, flawed legislation and give immunity to the IRA, she should stand up now and say so.

Mrs Badenoch: Let me start by talking about the shadow Attorney General. *[Interruption.]* Yes! Do Labour Members know what the shadow Attorney General is doing? He is defending veterans pro bono against the actions of this Government. We on this side of the House will defend those who defended us. But why do we not talk about the actual Attorney General, who is sitting in Cabinet: the man who defended Gerry Adams; the man who is trying to bring Shamima Begum back into the country; the man who is helping to surrender the Chagos islands? I will take our shadow Attorney General every day of the week against the Prime Minister's Attorney General.

We protect our veterans. I want the Prime Minister to know that we protect our veterans. What he is doing to veterans is disgraceful. But this is serious, and I do not want the House to be under any illusions. The Prime Minister should know that we will absolutely support any efforts to help bring peace to Ukraine and we will work with him to ensure NATO remains the bedrock of our security, but we cannot write a blank cheque when he is also surrendering the Chagos islands, surrendering our veterans to lawfare and surrendering to his Back Benchers by prioritising welfare handouts over defence spending, as if the world has not become more dangerous. Is it not time that the Prime Minister changed course, and for once put the British national interest first?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition talks about the shadow Attorney General. Of course, I accept that lawyers have to represent all sorts of crime. Of course, I accept that principle. The question is whether the shadow Attorney General can sit in the shadow Cabinet when the Conservative party says it supports us on sanctions. We want the money from Chelsea football club to go to Ukraine. I am not sure whether that is the Leader of the Opposition's position. If it is her position, presumably it is something they discuss in the shadow Cabinet, advised by a shadow Attorney General who is representing the very man whose money we want to send to Ukraine. If she cannot see the conflict of interest in that, then she shows no judgment and no leadership at all—the same old. It is a new year, but the Leader of the Opposition has absolutely nothing to offer the country. She is totally irrelevant. Nobody is listening to her. This is the year when, on this

side of the House, we turn a corner and people benefit from the decisions we made: £150 off energy bills, freezing rail fares and lifting half a million children out of poverty. We are turning the corner and there is much more to come.

Q5. [907081] Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Prime Minister can keep the good news going. He has rightly made house building and economic growth key priorities for the Government. By giving the go-ahead today to the Chesterfield Staveley regeneration route, he will help us to deliver 1,500 houses and 5,700 jobs on land that was previously coalmining and brownfield industrial land. It is not just a road; it is a growth project. Will the Prime Minister keep the good news coming and tell us that he will support the Chesterfield Staveley regeneration route?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; I know that he is working on this scheme. As he knows, land investigation works are currently taking place to help establish the final costs. The Roads Minister is looking closely at the scheme, alongside about 40 others. We will prioritise schemes that deliver faster journeys, and allow new homes and jobs.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Mr Speaker, may I wish you and everyone in this House a happy new year? I welcome the progress made on security guarantees for Ukraine yesterday. Geoffrey Robertson KC is a respected authority on international law. He is also the head of the Prime Minister's barrister chambers and he could not be clearer: President Trump's actions in Venezuela are illegal. He says the United States:

"is in breach of the United Nations charter"

and

"has committed the crime of aggression, which the court at Nuremberg described as the supreme crime".

Does the Prime Minister agree with his old mentor, or has he got it wrong?

The Prime Minister: There are plenty of things that Geoffrey and I have agreed on and disagreed on over the years, but let me set out our position. It is our long-standing position that Maduro was not a legitimate president in Venezuela, so nobody, I think, sheds any tears at his removal. What we were saying before the weekend, and we say again, is that there needs to be a peaceful transition to democracy in Venezuela. The benchmark of all actions of all countries is, of course, international law, and it is for the US to justify its actions accordingly. My focus is on the defence and security of the United Kingdom. Yesterday we were working with NATO allies, including the US, on security guarantees for Ukraine. It is only with security guarantees that we will have a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, which is vitally important for Ukraine, for Europe and for the United Kingdom.

Ed Davey: The Prime Minister just looks ridiculous when he will not tell the truth: that Trump has broken international law. Turning to Donald Trump's next target, the Prime Minister was right to give the Danish Prime Minister his backing over Trump's threats to annex

Greenland and I welcome his joint statement with other European leaders, but does he also agree that if Trump does attack Greenland, it will be the end of NATO? Given that frightening possibility, does he accept that the UK needs to increase defence spending more quickly than currently planned and build new alliances with reliable nations?

The Prime Minister: The Greenland issue is obviously very important and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising it. The future of Greenland is for Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark, and for Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark alone. Yesterday, he will have seen that I put out a statement to that effect, along with fellow allies in Europe. Of course, NATO is hugely important—the single-most effective and important military alliance the world has ever known. He keeps encouraging me to sort of tug away at parts of NATO, and to choose between Europe and the US. That would be a strategic mistake for our country.

Yesterday we were working with our NATO allies, including the US—our NATO ally—on a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, which will not happen without security guarantees from the coalition of the willing backed by the United States. That is a vitally important issue, and we made progress on it, but there will not be a just and lasting peace in Ukraine without those security guarantees, and not achieving a just and lasting peace in Ukraine is not in our national interest. That is why I am applying so much time and energy seeking to get that outcome.

Q7. [907083] **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Even its strongest advocates acknowledge that Northern Ireland is trapped in dysfunction—not because reform is not possible, but because the DUP and Sinn Féin have not allowed it. We have become a political “Hotel California”, where the past is always around but the future never arrives. There is growing public consensus that some of Stormont’s procedures simply are not working. The SDLP has found slivers of common ground across the political parties, too. Does the Prime Minister agree that now is the time for a structured conversation that both protects power sharing and addresses the culture of veto and decline so that Stormont might finally take responsibility and start to deliver for the people?

The Prime Minister: The Belfast/Good Friday agreement is one of the greatest achievements of the last Labour Government. As the hon. Lady well knows, it enshrined Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom and set out clear principles and processes under that framework. I am aware of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee’s inquiry into institutional reform, and I can indicate that we are always happy to discuss any proposals for reform that would lead to a consensus.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware of the grave concerns that abound around the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, particularly among veterans and those who stand up and speak out for the interests of those who defend our nation. They have read the six protections in the Bill and they do not see them as such: they offer no protection, they are procedural, and they apply to terrorists, too. Will the Prime Minister confirm that what we have heard is true—that the Ministry of Defence and the Northern

Ireland Office intend to bring forward Government amendments that will specifically and particularly protect veterans, and that they will offer protection?

The Prime Minister: I know how deeply the right hon. Gentleman feels about these issues. As he knows, the Bill will put in place new measures designed specifically to protect veterans. Those safeguards have been developed with veterans in mind after carefully listening to their concerns. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives have no respect at all for this issue, have they? We have been meeting veterans’ organisations and listening to their views, and, as the right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear, the House will see the result of those considerations when the Bill reaches Committee. We are determined to ensure that protections are as fair and effective as possible, recognising the role that service personnel played in keeping people across the UK safe during the troubles.

Q9. [907085] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Many independent business owners I have met fear the cumulative impact of the rateable value revision and relief reductions. In York, hospitality businesses will see an average business rates rise of 41%, music venues a rise of 44.4% and many independent shops increases of around 27%, meaning doors closing and trade ceasing—businesses simply cannot do it. Will the Prime Minister urgently review the business rates proposals, and will he ensure that a Minister or official attends my business rates summit at the end of January? I want to avert a crisis on York’s high streets.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. As she knows, the rates went down during covid, and that is now coming to an end. We have therefore put in interim relief as we move to the new rates. We are continuing to work with and talk to the sector about that support and about what further support and action we can take.

Q2. [907078] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The period after Christmas can be a challenging time for many people, and consequently the month of January consistently sees higher rates of suicide than other times of the year, but suicide is preventable and lives can be saved. Education, raising awareness and targeting vulnerable groups are all effective suicide prevention strategies, and I was pleased to see them in the recent men’s health strategy, but I call on the Government to go a step further and launch a public health campaign to encourage discussions about suicidal thoughts and ideation. Will the Prime Minister agree to continue this conversation with me, and will he state his support for a public health campaign to tackle the worryingly high number of deaths from suicide in this country?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. I can assure her that we want to work with all colleagues across the House on that crucial issue, and it is in our interest to do so. As she said, we have launched the first ever men’s health strategy, announcing over £3.5 million for suicide prevention and support programmes. We are recruiting more than 7,000 mental health workers, which includes access to talking therapies, and we are also rolling out mental health support teams in schools. It is vital that we raise awareness and increase the

support available. I can assure the hon. Lady that Ministers will be happy to discuss her proposals with her, because I genuinely want to work across the House on this serious and tragic issue.

Q11. [907087] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): I was very pleased to hear the Government's latest announcement about the roll-out of the chickenpox vaccine. It comes in stark contrast to the vaccine conspiracy theories being peddled by Reform. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only with a Labour Government is healthcare in this country safe and that Reform must never, ever be in a position to be responsible for the health of this country?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased about the measures we were able to announce this week. They come on top of the 5 million extra appointments we have delivered in the first year of this Labour Government and the 300,000 who have been taken off waiting lists, and more is to come as we turn into 2026. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. *[Interruption.]* Reform MPs laugh at the denial of the importance of vaccines. Imagine where this country would be if Reform ever saw power. If anyone wants an example of what it would be like, they should look at the local councils where Reform won power—they are absolutely chaotic, in a mess and putting taxes up.

Q3. [907079] **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Unlike many of his parliamentary colleagues, I actually do not think that the Prime Minister should resign. But at the start of a new year, it is time to reflect—reset, detox, if you will—on his Government's appalling economic policies and tax rises, particularly business rates and the impact they are having on the hospitality sector. Will the Prime Minister commit to doing that today?

The Prime Minister: I will reflect on the fact that inflation is falling and the Bank of England says that it is going to be down to its target. I will reflect on the fact that we have had six interest rate cuts in a row, and for those with mortgages that will be hugely effective. I will reflect on the fact that the International Monetary Fund says that we will have the second highest growth in 2025, defying the forecast. I remind the hon. Member that under the Conservatives we had inflation at 11% and the worst Parliament for living standards on record, and the Leader of the Opposition thinks that Liz Truss was 100% right to crash the economy. They are literally the only people who think that anybody should be listening to them. Nobody is!

Q12. [907088] **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Adrian Howe was a successful and dedicated Vodafone store manager for over 20 years. In 2017 he was offered the opportunity to take on a franchise for one of their thriving stores, but the goalposts changed and he was forced to take on a struggling store. Just days before he was due to open that store, Adrian stepped into a lake and did not ever return home. Adrian's wife and widow, my constituent Tracey, wonders if the Prime Minister will review franchising legislation to ensure that there is a balance of power between companies and their franchisees, so that nobody else feels undue pressure when they take on a franchise.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I think I speak for the whole House in saying that I am deeply sorry to hear about that tragic case, and all our thoughts are with the family. There is a live legal case that I cannot comment on, but I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will look closely at its final outcome. There are strong rules in place, but we will look at the outcome to see whether there is more that can be done.

Q4. [907080] **Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Last year, the cargo vessel Baltic Clipper lost 16 containers off the beautiful West Sussex coastline. Beaches and seas in my constituency have been polluted with toxic debris. The clean-up was initiated and led almost exclusively by resolute local volunteers. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to all those involved for their extraordinary efforts? Will he, or the relevant Minister, meet me to ensure that the coastline is restored and that local taxpayers will not pick up any costs?

The Prime Minister: Let me join the hon. Member in paying tribute to the agencies and local volunteers who supported the clean-up efforts; they are the very best. Liability sits with the polluter, and agencies and her local authority should work with the responsible party to recover the costs. I will ensure that she gets the meeting she asked for with the appropriate Minister.

Q14. [907090] **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I recently met bereaved constituents who lost their babies at Leeds teaching hospitals NHS trust. Understandably, their confidence in the system is at an all-time low. They want answers about the circumstances in which at least 56 babies and two mothers have died in recent years. Will the Prime Minister update the House on what steps he is taking to ensure that an inquiry uncovers the factors that led to these deaths, confirm Donna Ockenden as chair of that inquiry, and join me in paying tribute to the courageous families campaigning to ensure that nobody has to suffer the same tragedy again?

The Prime Minister: Every mother and baby deserve safe, high-quality, compassionate care. I want to see the inquiry at Leeds start as soon as possible. We are working with bereaved families to shape our approach and to appoint a chair whom they can trust, as my hon. Friend knows. I have a huge amount of respect for Donna Ockenden, who is an outstanding advocate for families. We will ensure that we select a chair of the highest standard who has the independence and expertise needed to deliver the real change that is needed.

Q6. [907082] **Mr Angus MacDonald** (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): According to the Office for National Statistics, 174,000 people under the age of 35 moved abroad in the year ending June 2025. In the highlands, the problem is especially acute: demographic statistics show that young people are not staying in rural communities and pupil numbers in schools are down by 40% to 50% in the past 20 years. Rural depopulation and youth emigration are two sides of the same story: lack of opportunity. We have a demographic crisis. What is the Prime Minister doing to ensure that the UK offers strong apprenticeship and skills pathways for young people? Does he agree that the SNP's failure

in Scotland, diverting away £170 million intended for apprenticeships and skills development, shows exactly what happens when opportunity is not delivered?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member. Alongside the record settlement that we have put in place for the Scottish Government, we are delivering huge investment in apprenticeships and offering a paid placement for every young person, which is vital. The SNP, on the other hand, blocked a welding facility in the Clyde, because apparently it was related to defence. The SNP does not back Scottish industry, young people or national security—we do.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): The Government are tackling patient waiting lists through NHS modernisation and reform. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to tackle victim waiting lists by reforming our courts and criminal justice system?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. I have been working with victims of violence against women and girls for the best part of 20 years, and I have assured them time and

again that if we got the opportunity, we would make the system work better for them. They have to wait far too long for justice, and in many cases they do not see justice at all. I am absolutely determined that we are going to turn that around.

Q8. [907084] **Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** The Prime Minister promised not to bulldoze the countryside, but under Labour, green fields in Aldridge-Brownhills on Stonnall Road, Birch Lane and Bosty Lane are now under threat. Does he accept that his housing target can be met without destroying our farmland and countryside by reusing empty homes and brownfield land, or is that yet another promise that he never meant to keep?

The Prime Minister: We will not plough through farmland; we will make sensible proposals to build houses. The Conservatives failed to do that in 14 long years, so now, because of the inheritance we got from them, young people do not have the dream of home ownership. We will turn that around.

BILL PRESENTED**DEPRIVATION OF CITIZENSHIP (PROMOTION OF
TERRORISM OR VIOLENCE) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Sarah Pochin, supported by Nigel Farage, Richard Tice, Lee Anderson and Danny Kruger, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to deprive a person of citizenship if they have been convicted of an offence relating to national security in the United Kingdom or abroad and have subsequently promoted terrorism or violence in public; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January, and to be printed (Bill 358).

**Student Finance
(Review of Payment Schedules)***Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

12.40 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to review the scheduling of student finance payments to undergraduates; to require the review to consider advance provision of certain student finance payments in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Today, I introduce the Student Finance (Review of Payment Schedules) Bill. A former civil servant—one of the designers of the current student finance system—once told me that the loan system has become a Frankenstein's monster. Maintenance loan payment dates simply do not line up with the reality of students' lives. Rent and bills are due monthly but student finance arrives in infrequent, uneven chunks, forcing students to budget against uncertainty or rely on overdrafts simply to get by.

The system assumes a level of financial resilience that many students simply do not have—and even once students graduate, the problems just do not stop. Repayment is needlessly complex and riddled with ludicrous features, such as charging higher interest rates to those who go on to earn more. The result is a system that adds stress during study, confusion after graduation and long-term financial insecurity for an entire generation. As one of the youngest MPs, who is still repaying a plan 2 loan, I recognise many of those challenges.

I work with the University of York students' union, whose representatives are sat in the Public Gallery, on cost of living issues such as bus fares for students locally. Today's Bill, however, seeks to make student finance work better for the over 2 million undergraduate students in this country, and it would build on the work of this Labour Government to reintroduce targeted maintenance grants for students from the lowest income households. We need to change the way maintenance loans are distributed. Scotland's student finance system administers monthly maintenance payments. Long story short, that is the model that needs to be explored for England and Wales. It comes at no extra cost and is a no-brainer.

Many students face financial strain because maintenance loans are paid termly. For a student receiving the maximum £10,200 outside London, that creates three lump-sum payments of approximately £3,400 each. Let us imagine receiving four months of salary all at once; that is the system we expect students to navigate. Many are at the point in their lives when they are still learning those essential budgeting skills. The termly payment schedule fuels cash-flow challenges, leading to students maxing out overdrafts—nearly one in three with an overdraft have maxed out their facilities at some point—and creating problem debt, pushing them to other forms of credit simply to get by.

There is also a particularly acute pressure point as students transition between years at university, when rent deposits are due before their student finance payments arrive. Students should not be pushed into financial worry, especially after a stressful period of sitting their exams, simply because of a payment scheduling mismatch.

That is why I believe that we should move to monthly payments. Not only would it give students greater financial stability and reduce stress, but it would better reflect the world of work once students leave uni and start getting their first full-time payslips. For second and third-year students, being able to access finance from July, when rent often begins, would be genuinely transformative.

At the moment, we force families to step in, or we force students who do not have that safety net into overdrafts. Student finance can also act as a barrier for working-class students from the moment they get their A-level results because of the up-front costs before they even go to university. Pots and pans, rent deposits, books, software, travel passes, course subscriptions—the costs all stack up. The reality is that by the time a student sets foot in their first lecture, they have already navigated a stressful and uneven financial landscape.

I heard of a student who could not afford the train ticket to get to university because their student finance had not arrived. Starting uni should be memorable, not miserable. Another student who was a care leaver wrote to me saying that they had experienced the “just about coping” stage at first hand. They recalled the “genuine terror” of not knowing how they would pay their rent because their loan had not landed. Research by Student Minds, covered by the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, showed that nearly half of students felt the rising cost of living was impacting their mental health.

The simple but transformative fixes I have outlined today would make a huge difference, and student unions across the country, including the National Union of Students, agree. Just some of the SUs that are backing my Bill include Manchester, University College London, Leeds, Birmingham, Exeter, Sheffield, Liverpool, Greenwich, Newcastle and Bath Spa, and these represent around 350,000 students. When we add in Durham, Derby, Bath, Buckinghamshire, Staffordshire, Lancaster, Essex, Leeds Trinity, Chester, Royal Holloway, Bradford, Roehampton, Worcester, the University of Law, Winchester, University College Birmingham, Liverpool Hope, the Arts University Bournemouth, Buckingham and of course York, we have student unions representing a third of all the students in the country supporting this Bill and these small tweaks today. Thank you! I am still getting letters of support even now. I want to give special thanks to Amira Campbell, the president of the NUS, who is also backing my Bill. She says:

“Student finance is in dire need of reform and a review into the payment plan is a great place to start. We’d strongly support this review and a move to monthly payments which would allow students to better budget their income, particularly over the summer where bills come in, but their income does not.”

Just briefly on loan repayments, plan 2 borrowers, including me, were never clearly told that higher graduate earnings meant higher loan interest. As a former Financial Conduct Authority regulator, I can tell the House that, although the regulations do not apply to student loans, my honest view is that the communication around student loan repayments, where income is linked to interest rates, feels like a mis-selling scandal waiting to unfold.

In summary, the under-30s have been forgotten about in British politics for far too long. You may not believe it, Mr Speaker, but it was only a few months ago that I left that age group—

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Surely not!

Mr Charters: Yes, I know—my grey hair and tired eyes from my two amazing young boys make me look just a little bit older. It is this Labour Government who are giving younger people a better deal: votes at 16; better wages and rights for student workers; and bringing back targeted maintenance grants. Of course, on the latter, we should always be looking to go that bit further. Reform Members just do not care about young people. They want to cut their wages—

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Rubbish!

Mr Charters: Well, they want to cut the national minimum wage for young people. What a scandal! The Greens are peddling false hope to students and have no realistic plan to help with the cost of living. Their Members are not even here today. And this entire mess is totally of the Tory-led coalition Government’s making—the one I went to university under, by the way. We must help students with the cost of living so that they can live up to their full potential, rather than having a terrible experience at uni because they are struggling to make ends meet. So let us make a simple fix to the timings of maintenance loans to support millions of students up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Luke Charters, Adam Jogee, Abtisam Mohamed, Tom Hayes, Pam Cox, Luke Myer, Mike Reader, Sarah Russell, Gareth Snell, Afzal Khan, Sam Carling and Dr Jeevun Sandher present the Bill.

Mr Luke Charters accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January, and to be printed (Bill 357).

Opposition Day

[15TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Jury Trials

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment tabled in the name of the Prime Minister. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.50 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that it is wrong to abolish jury trials for crimes with anticipated sentences of three years or less because jury trials are a fundamental part of the UK constitution and democracy; acknowledges the scale of the courts backlog and the necessity of reducing it to ensure justice for victims but believes that restricting the fundamental right to trial by jury will have a limited effect on reducing that backlog; calls on the Government to increase the number of court sitting days to help urgently reduce the backlog; and further calls on the Government to publish immediately all modelling it has undertaken and received on the potential impact of the abolition of jury trials on that backlog.

The Government propose to abolish the right to trial by jury for a vast range of offences and for any case where they expect a sentence of three years or less. This is nothing less than wielding a constitutional axe against a centuries-old cornerstone of our liberty. Juries are not some bureaucratic add-on to our justice system; they are the means by which the public consent to and participate in the exercise of the gravest power of the state: the power to convict and imprison our fellow citizens.

Yes, we face a serious Crown court backlog—that is not in any dispute today. That is not even a subject of debate today, because everyone on both sides of the House knows it and acknowledges it. We all accept that its roots did not begin under this Labour Government; it goes back to the pandemic and further than that. We all accept that there has been a lack of investment in our criminal justice system under Governments of all political persuasions, that the criminal Bar is in a weak place, and that young people do not feel they can go into the law or at least not into this most challenging and poorly paid part of it. We all accept that some of our courtrooms are in a terrible state, that the IT system is failing, that the contracts for getting prisoners to court on time are poorly managed and that the private contractors are underperforming. We all accept that the system is in a mess and needs to be reformed, but that is not the question at hand today. The question before us is, what is the best way to resolve this, and is the route to fix our criminal justice system and to deliver swift justice for victims to scrap something that we have known as a country since 1215, if not before?

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way; he is always generous with his time. He talks about the length of time it takes for victims to get justice. I speak to police officers in my constituency all the time who say that one of the issues with the backlog, this waiting list, is that people who have been police officers for three years are asked to go to court for cases about things that happened before they were even police officers. Does he recognise that this is a huge challenge that we need to overcome?

Robert Jenrick: I do. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is shameful to our country that victims of serious crimes like rape will have to wait until 2028 or 2029. In fact, I believe the longest listing hence today is 2030. No one in this Chamber could possibly defend that for one moment, but will this policy make a material difference to fixing that problem? I do not believe that it will. I have not heard anyone who really believes in their heart that it will fix the problem, and if it is going to make a difference, publish the modelling and the evidence so we can see it, because Lord Leveson has not published any modelling. Lord Leveson gave a view that it might lead to a 20% reduction in the length of a trial. That is heavily disputed by other practitioners, including—and I do not mean to demean Lord Leveson—people who are closer to the coalface of our criminal justice system: judges and criminal barristers. The Department has not published any modelling. Does it exist? If it does, publish it and then we can have an honest and evidence-led debate.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend squares up to lead civil society in a battle against this monstrous measure, may I ask him to have some sympathy for Labour Members, who are about to be led to the top of the hill once again, as they were with the farm tax and the winter fuel allowance, on a measure that simply will not deliver the solution it is designed to? They will all end up having the rug ripped from under them once again after enduring all the political pain.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is right. Having served as a Minister in the last Conservative Government under multiple Prime Ministers, I have been led up a few hills before myself, and I know what it feels like to be a Minister in this situation. This is not a hill to die upon. Let us fix this problem. Let us build a cross-party consensus on how we get the backlog down—I will speak about a few of the solutions as I see them, as we see them, in a moment. This policy is not going to happen. I honestly believe that this is not going to happen.

There is opposition not just from the official Opposition, but from every other party—Reform, Plaid, independents and the Liberal Democrats. There is opposition from Labour Members—good, experienced colleagues on the Government side. There is opposition in the House of Lords from Labour peers of the highest repute like Helena Kennedy—people who have spent careers in the law. This was not in the manifesto; the House of Lords does not have to support it. The last time Jack Straw and Tony Blair tried to do this, the House of Lords stepped in and it failed.

This is a distraction. This is a waste of everyone's time. If the Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary and his Ministers care about swift justice, they should scrap this pointless distraction and focus every hour of the day on the hard yards of government, on doing the difficult things, and on the administrative failures of the Ministry of Justice that have existed for years, so we can actually ensure that the backlog is brought down.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con) *rose*—

Robert Jenrick: I will come to the hon. Lady in a moment, but I give way to my right hon. Friend.

David Davis: My right hon. Friend is being characteristically overgenerous to the Government when he talks about the requirement for modelling. This is not a “Mastermind” question; it is simple arithmetic. Three per cent of trials are by jury. If we do away with half of them, which is more draconian than even the Government are talking about, and there is a difference of 20%, the maximum difference it could make to the throughput of the court system is 0.3%. It will make no difference whatsoever to one of our most fundamental issues, yet it will throw away the most fundamental tenet of our justice system.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why if the Government have a case, they should publish the evidence—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is easier if you look at me because I cannot pick up what you are saying when you are turned the other way.

Robert Jenrick: Of course, Mr Speaker—apologies.

If the Government have a case, they should publish the evidence and the modelling. This is not a minor policy; it will change something that we have enjoyed as a country for hundreds of years. Something as significant as this should be done on the basis of evidence, so I say to the Minister that whether the Government accept our motion or not today is by the bye, but they should accept the spirit of it and publish the evidence now so that everyone can see it; so that the lawyers, judges and practitioners who care and are worried about this can engage in a proper debate; and above all, so that we in the House of Commons, who are the guardians of our constitution and our ancient liberties, can have a debate on the basis of facts.

Florence Eshalomi *rose—*

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) *rose—*

Robert Jenrick: I will give way to the hon. Lady and then to the hon. Gentleman.

Florence Eshalomi: The right hon. Member has made some valid points about the situation we face—the fact that 78,000 cases are caught up in the backlog, that many of our constituents are waiting for their day of justice and that justice is being denied, and we know that many people cannot continue to wait—but does he not accept that there was not enough focus on all the issues he has outlined during the last Administration and that they could have done a lot more to resolve them, so that we were not in this difficult situation that we have to find a way to address?

Robert Jenrick: Both parties must share the blame for the present situation. The former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Justice came before the Justice Committee last year and was asked broadly the same question that the hon. Lady just asked me: what is the root cause of the current backlog? She responded that although the system had been poorly funded for some time, which had created a number of challenges, the primary cause was the pandemic. Covid created immense strain on our justice system. As a result of that, a backlog that had,

broadly speaking, been falling in the years prior to the pandemic—it had begun to rise slightly in the period immediately before—shot up. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I will not have all sides cross-examining each other. I am listening to just one person at the moment.

Robert Jenrick: I am just restating, I think fairly, what the former permanent secretary said. The Ministry of Justice did not do enough to get the backlog under control. There has been a serious failure to fix the productivity problems in our court system, as I think the Institute for Fiscal Studies set out independently in a report last year. Could the last Government have done more? Well, perhaps they could have. They did try to do things: they increased the number of sitting days and brought in special courts, such as Nightingale courts, in parts of the country, which began to make some difference. None the less, the backlog kept rising.

The backlog has risen very substantially under this Labour Government as well. In fact, to the extent that we have accurate figures, it is rising by about 500 cases every month, so the problem has continued to get worse and worse. I therefore do not see today’s debate as a partisan debate between the two main parties. The key thing is how we solve the problem. How do we look to the future? Is slashing jury trials the answer? No. Are there better ways to do this? Yes.

Karl Turner: It pains me to say that I agree with the vast majority of what the right hon. Gentleman is saying at the Dispatch Box. He referred to Sir Brian Leveson. Of course, none of us would suggest that Sir Brian does not know what he is doing—he is very eminent and skilful, and has taken a great deal of time to come up with his suggestions—but does the right hon. Gentleman know of any situation before when the Bar Council, the Criminal Bar Association, circuit leaders and every other stakeholder in the criminal justice system have been as one in their opposition to an utterly ludicrous, unworkable policy?

Robert Jenrick: I rest my case, my Lord. I sincerely thank the hon. Gentleman for the way he has conducted himself, and the campaign that he has fought and is fighting on this issue. Having campaigned at times against my own Government and having voted against the last Conservative Government, I know that it is not easy to do, and I credit him for the work he is doing.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Robert Jenrick: Let me answer the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), because he is making an important point. Lawyers rarely agree—in fact, their profession is often to disagree. This issue has united everyone in opposition to it. The Law Society, the Bar Council, the Criminal Bar Association and lawyer after lawyer has said that this policy is wrong and a better way is possible. This is not party political. It cuts across all parties, and opponents include vehement critics of mine. I woke up the other day to hear Anna Soubry on the “Today” programme saying that everything I was arguing was right. This is about getting the right answer for our criminal justice system.

Dr Murrison: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are alternative models for getting to the place where we all want to be—that is to say, for reducing this awful backlog, which is denying people justice? Will he take particular note—he probably already has—of the model introduced in the south-west by my constituent James Ward OBE? He introduced covid resolution courts, which were able to bring the backlog down from 52% to 2% through proper case management in the Crown Prosecution Service. That intervention alone saved 10 sitting years.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let me come to some potential solutions. It is important to note that the backlog varies very widely across the country. His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service is a poorly managed organisation with limited accountability to Ministers, and it has not been performing its function as well as it should. There are parts of our country where the backlog is far smaller than in others. In Liverpool and parts of Lancashire—despite the closure of your local court, Mr Speaker—the court backlog is substantially lower, as it is in Wales. There are significant regional differences because better managers, active judges and good case management of the kind that my right hon. Friend mentioned have made a significant difference.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will just advance my case a little, and then I will come to my hon. Friend. The most important thing that we could do is get the courts sitting round the clock. There are sitting days on the table that are not being used. The Lady Chief Justice, the most senior person in our judiciary, has said repeatedly that she is able to offer the Government more sitting days. She has said it in the press, she said it before the Justice Committee the other day, and I am sure that she has said it privately to Ministers as well. The Government have been pushed, slowly, to take her up on those sitting days, and I commend them for that.

However, there are still, by the Lady Chief Justice's measure, at least 2,000 extra sitting days available that the Government are not taking her up on. We need to go back to her, welcome those sitting days with open arms, and say, "What would it take for you to produce more? Can we turn 2,000 into 5,000, or 10,000?" Get the courts actually sitting. That is not happening right now. The principal reason for that is financial: the Ministry of Justice has not been able to secure from the Treasury a comparatively small sum of money. We can argue about the priorities of this Government, and we will differ across the House, but the sum of money that we need for the proper operation of our criminal justice system is relatively small. It must be better to spend that money on this cause than to scrap an ancient freedom that we have enjoyed, generation after generation.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend is making excellent points about alternative solutions to scrapping the right to a jury trial. Any MP who has spent any time in their local courts will have seen that the issue is not the juries, but poor administration, which is resulting in about a quarter of trials having to be rescheduled. Does he agree that rather than setting a

precedent of scrapping the right to trial by jury, the Government should start by looking at ways to remove the pressure on an overwhelmed CPS? Does he think that giving the police greater charging powers would be a way to move forward on this?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes a number of very important points. There are better ways to handle this situation. I do not pretend that they are simple; they are difficult. They involve getting to the heart of bureaucratic organisations that have been poorly managed and are unaccountable. Let us look at some of the solutions. One, which Brian Leveson mentions in his report, is incentivising early pleas to prevent cases dragging on unnecessarily, for example by ensuring that those accused of offences meet their counsel earlier, so that they get good advice about their likelihood of success or otherwise sooner, and changing the fee structure accordingly to achieve that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for bringing this issue forward. Just to give an example for when he is looking at options, in Northern Ireland we had cause to use Diplock courts on many occasions. In 2023, they were used on 0.8% of occasions. Terrorist trials and serious criminal trials do not have a jury because of intimidation. However, does he agree that our natural sense of justice demands a jury of our peers, that non-jury trials must remain exceptional, and that justice can be served more efficiently by juries, by increasing court dates, and by cutting the number of ineffective trials that waste time—the very thing he has referred to?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a series of important points. There is something very special about being judged by a group of one's peers, and about the wisdom of ordinary members of the public coming together. Juries are basically the only opportunity for members of the public to participate in our criminal justice system. That is important and should be preserved. He is right to say that we need to get the courts sitting around the clock. This week alone, 241 sitting days have been missed because of closed courtrooms—241 in three days! Imagine what the figure is over the course of a year.

We must ensure that prisoners arrive at court on time. The present contract is not working properly, which leads to many trials collapsing or suffering unacceptable delays. We need to drastically improve court IT, ending the technical failures that waste hours of court time every week. As I said, we need to provide proper support for the criminal Bar. I welcome the Justice Secretary's modest intervention the other day to ensure that there are enough advocates to prosecute and defend cases. Those are the bottlenecks that actually drive delays. Bottlenecks are a problem of resources and management, not an inevitable side effect of having citizens weigh evidence. Jury trials are not the problem. We must ensure that we get to the root of the challenge, not get rid of something that we have enjoyed for such a long time.

Let me mention the degree of opposition to the proposal, which my hon. Friends have rightly mentioned. It is important to note the broad opposition of the legal world, where alarm bells are ringing about the policy. The Law Society, which represents thousands of solicitors,

calls it an “extreme measure” that goes too far and fundamentally changes how our justice system operates. Its president, Mark Evans, warns that the plan goes further than the recommendations of Sir Brian Leveson’s review of efficiency, and is not backed by evidence that it will solve the backlog. The Bar Council, which represents barristers, has been equally clear that it sees

“no basis for altering the structure of the court system”

in this way, and warns that limiting the right to a jury trial strikes at a core citizen’s right.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Robert Jenrick: I will, but then I must conclude my remarks, because many colleagues wish to speak.

John Grady: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman might clarify one point on the Opposition’s position. In Scotland, there has never been a right for the accused to elect to have a jury trial. The prosecution decides whether a case will go to jury trial. Is the Opposition’s position that such a reform in England should be opposed?

Robert Jenrick: That is the subject of this debate, isn’t it? England and Wales have their own legal tradition, and Scotland has its own. Those of us who represent constituencies in England and Wales are here to defend our constitutional rights and settlement, and we will. It is up to those in Scotland to choose their path forward.

The hon. Gentleman’s point raises another important question: is this debate a technical, bureaucratic one about how to get the backlog down in the most expeditious way, or does he speak to an ideological view that jury trials are wrong or superfluous, and that ordinary people do not know what they are talking about and their views should be casually set aside? I do not know the answer to that question in respect of the hon. Gentleman, but some in our politics do take the latter view. They think that ordinary citizens cannot be trusted. As Baroness Helena Kennedy suggested, some in the Labour tradition take the view that led Tony Blair and Jack Straw to take the original decision. Clearly, that is not everyone in the Labour tradition, as we see today—it may be a very small minority—but that view is not one that we support.

We want ordinary people to continue to be at the heart of our criminal justice system. That is why we have brought forward the motion. This is an Opposition day debate, but opposition to this proposal is not restricted to those on the Conservative Benches, or to those in the other Opposition parties; it is found on both sides of this House and in the other place. It comes from the solicitors, barristers and judges who can speak out, and from those who cannot, when they speak privately at their kitchen table. It comes from ordinary citizens of our country, who want jury trials preserved—poll after poll shows that clearly.

We are talking about 800 years of legal tradition. Let us not toss it aside; let us defend it, because it matters, and then let us unite and find a way to fix the bureaucratic failures of the Ministry of Justice to ensure that we have swift justice. Justice delayed is justice denied; we all agree on that. We can do this without ruining a gift that this country has given the world, and a fundamental part of our constitution and our democracy. Vote for our motion to defend jury trials, and tomorrow let us work together to fix the court backlog.

1.15 pm

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to end and insert:

“believes that the Government inherited a justice system on the brink of collapse with a record and rising caseload created under 14 years of Conservative mismanagement, austerity and cuts to the justice system that has forced victims of crime to wait years for justice; notes that the justice system has historically evolved to match the needs of the society it serves; supports the Government in making the investment required, including continuing to break records on the number of sitting days funded; looks forward to Sir Brian Leveson’s upcoming recommendations on reforms to improve efficiencies across the courts system; further supports taking forward reforms to the justice system based on Sir Brian Leveson’s independent review of the criminal courts in which victims and the public can have confidence; and further notes that the Government will introduce legislation and publish its impact assessment in due course.”

“Let’s fix it tomorrow”, says the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)—tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow. What a luxury! Our justice system is in a state of crisis, as he has said, but although in every crisis there is risk, there is also opportunity. The opportunity here is one that we in government grasp, to modernise our justice system and bring it into the 21st century.

Let us start with the crisis. I did not hear an apology in the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, but he did lay bare the facts about what the previous Government did to our justice system. Being in government is about choices. We know what choices His Majesty’s Opposition would make about the justice system because they had 14 years to show the world. Now the right hon. Gentleman says, “Let’s come together, talk about investment in our system and talk about solutions,” but what did the Conservatives do for 14 years? They closed half of all courts in England and Wales. Who did they entrust with the guardianship of our justice system? Liz Truss, Dominic Raab, Chris Grayling. They decimated our legal aid system and all but broke our prison system.

What is the result? Well, the right hon. Gentleman is right: there is consensus that we are in crisis and that the status quo cannot be tolerated. Nearly 80,000 criminal cases are currently waiting to be heard in the Crown court—more than double the waiting list pre covid. Victims are waiting years for justice—over 20,000 open cases in the Crown court backlog have been waiting for a year or more. Justice delayed is justice denied, and the Conservative party must bear much of the blame, but we will never hear the word “sorry.”

Dr Murrison: I am not interested in a party political rant, but plainly the Minister is. What I am interested in, however, is expediting justice for my constituents. She will have heard in my intervention on my right hon. Friend the shadow Justice Secretary that there is a model to solve that. Will she please explain why the model that my constituent James Ward brought forward, which had spectacular results in reducing delays in our criminal justice system, is not being applied but the abolition of trial by jury is?

Sarah Sackman: The Conservatives had 14 years to implement the solutions that they now say are blindingly obvious. The fact is that swift courts, flow courts, blitz courts—whatever we wish to call them—are being operated, but they cannot keep up with demand. Our justice system has simply not kept pace with the times and the

[Sarah Sackman]

demands of modern society. There is now record demand for criminal cases. There are more police officers, arrests are up by 10%, and cases arriving at the Crown court are up by 20%. Trials are more complex, with cases taking, on average, 71% longer. Technology, such as the smartphones we carry in our pockets, is creating more digital evidence than ever before. Jury trials take twice as long as they did in 2000.

Those delays mean that in many cases justice is simply not being served. With those delays, witnesses pull out, memories fade and, as others have pointed out, more trials crack. As a result, justice is not being served. We have a system in which, as we know, there are criminals who are planning to spend next Christmas, and the Christmas after that, at home with their families. They are gaming the system, while victims wait longer and longer for justice, dealing with isolation and mental torment, unable to heal and to move on.

No one is defending the status quo, yet no Government to date have been bold enough to take the necessary action towards finding a solution. I am a firm believer that politics is an agent of change—that is why I left my career in law to enter politics. When we are presented with a crisis, we see the opportunity, we find the plan, and we fix it—we make it better.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Government's amendment, which the Minister has signed, refers to the Government's impact assessment. Have the Government done an impact assessment but are refusing to publish it, or did they announce plans to end jury trials for certain cases without that evidence?

Sarah Sackman: My answer to the hon. Gentleman is simple: there will be an impact assessment and this House will have the opportunity to scrutinise it. It is important that the impact assessment assesses the Bill that is brought forward, which must of course interact with the concordat process and the agreed number of sitting days with the judiciary.

We as a Government do not practise the learned helplessness that His Majesty's Opposition did in the past 14 years; we look for solutions. That is why we commissioned the independent review of the criminal courts, to conduct and carry out a careful piece of work, and to provide the blueprint for the change that is so desperately needed. All I hear from the Opposition is, "The Government should simply ignore that work", but that is the evidence base, and that is the blueprint we are going to follow.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): On the point about delay and the solutions we must bring forward, just yesterday I was with communities, near here in Victoria, who are facing the scourge of street drug dealing, and the aggressive harassment of residents by drug dealers, who also prey on vulnerable people who find themselves rough sleeping. The police, people in the sector and those working on the front line tell me that they are really struggling with the state of our courts and justice systems. Does the Minister agree that victims of crime are affected by that, as well as communities who are facing and struggling with the scourge of crime and antisocial behaviour on

our streets? She will have listened to the remarks of the shadow Secretary of State, so was she as profoundly disappointed as I was by his attempt at building a consensus on this topic, and by the complete paucity of suggestions that he has brought forward, when many suggestions are already being considered?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right: at the heart of the considerations that we must make as we bring our justice system, reformed and rebuilt, into the 21st century, are victims. This is all about delivering swift justice for victims, because what our constitution guarantees is not a constitutional right to a jury trial, but a constitutional right to a fair trial. The essential ingredient of fairness is timeliness, not waiting years while evidence deteriorates, memories fade, and victims and witnesses alike pull out; it is about getting swift justice. When I talk about reform of the system, of course I listen to important stakeholders who lead our professions, and of course their opinion counts, but my interest is in having a criminal justice system that serves the public, not one that serves lawyers.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The Opposition are keen to rely on Magna Carta to defend jury trials, but Magna Carta also states that justice should not be delayed. Sir Brian Leveson reported that jury trials are taking twice as long as they did in 2000 because criminal cases are now much more complex and can involve thousands of pages of electronic evidence. We are putting more pressure—financial and otherwise—on jurors, and it is now much more difficult to support and guide them. There is clearly a case for reform. I understand that one recommendation made by Sir Brian Leveson was to have jury trials replaced by a judge and two magistrates, so could that be a possible compromise to reduce the delays?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right to say that the nature of crime and of the evidence presented is altering the way our criminal justice system works, but let me provide this reassurance to the House: as well as modernising and rebuilding our justice system, these measures are designed to protect jury trials for the most serious cases. As I have said, many of those trials are becoming compromised, with many victims of the most serious crimes waiting years for justice. It is right that when we ask jurors to do the most important civic duty, we use their time wisely. Does it make sense that the queue of the victim of rape or of a homicide is shared with someone who has stolen a bottle of whisky and who could be dealt with by a lay magistrate who, by the way, introduces the lay and democratic element into our courts?

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The letter on criminal court reform written by the Justice Secretary to the Justice Committee states on rape and prioritisation:

"We are not introducing a specific target for rape cases, but our overall objective is to drive down these wait times as quickly as possible. Listing is a judicial function and the judiciary already prioritises cases involving vulnerable victims and witnesses, which includes victims of sexual offences, including rape."

The Minister's example about a bottle of whisky is therefore not appropriate; it is fundamentally wrong, according to the letter written by the Justice Secretary himself.

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Gentleman is right that listing is a judicial function, but the fact remains—this is CPS data—that some 4,000 cases last year could have been heard four times faster. We know that cases are heard four times faster in the magistrates court than in the Crown court, and although magistrates had the sentencing powers to deal with such matters, the defendants elected for a jury trial, which they have the right to do under the current system. Why did they elect for a jury trial? They did so because it would drag the process out longer. If a case can be dealt with four times faster in the magistrates court, then removing the right to elect, which is what we propose to do, is a far more efficient way to free up Crown court capacity so that very serious cases—not just rape, but robbery, homicide and serious drug offences—can be dealt with more swiftly.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): What has been missing from this debate is the word “victims.” We inherited a system in which there are criminals who will have chosen to spend Christmas at home with their children. They will still be at home with their children next year, and the year after that, because we have a system that allows them to kick justice down the road. Meanwhile, women will have been raped this Christmas, and they will have to wait half a decade for justice. How can Members defend that system?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Interventions should be short and colleagues should have been here at the beginning if they wish to intervene—*[Interruption.]* I was not here at the beginning, but I do not need any help. Members must have been here at the beginning of the speech of the Member on whom they wish to intervene. Please keep interventions short.

Sarah Sackman: As so often, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) is a powerful advocate for women and for victims. As I have said, the reforms that the Government are bringing forward are laser focused on swift justice for victims. I wish to address the point about investment—

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Sackman: I will complete this point and then I will take an intervention.

Investment is what is needed, and investment can get us out of the crisis we are in. Let me be absolutely clear: this Government are making an investment, turning round an oil tanker that had been run into the ground for years when we inherited it. This year alone, we allocated more than 11,000 sitting days to the Crown court. That is the highest ever number of sitting days, and 5,000 more than His Majesty’s Opposition allocated when they were in government. The concordat is taking its course, and there will be more to come.

We have also invested in the professions, with an uplift for criminal legal aid solicitors of £92 million. That is part of this package. We have £34 million for criminal defence barristers, and, crucially, match funding for pupillages to increase the talent pipeline, so that we can have the sustainability in legal practitioners to both prosecute and defend cases in the system.

We are making that investment, and we will ensure that that record-breaking investment continues so that people are not waiting longer and longer, but let me be absolutely clear that funding alone will not solve the

problem. The Government cannot simply sit their way out and write a blank cheque. Do not take my word for it; that is the central conclusion of the independent review of the criminal courts. We need more investment, but investment alone will not resolve the crisis and decline in our criminal justice system.

We need three things. We need investment, which is starting to be made and to percolate into the system. We need reform, which is what the independent review of the criminal courts tells us; the Opposition say, “Ignore it,” but I am not prepared to do so. We also need modernisation. How can we harness the technology at our disposal, whether it is AI transcription or case summarisation, to ensure that we get swift justice? It is those three pillars that will transform and bring our criminal justice system into the 21st century.

There are those who tell us that simply spending our way out or tweaking a lever here and there will solve the problem, but it will not. I agree with those who say that we should bring prisoners to court more efficiently to avoid delays. Do we need to do that? Yes, we do. I eagerly await part 2 of Sir Brian’s report, but we are working on those things straight away. Do we need more efficient listing? I agree that we do, so let us get those efficiencies—there is consensus on that. Do the Government and I think that that alone will salvage the system where there is such an acute degree of crisis? No. We need the reform and the modernisation together with the investment.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We have already recognised that there is a regional aspect to this issue. Wales’s Crown courts generally outperform those in England. They are not perfect—we have a backlog of maintenance issues and other problems—but I can only reiterate the opposition of past and present Labour Welsh Government Counsels General, who say that scrapping jury trials is both extreme and unnecessary. Why not take this as an opportunity to keep jury trials in Wales so that we can get a real-time impact assessment that we could compare with what is happening in England if we have to have changes?

Sarah Sackman: The right hon. Lady is right that there are regional difficulties—the situation for those in the south-east, London and parts of the north-east and the north-west is utterly dire—but let me be absolutely clear and clarify something. She says that we are scrapping jury trials, but we are not. Let us get the facts straight about the way in which the system works now and the way in which things will work once these proposals are implemented.

People talk about a right to a jury trial, and the public could be forgiven for thinking that everybody who graces a criminal court gets a jury trial, but that is not how things work. Some 90% of cases in this country are heard without a jury trial; they are heard robustly and rigorously in our magistrates court, which retains that lay element. I pay tribute to the work of our magistrates, who are drawn from our communities, provide local justice and represent the communities that they serve. The remainder of cases are currently heard by jury trial, and all the most serious crimes, such as homicide, kidnapping, robbery, serious drug offences and possession of a weapon, will continue to be heard by juries under our proposals.

[Sarah Sackman]

What we are making is in line with expert recommendations, as occurs in other jurisdictions such as Canada and New South Wales, which are comparable with ours. This is a fairly modest reform removing the right to elect so that those cases that can be heard by the magistrates court are retained in the magistrates court and a modest number of cases are heard through a swifter court—the Crown court bench division. In addition, complex fraud and economic crime currently heard with a jury will appropriately be heard by an expert judge. That is a sensible, pragmatic package of reforms informed by an independent review.

I am afraid that asking us simply to ignore the work of the review is not sensible. If we were to leave that review on the shelf gathering dust, people would say, “The Government are failing to pull every lever.” I am not prepared to do that. We have asked people to have a long, hard look at it—not just Sir Brian Leveson, but David Ormerod, a distinguished criminal law academic, and other members of the panel. We will take that and implement it as our blueprint.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): Let me speak to the point about the magistrates. In 2012, I took part in a six-month in-depth application process to become a magistrate, and I was accepted. I was then told that because of a pause by the previous Government, there would be no recruitment. In the following eight years, we lost 10,000 magistrates, to the point that in 2019 the then Justice Committee wrote that the crisis was “as frustrating as it was foreseeable”

and that

“it has taken a near crisis to prompt the Government into belated action.”

Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the Opposition cannot have their cake and eat it? They must understand that the system is in a crisis of their making.

Sarah Sackman: I could not agree more. As I am someone with responsibility for the recruitment of our magistrates, I know my hon. Friend will have seen in the early headlines this year that we are looking for more magistrates. We want them to be more diverse, younger and from different parts of the country and different backgrounds. As I said, our magistracy has halved in the last 10 years. I want to see us turn that around as we place our confidence in our magistrates to continue handling the vast majority of criminal cases, which they do at the moment.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My first job after graduating was in a magistrates court, which was just making the transition from writing court records in a huge ledger by hand to computerisation; I appreciate that it has modernised an awful lot since then. Let me pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake) about the impact of persistent drug dealing on local communities. One of the things being piloted in Bristol is an intensive supervision court. We know that a huge number of crimes are committed by people with persistent drug addictions, so if we can divert them from the criminal justice system it will help to free up our courts. Can the Minister say a little about what we are doing to roll out that programme?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend asks a really important question, and we will lay out our plans on just that point. How do we prevent that revolving door of reoffending? It is there in the work that we are doing on sentencing and early intervention, because prevention is so much better than cure.

One of the most depressing features that has arisen as a result of the rising waiting lists in our Crown court is that the number of early guilty pleas—those pleading guilty at the earliest possible opportunity—has gone down precipitously. That means that very often, offenders are pleading guilty at the door of the court, and that wastes huge amounts of resource. I want to ensure that jury trials are there for the most serious cases and that we are using jurors’ time effectively and efficiently, because we owe it to them to deliver swifter justice, just as we owe it to victims.

As I have said, I have heard the concerns of the Opposition and those who head up the professions. There are those in the professions who support what we are doing, but we have our detractors. I am not putting my fingers in my ears; I have engaged with them throughout this process, just as the independent review of the criminal courts has done.

People have questioned whether swift courts will work. The independent review of the criminal courts has recommended the swift court model, which was championed by Lord Justice Auld and *The Times* Crime and Justice Commission. As I said, it exists in other countries, such as Canada, and it works there. Sir Brian estimates that trials without a jury could reduce hearing time by at least 20%, which he says is a conservative estimate. It stands to reason that jury trials are important, but hearing cases without a jury negates the need for jury selection, for judges to explain legal concepts to jurors and for jury deliberation. Those all add to the time that it takes to hear a case in the Crown court.

Karl Turner: The Minister talks about Sir Brian’s presumption—which is what it is—that there will be a 20% reduction in time with a single judge, as opposed to a jury. I think that presumption is probably right, and I think he is probably right to say that it is conservative, but what about the writing up? When does the judge write the judgment and give the reasons? Are they doing that while putting the kids to bed in the evening, or are they doing it the following day, the day after and the day after that? Reasons will be necessary when a single judge is deciding the innocence or guilt of a defendant. What is the answer?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right that if a case is determined by a judge, reasons will need to be given. Indeed, reasons are a good thing—those convicted of a crime will have transparency, knowing why the result has been reached. I am sure Sir Brian Leveson will have been well aware of the need for a judge to give reasons, and will have factored that into his conclusion, in the same way that we have the data from Canada and from New South Wales. I met judges at the Supreme Court in Toronto, where equivalent cases are tried by judges alone and tried by a jury. It is not about the relative merits of those two things; simply as a practical matter of timing, those judges told me that it takes about half the time. Given the evidence that we have, it is undeniable that trying cases by judges alone is going to take less time. When I have to focus on creating an efficient

system that deploys resources in a proportionate way and delivers swifter justice for victims, it would be madness to ignore the conclusions of the independent review.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): On the point of saving time through fewer jury trials, does my hon. and learned Friend agree that this is not just about the amount of time a jury is in the courtroom? It is about all the other factors within the criminal justice system that contribute to the time taken—the time it takes for back office staff to organise jury selection and summoning, the time it takes for the Crown Prosecution Service to prepare reams and reams of paper for jury bundles, the time it takes to deal with the expenses, and so on. This is about the criminal justice system as a whole, not just the time spent in the courtroom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the Minister responds, and to save another Member from any embarrassment, coming in halfway through a speech and trying to intervene is not acceptable.

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend speaks with ample experience from two decades spent working for the Crown Prosecution Service. She knows exactly how the system works, warts and all. The realism and pragmatism she brings to this debate speaks to the really important point that operating a jury system is expensive and takes a lot of time, which is why we have to deploy it in a timely and proportionate way for the most important cases. At the moment, it is available for 3% of cases, but so many of those cases are running in such a delayed fashion that they are collapsing at the 11th hour and justice is not being served. We are actually undermining the jury system by allowing it to run out of control. It is because we want to preserve that feature of our legal system that it is so important that we heed the recommendations of the independent review, make the necessary investment and modernise.

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Sarah Sackman: I will give way for the final time, and then I will wrap up.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. and learned Lady is being very generous with her time. The nub of her argument is that reducing the number of jury trials will make a material difference in cutting the backlog. She has quoted some conversations she has had with judges in Canada and so on, and I do not doubt her sincerity and the work she has done. Why will she not commit today to publishing the modelling and evidence basis for the assertions she is making, not in the months to come, but this week or next week—as soon as practicable? I will happily return to this Dispatch Box if she proves me wrong on the basis of the evidence she presents. Will she make that commitment to all of us today?

Sarah Sackman: I will make a commitment to publish an impact assessment, an equalities impact assessment, and the evidence of the independent review in the usual way when we bring forward our formal Government response and the necessary legislation. Parliament will

have a chance to scrutinise that legislation, to interrogate it, and to express its opposition if that is the conclusion that is reached.

Let me be absolutely clear, though. When I was in practice, when I used to appear in court and I made a proposition, the judge would say, “Where’s the evidence for your proposition?”, as I am being asked now. There is authority behind the proposition I am making—that, if vital institutions are not working for the British public, we should be open to changing them in three ways. Those are by making investment, which we are beginning to do; through structural reform, which is what is on the table; and through modernisation. The evidence base for that structural reform is as follows: the international comparisons; Sir Brian Leveson’s independent expert review; and—this is critical—the fact that we know from Ministry of Justice data that triable either way cases, which could be heard in the magistrates court or the Crown court, are heard four times faster in the magistrates court. If we take cases that are not suitable for the Crown court and hear them in the magistrates court, we free up capacity for the Crown court to hear the most serious cases, so it stands to reason that they will be heard faster. However, we will of course publish the detail at the appropriate time for all to scrutinise.

To conclude, everyone in the Chamber today has agreed that we are in a state of crisis. The difference between His Majesty’s Opposition and the Government is that I reject the learned helplessness that festered under the previous Government. This Government have a choice to make, and we are making it. We are making the decision to use a crisis and turn it into an opportunity—to bring down the waiting lists and modernise the system in the process. People ask me, “Sarah, would you be doing this if there was not a crisis in our courts?” I say yes, because we need a better system, one in which courts, not criminals, triage cases. We need a system that makes better use of jurors’ time and ensures that someone accused of shoplifting is not in the same queue as a victim of another crime. No one has had the guts to take on a programme of reform of this scale, but this Government have the guts. The Conservatives had 14 years to fix the system, but they ran it into the ground. We make a different choice; we are bringing forward change.

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

1.46 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I am glad that the Minister has heard the opposition from right hon. and hon. Members from across the House. I have great news for her—she is going to hear it again.

An opinion that many of us across the House and the political divide share is that our criminal justice system is in complete disarray, with nothing epitomising this more than the backlog in our criminal courts. In our Crown courts, the backlog stands at almost 80,000 cases, with trial dates now stretching late into this decade. The delayed justice, harm to victims, and impacts on rehabilitation are a shameful legacy of over a decade of complacent Conservative Governments. The Conservatives’ inability to recognise the crisis and steer a new course to fix the system is completely unforgivable; instead, their Prime Minister ran away from full prisons and a court

[*Jess Brown-Fuller*]

system in disarray and called a general election in 2024. As such, although we will be supporting the Conservatives' motion today, I look forward to hearing many contributions from their Back Benchers apologising not only for causing this crisis, but for their abject failure to fix it when they had the power to do so.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. Does she agree that jury trials are not responsible for the backlog in Crown court cases piling up to nearly 80,000, and that the real causes are staff shortages, a broken estate, and 10 years of Conservative complacency that hollowed out the justice system and left victims waiting years for their day in court?

Jess Brown-Fuller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We in the Liberal Democrats have sympathy for the scale of the task that this Labour Government have inherited, and we are glad that they recognise the real losers here—the victims. It is an utter failure of the justice system that victims and defendants are being given court dates for the end of the decade, facing years of delay and re-traumatisation, when so many just want justice and then to move on with their lives.

Here's the rub, though: we fundamentally disagree with the Government's approach to tackling this crisis. They are throwing the baby out with the bathwater, ignoring the actual issues and targeting a key and celebrated success. Trial by jury is deeply enshrined in our conscience and constitution, and is respected all over the world. The possibility of being tried by one's peers—not an elite, unrepresentative group of individuals—is fundamental to a fair trial in this country. That point was recognised by the Deputy Prime Minister himself in the Lammy review. It concluded that unlike other stages of the criminal justice system, jury trials do not show statistical bias against ethnic minorities. The Deputy Prime Minister set out in extreme detail that, compared with magistrates courts, Crown courts provide an effective check on prejudice and avoid discriminatory verdicts. Twelve heads are better than one—a point proven by the increased public trust in jury trials.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I would like to say, in support of what the hon. Lady has been saying, that surely a distinction of which we need to be aware is that, whereas the judge is a specialist in deciding what the law says and how it should be applied, he or she is not a specialist in deciding whether someone is telling the truth or not; and in that sense, we are far more likely to get the right answer from a group of people considering it together, as a collectivity, than from an individual, no matter how eminent in the intricacies of the law.

Jess Brown-Fuller: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid and worthwhile point, and I thank him for raising it. It is highly irresponsible and dangerous for this Government to pursue efforts to remove the right to trial by jury in most Crown court cases as a means of fixing the backlog—although we have just heard from the Minister that that is not actually the intention at all; the intention is that she would do it anyway—especially given that the evidence behind the provisions' effectiveness is flimsy.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I have been contacted by so many KCs and criminal barristers in Winchester, one of whom is Rosemary Burns. The collective confusion is about why we are removing such a fundamental, entrenched constitutional principle, rather than focusing on crumbling courtrooms and courtrooms sitting empty due to the cap on the number of days the court can sit and the failure of prisoner transport to bring defendants to court in time. Why are these logistical and infrastructure issues not being given a laser focus before this measure is even considered?

Jess Brown-Fuller: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I will come later in my contribution to the inefficiencies within the system.

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I will make some progress, if the right hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The Government claim that this decision has stemmed from the review undertaken by Sir Brian Leveson, the first part of which was published last year. The objective behind the review commissioned by this Government was rightly to find solutions to the overwhelming backlog, and Leveson's original suggestion was the creation of a Crown court bench division, including a judge and two magistrates, which was modelled to reduce trial length by 20%. The Government, however, have gone further than Leveson recommended, meaning that those accused of crimes with likely sentences of less than three years will, for the most part, not be heard by a jury. New so-called swift courts will be created where just one judge hears cases. The efficiency savings quoted by the Government are the same figures suggested by Leveson under his Crown court bench division model, but the modelling has, like this entire proposal, been widely criticised for lacking transparent data behind the calculations.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a slight confusion? The Minister consistently referenced the importance of this review and how independent and important it was, but then has thrown out the central tenet of it, which was to introduce a court that has a judge and two magistrates. That would provide three heads rather than one, some local influence and some laypeople. Does my hon. Friend have any views as to why the Minister is so insistent on throwing out that central tenet, given how important she says the review is?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank my hon. Friend, who is also a member of the Justice Committee, for her important point that Leveson did not make this proposal at all. He was talking about a separate division, which the Deputy Prime Minister has announced as a swift court. He has ignored the impact of having two laypeople as magistrates as part of that. It does not make any sense to me, and it does not make sense to many people in this Chamber.

Dr Murrison: Does the hon. Lady share my dismay that not only did the Minister admit in her closing remarks that her plans are ideological, not practical or expedient, but also that she spent 30 minutes without talking about the central issue, which is that the majority of cases listed in our courts crack on day one, meaning that the courts are there, but nobody is working within

them? That is what needs to be sorted out, rather than this maladroitness plan to reduce liberties that we have enjoyed for 800 years.

Jess Brown-Fuller: The right hon. Gentleman pre-empted what I will go on to say in my speech. We are yet to see an impact assessment. That was spoken about by the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). It is also mentioned in the amendment tabled by the Government. We need to see the modelling and the impact assessment, and understand where these savings are coming from. Even if the figures are accurate, they avoid the glaringly obvious fact that they are measured against a completely inefficient system. The system is fundamentally not undermined by jury trials, but instead plagued by years of under-investment, creating an ever-growing list of unaddressed issues across the system. The Government seem willing to ignore that fact, despite it being present in every piece of discourse surrounding their proposals. They have bought a car that will not run, and they have decided to spend all their time and money on a new paint job before opening the bonnet.

This proposal is utterly shameful, fundamentally because there are alternatives, despite the narrative that the Government are advancing. They do not have to attack jury trials, especially when their own Ministers and their own Prime Minister have been fierce advocates of jury trials in the past. Instead, they should be looking at the real issues within the system that have led us to this point. Chief among them is the productivity decline that our criminal courts have experienced since 2016. Wasted time in and around courts is caused by a wide range of issues, all of which are being ignored by the Ministry of Justice. It means that the Government's increased investment is being used inefficiently. It also means that many of these issues will persist, even if their attack on jury trials leads to reductions in trial length.

The solutions are out there, and the majority of legal professionals opposing the Government's reforms are overflowing with practical suggestions, but the Government are not listening, so today I will lay some of them out. First, there must be investment in the courts estate, not only to reopen the hundreds of courts closed under the Conservatives—including my court in Chichester—but to properly maintain those that remain open. Evidence of leaking roofs, foul smells and flooded rooms across the estate is hardly indicative of a properly functioning justice system, and that must be addressed. Trials being abandoned because the heating is not working or there is no running water is unacceptable for those victims.

Even at the roughest of estimates, the restriction of jury trials will at best save 9,000 sitting days in court a year. That is based on not being able to see an impact assessment. The Government could increase the number of sitting days up to the possible 130,000, which would far exceed the apparent savings they would gain from the removal of trials. The concept of a restriction on sitting days is artificial. If there is a case, a courtroom, a defendant on remand and court staff ready to go, the case should be heard.

Linsey Farnsworth: I gently point out to the hon. Lady that it is not just about a courtroom being available, but the resources that have to go into that. It is about not just whether we have the space, but whether we have

the barristers and the solicitors, and whether we have enough CPS lawyers, court clerks and ushers. There is a bigger picture, and that is why the whole package that the Government are putting forward is incredibly important. Just tinkering around the edges has been done for years, and we are in this crisis now.

Jess Brown-Fuller: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady when she points out that it has to be a full package of support, but that is not what we are debating today. I am laying out all the things that she rightly points out, such as the total inefficiencies within our court system, but until we see those situations addressed and those things fixed, how do we know that that would not save the court sitting days that we would apparently see by eroding the right to jury trial?

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Isleworth Crown court, which is one of the closest courts to my constituency, closed down five of its 14 courtrooms last year because of maintenance issues and because of the cap on sitting days put in place by the previous Conservative Government and only partially lifted by this Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that as well as addressing all the maintenance issues and the system inefficiency, we could, if we increased the number of court sitting days and addressed the workforce issues, preserve this fundamental right to a jury trial for all?

Jess Brown-Fuller: That is an excellent point.

The Government have rightly returned the number of days to 2016 levels, but with a rising backlog they need to go further and increase capacity. As pointed out by the Secret Barrister, we also have huge delays in the NHS, but we do not hear the Government proposing a cap on A&E sitting days to save the cost of having the lights on. In addition, the hours lost to unenforceable contracts have left many trials without a defendant while everyone waits for them to be delivered from prison. Given that one of the Government's key arguments for reducing jury trials is the increasing length of trials, explicitly linked to complexity, I urge them to address the impact of those failing contracts. There are also key efficiencies to be gained from investment in the IT systems, given the widespread complaints about the functioning of wi-fi and about disrupted systems. The common platform system advertised to solve these issues is over budget and delayed.

There are serious solutions to issues such as this, but rather than being addressed they are seemingly being ignored. Of course there are associated costs, but there are clearly major costs associated with not addressing the problems in the system. For example, it costs £55,000 a year to keep someone in prison, and the number of prisoners on remand has doubled in the last seven years. The savings are there as well; they just need to be realised. It is also clear from courts such as Liverpool Crown court—which I think was mentioned earlier—that efficiencies can be achieved, without spending, through a proactive and realistic approach. Jaime Hamilton KC has set out steps such as prioritising cases in which late guilty pleas are likely, which would lead to improved outcomes in case clearance. It is unfathomable to me that the Government have tasked Brian Leveson with producing two reports, the second of which is to focus on efficiency improvements and better use of technology

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in the court system, when surely it would be logical to produce that report first, in order to introduce those efficiencies and bring the backlog down.

The Government have identified the problem that they inherited, but have arrived at entirely the wrong solutions. They are searching for an easy way out, a quick fix, but reducing access to jury trials is not that fix. It is unscrutinised, it is unfair, and it continues the trend of declining public trust in our justice system. The Government are right to say that victims are among those being let down, waiting years for justice and unable to move on with their lives, but we need solutions that work—solutions that address the causes of the crisis, reverse the systematic underfunding that has plagued the system, and genuinely improve efficiency.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. To ensure that everyone is able to contribute to the debate, there will be a speaking time limit of eight minutes to begin with, but it will come down further.

2.1 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The background to this debate is well known. Against that background of a historically high and growing backlog of cases in the Crown court provoked by the previous Government, the former Lord Chancellor commissioned Sir Brian Leveson to undertake an independent review of the criminal courts with the aim of bringing the backlog down. Part 1 of the review was published in July 2025, and suggests structural and policy changes. Sir Brian made 45 recommendations, a few of which concerned changes in mode of trial; those have become the main issue of contention, because they restrict the right to jury trial. The policy changes proposed came first because some require primary legislation, but in a matter of weeks we will also have part 2, which will look at greater efficiency in the Crown court and may be less contentious.

Sir Brian makes clear that all the recommendations and both parts of his report are a package, not a pick-and-mix selection. That is because he believes that the crisis in the Crown court, with trials for serious offences waiting three or four years to be heard, is so severe that every lever must be pulled to control and then reduce it, and in that he is surely right. Moreover, this is not a short-term problem. Changes in the complexity and detail of criminal cases mean that longer and more legally and factually difficult trials are here to stay. For that reason, Sir Brian does not recommend that changes should be temporary or curtailed, for example by a sunset clause, in any legislation.

So what happens now? First, we must have Sir Brian's full report to consider, and, as I have said, part 2 is due imminently. Secondly, we must have the Government's response to the report, saying which recommendations they accept entirely or in part and which they reject. Then will come the Bill putting necessary recommendations into law and accompanied, we are told, by an impact assessment giving greater statistical colour to the effect of the proposals on the backlog.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: I will give way once, but I am aware of time.

Gideon Amos: The hon. Gentleman is an expert in this area, but if every lever needs to be pulled, should not the cap on sitting days be removed? That would make a far bigger difference to the process of clearing the backlog than removing jury trials.

Andy Slaughter: I am coming on to that. The number of sitting days has already increased substantially in comparison with what the last Government did, and I think that it should increase further, but I also think that when Sir Brian says “every lever”, that is exactly what he means.

The likely date for all the documents that I have mentioned to surface will be some time in the spring, ahead of the end of the current parliamentary Session, with the Bill carried over into the next Session and becoming law later this year.

On 14 October 2025, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) led a debate in Westminster Hall on

“the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Part 1”.

I commend to Members the report of that debate, which was well informed and measured on all sides. I do not think that today's debate will take the matter further in the absence of the documents that I have described, but here we are. In the meantime, there have been some loud protests about certain of Sir Brian's proposals from parts of the legal profession and from some Members of this House. They include replacing the right to a rehearing of a case decided in the magistrates court with a limited right of appeal, and extending trial by judge and magistrates to more serious offences than is currently the practice of district judges in the magistrates and youth courts by creating a Crown court bench division.

The Government have said that they wish to go beyond Sir Brian's proposal for a judge to sit with two magistrates in some cases currently tried by judge and jury, and allow a single judge to decide guilt or innocence in cases likely to attract a sentence of up to three years' custody. They also go further than Sir Brian in proposing to extend magistrates' sentencing powers to 18 or possibly 24 months, and removing entirely the defendant's right to elect. Where the Government seek to go further than the independent review, they should set out clearly their reasons for so doing.

The most controversial proposal is to curtail the right to trial by jury in between a quarter and a half of cases where it is currently available, while retaining it for more serious offences. My own view is that trial by jury is not an absolute or immutable right. The availability of jury trial has varied and generally become more constricted over the ages, in criminal and civil cases—those involving defamation and inquests—through the reclassifying of offences from either way to summary only.

I am pro-jury. I think that a lay element in the criminal justice process is reassuring, introducing a more democratic element into a profession regarded by some as elitist and homogeneous. I think that the

involvement of citizens in the criminal justice system, whether jurors or magistrates, is good not only for the individuals and the legal system but for society generally. However, where we draw the line between jury trial and other modes of trial is a matter of degree and judgment, not of legal or moral principle. I think that there is nothing wrong with reviewing the appropriate forum for trial, as has been done many times, whether in its own right or because it is a piece of the jigsaw that will create a better system overall. I would like to see more evidence to support the contention in Sir Brian's review that significant time will be saved and a significant increase in the number of cases heard will result. I would like to hear that there is more money for sitting days, for trial counsel and for functioning courts; that courts are run more efficiently; that listing is as good at every Crown court as it is at the best; and that Serco and Amey deliver prisoners to court in good time to start the day's proceedings, not halfway through the afternoon.

We are not going to get the answers to all these questions today, although I hope that we will before long. I prefer the Government amendment, which anticipates the provision of this information, to the Opposition motion, which prejudices what it will contain, and I acknowledge that the Government have already increased the budget and have already introduced greater-efficiency measures.

The Justice Committee is seized of this issue. We heard evidence from Sir Brian Leveson in November and interrogated the Lord Chancellor in December, and next week we will hear from opponents and supporters of the proposed reforms and from the Minister for Courts and Legal Services, who opened this debate. We may have some criticism of the Bill or of the Government's response to the review and seek to amend, but, like the Government and, I think, Members in all parts of the House, we hear every week of fresh indignities heaped on victims of crime, and on defendants too, who are made to wait for years beyond what is humane, often in a physical or mental prison, for a resolution of their cases. Not to consider them is not to be serious either about the damage that delay is doing to individuals or about the damage that it is doing to confidence in our courts.

This is not a one-way valve; there are gains and losses, whatever course we take. For the present, I am prepared to give the Government the benefit of the doubt that they are looking for every possible measure to repair our battered justice system. I certainly prefer their honest endeavour to the gamesmanship of the Conservative party, which broke the system and now seeks to use its dilapidated condition as a political tool.

2.10 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): May I start by commending my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)? I do not always agree with him—I am not quite Anna Soubry—but on this issue, he struck exactly the right tone. I speak as somebody who has criticised the Ministry of Justice, under all parties, rather vigorously for 30 years, and he struck exactly the right tone in saying that the system has to be put right, given the failures over 30 years and more. We have to address this matter but not take the fundamentals out of the system in the process of doing so.

May I do something unusual and commend the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller)? She made a very well thought-through speech.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): You're going soft!

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): New year, new David!

David Davis: I am losing the House, piece by piece, but that is okay. The Minister should pay some attention to the detail of the speech by the hon. Member for Chichester, because she made some extremely important points.

As for the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), he and I have fought together on some spectacular cases of miscarriage of justice—successfully, I think, in the biggest ones—but I do not agree with him that the Government's policy does not address matters that are morally fundamental to the justice system, because the jury system is absolutely fundamental, for a few reasons that I will touch on in a minute.

The Minister has a difficult job. Bluntly, her Department—not just the Ministers, but the Department itself—has not done a very good job of managing the system over decades. The system failures have been serially spectacular, and I recommend that she look back at some of the National Audit Office reports. I commissioned one when I was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee; it is the longest NAO report that I can remember and the most complex, because these matters are systemically complex and do not lend themselves to off-the-cuff answers. She talks about modernisation, which is often important, but it should not be at the price of taking out the most important building block in our justice system—one that the rest of the world, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark said, has been copying for centuries.

Of course, the majority of the judiciary does not agree with restricting jury trials. When I raised this matter with the Justice Secretary—I think I did so in oral questions on one occasion—I asked him whether he had read the report by Mr Rivlin KC, which does a formidable job of forensically taking apart the Leveson recommendations. One of the points he makes is that Leveson is making judgments—quite properly, as a very distinguished judge of very long standing—but he is not making them on the basis of empirical data. There was very little empirical data behind what Lord Justice Leveson argued, and it is really important that we look at that. I recommend to the Minister that she read Mr Rivlin's note. He was the head of Southwark Crown court, which has one of the highest throughputs in the country, and he put this point to all his judges. Not one of those working, active judges agreed with Leveson.

Implicit in Leveson's comments, and certainly in what the Minister said, is an underlying idea that juries are not quite up to it in certain cases. It is suggested that they cannot quite cope, particularly in technical and financial cases. Well, I have handled about a dozen miscarriage of justice cases over the course of the last decade or two, and in not one of them was the jury the source of the error. More often than not, it was a misdirection by a judge or an error of the system, or the court case was allowed to get out of control in some

[David Davis]

way or another—I will come back to an example or two in a minute. It was pretty much always down to the judge, and sometimes to the lawyers in court, but not to the jury.

The risks involved in restricting jury trials are significant. When the Minister is modelling the numbers—she talks about the speed of the magistrate system—she should look at the appeal rates for magistrates' decisions and the number of appeals in which the magistrates' decisions are overturned.

Linsey Farnsworth: I gently say to the right hon. Member that the current system for appeals from the magistrates court requires a full retrial. When somebody comes to give evidence, we ask a lot of them, particularly the victims. To do that all over again, after a wait of a considerable number of months or even years, is very onerous. Quite simply, the victim does not want to go through it all over again. That is the problem, which this policy fixes.

David Davis: Frankly, the hon. Lady highlights yet another problem with the magistrates court. The point is that if we are going to implement a big, systemic change, we should not change the fundamentals. That should be done as a separate testable exercise later, after we have tried everything else.

Let me come back to the expertise of juries. It is illegal in Britain to talk to jurors about what happened in the jury room—it is not allowed—but there is a spectacular lacuna in that. One of the most complicated financial cases was the Jubilee line fraud trial, which collapsed. As a result, it was possible to interview the jurors. This case was in an area where it is said that jurors cannot cope: complex financial law. They were asked, "Couldn't you cope? Was there a problem?" When they were asked if they could not understand the case, they answered unequivocally, "Oh yes, we could understand the case. It was the lawyers who couldn't understand the case." That is precisely what the outcome of that analysis was.

The Minister resisted publishing the model, which is understandable. I can see why she is doing that. She wants it to be presented properly and transparently, I hope, but she has made the decision already, so at the very least, she should tell us the size of the saving and the size of the change. In my judgment, it is less than half of 1%—a point that I made in an intervention earlier. She may disagree. Well, let us see what she thinks the size of the saving really is, because we are expected to take this on trust, and we should never change something that is so fundamental to our constitution and justice system on trust. I do not think the Government's policy will move the dial at all.

There is one other systemic issue that I want to raise. Again, my hon. Friends might not like it—

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): That is not unusual.

David Davis: It is not unusual, I know.

My hon. Friends might not like my mentioning this primary case, because it undermined a part of the Thatcher Government's activities. It was the case of

Clive Ponting. He was the civil servant who gave out the information that the Belgrano was sunk while it was leaving the Falklands, not arriving. The judge in that case instructed the jury to find him guilty, but they found him not guilty. Why? Because they made a moral judgment about the powers and rights of the state over the citizen. We cannot replace that with any judicial mechanism.

My comment to the Minister is that I sympathise with the size of the problem, and she is right to try to take it on. I am glad she is doing so, and I will support her in what she does, but she should not tackle the problem by wrecking the system. Justice delayed is justice denied, but summary justice is not justice at all.

2.19 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the Opposition on using one of their Opposition day debates for this very important subject.

There is no doubt but that this Government inherited a terrible crisis in the criminal justice system, with the backlog of criminal cases in both the Crown court and the magistrates court growing every single day. However, I can tell Members that I have been in this place for 16 years—I was elected in May 2010—and in those 16 years I have not once been tempted to vote against the Whip. Not once have I voted against the Labour party, whether in opposition or in government, but I now tell the Minister, the Chief Whip, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister that I will vote against this ludicrous proposal every step of the way, including by voting with the Opposition today.

This proposal goes well and truly beyond what Brian Leveson recommended. I have had the privilege of getting to know Brian Leveson a little. On one occasion, he helped me put together a private Member's Bill on the issue of causing serious injury by dangerous driving. That proposal was adopted by Ken Clarke when he was Justice Secretary, and it was put into the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Ken Clarke always tells the joke that he accepted my private Member's Bill as an amendment to his Bill, but I then voted against his Bill. That is, of course, the type of thing I would do.

These proposals will not reduce the backlog one iota. Sir Brian speaks of 20% efficiency savings, and I do not dispute the fact that it is quicker for a single judge hearing a trial to deal with the trial, but what happens to the writing up of the judgment giving the reasons why the judge has come to their view? That will not take minutes. As I said in my intervention on the Minister, the judge is not going to put that to bed while he is putting the kids to bed in the evening. It could take days, so any saving will be lost by judges having to write up their reasons.

There is a multitude of reasons for the backlog in the criminal courts. It is true—I have to be honest here—that parties of all political persuasions have failed to invest in the criminal justice system for decades. That is the reality of where we are. The previous Government played their part, but since we have been in government we have not, in my view, addressed the issues as we should, because the backlog can be addressed. If we look at Liverpool Crown court as an example,

there has been proper case management of cases, and what is the backlog there? We should perhaps go there, and have a look at what the judge is doing.

I am concerned about the extra powers for magistrates to give sentences of up to 24 months. That concerns me, because the reality is that 41% of appeals from the magistrates court to the Crown court are successful. In any event, if there are going to be more cases for magistrates because they have more powers to sentence, where will all these guilty people be put? Where will all these guilty criminals, who apparently are going to be convicted in swifter forms of justice, be imprisoned?

I have said that this is a ludicrous proposal, and it really is, because it will not work. There was no mention in the Labour party manifesto of doing away with some jury trials. I suspect the Opposition were as shocked as anybody when they had to give up one of their Opposition day debates on this subject, because in opposition the Secretary of State for Justice would have gone off his head at the prospect of this being proposed by the previous Conservative Government.

This proposal raises more questions than it answers, so I have some questions for the Minister. First, did the Ministry of Justice do any modelling before the announcement, and if not, why not? If it did any modelling, please can we see it? Did the Secretary of State consider piloting single judge-only trials? Why are Ministers determined to pretend that trials for shop theft, for example, are holding up cases of serious sexual assault? There are listing priorities for such cases, and if a listings officer in a Crown court is prioritising a shop theft over a rape or serious sexual assault, I accept that that is a major problem. If the Minister can point to an example, fine—give us the example, and let us go off and investigate it—but, frankly, I do not think that is happening.

Today, 75 Crown court courtrooms are sat idle: 75 out of 516 courtrooms are not sitting. Why? Why do we not address the issue of courts not sitting? If we do not have enough judges and barristers to conduct some trials, where does the Justice Secretary think the judges and barristers are going to come from to do these judge-only trials? How long does the Minister think it is going to take for the prosecution, the defence and the judge to determine whether a case is worth less than three years on conviction, and thus is viable for a bench trial? When will circuit judges find the time to draft their reasons? That is a point I have already made.

What counts as successful delivery of a prisoner to court—mid-afternoon, or ready for court at 9 am, so the barrister and the solicitor can have a conference before they are called into court at 10 am? What delivery times are these private companies expected to meet? I know of an example recently when a Crown court judge—I will not identify the court or, indeed, the judge—asked an officer to come into court to explain why they had arrived at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and the answer given was that they had had to stop for a cheese sandwich. That is what is happening in the real world, and those are the issues the Minister needs to address.

What happens if a case is determined as suitable for a bench trial, with a sentence of less than three years, but the judge, after conviction, gives one of more than three years? This is a terrible error.

My final question is this: if charged with, say, a fraud or false accounting case, would the Minister want to be tried by a jury of 12 or a single judge sitting alone?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The time limit has now dropped to four minutes.

2.27 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): From prepping for this debate, I know that the policy is one that tries to solve an administrative problem by simply changing a principle. The three areas I will try to cover—we will see how I get on—are the principle, the policy process and the practical side.

To deal with the principle first, we have heard a number of times that justice delayed is justice denied. Delay does harm trust and it can prolong suffering, but justice done wrongly corrupts the system itself. The Justice Secretary knows that, as in his own Lammy report he said that juries act as “a filter for prejudice” during trials.

Moving on to the policy process, on the one hand the Government are saying that the policy is much needed to help with the admin side, but on the other hand they are saying that these are very small changes. We only have to look at the letter written by the Secretary of State to the Justice Committee to pull some of that apart. It states:

“Of the c.3% of criminal trial cases that proceed to a jury trial in the Crown Court, over half would still proceed to the Crown Court and get a jury trial post-reform.”

However, later it says:

“An alternative way of expressing impacts is to account for cases that will be retained in the magistrates’ courts after the reforms. Based on projected case volumes and case mix, of those cases that still proceed to the Crown Court post-reforms, around three-quarters of them are still expected to be allocated a jury trial.”

So we already have a discrepancy, in the same paragraph of the letter, in what the numbers are.

The question, “Has any modelling been done?”, has been asked multiple times. We again know from the letter addressed to the Committee that modelling has been done, because it says:

“The assumptions underpinning the modelling of the reforms I announced last week are subject to the Concordat process that agrees sitting days with the judiciary and it would be improper to pre-empt the conclusion of this process.”

In short, modelling has been done, so if Ministers want to strengthen their argument, why would they not produce that modelling? When we have asked the Minister who is at the Dispatch Box—she was asked again by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), for the seventh time—whether an impact assessment has been done and not released, or is being done and will be brought forward, we have not got an answer. One would have thought that if you had done the work—

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am also grateful for the motion and for the opportunity to object, cross-party, to the restrictions on our important rights to a trial by jury. I was, however, hoping that the Conservatives

[*Siân Berry*]

would, in this debate, admit some real responsibility for the awful state of our criminal justice system. Will he correct that gap in any further way in his contribution?

Dr Evans: I refer the hon. Lady directly to the opening speech. If she sits and reads *Hansard*, it was very much different regarding that point.

I will move on to the other practical points we need to talk about—some even in the letter—about process. For example, the letter states:

“judges will assess the likely sentence in accordance with the Sentencing Guidelines. They will consider the facts of the case to make a determination of likely culpability, harm”—

and so on. It then goes on to say:

“eligibility is based on likely sentence length, any triable either-way offence could be in scope of the CCBD, if it were likely to receive a sentence of 3 years or less”.

What happens if the judge decides that they would not go to a jury trial? Later on, the same letter states:

“judges will retain the full sentencing powers available in the Crown Court, meaning there is no restriction on the sentence that can be handed down in the case.”

That points out the fact that a judge could make a decision at pre-hearing that the case need not go to trial because the sentence will be less than three years, and after that find out that the sentence will actually be five, six or seven years. There is a real discrepancy.

The letter also states:

“As you know, we do not have minimum sentences in law.”

That is demonstrably not true—think about drug trafficking, firearms or repeat knife offences. We only have to look at section 28 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, which talks about how using a knife for a second time will result in a minimum of six months. That was codified and updated in section 315 of the Sentencing Act 2020. The letter is filled with holes.

I thank Joanna Hardy-Susskind, who has pointed out a lot of these issues. She has done a lot of working explaining that the MOJ does not even understand the letters it is putting out in defence of this policy. If the Ministry was to release the modelling and the impact assessment, it could demonstrate to us all why we should make the change.

I am running short of time to talk about the practicality, so I will close where I started.

David Davis: I am not just standing to give my hon. Friend a minute. Does he agree with me that even if we accept what it says, being sent down for a couple of years can destroy a life?

Dr Evans: Absolutely. That is fundamental. There must be trust in the system and in the decision taken, and I worry that that is being eroded by this proposal.

I am going to change my speech. I started on the presumption that the Government are trying to solve an admin problem with a principled change, but I think, after listening to the Government Front Bench, that I am wrong. The Minister was asked, “Sarah, would you still go with this regardless of the backlog?” and the answer was yes. There we have it. It is clearer than ever before. Efficiency is the excuse and ideology is the aim. Regardless of the vote today, the answer is here for all

to see that the Government do not believe in maintaining jury trial. For that reason, Members must stay and vote with the Opposition.

2.33 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): We are facing a real and serious crisis in our criminal courts. It did not happen overnight and it certainly did not happen by accident. It is the result of 14 years of neglect, and it is now denying justice to people up and down the country. Right now, around 80,000 cases are waiting to be heard in the Crown court. If we do nothing, that number will only grow. As we have heard today, in some areas cases are being listed in 2030.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is really frustrating to hear people say that the backlog is the result of covid, when it is clear that backlogs were increasing before covid as a result of underlying factors including substantial real-terms cuts to the justice system, court closures and reductions in judges and court staff? They began rising in 2019, the same year that the previous Government cut sitting days.

Emma Foody: Absolutely. I agree with my hon. Friend. I am immensely frustrated at the rhetoric on that point.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Were backlogs higher or lower in 2010 than they were in 2019, before the pandemic?

Emma Foody: Unfortunately, I did not hear the apology that should have precluded the question, for the absolute carnage the Conservatives left in our courts on their watch. They have shown no recognition or contrition for what they left behind. In every single one of those cases there is at least one victim unable to access justice. [*Interruption.*] I am glad that Opposition Members find it so amusing. They would find it much less amusing if they were at the other end of the justice system. Every victim is waiting to move on. Every witness is stuck in limbo. Every defendant is entitled to have their case heard, within a reasonable time, to repay their debt or to begin to be rehabilitated.

I speak about this issue not just as a Member of Parliament, but as a former member of the judiciary, having sat as a magistrate. I have made the decisions in courtrooms that I knew would have a lasting impact on people’s lives.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): A very valid point was raised earlier about triaging whether a case should have a jury trial. If a judge decides that the sentence would be less than three years, but after a trial in the absence of a jury it is decided that the defendant should get five or six years, do they have a right to appeal the decision and have a jury trial?

Emma Foody: I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to go into the details of the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but I would like to make some progress.

As I said, I have made decisions that will impact people’s lives. I have seen at first hand long delays that damage victims’ wellbeing, undermine their confidence and cause too many to withdraw from the process

altogether. That is not a failure of victims, but a failure of the system. Let us be clear: the backlog is not just frustrating; the system can be frustrated. Some defendants game the system to delay their trial and avoid accountability for as long as possible, in the hope that by the time their case is heard, either it will fall over entirely, or witnesses and victims will be unable to give evidence, as it is not as fresh as it was. That is indefensible.

That is exactly the type of behaviour that the reforms are designed to stop. We are already investing heavily; there are more Crown court sitting days this year than ever before. We are putting money into repairing and modernising court buildings, legal aid and victim support services, which are getting long-term funding so that they can plan ahead. However, anyone who has worked in the courts knows that we cannot spend our way out of this problem. There simply are not the judges, the criminal barristers or the court staff to keep up with demand. Even courts that are running flat out are struggling. Without any reform, the backlog will continue to grow.

As we have heard today, everyone will have the right to a fair trial—that is fundamental—but the truth is that most criminal cases have never involved juries. Over 90% are already dealt with by magistrates, and they are dealt with fairly. Let us also be honest about history. It was a Conservative Government who, through the Criminal Justice Act 1988, restricted eligibility for jury trial by reclassifying a range of offences as summary only. We see selective amnesia all too often in this place.

As a former magistrate, I am proud of the work that magistrates do. I was pleased to see the campaign launched recently to recruit more of them to the bench. They are volunteers, drawn from their communities, who give up their time to serve the public. They are more representative of the society that they serve than the judiciary as a whole, and they take their responsibilities extremely seriously. I thoroughly enjoyed my role and truly encourage anyone from my community, and communities across the country, to put themselves forward for this important role.

Sir Brian Leveson has been clear: jury trials now take far longer than they used to, largely because cases are more complex and involve vast amounts of digital evidence. That is not anyone's fault, but it does mean that the system needs to adapt. We must restore confidence by keeping communities safe and making sure that victims are supported, not forgotten, by the system that is meant to protect them. The Conservatives left behind a justice system in serious trouble. Labour is choosing to fix it.

2.38 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The right to trial by jury is not some procedural convenience capable of being abridged when the administrative weather turns foul; it is one of the great constitutional expressions of liberty under the law. It is overwhelmingly legitimate, because it places the citizen, and not the state, at the heart of criminal judgment. When the state proposes to narrow the circumstances in which it must persuade 12 of a defendant's peers, it is not merely managing a backlog; it is fundamentally recalibrating the balance between the individual and the Crown.

There is no doubt that the criminal justice system is under acute strain. Victims and defendants wait too long. Justice is stretched thin. However, the issue before us is not whether reform is necessary, but whether this reform is justified, proportionate and supported by evidence.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I hear everything my hon. Friend says. In his opening speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) laid out a number of matters that could be acted on immediately to improve efficiency and ensure that we maintain the pillar of society that is our jury trials. Do you agree that we should be focusing immediately on that, rather than demolishing—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. No “yous”—it is not me responding.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I will touch on some of those points in a moment.

There has quite rightly been much reliance on Sir Brian Leveson's report; he is a jurist of great distinction, and his work deserves careful reading, rather than convenient citation. Notwithstanding his analysis, this is a fundamental change to our legal system, and what is conspicuously absent from the Government's argument is compelling evidence that jury trials are the principal driver of delay. If we are serious about confronting the backlog, we must look unflinchingly at the real causes: the prosaic but decisive failures of capacity, of which the jury trial is merely the most visible casualty.

The first issue is judicial sitting days. Courts cannot hear cases without judges. For too long, we have rationed judicial time as though it were a luxury, rather than the lifeblood of the system. Courtrooms stand idle not because juries cannot be summoned, but because there are no judges available to sit.

The second issue is the court estate. In too many parts of the country, criminal courts are dilapidated, unreliable and, frankly, unfit for purpose. Trials are delayed because of leaking roofs, broken technology and inadequate facilities.

Catherine Atkinson: Is there a part of the hon. Gentleman's speech where he says that the reason that so many of our courts are dilapidated and falling down is because we did not see investment in 14 years of Conservative Government?

Dr Shastri-Hurst: The hon. Lady is right to a degree: there has been failure by successive Governments to invest in the criminal justice system. If we were serious about this issue in this place, we would look at cutting welfare, which spends the entirety of the Ministry of Justice's annual budget in just two weeks. We need to prioritise spending, and the criminal justice system has been left high and dry for far too long by Governments of all colours.

It is now routine for trials to be adjourned because defendants either arrive late or do not arrive at all, with juries discharged, witnesses turned away and days of court time lost as a consequence. These delays have nothing whatsoever to do with the presence of a jury, and everything to do with operational failure in the system.

[Dr Shastri-Hurst]

The next point I wish to make, and possibly the most grave, is about the erosion of the criminal Bar. We face a serious shortage of suitably qualified advocates both to prosecute and to defend. Cases are delayed because no one of appropriate experience is available or willing to take them on. That is not inefficiency, but attrition. Curtailing jury trial risks mistaking the symptom for the disease. Worse, it risks creating a system that is perhaps faster, but thinner, and ostensibly more efficient, but unquestionably less legitimate.

I think of the words of Lord Hailsham, a former Lord Chancellor and one of the greatest legal minds of the previous century, who warned this very House of the dangers of an “elective dictatorship”, and the slow accretion of power to the state at the expense of the citizen. The jury trial is one of the great counterweights to that tendency, ensuring that the coercive power of criminal law is exercised only with the consent of the community. Juries do much more than merely find facts; they embody public confidence, guard against institutional complacency and remind us that justice is not something merely administered to the people, but done with them. If the Government believe that it is right to curtail that right, they must show clear evidence that jury trials cause the delay, that alternative modes of trial would be demonstrably faster, and that fairness, legitimacy and public confidence would not be diminished.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): There was no mention of reforming the jury trial system in the Labour manifesto. Given that this is a fundamental, very serious change to the operation of our legal system, which has served us well for centuries, does the hon. Gentleman agree that this change should never be allowed to go ahead without some form of electoral mandate?

Dr Shastri-Hurst: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right: there is no mandate for this decision. It represents such a significant constitutional change to our legal system, and it is being made without reference to the will of the people.

Justice delayed is indeed justice denied, but justice expedited at the cost of constitutional principle may prove a far greater denial still.

2.45 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): Trial by jury is a cornerstone of our justice system. Being held to account in court by our fellow citizens is one of the embodiments of the principle of justice by the people, for the people. Like all aspects of our justice system, jury trial has a history, and has changed over time in response to changing social needs. I think a better understanding of how and why it has changed would help us to understand—if not agree with—the present-day proposals to amend it for our times, so I will focus my remarks in support of amendment (a) on that history.

When juries were first introduced, one of their roles was to determine the facts of the case before them. In other words, they had an investigative function—a function that was later removed from them and given to other bodies. Juries went on to be used in both civil and criminal cases for centuries—until they were not; a major reform in the 19th century removed juries from

the adjudication of civil cases. A key driver of that reform was the pressing need to process a vastly increased flow of civil disputes created by a more complex commercial economy. Today, our civil justice system is renowned around the world for its robustness and fairness.

The composition and role of the jury in criminal cases has also undergone major changes over time. Who was called to serve on juries in the mid-19th century? Men of property, who gave verdicts in trials on a wide range of alleged offences. If we jump forward to the early 20th century, we see some major changes to that arrangement: by then, the range of people who could be called for jury service had widened to include women and working people, but the range of offences deemed to require a jury trial had greatly narrowed—a result of the Summary Jurisdiction Act 1879, which was passed in this place to respond to the need for enhanced public access to justice by greatly expanding the remit of summary courts and magistrates. The magistracy is, of course, another embodiment of justice by the people, for the people.

I could say more, but this very potted history shows that juries have played a vital but shifting part in our justice system and have never operated in isolation from the other moving parts of the justice ecosystem. Their remit has narrowed at different points over time as the remits of other judicial bodies have expanded and flexed.

For me, the Government's proposals for court reform are rooted in an undisputed drive to modernise our justice system. Those proposals retain jury trials—the right to jury trial is not being removed—but they also encompass a much wider range of suggested and very necessary changes to our justice system in order to uphold public access to justice.

2.48 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Jury trials were introduced to bring order and justice to a legal system beset by opportunism, superstition, bias and archaic practices. For eight centuries, they have been the bedrock of English and British liberty, recognised globally as a bulwark against tyranny and oppression. Yet without any modelling, impact assessment or equalities assessment, and not in line with the review done by Sir Brian Leveson, the Government plan to scrap this ancient protection.

Ayoub Khan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alicia Kearns: I have yet to make an argument, but I will shortly.

Who in this place can honestly say that if they were facing incarceration, they would be happy with just one judge and no jury making that decision? Think of the victims who face unconscious bias daily, and who will not get justice if just one person decides that question.

Most sinister of all has been the debate in the Chamber this afternoon. Labour MPs have argued that juries—ordinary people—cannot be trusted and are not up to the job. They have said that it is too complex and too detailed. What next? Will Labour strip their right to vote as well? It is deeply concerning. The Minister has said that this change is not the result of some crisis that Labour MPs want to blame on the Conservatives, and that the Government would be making it anyway. It is

ideological. Every time Labour has come into government it has tried to strip jury trials—under Blair when I was a child, and yet again now.

Both the Prime Minister and the Justice Secretary have previously recognised the importance of jury trials; in fact, they opposed their abolition publicly. How will they justify their change of mind? Perhaps when the Justice Secretary is returned to Parliament after the next election, as he almost certainly will be, he will bring in trial by combat. Almost 40 of the Government's MPs have opposed this change, and they are absolutely right to do so, because there are other options, including using unused sitting days and Sir Brian Leveson's proposal to have one judge sitting with two magistrates; there would then be an element of a layperson having a say.

Clearly, the Prime Minister can admit it when he gets something wrong and can change course, as we saw—albeit far too late—with the family farm tax, welfare and grooming gangs. Do not leave it too late this time. The Labour manifesto made no mention of curtailing our right to jury trial. This is not a minor shift in policy; it is a worrying trend fundamental to the relationship between the individual and the state. We see this trend in the proposal for digital ID and the stripping of fundamental freedoms. Jury trials recognise the gravity of removing someone's right to liberty.

Pam Cox: Will the hon. Member give way?

Alicia Kearns: I am just wrapping up, but go on.

Pam Cox: I wonder what the hon. Member thinks about the history of jury trials, which shows that the right to trial by jury has not been an inalienable ancient right, but has been flexed over time.

Alicia Kearns: If the hon. Lady had listened carefully, she would have heard that I did not say that jury trial was an inalienable right. The law says that one has a right to a fair trial. However, we have established historically that jury trials mean that we do not see unconscious bias. There have been archaic and appalling cases that have shown that one individual making a decision about others is often not fair, transparent or right. As we heard from Sir David Davis, there is a greater number of retrials when an individual made the decision in a trial than when a jury made the decision.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Just to make sure that the hon. Member does not make a further mistake, I remind her not to mention colleagues by their first name.

Alicia Kearns: My sincerest apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. A year of maternity leave does leave one with a few cobwebs.

The British people are very clear that they do not want this fundamental change.

Ayoub Khan: The hon. Member makes a persuasive point about modelling and impact assessments. Having practised at the criminal Bar for the last two decades, I can tell the House that there will still be opening speeches by defence counsel and prosecution counsel, and there will still be cross-examination of witnesses. Most importantly, there is the questioning of the defendant. Judges understand the procedure, but defendants must also understand the procedure and closing speeches.

I cannot see where there will be savings. That is why the modelling is so important. Does the hon. Member agree?

Alicia Kearns: I am afraid that we hear again the continual argument that the average layperson cannot understand justice. If a defence lawyer or prosecution lawyer cannot make the argument make sense to the average person, they have no job representing an individual at court. It is their duty to make law transparent and understandable to every individual.

We hear this argument that court cases have become more detailed, but we should be pleased that there are more detailed and complex arguments being made in our courts. It is a sign of a court system that is working, and that does not rely on basics or tropes to get justice, yet the Labour party sees it as the opposite.

This is, unfortunately, yet another disappointing and deeply sinister step toward the Government fundamentally changing our relationship with the Crown and the state. I urge the Government to listen to the legal industry, and to listen to and trust the British people.

2.53 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I wanted to be a barrister from when I was a child. I did not know any lawyers, and I think I got most of my ideas about what lawyers did from TV shows, but jury trials is what I wanted to do. Some of my most memorable moments as a barrister were prosecuting and defending in front of juries, so I get the importance of jury trials, but I also saw courts falling down and delays getting longer and longer, and I have spent recent years hearing former colleagues talk about cases that are listed for three, four or five years' time. We have heard that the Crown court backlog is sitting at 78,000 cases, and in every single case, justice is being put on hold—a family is left reeling from a burglary, a teenager is recovering from assault, or a survivor of sexual assault is waiting years for her day in court. It is not acceptable.

Of course I want increased funding, and with this Labour Government we are already beginning to see that; an additional £450 million per year has been earmarked for the court system over the spending review period to fund the increased number of court sitting days. However, Sir Brian Leveson made it abundantly clear that the current system cannot stop the backlog from growing. With more digital evidence being presented in court; more DNA, cell site, electronic and social media evidence; and the massive disclosure exercises, trials are more complex. Sir Brian Leveson found that jury trials are taking twice as long as they did in the year 2000.

I spent over a year of my time as a barrister working on a complicated insider trading fraud case. We spent huge amounts of time and resource working out how we would present that prosecution to a jury. This is not to say that juries are not capable, but in terms of suitability and proportionality, I need no persuasion that trial by jury is often not appropriate in fraud trials and similarly technical trials.

We must be absolutely clear that the proposal is not to scrap jury trials. The proposal is to amend the type of cases that are heard by juries. The types of cases being heard by jury have changed and evolved over time. It was the Conservatives who, through the Criminal Justice

[Catherine Atkinson]

Act 1988, made offences such as common assault and criminal damage summary only, and not subject to jury trial. We are rightly proud of our legal traditions, but it is untrue to suggest that the lack of jury trials is somehow unique to despotic regimes. Sweden, which is No. 1 in the World Justice Project's global rankings, does not use jury trials at all. Norway, which is ranked No. 3, also does not—nor do Germany and the Netherlands. In France, Denmark and Canada, only the most serious cases are heard by juries.

I believe that jury trials are a fundamental part of system, and it is right that they remain so, but something has to change. Without really bold action, the backlog will continue to grow.

Alison Griffiths: I just wonder why the hon. Lady would not look to implement the recommendations from the shadow Secretary of State before seeking to restrict jury trials.

Catherine Atkinson: There are a huge number of additional measures that will be rolled out, and I look forward to continuing to engage with Justice Ministers on other measures that I believe will help. We have more coming after the next stage of the Leveson review.

We need bold action to ensure justice for victims across the country—and not years in the future. They need a criminal justice system that works. We all—the British people—need to have faith in our criminal justice system again.

2.58 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson). I listened to her speech very closely, and it was largely invalidated by the admission of the Minister that she would have made this change anyway, irrespective of any backlog. The hon. Member cannot guarantee the House—neither can the Minister—that the backlog would come down after the abolition, or partial abolition, of trial by jury, because there has been no impact assessment or modelling shown to the House. I am sure that the hon. Member will concede that.

The Minister is making this change under the guise of modernisation, but we must be very clear about what is at stake: 800 years of legal precedent. This right is set out in Magna Carta—and how clever they were in 1215 to come up with a legal mechanism that made sure that individual citizens have the right to pass judgment on their peers. This mechanism goes right to the heart of our society and shapes the relationship between the individual, or group of individuals, and the state. That is so the state cannot abuse its power in making a decision about taking away someone's liberty or livelihood, or their reputation; a panel of peers makes that judgment. That is what is at stake.

Catherine Atkinson: Will my hon. Friend consider how Conservative Governments were wrong to reduce the number of types of offences heard by juries? Does he agree that it is absolutely necessary to see some

modernisation, acknowledging that criminal trials and the evidence presented in those trials has changed over the years?

Saqib Bhatti: I am delighted that the hon. Member called me her hon. Friend; I accept such an accolade. I agree with trial by jury, as stated in the motion—it has validity in where it is in place—and Opposition Members think that reducing it, as the Government propose, without any assessment or guarantee of numbers, is wrong.

The hon. Member and many other Labour Members set out a number of ways—albeit in a party political guise—in which we could reduce the backlog, but the reality is, the Government are not even talking about those seriously; they are talking about reducing jury trials. I was here when the Justice Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and said that they would reduce jury trials to reduce the backlog. Those two things do not go hand in hand. That is why there is cross-party opposition as well as opposition from judges and all sorts of organisations, including the Criminal Bar Association, which says that this will not achieve what the Government want it to.

A constituent of mine—a local barrister who sees this day in, day out—wrote to me about improvements in sitting days. He wants to see investment in sitting days, and the Conservatives have called for that. We have also called for prisoner transport services to be on time, as well as—I think the Minister referred to some of these points—the targeted removal of cases that can no longer be prosecuted and, of course, investment in basic court infrastructure. If all those issues had been assessed and invested in, there may even have been cross-party support, as offered by the shadow Justice Secretary. I was surprised by the Minister's tone; she then made the glaring admission that this change would have happened anyway.

This is about big statist ideology, undermining trial by jury. We continue to hear, as we did from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), that this proposal will undermine fairness in the system. Fundamental to this, in my view, is arrogance. There is arrogance in saying, "Actually, lawyers will know better than juries." The whole nature of trial by jury is not about expecting an individual juror to have expertise in everything; it is about collective decision making that takes away bias and discrimination. No Government Members can guarantee that an individual judge—as neutral as they must be and as professional as they are—will not demonstrate those biases. That is the point we are making: the Government's plan undermines one of the most fundamental individual liberties that we rely on in society.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that if the argument that runs is, "It is about expert lawyers arguing their case to an expert judge", the next way of trying to speed up the jury process or modernise our legal process will be a further erosion of our rights by reducing the rights of appeal, because of that use of expert judges alone, without the benefit of a lay jury?

Saqib Bhatti: I agree with my hon. Friend. I suspect that I am running out of time. [Interruption.] I have one minute. Of course, the fundamental point is that

this is a slippery slope, which opens the door to further erosion of individual rights. Government Members may think their proposal is a good idea because it cuts waiting times, but there may well be a moment when an individual has to rely on trial by jury—by the way, that is their right; they can request that because it gives fairness—and it is that fundamental right of being judged by our peers on which we rely. I implore Government Members to follow the example of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who is taking a brave stance.

3.4 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Who would have thought that a Government led by a human rights lawyer would be leading the charge to remove one of our most basic human rights, trial by jury? The Government are removing the right to a jury trial for any offences that carry a likely sentence of less than three years, supposedly to reduce the backlog of cases waiting to go to trial—but let us look at the evidence.

There is a backlog of 78,000 cases. There are around 1.3 million prosecutions in England and Wales every year, and 10% of those cases go before a Crown court. Of those, three out of 10 go to trial. These reforms mean that more than two out of 10 will still go before a jury. Given those figures, there will be no realistic change to the waiting times from removing that fundamental right. Who was doing the maths for this—the “Mastermind” Lord Chancellor? No wonder the Prime Minister appointed him.

My constituents in Tatton, from school pupils to the leader of the northern circuit and barristers from the Middle Temple, urged me to speak today to say that this is an absolute disgrace, and they put forward some of their suggestions. A barrister at St John’s Buildings said, “Actually, I don’t believe at all that cutting trial by jury will get down these lists and sort out the problem. In fact, I’m deeply concerned that such proposals will further erode the trust of the public in our justice system. It will remove their participation in criminal justice. There is no evidence that it will have any impact on the delays. A better solution for the backlog would be to stop the cap on the number of sitting days and let courts sit around the clock, and also to sort out the failure of the prisoner transport system, which does not get defendants to court, or that gets them there late and wastes time.”

Another barrister—a King’s Counsel criminal barrister at Lincoln House Chambers in Manchester—said, “I’m very concerned that curtailing jury trials is based on no credible evidence at all. In particular, there has been no pilot scheme. It appears that the suggested savings of 20% have been pulled out of thin air. Very importantly, it will erode a deeply entrenched constitutional principle that a jury may acquit as a matter of conscience in these cases. It will remove a bulwark against misuse of the criminal court by the Government and those in authority, and the ability of a jury to take a view favourable to a defendant for reasons other than evidence of guilt.”

What about the Lord Chancellor? Until a few weeks ago, he believed in juries and trial by jury, too. This is one thing that Government Back Benchers should really be concerned about: constituents have said to me that for such an important change to our unwritten constitution,

there should have been mention of it in the Labour party manifesto. One person said, “That would have factored into my voting decision, and it could well have been—if not would have been—a very different decision.”

The debate has been revealing. There are no data, no impact assessments and no pilot. The Minister herself, who even suggests—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The speaking limit is now three minutes.

3.8 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): Plans to restrict access to jury trial take a sledgehammer to one of the most important protections for the people of this country. I would expect any Government suggesting a change of that magnitude to have a strong rationale for doing so. Instead, we hear the nonsensical argument that curtailing jury trials will address the courts backlog, yet the Minister of State for Courts and Legal Services told the House that only 3% of court cases are jury cases. So before we even get into the debate, we need clarity on what this change will mean for the backlog. That means modelling and timescales, not justifications based on religious belief. I suggest that the Government are getting desperate when that is the best they can offer—perhaps next we will hear that the tooth fairy backs digital identification or that Father Christmas supports giving away the Chagos islands.

Back in the real world, in 2024 the Lady Chief Justice gave evidence to the Justice Committee that our courts faced around 100 unplanned closures every week, with 200 near closures per month. That is in line with credible data suggesting that just yesterday, 15% of our Crown courtrooms sat empty, and it is the same today. If the Minister wants to tackle the backlog, might that not be the best place to start?

Let me turn to the key benefit of jury trials: the involvement of our peers in delivering justice. These are people in our own communities with no obvious axe to grind or political motivations. Any justice system that concentrates powers in the hands of a small number of repeat decision makers inevitably risks groupthink and unconscious, or even conscious, bias. A jury is a built-in safeguard: 12 ordinary people drawn at random, bringing different instincts and experiences, and forced to test the prosecution’s case in a way that a single decision maker cannot. Simply put, it is safer to spread human fallibility across 12 people than to concentrate it in one. A system in which liberty hinges solely on inputs from various arms of the state—the police, the CPS and then a judge—cannot be as inherently fair as one in which justice is done with the people’s direct involvement.

The curtailing of jury trials is not the only concern. Ministers want to expand sentencing powers in the magistrates courts by allowing them to hand down sentences of up to two years, while at the same time restricting the ability to appeal decisions taken in those courts. It is extraordinary that this Government think that someone who can sit as a magistrate from the age of 18, with no legal qualifications or experience, should be able to decide whether someone loses their liberty. If you were in the dock, would you be happy with that? Juries may not be perfect, but I know what I would prefer.

[Rebecca Paul]

If the Government are determined to push ahead with this, they are knowingly increasing the risk of wrongful convictions and excessive sentences. We know that more than 40% of appeals against decisions taken by magistrates courts are upheld. How many miscarriages of justice are this Government willing to accept?

Ministers would be foolish to trade away a centuries-old safeguard for a headline about swift justice, only to discover afterwards that our courts are no speedier, just less just. I believe that the British people must remain participants in their system of justice rather than mere observers. I urge Ministers to think again. Do not curtail jury trials. Do not concentrate yet more power in fewer hands. Fix the courts. Protect our legal heritage.

3.11 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The right to a trial by jury is one that has stood at the very centre of our criminal justice system for centuries. It is a crucial check on the power of the state as it undertakes one of the most solemn duties: to try a citizen and to determine guilt or innocence. That principle is, in the words of the Lord Chancellor himself, “a fundamental part” of our democracy. Instead of taking practical and obvious measures, such as fully utilising courtrooms that sit empty to address the serious backlog in the criminal justice system, the Government have instead chosen the destructive option that, in reality, is unlikely to adequately address the pressure on the system at all.

The Government’s approach rests on the flawed assumption that only certain cases are serious enough to merit trial by jury, but who is to decide what counts as serious? Horrific crimes such as murder and rape are rightly treated with the utmost gravity, but offences deemed lesser can still ruin lives: a theft accusation can end a career; an assault can leave lasting physical and psychological harm; a reputation can be destroyed beyond repair. Our justice system is not merely about classification but about justice itself. It works by consent and is the stronger for it. Trial by jury embodies that public consent. Without it, we risk victims’ trust in its fairness and defendants’ confidence that they will be judged fairly by their peers.

This debate is also about judicial decision making. The reality is that not all judges are created equal. No one is infallible. Judges can get things wrong and they can do so on more than one occasion. The strength of the jury system lies in renewal. Each case is considered by a fresh group of citizens. If a judge becomes the sole arbiter of guilt, there is a risk that errors—conscious or unconscious—can be repeated. The jury system makes our criminal justice system more robust, more resilient and ultimately more trustworthy.

Jury trials also play a vital role in ensuring justice is done, because they are drawn from the communities they serve. That point was made to me by Daniel and Grace Robinson, who are constituents of mine and experts in addressing modern slavery and criminal exploitation. From the hundreds of cases they have seen, they note that juries often recognise indicators of modern slavery much more than would have happened without them. That is because they bring a broad range of experience.

The Government seek to justify their changes on the basis of backlog reduction and cost, but we must not weaken the system that is respected across the world—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Lewis Cocking.

3.14 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): As we have heard, trial by jury is one of this country’s most fundamental rights. Only months ago, this Government were elected and a Minister was saying:

“Jury service is an essential part of criminal justice which underpins the impartiality and fairness that runs through our legal system.”

I would have thought that every Member from right across the House would agree with that statement. Not a single one of us stood on a manifesto at the last general election to abolish jury trials in this country. Why would Ministers be so keen to abandon such an important tradition of our great country?

That we ask that question will come as no surprise to our constituents. From abolishing local councils and cancelling elections to imposing an authoritarian digital identity scheme, it is all part of the same pattern. Again and again, this Labour Government show that they are more than happy to curtail the voice and freedom of the British people.

If the Ministry of Justice had exhausted every possible route to get that backlog down, its proposals on jury trial trials might have a bit more credibility. This Government could remove the cap on sitting days, ensuring that courts can work at full capacity. They could work day and night to eliminate inefficiencies in the system, which waste hours of court time—but they have not.

Having seen the justice system up close through my work with Hertfordshire’s police and crime commissioner, I know that huge amounts of time are lost before a case even reaches court. A recent study from the University of Leicester found that, on average, it takes 113 days to charge a suspect after a crime has been recorded. Issues between police forces and the CPS when cases are submitted can add at least 72 days to the length of a case. Communication between police forces and prosecutors could be vastly improved. Digital evidence, such as body-worn cameras and CCTV, is widely present and the study notes that cases with digital evidence were submitted more quickly to the CPS than those without. Investigators also warn, however, of how time-consuming handling that sort of evidence can be. The Government should therefore focus on ensuring that police forces, prosecutors, the courts and, of course, victims take full advantage of video evidence so as to accelerate justice rather than slow it down.

That is just one example of the actions that Ministers could take, instead of embarking on this jury trials policy, which abandons such an essential component of justice in the United Kingdom. I urge this Government to start listening, to use all the tools available to them and to drop this disastrous policy.

3.17 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I start by saying how extraordinary it was to hear the Minister of State for Courts and Legal Services say earlier that

she would be pursuing this policy even if there were not a backlog to deal with. That suggests that it was planned all along, but it is nowhere in the Labour party manifesto. Will the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) explain in summing up why that is the case?

There is no mandate to reduce trial by jury. It is a profound constitutional shift—one that strikes at the heart of the relationship between citizen and state. Trial by jury is a centuries-old safeguard designed to ensure that an individual can be judged guilty only by their peers and not by the machinery of the state. It is the ordinary person's shield against arbitrary power and yet, astonishingly, the Government now ask us to believe that that ancient protection must be curtailed just because Ministers do not want to do the hard work to reduce the backlog.

The Bar Council, which represents the very professionals who keep our justice system functioning, is correct to raise alarm bells. There is absolutely no evidence—none whatsoever—that restricting jury trials will reduce the backlog. The Government have produced no modelling, no data and no analysis to justify that constitutional gamble. That work should have been done before the announcement was made, especially for something of such magnitude. Around 3% of criminal cases currently reach a jury. To claim that reducing jury trials further will magically clear the backlog of tens of thousands of cases is just implausible. It defies logic and makes no sense whatsoever. This is a complete distraction. No hon. Member supporting the Government position has been able to explain how the decision will actually shift the dial on reducing the backlog.

Concern goes deeper, however, as many of my hon. Friends have explained. Every time this Government face a crisis, their instinct is not to work out how sensibly to fix the system but to take things away from British citizens. We have heard examples including digital ID and Chagos, and now they are taking away people's right to be judged by their peers because they cannot get a grip of the criminal justice system. Judge-only trials may be quicker, but they are not fairer. They concentrate power in the single hand of a single state official. Did it cross anyone's mind to pilot juryless trials in Crown courts? If not, why not? They remove the diversity of experience, the collective wisdom and the democratic legitimacy that juries bring. How many judges are under 40? How many are non-white? How many were educated in state schools? How many have personal experience of the issues? Now ask the same question of juries.

3.20 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): For me, the key question in this matter is this: what will be the impact on public confidence in our legal system? I will answer that question based on my professional life as a criminal barrister practising in our criminal courts. I shall also answer it from the perspective of someone who practised in Northern Ireland, where we had both jury trials and judge-alone trials, called Diplock courts. I have seen and operated both, and I know the public confidence level resulting from those respective types of trials. I have absolutely no doubt that the public have far more confidence in 12 peers making the decision than in a single judge making the decision. It is not that our

judges are not intellectually adequate. It is not that they do not have massive legal experience. It is the fact that they do not have the lived experience of 12 individuals who are making a decision about charges against an equal person. That is the genius of the jury system. Those 12 individuals come to the case without preconceptions and without the baggage of anything else, and when they hear the evidence—and the evidence only—they make their decision.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): The hon. and learned Member is making a good point. I, too, am a recovering lawyer. On the impact of these proposals, does he agree that because of the lack of confidence, what we are likely to see is not a cut in the backlog but an increase in applications to the Appeal Court to overturn unsafe convictions? That is hardly a way to fix the justice system.

Jim Allister: Indeed, and I would remind the House that, because of concerns about the Diplock courts in Northern Ireland, there was an automatic right of appeal, to try to build some confidence. That automatic right of appeal would not exist, in the main, in the proposals before us.

We are told that this measure will save time. It will not save time. What time would we be saving—an hour to swear in a jury or maybe a day while a jury deliberates? As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) pointed out, a judge who has to make a decision might do so there and then, but he would then have to go away and write it up. He would spend a lot longer writing it up, knowing that it might have to go through the fine-toothed comb of the Court of Appeal, than a jury would spend reaching a decision. There will be no time-saving. In my experience, the loss of time and the delays in our courts come primarily from delays in providing disclosure and from witnesses not being available. None of that will change under this new system. What will change is the body blow to confidence in the judicial system and the legal process.

For me, the Government lost this debate today when the bottom fell out of their case and the Minister had to say, effectively, that this was not about delay but about an ideology. It is an ideology that ill fits this House and an ideology that the House should most convincingly reject.

3.24 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Since 1220, trials by 12 good men—trials by jury—have been taking place. Juries are a key way that citizens consent to and participate in one of the most significant powers the state holds: to convict and imprison subjects. According to the Secretary of State's figures, cited in this House on 16 December last year, only 3% of all criminal cases are heard by a judge and jury under the current regime. He also claimed:

“Jury trials will remain a cornerstone of the British justice system. Delayed justice is justice denied.”—[*Official Report*, 16 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 742.]

Yet he is now choosing to bring to an end an almost 1,000-year-old system in the name of efficiency. This is a complete red herring.

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

Remedies are already available that would help to solve the backlog. In November, the Institute for Government stated:

“The major drivers of poor productivity are not having enough criminal lawyers, badly maintained court buildings, shortages of court staff and poor technology”.

While none of those are quick or easy to overcome, maximising productivity is a far more practical and measured step than the controversial and nuclear option of judge-only trials via the introduction of a new intermediate court, the Crown court bench division, which has been neither piloted nor thoroughly modelled—[*Interruption.*] I hear the Minister chuntering from a sedentary position about who started that. Well, this Government are doing nothing to address it. They could do as we on the Conservative Benches suggest and make a start by providing an adequate number of sitting days. Lady Chief Justice Carr has already said that 2,000 days are currently going unused. I would advise the Government to help sort the backlog by allocating those, rather than by abolishing a significant part of our system.

The Institute for Government has identified that scrapping jury trials will save between 7% and 8% of the time currently spent on Crown court jury cases. Abolishing a practice used in such a small percentage of cases shows that this Government are more focused on the same tinkering at the edges that the Justice Secretary has stated we cannot afford to do, as opposed to using pragmatic, clear solutions that could help fix the issues. It also represents yet another in a long list of examples of Labour wanting to take power from citizens and further enorge the state. The Justice Secretary need not listen only to me. The Bar Council’s leadership issued a statement that made clear its position that it was against the curtailment of jury trials, stating:

“There is no evidence we have seen...that it will significantly reduce the Crown Court backlog. However, there is evidence that diminishing the constitutional principle of trial by jury will erode trust in our criminal justice system.”

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): When the Justice Secretary gave evidence to the Justice Committee in December, he said that the evidence underpinning the 20% time saving that comes from Sir Brian’s report would be released. If that makes the proposition good—I understand that the hon. Gentleman disputes that—would he and his party still oppose even the principle of structural reform, even if it is necessary to cut the backlog and keep it down?

Ben Obese-Jecty: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have just been informed that the hon. Member walked into the Chamber only about five minutes ago—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) has been here for a while. He was not allowed to make a speech because he was not here at the beginning of the debate, but he has been here for a while.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will make progress.

No one who voted for Labour voted for this seismic change. It is rushed, knee-jerk and smacks of a Justice Secretary who is still smarting from his demotion from one of the great offices of state and is now overcompensating by attempting to make his mark. I urge the Government to reconsider, and I urge those on the Government Benches who plan to rebel today to do so with a clear conscience, knowing that they are simply cutting out the middle man, because the Government will inevitably end up where those rebels already are.

3.27 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Trial by jury is not a luxury; it is one of the oldest and most fundamental protections in this country and a key safeguard of liberty. Yet under this Government, it is being treated not as a principle to be defended, but as a system to be rationed. We all agree that there is a crisis in the criminal justice system and that we need to bring the backlog down. Cases are drifting for years before reaching court, draining justice of its force and credibility. To the frustration of my constituents in Esher and Walton, the consequences fall heavily on victims and witnesses. Prolonged delays weaken evidence, memories fade, statements are withdrawn and prosecutions collapse. Confidence in law and order, and therefore in democracy, falters.

As my local borough commander told me this week, this change undermines policing. The Government have rightly prioritised community policing, and my own force in Esher and Walton has increased the solving rate for burglaries by 84%. Would it not be great if we all slept safely in our beds? But no—residents were shocked to learn that two individuals charged for burglary in December will not appear in court until September 2027. Similar problems arise in youth justice where sentences are repeatedly deferred, leaving young offenders without timely consequences and that most important of lessons for young people: that if they commit a crime, they will be punished. It erodes public confidence.

Why not use the most immediate lever and lift the cap on court sitting days? Late last year, I visited Kingston Crown court. The regional backlog had grown by 25%, yet courtrooms sit unused. Staff described to me the frustration of having judges, clerks, ushers, spaces and cases ready to proceed only to be blocked by limits on sitting days put in place centrally. The Government impose those caps—it is nonsensical. It makes no sense to pay for court buildings, judges and staff and then prevent them from operating fully. That is a false economy, which shifts the cost on to victims and communities and erodes public trust.

The Government have only marginally increased Crown court sitting days, barely touching the scale of the backlog and falling far short of what is needed, and this goes back to the priorities of the Treasury. Surely it must prioritise law and order first. Instead, the Government have decided to treat jury trials as a nuisance. They seem too costly and inconvenient. They are being squeezed not because they have failed, but because cutting them is easier than rebuilding the system around them.

This is a political choice, and it seems like an ideological choice from the conversation earlier, not an inevitability. The Liberal Democrats have set out a serious alternative: to invest in court buildings, lift the cap on sitting days,

use courtrooms effectively, fix broken contracts that cancel hearings, including the failure of prisoners' transport to bring defendants to court on time, and invest in rehabilitation to reduce offending. This policy is not what my constituents in Esher and Walton want.

3.31 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I do not agree that the Government should curtail our rights to trial by jury. Trial by jury is an ancient right in England and the very essence of our criminal justice system. Combined with the Government proposals for digital ID, it reveals a very authoritarian attitude. It marks a significant shift in the balance of power between the citizen and the state, and I shall vote against it.

There is a crisis within the criminal justice system and specifically with the Crown court backlog, but that backlog was not caused by trial by jury and will not be cured by its removal. Why does the Lord Chancellor believe that abolishing the right to jury trials for those likely to receive a sentence of three years or less is the right thing to do to bring down the backlog? If it is based on evidence, as he says, will he publish that as soon as possible?

In the last two years, Government figures show that the Ministry of Justice, which includes the court service, lost the highest number of days per member of staff in sickness and absence in the whole of Whitehall, at an average of 10.7 days of sickness—more than two working weeks for every member of staff. That is more than 30% higher than the civil service average and over twice the UK average if the private sector is included. Were the Lord Chancellor to focus his efforts on improving the efficiency of his own Department, he might start to see the system as a whole improve.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I was not going to intervene, but I think it is important to because I have just visited Bournemouth Crown court and magistrates court, and the people there talked about that question of sickness. They talked about the fact that their staff have been carrying the load for so many members of a team who were not in place because they had seen austerity. Many staff in the Crown court system may be going on to sickness leave because they are burned out. They are burned out from years of cuts. Does the hon. Member not recognise that we need to invest in our Crown court system so that they can get back on their feet and our criminal justice can also get back on its feet?

Sir Ashley Fox: In my experience, staff absence is normally the result of poor management. I suspect that the Ministry of Justice is managing its staff significantly worse than the rest of the civil service if staff sickness is 30% above the public sector average, which is not great to begin with. With approximately 16,400 staff in the court service, simply reducing the rate of absences to the civil service average would free up nearly 50,000 working days. That would help cut the backlog without undermining the principle of a fair trial.

We know that this Government have a habit of making bad decisions, getting ambitious Back Benchers to defend them for a few months and sending a hapless junior Minister out to face the media while the Secretary of State hides in his office, only at the last minute to realise

what a disaster the plans are before executing a U-turn that comes far too late for them to gain any credit. We have seen that on winter fuel, welfare reform, the grooming gangs inquiry, the two-child benefit cap and, most recently, the family farm and family business tax, so I urge Labour Back Benchers to be very cautious about supporting the Government this evening. They risk voting for something that their constituents do not want and that in their hearts, they know is wrong. Ultimately, they know that late in the day, the Government will back down, leaving their credibility in shreds.

3.34 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I would not say this of most of the debates that I attend in the House, but this one has been genuinely revealing, primarily because of what the Minister said at the end and the opening of her remarks. As the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) pointed out powerfully—he speaks with great professional experience on this issue—these proposals will not work. That is exactly what the Minister has been told by her own colleagues. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) described the proposals as “ludicrous” and said that they will not work. It is what she has been told by her own profession—her own colleagues in the legal profession point to the fact that these proposals will not work.

That speaks to a conundrum we have considered in past debates on this issue: why is there such reluctance on the part of the Government to bring forward the impact assessment if they have already made this decision? If they have already taken the view that these changes will work, surely they want to present the evidence to prove that. As was pointed out earlier in the debate, if they will not publish the full impact assessment, surely they will publish the threshold—the minimum tipping point—on which this policy will be determined worth while, not least given how fundamental a change is being proposed.

As the Minister set out at the end of her remarks, she would be making this change irrespective of whether there is a crisis in the courts. There we have the crux—the head of the nail that the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim hit—which is that this is an ideological change. That in turn opens up a second paradox: if the change is ideological, why was it not in the manifesto? Indeed, if it is ideological, why is it contrary to what the Justice Secretary said so many times in opposition? When did he have his change of belief to this new ideological position?

Given the time limit, I will turn to a further contradiction. The Prime Minister has so often spoken about the need for more trust in politics, yet here we have a policy that marks a fundamental change after 800 years of legal precedent with no transparency or evidence that it will work, that was not in the manifesto and that is contrary to the remarks that the Government have made.

At the start of her remarks, the Minister spoke about choices. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) pointed out with the list he gave and as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) rightly identified, this will be a choice for Labour Back Benchers, and it is a choice that they are at risk of making only for the Prime Minister to then belatedly change his mind.

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

3.37 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am pleased to wind up this Opposition day debate on the Prime Minister and Justice Secretary's ill-considered, poorly evidenced and rash plan to curtail one of our cornerstone rights—the right to a trial by jury—which the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) colourfully described as one in which the bottom fell out of the Government's argument.

I disagree with the Prime Minister and the Justice Secretary on very many issues, but today, for once, I find myself in fulsome, wholehearted agreement with not just the Prime Minister and the Justice Secretary, but the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards). I agree with all three of them that jury trials are a crucial, vital part of our justice system that should be protected wherever possible. Even with this Prime Minister, who has an unrivalled reputation for having opinions that last as long as they remain popular with whoever's vote he is seeking at a particular point in time, we are in the extraordinary position where the Government are now putting forward a proposal that the Justice Secretary, the Justice Minister and the Prime Minister himself all previously argued vigorously against.

In fact, I am going to indulge in a degree of parliamentary plagiarism—I am going to let them do the hard work of writing at least some of my speech for today. First, I will hand over to the Justice Minister, who previously said on the issue of limiting jury trials:

"Instead of weakening a key constitutional right, the government should do the hard work... We all have the right to be judged by our peers when the prospect of imprisonment from society is before us. To take that right away would be a wholly draconian act."

Next, let me ask the Justice Secretary to take over. He said:

"Jury trials are fundamental to our democracy. We must protect them."

He also said:

"Jury trials are a fundamental part of our democratic settlement. Criminal trials without juries are a bad idea."

I could not have said it better myself.

Finally, although I appreciate that he is a busy man, I will lean on the Prime Minister's carefully considered words. He said:

"The general and overriding presumption should be jury trial, with very, very limited exceptions",

and,

"The right to trial by jury is an important factor in the delicate balance between the power of the state and the freedom of the individual. The further it is restricted, the greater the imbalance."

That question of balance is at the heart of the matter. The Minister, as well as Labour Back Benchers—thin on the ground though they have been—have rightly pointed out that we have criminal trials without juries. That is a fact, but it is no argument for these measures. If that is the Government's argument, we could simply do away with jury trials entirely without anyone being concerned. It is and has always been a balance, but as the Justice Minister, the Justice Secretary and the Prime

Minister understand—or understood at one point at least—altering that balance should be considered only when there is no other option.

To draw a comparison that illustrates the seriousness of the matter, during the pandemic—at the heart of the crisis that was widely accepted to be the biggest challenge to face our nation since world war two—jury trials continued. In fact, it was during world war two that we last saw proposals anything like as radical as those we are considering today, but even they did not come close to this proposed curtailment. During that time, we reduced the number of jurors from 12 to seven in most cases. When our nation was under attack and every element of life was turned over to the war effort, we modified but fundamentally retained the right to jury trials.

I am pleased to say that the meeting of minds between me and the triumvirate who are making this decision is only the beginning; I find myself in common cause with 37 Labour MPs today. It is fair to say that the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), as well as the hon. Members for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) are very far from me on the political spectrum, but, like other colleagues, they are clear that these proposals are wrong, and I wholeheartedly agree. When there are 37 names on a signed public letter, any decent Whip would know that there are at least the same number lurking in the background, not willing to go public but rushing to answer the phone call from the Whips at the weekend to say that they are not happy with the proposals.

What do those 37 Members say? They say that the proposal is "madness", that it

"will cause more problems than it solves",

and that

"the public will not stand for the erosion of a fundamental right, particularly given that there are numerous other things the Government could do to more effectively reduce the backlog."

That final point takes us right back to the issue of balance. The Government have quite simply failed to articulate why these proposals are the only way forward. They might have received a more sympathetic reception had they strained every sinew to tackle the issue and truly exhausted all other options since their election.

As our motion acknowledges, the courts are under unprecedented pressure—no one disputes that. The delays are too long, victims are waiting too long for justice, and defendants are left in limbo. Prior to the pandemic, the Crown court backlogs were lower than those that we inherited from the previous Labour Government—I do not remember Labour MPs being concerned about that at the time—but then covid hit and placed unprecedented strain on the criminal justice system, leaving a long and difficult legacy. The result was an enormous reduction in court capacity that led to backlogs shooting up in a way they never had before.

I remind the house again that even during that challenging time, there was cross-party support for the guiding principle that jury trials should continue. After the pandemic, England and Wales resumed jury trials faster than many comparable countries, following one of the shortest suspensions anywhere, because they were treated as a priority. The previous Government opened, and

extended the use of, 20 Nightingale courtrooms, increased the number of judges and raised the judicial retirement age to retain experience in the system. In a short number of years, we increased the number of sitting days by more than 20,000—an unprecedented level. Despite that, the loss of capacity could not simply be undone.

Catherine Atkinson: In the light of the shadow Minister's comments about sitting days, does he condemn the Conservative cut of nearly 15% of sitting days in 2019 and congratulate this Labour Government on increasing the number of sitting days?

Dr Mullan: As the shadow Justice Secretary outlined, there has not been enough investment in the justice system over many decades. I also want to make it clear that the claim about a record number of sitting days is a bit of a statistical anomaly, because, as the Government know, there was a change in how sitting days are measured. Using the historical measure to make the comparison, we matched that number of sitting days—and perhaps even surpassed it. Of course, we uncapped sitting days for a number of years during the pandemic. This Government have failed to do that, and they have failed to rapidly increase the number of sitting days, which the Institute for Government said makes things more difficult. As I said, there is no dispute about whether there are long-standing issues, as Members across the House acknowledge. The question is what to do about them.

Let us be clear about how many of the unacceptably long waits are the result of a wait for a jury trial. The Justice Secretary has rightly been criticised for quoting statistics about victim drop-out rates in a deeply misleading way. We do not want to see any victims drop out for any reason, or any long waits, but fewer than 10% of drop-outs occur post-charge, and that figure is coming down. It is not helpful to understanding this issue for Members to cite waits of six or seven years that in fact relate to the delay from alleged offence to sentencing. Yes, waits for trial from point of charge are too long, but that is just part of the picture.

Jury trials are not a quirk or a happenstance for how we deliver criminal justice in this country; they are a foundational principle of our justice system reaching back to Magna Carta. For more than 800 years, ordinary men and women have been trusted to sit in judgment, to weigh evidence, and to decide guilt or innocence. That public participation is not a flaw in the system; it is one of its greatest sources of legitimacy. Removing juries, even for a narrow category of cases, let alone the radical changes before us, alters the relationship between the citizen and the state, and replaces collective judgment with individual arbitrary authority.

Catherine Atkinson: In light of the shadow Minister's comments, does he think it was wrong of the then Conservative Government, through the Criminal Justice Act 1988, to make offences such as criminal damage and common assault summary only, removing juries for those offences?

Dr Mullan: I wonder whether the hon. Member was listening to my speech. I have said throughout that the issue is one of balance. As the Prime Minister, the Justice Secretary and the Minister have said, we must

tread carefully; for the hon. Member to draw comparisons between minor changes and wholesale huge reductions in the use of jury trials shows that she fails to understand that the issue is one of balance. The obvious flaw in the argument being made by the Government in support of these measures—that they are to tackle what we should all consider a temporary problem—is that the measures are permanent. There is no plan to reverse them when the backlog is down, as the temporary measures in world war two that I mentioned were reversed.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that curtailing jury trials will not solve the delays but simply push the backlog back to the appeal courts? Worse still, it risks creating a two-tier justice system where those who can afford to appeal will do so, and those who cannot will be left behind.

Dr Mullan: The hon. Member is pointing out one of many flaws in the arguments that the Government have put forward to justify their case, and they simply have not made it. Court sitting days are still being wasted. Yesterday alone, more than 50 Crown court rooms sat empty.

Let us be clear: while the Government lean heavily on at least some of what has been proposed in Sir Brian Leveson's review, they need only to have looked into the bowels of the MOJ to unearth those exact ideas. That is because—this will come as little surprise to Conservative Members—we have been here before with Labour Governments. As Justice Secretary when Labour was last in office, Jack Straw also proposed removing the right to a jury trial for either-way offences. As is the case today, rightly, Members of both Houses and people from across the political spectrum united to stop those proposals. We can do away with the pretence that this is purely the workings of an independent figure. I am afraid that Sir Brian has become a shield for defending these ideas—a shield that Labour Members lacked last time around, and that they obviously hope will make the difference this time.

We are right to fear that this is the thin end of the wedge. Thanks to leaked plans, we know what the Justice Secretary wanted to do, which was to go much further than even these proposals by removing jury trial for sentences of up to five years. Where will the Government go next if they succeed with these proposals?

It is also impossible to ignore the wider context. A number of my constituents have raised with me, and other Members of the House, the point that while the Government argue that fundamental legal safeguards must be set aside, they are spending £1.8 billion on a nationwide mandatory digital ID system. The Criminal Bar Association, the Bar Council and the Law Society have all warned against the proposals. They have been clear that restricting jury trials will not solve the backlog, and risks distracting from the real work that needs to be done: fixing the basics, investing in infrastructure and people, and making them function efficiently.

I close by going a little closer to home. Rudyard Kipling, who lived in my constituency—you can find a statue of him in the village of Burwash—said in his 1911 poem, "The Reeds of Runnymede", about the centrality to British freedom of trial by jury—[*Interruption.*] I will finish with this, Madam Deputy Speaker, if Labour Members could stop their chuntering. He said:

[Dr Mullan]

“At Runnymede, at Runnymede,
Your rights were won at Runnymede!
No freeman shall be fined or bound,
Or dispossessed of freehold ground,
Except by lawful judgment found
And passed upon him by his peers.
Forget not, after all these years,
The Charter signed at Runnymede.”

Conservative Members have not forgotten. Let us hope that enough Labour Members have also not forgotten either.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): It will be quite tough to follow that, but here we go.

This has been a very useful debate. Every single contribution, including those from Conservative colleagues, has commented on the crisis in our courts that we inherited from the Conservatives after 14 years. We have heard some suggestions; the gist of the suggestions from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Opposition is, “Let us get more court sitting days.” Would it not have helped if the Conservatives had not closed half of the magistrates courts in England and Wales? Across the entire estate, they sold off more than 40% of all court buildings for far less than they were worth to the communities they served.

As a result of the Conservatives’ vandalism of our court system, there are nearly 80,000 cases waiting to be heard and that number will continue to rise beyond 100,000 without investment, efficiency savings and structural modernisation. Let us be clear: this Government will bring forward a modernisation package that will drag the criminal justice system into the 21st century, ensuring that justice is done fairly and swiftly, that our system meets the challenges that modern criminal cases bring, and that we never again reach a point at which the public’s faith in the criminal justice system is so severely undermined.

The House has heard today a clear and compelling case from my hon. and learned Friend the Courts Minister, who set out the bold but sensible reform we need, bringing down the backlog by the end of the Parliament. It is rooted in evidence, grounded in reality and driven by a simple objective: to fix a criminal court system under unprecedented strain and put it on a sustainable footing for the future.

Dr Luke Evans: When the Courts Minister closed her statement, the principle was not about the backlog: she said that she would have gone ahead with scrapping juries to this extent regardless of the backlog. Will the Minister clarify the Government’s position? Is it a principled position or is it about dealing with the administrative burden?

Jake Richards: We absolutely have to drag the criminal justice system into the 21st century by modernising its structures, but the context in which we operate clearly has an effect on that programme. The fact that we have

inherited an unprecedented backlog in our criminal court system affects the urgency and radicalism of that reform.

Let me take this opportunity to pay particular tribute to Sir Brian Leveson, who is no shield. His independent review has driven the reforms that we are taking forward; it is rigorous, thoughtful and absolutely clear about the scale of the challenge before us. Let us be very straight: the reforms being proposed, which will be set out in due course before this House, are not plucked out of thin air but the result of intensive, careful work undertaken by the most senior lawyers, academics and members of the judiciary. The modernisation programme will be built on evidence. These are difficult decisions and no doubt uncomfortable for some in the legal profession, but they are absolutely vital for a properly functioning and robust system that we can be proud of to take into the future.

Let me bust some of the myths that we have heard in the debate. Some right hon. and hon. Members have suggested that these changes tear up a historical right to a jury trial. Let me be abundantly clear that they do not. Article 40 of Magna Carta reminds us that we must not “deny, or delay right or justice”,

giving us the old adage that justice delayed is justice denied. Sadly, in this country today, justice delayed has become justice denied for far too many victims. The Government will not cling to mythological tradition at the expense of fairness, effectiveness and public confidence. We will rise to meet the challenge of the day, rather than living in the past.

I have heard on countless occasions the assertion that this Government are scrapping jury trials. That is not true. Everyone has and will always have the right to a fair trial, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) made clear in her compelling speech. There has never been an inalienable or unqualified right to a trial by jury.

Let us set out the maths in some detail, because this is very important. Currently, 10% of all criminal cases are subject to jury trial. Some 7% of those are pleas, where there is no trial, so just 3% are subject to a jury trial. The reforms before the House would reduce that number to just 1.5%. These are modest reforms affecting a small proportion of the criminal cases in our country.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I have great respect for what the Minister is saying, but I and many others on the Labour Benches still have questions. Will he agree to meet those of us who think, for example, that the proposals from the Criminal Bar Association deserve closer scrutiny, so that we can discuss those proposals in further detail?

Jake Richards: As ever, I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this or many of the other issues he raises in the House.

Let us be very clear that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox) has set out, this is a modest change to jury trials—something that has happened throughout our history. The Opposition were reminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) that their party has made modest changes to jury trials in the past. It was Margaret Thatcher, one of the shadow Justice Secretary’s various political heroes, who reclassified crimes including taking

a motor vehicle without authority and who raised the threshold for criminal damage. Those became summary-only offences in 1988—they were not subject to juries at all. I wonder whether Conservative Members consider Mrs Thatcher to have torn up the Magna Carta or undertaken constitutional vandalism. It is a rhetorical device that Rumpole would be proud of.

We have heard today about what more we could be doing, but let us set out what we are doing. This Government are investing at record levels; this year alone, we have allocated over 100,000 Crown court sitting days—the highest number ever and 5,000 more than the previous Government. I remind the House again that in 2019, the previous Government cut Crown court sitting days by almost 15%—that is their record and their legacy, but Conservative Members did not mention any of that in their speeches today. The Government have committed £34 million a year for criminal legal aid advocates and £92 million a year for criminal legal aid solicitors, in recognition of their vital role in the justice system and to fix the problems caused by the previous Government's mismanagement. We are also looking at match-funded criminal barrister pupillages, with a clear focus on opening up the criminal Bar to more talented young people from every background.

Ayoub Khan: The Minister tells the House that an insignificant number of cases will be impacted. If that is true, what is the point? I am sure he has heard the adage that justice must not only be done, but be seen to be done. It can only be done through jury trials.

Jake Richards: It is a small number of cases, but they take an inordinate amount of time. That is the whole point of what Sir Brian Leveson has put forward, and in due course, when this legislation comes before the House and the impact assessments are put before it, the hon. Gentleman will be able to see that for himself.

Others have argued that investment alone, or ironing out inefficiencies, would be enough to deal with the record and rising caseload. We have heard about the problems with getting prisoners to court and about the buildings left with leaking roofs after 14 years of austerity. We are going to fix those too, but Sir Brian Leveson could not have been clearer that that will not be sufficient. Even with record investment, the Crown court caseload is projected to exceed 116,000 by 2029. The demand is simply too great, which is why we are driving forward a full programme of modernisation.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Jake Richards: I will give way on that point, and then I will make progress.

Tom Gordon: The Minister talks about record demand and the pressure on court services. Is he able to outline what assessment has been made of the increase in pressure on the court system as a result of cracking down on the right to protest in legitimate cases?

Jake Richards: We treat all cases the same. The hon. Gentleman can make that point in a debate on that subject at another time.

Let me end where I began. The crisis that this Government inherited has no doubt given rise to a heightened need to deliver a more modern, resilient and flexible model of criminal justice: one that protects what is fundamental—such as jury trials for the most serious offences—but is bold enough to change where change is needed so that it truly serves victims, commands public confidence and is fit for the realities of the 21st century. These changes will provide long-term, stable foundations for the criminal courts system and prevent the caseload from ever again reaching its current levels. That should be our focus—not a narrow debate on the merits of tradition versus the challenges of the day, or preserving a system that so clearly no longer works for the British people.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 182, Noes 290.

Division No. 396]

[3.58 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Allister, Jim	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Amos, Gideon	Duffield, Rosie
Anderson, Stuart	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Andrew, rh Stuart	Dyke, Sarah
Aquarone, Steff	Evans, Dr Luke
Argar, rh Edward	Farron, Tim
Atkins, rh Victoria	Foord, Richard
Babarinde, Josh	Forster, Mr Will
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Fox, Sir Ashley
Barclay, rh Steve	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bedford, Mr Peter	Franklin, Zöe
Bennett, Alison	Freeman, George
Berry, Siân	Garnier, Mark
Bhatti, Saqib	George, Andrew
Blackman, Bob	Gibson, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew	Glen, rh John
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Glover, Olly
Brandreth, Aphra	Goldman, Marie
Braverman, rh Suella	Gordon, Tom
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Grant, Helen
Burghart, Alex	Green, Sarah
Cane, Charlotte	Griffith, Andrew
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Griffiths, Alison
Cartlidge, James	Harding, Monica
Chadwick, David	Harris, Rebecca
Chambers, Dr Danny	Hayes, rh Sir John
Chowns, Dr Ellie	Heylings, Pippa
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Hinds, rh Damian
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hoare, Simon
Cocking, Lewis	Hobhouse, Wera
Coghlan, Chris	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Collins, Victoria	Hollinrake, Kevin
Cooper, Daisy	Huddleston, Nigel
Cooper, John	Hudson, Dr Neil
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Costa, Alberto	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Coutinho, rh Claire	Jardine, Christine
Cross, Harriet	Jarvis, Liz
Dance, Adam	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Darling, Steve	Jenrick, rh Robert
Davey, rh Ed	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Davies, Ann	Jones, Clive
Davies, Gareth	Jopp, Lincoln
Davies, Mims	Kearns, Alicia
Davis, rh David	Khan, Ayoub
Denyer, Carla	Kohler, Mr Paul
Dewhurst, Charlie	Lake, Ben

Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe

Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Wayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Turner, Karl
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Nick Timothy and
 Jerome Mayhew**

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam

Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom

Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan

Onn, Melanie
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle

Sewards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir
 Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir
 Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris

Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo

White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:

**Gregor Poynton and
 Nesil Caliskan**

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House believes that the Government inherited a justice system on the brink of collapse with a record and rising caseload created under 14 years of Conservative mismanagement, austerity and cuts to the justice system that has forced victims of crime to wait years for justice; notes that the justice system has historically evolved to match the needs of the society it serves; supports the Government in making the investment required, including continuing to break records on the number of sitting days funded; looks forward to Sir Brian Leveson's upcoming recommendations on reforms to improve efficiencies across the courts system; further supports taking forward reforms to the justice system based on Sir Brian Leveson's independent review of the criminal courts in which victims and the public can have confidence; and further notes that the Government will introduce legislation and publish its impact assessment in due course.

Rural Communities

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.13 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets that the Government's policies have resulted in taxes forecast to rise to the highest proportion of GDP on record, record closures of agriculture, forestry and fishing businesses in the last 12 months, the closure of two pubs or restaurants every day and falling levels of business investment; further regrets the Government's changes to funding for rural areas; also regrets the Government's plans to build more energy infrastructure in the countryside to meet its net zero targets; believes that these changes are likely to affect the rural way of life; additionally regrets the Government's chaotic approach to its plans to change Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief; and calls on the Government to scrap all its planned changes to those reliefs.

Rural people feel betrayed by this Labour Government of the urban elite. Before the election, the Prime Minister promised that a Labour party under his leadership would form a

"new relationship with the countryside...based on respect",

yet after a year and a half, his Government have shown nothing but contempt, arrogance and, on occasion, cruelty to rural people. It is a great pity that the Secretary of State is missing in action from this debate, but she does not seem to like scrutiny.

The Government's decisions have resulted in a cost of living crisis; we have rising food prices, rising unemployment and the highest taxes on record, while business investment and confidence have plummeted, and growth has flatlined. The consequences can be seen and felt in the very fabric of our rural communities. Shops, pubs, hairdressers and post offices in market towns are closing because employers cannot afford Labour's hikes to national insurance, the minimum wage and business rates. Agricultural suppliers are disappearing as farming investment plummets, and a record number of farms have closed in the last 12 months, with more to follow, because Labour's chaotic farming decisions and its failure to launch a new sustainable farming incentive scheme have undermined people's livelihoods at every turn.

These businesses are not just buildings or land. They used to employ people, giving young people their first job, bringing mothers back into the workforce after maternity leave, enabling people to have good careers near their families, encouraging others to start their own businesses, and bringing prosperity and vibrancy to our market towns and villages. However, as a direct result of Labour's taxes and business cost rises, these jobs are going. As a successful small business owner in one of my market towns said to me before Christmas, "Reeves has cost me an extra £12,000 this year, which I simply don't have. My business will not survive this Government."

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend is quite rightly talking about what really matters in the countryside, namely the family farm tax. Does it say much about the priorities of this Government

that they think it is really important to waste Parliament's time by banning people from getting on a horse and chasing after a rag soaked in linseed oil?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend and county neighbour of course understands all the challenges facing our rural communities, and I think we are all wondering why, in the midst of a cost of living crisis, when very worrying events are happening overseas, food prices for all our constituents are continuing to rise, and jobs are being lost in all our constituencies because of the policies of this Government, they appear to be prioritising a lawful hobby, but I will come on to that in a minute.

In the midst of all this socialist misery, Labour is killing off pubs with their business rate hikes of up to 78%. *[Laughter.]* Labour Members may laugh, but they are not getting a drink out of this, are they? Two pubs and restaurants are closing every single day under this Government, so Members should support our pubs and pop into their local for a drink. The good news is that they will not meet a Labour MP there, as they have all been barred. *[Interruption.]* They don't like it up 'em!

In contrast, the Conservatives have fully costed plans to scrap business rates entirely for a quarter of a million high-street businesses and pubs, paid for by welfare reforms that the Prime Minister is too weak to push through. We Conservatives care, we get it, and we have people's backs.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Does that not speak to a wider point? I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that the shocking statistics out this week on just how few young people are able to get Saturday jobs show that if we cut business rates and allow businesses to employ people, we stand a much better chance of keeping them off welfare in the first place.

Victoria Atkins: That is exactly right, and the difference is that Conservative Members are used to running businesses and working in the private sector, whereas Labour Members have no idea and no clue.

It is not just our market towns and villages that are being hurt by this Government; our public services are, too. Labour has scrapped the rural services delivery grant. They have imposed a local government finance settlement that delivers a three-year punishment beating to shire districts, while their urban counterparts do better, and they have made cynical changes to funding formulas so that rural areas lose out. These choices will have a real impact on the delivery of public services—from health and social care to schools, vital infrastructure and transport. Scrapping the £2 bus fare has increased the cost of living for rural residents, and increased fuel duty will take even more money from our pockets later this year.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will make some progress, because I know how popular this debate is.

Labour's choices will scar our landscapes and nature forever. The Government are reversing our bold commitments to nature with another U-turn on biodiversity

net gains. The chief executive officer of the London Wildlife Trust has said of this U-turn:

“It’s a farce, a disgrace. It’s desperate.”

Well, that is Labour party policy for you. That U-turn has particular poignancy because of the industrialisation of our countryside, where pylons, substations, solar estates and wind turbines are set up, though local opinion is against them—all to meet the unachievable net zero targets set by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. My constituents are the victims of that in Lincolnshire, where Labour’s plans will destroy people’s homes, our cherished landscape and nature, as well as prime agricultural land that feeds the nation. We will fight those plans.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a salient point. When local people face the impositions that she mentions, it is prime land that is taken out of production, compromising our food security, making us less economically resilient, and costing jobs and livelihoods in the countryside.

Victoria Atkins: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend and county neighbour. What Labour does not seem to understand is that rural areas are not against building more homes and infrastructure. They just want them in the right places, and for them to go with the grain of the community, not against it. At least the Prime Minister is being consistent in this one instance. In the election campaign, he said that he was happy to make enemies of the people who oppose his plans. Well, that is a rare example of an election promise that he has kept. Just as Ministers do not understand business because none of them has ever run one, they do not understand the quintessential quality of rural life—that sense of belonging, of being part of a community. It is about people coming together, be it at the parish church, the local riding stables or our local pubs.

Rural sports, which were mentioned, are an example. They are a key part of the rural way of life for participants and non-participants alike. They are responsible for 26,000 full-time equivalent jobs, and perform vital conservation work across the countryside. Wander down a rural high street and you will see shops selling clothing and equipment for rural sports, as well as farriers, gun makers and saddlers, and there are others dotted around the countryside. A careless policy on rural sports will have wide-reaching impacts across our rural communities.

We rightly have some of the strongest gun laws in the world. The intent to strengthen those safeguards further is understandable, but we urge the Government to pause and work with the shooting community on their serious concerns that current proposals will have grave and unintended consequences, including causing further delays in vital medical assessments for licence holders.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is the shadow Secretary of State aware of the great concern in Shropshire among the rural community, in particular farmers, that the Government are conflating lethal firearms with shotguns? Of course, shotguns should be controlled, but they are already strictly controlled, and they are a vital part of rural life, especially for farmers controlling vermin, or those undertaking other rural pursuits. I appeal,

through the shadow Secretary of State, to the Minister to look again and disregard the consultation. The changes have not been called for and are unnecessary.

Victoria Atkins: As I say, we urge the Government to pause and work with the shooting community. We all understand the intent behind the proposals, but the Government have to get them right, because they could have grave ramifications.

Trail hunting, which we will hear about this afternoon, is long-established, and was specifically permitted by the previous Labour Government under the Hunting Act 2004 as a humane alternative to fox hunting. It is rightly a criminal offence to break the terms of the Hunting Act, and any such criminal offences should be enforced rigorously. Indeed, there have been 416 convictions in the past 15 years. Labour MPs need to be able to say why they propose imposing a blanket ban instead of tackling those who actually break the law. If there is to be intellectual consistency, do they advocate banning driving, on the basis that some people speed? Of course not. There should be effective enforcement of the criminal law brought in by their predecessor Labour Government. I wish, for example, that the Government would prioritise stopping the egregious crime of hare coursing, which we suffer from very badly in Lincolnshire, or organised rural crime or fly-tipping—all terrible crimes that seem to be increasing. Under this Government, sadly, police numbers are falling, including in rural areas. Rather than tackle the issues of policing and enforcement, the Government want to impose a blanket ban. Let us be clear-eyed as to why they are doing this: their Prime Minister is weak, his Cabinet is circling and his Back Benchers are revolting. *[Laughter.]* The Government need to throw them some red meat, so they are coming after lawful rural sports.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way from her humorous speech. She has just listed a series of changes that she would like this Labour Government to make. Can she tell the House whether, in a 15th year of Conservative Government, those changes would have been made?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. If the hon. Gentleman comes to the county of Lincolnshire, he will see the superb operation that Lincolnshire police did throughout that time to tackle hare coursing, with the support of Home Office Ministers. We have to be clear-eyed about the impact of organised rural crime, because theft of high-value farm machinery is having a terrible impact across farms. In short, this Government cannot let people live and let live.

The final example I will give is the Government’s arrogance and contempt over the infamous family farm and family business tax fiasco—what a complete and utter mess by the Secretary of State, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. I have some advice for the next Labour Prime Minister, later this year: this is a textbook example of how not to govern. The Government betrayed at the first opportunity an election promise not to touch agricultural property relief and business property relief, and spent 14 months marching junior Ministers and Back Benchers up the hill to defend their policy, telling the rural community that they were wrong and that

[Victoria Atkins]

Ministers knew better; they recommitted to this tax at the Budget on 26 November and at oral questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 18 December, and then they had a mystical revelation. Five days later, they U-turned on their hated tax. It was a Christmas miracle—and it is an absolute miracle that any Minister can look at themselves in the mirror after this chaotic and shameful episode.

The Government's mess of a partial U-turn will raise only enough money to pay for an afternoon in the NHS, yet, as the Country Land and Business Association points out, it will condemn the families operating on the slimmest of margins—who have invested in expensive machinery or who live in expensive parts of the country—to selling the family farm to pay this vindictive tax. That is why the tax must be axed.

We Conservatives have forced four votes on this issue in the past 14 months. Labour MPs toed the party line until the Budget vote in December, and that made the difference. They have the chance tonight to axe the family farm and family business tax completely, and their constituents will be watching.

This year we Conservatives will continue to fight for rural communities, for the shops, pubs and small businesses that are the backbone of the rural economy, for better funding for our vital public services, for rural people and sports to have the freedom to live and let live and, of course, for our farmers to thrive, not just survive. We Conservatives care about our market towns, our villages, our neighbours and our families. I say to them: we get it, and we have your backs.

4.28 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“welcomes the support that the Government is providing for rural people, communities and businesses; commends the continued support for farmers through investment in Environmental Land Management schemes which will boost nature and sustainable food production; recognises that the Government has listened on the subject of Agricultural Property Relief and made changes to support family farms; further welcomes the Bus Services Act 2025, which includes provision to support the protection of socially necessary bus services in rural areas; further recognises that the Government continues to invest in Project Gigabit with £2.4 billion available to ensure over one million premises have access to gigabit-capable broadband; and supports the joined-up approach with the weight of Government behind tackling rural crimes such as the theft of high value farm equipment and livestock.”

I welcome the chance to open the debate on behalf of the Government and to highlight what we are doing to support rural people, businesses and communities to realise their full potential. I apologise in advance to the House and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will not be able to stay for the whole debate. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh, no!”] I am sure hon. Members will miss me.

We are committed to improving the quality of life for all people across the country. To achieve that, we are putting the needs of people and businesses in rural areas at the heart of policymaking. I am baffled, quite frankly, that the Opposition think they have any right to speak on behalf of rural communities after the 14 years of chaos and corruption that they put this country

through. I am astounded that they are now trying to present themselves as the solution to the problems that rural communities face, when they were the architects of many of those very same problems.

The very Members sat opposite me presided over the first Parliament in modern history where living standards were lower at the end than they were at the beginning, and rural communities were some of the hardest hit by their incompetence. The Conservatives are the party that oversaw the shambolic Brexit deal that hit farming communities hard. That was happening alongside the sleaze that countless people across the country will no doubt remember so well: £1.4 billion of wasted taxpayer money on dodgy covid contracts given to Tory mates over WhatsApp, and partying while the country was in lockdown.

Rural communities gave their damning verdict on those 14 years at the general election, sending Conservatives to the Opposition Benches and returning more rural Labour MPs than ever before. While Conservative Members continue to protest, we will get on with clearing up their mess.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Angela Eagle: No, I will not give way.

The rural economy already contributes £259 billion to gross value added in England alone, and we know that rural areas offer significant potential for further growth. The Government are committed to harnessing this potential to ensure that we can fully realise the opportunities that exist in the rural economy across the whole country. Small and medium-sized businesses are the engine room of the Government's No. 1 mission, which is growth, and there are half a million registered SMEs in rural areas—the vast majority of them not having anything to do with agriculture or farming.

The SME plan, which was launched by the Prime Minister last summer, represents the most comprehensive package of support for small and medium-sized businesses in a generation. The plan will make a real difference to the day-to-day trading operations of small businesses. That includes a new business growth service and a massive £4 billion finance boost to increase access to finance for entrepreneurs and make Britain the best place to start and grow a business.

A prosperous rural economy requires effective transport as well as digital infrastructure, the availability of affordable housing and energy, and access to a healthy, skilled workforce. We are tackling those issues. We know that rural residents often have to travel further to access work, education, training, healthcare and other essential services. The Conservatives made that worse by slashing local bus routes in England by 50%, with more than 8,000 services slashed in their time in office.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: No, I am getting on with my speech. [Interruption.] There are many Opposition Members who wish to speak, and I do not want to take their time up.

Rural transport under the Conservatives became a postcode lottery—

Harriet Cross: Will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: Perhaps the hon. Lady will let me make my point before she gets up to ask me a question.

Rural transport under the Tories became a postcode lottery, and the price that many communities paid was to have no reliable bus service at all. Under Labour, the Bus Services Act 2025 places passenger needs, reliable services and local accountability at the heart of the industry by putting power over local bus services back into the hands of local leaders across England. We are reconnecting our local communities by protecting socially necessary bus services and the most vulnerable. We are rebuilding connectivity and confidence in our countryside—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Angela Eagle: I will give way to the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew)

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Minister talks about rural transport. Does she not recognise that enhanced partnerships run by Conservative county councils in Norfolk and Essex have increased bus usage by more than anywhere else in the country because they are working with the private sector, not against it?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are not working against the private sector. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the Conservative record in this area. They presided over a 50% cut in the availability of bus services across the country, and that was often worse for rural areas as some lost their buses completely. We know that rural areas are benefiting from Labour's changes—for example, York and North Yorkshire.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Angela Eagle: I will give way to the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard).

Mark Pritchard: It is humid in here. I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. She is talking about important subjects for all our communities, including infrastructure, SMEs and transport. We can differ on who is to be praised or not. On the Government's legislative priorities—many of these things require legislation or have already had legislative time spent on them—why are the Government going to spend so much time on banning trail hunting? Is she aware that, if that goes through, in Shropshire alone we will likely see the death of at least 300 hounds? That will impact on many rural SMEs.

As the Minister has been in the House a very long time, she will know that I have had at least three animal welfare Bills in the House—[*Interruption.*] That was long before the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) even set foot in the Chamber. My record on animal welfare is long and established. Today, I stand up for all the people in the hunts who do not want to destroy all those dogs as well as jobs.

Dame Angela Eagle: First, I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's record on animal welfare; I think everyone across the House respects it. Secondly, I was in the House when we voted to ban hunting in the first

place. I was actually in the Chamber when it was invaded by hunt protesters, who did not show much attention to the law when they ran into this place—they were so surprised that they had arrived here that they did not quite know what to do. I therefore take no lessons on any of that.

The ban on trail hunting was in our manifesto, and we are consulting on how to put it into effect. I certainly hope that the right hon. Gentleman will take part in that consultation.

Mark Pritchard: I will vote against it!

Dame Angela Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman may vote any way he likes, but I hope that he will take part in the consultation so that we can have a proper debate about these things.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I am interested to know how keen the Minister is to adhere to that distinct element of the Labour party's manifesto, because it seems clear to rural communities up and down Scotland and elsewhere on these islands that it is pick-and-mix as the Government introduce things that were never in the manifesto and fail to deliver that which was. When did the manifesto become such an important compass for the Minister?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are in only the 18th month of the five years of the Parliament, so the hon. Gentleman should be patient.

Tom Hayes: Bournemouth is a town of animal lovers, and it has received with great happiness the news that the Government are bringing forward animal welfare reforms. Could the Minister outline some of those reforms and how they will particularly benefit our rural communities?

Dame Angela Eagle: Certainly, the animal welfare strategy is very comprehensive. As hon. Members will know, it encompasses farm animals, wild animals and pets, as well as international trade and all those aspects. It also looks at what can be done to enforce the ban on hare coursing, which is particularly brutal. I was happy that the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) supported that element. [*Interruption.*] But it happens all the time—that is the point. I said, “enforce the ban”; I did not say “banning”. We can have the best laws in the world, but if none of them is enforced we might as well not bother.

Dr Luke Evans *rose*—

Dame Angela Eagle: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should be patient and let me finish my sentence. He should be well aware that the Conservative Government's record on enforcement was dire, because a lot of enforcement activities were decimated by the cuts they enacted in the period of austerity.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is being generous with her time. The previous Government's cuts to the Environment Agency have had a huge impact on parts of my constituency and just beyond it. We have had fly-tipping on an industrial level that has leaked into the rivers and streams of my constituency and caused a huge amount of damage.

Dame Angela Eagle: That is exactly right. The cuts that were made to enforcement activities and enforcement muscle have caused many huge problems that we are attempting to clear up, such as the 20% rise in waste crime. Many of the benefits we expect and the requirements to keep our rivers free and our wildlife healthy were, in effect, not properly enforced during the austerity years. I am a fair person, so I will give way to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans).

Dr Luke Evans: If the Minister's argument is about enforcement, and given that it is already illegal to hunt with dogs, is she not arguing for more resources for our rural communities to enforce what is legal or illegal? Let us take the example of Leicestershire. We instituted our rural crime team in 2019 and have seen that type of crime drop by 23%. My worry is that if the Government have their way, that funding will disappear and therefore rural crime and enforcement will get worse. Will she square that circle for me? Also, is she speaking to the Home Office to make sure that rural communities get the policing they need and the funding for that?

Dame Angela Eagle: I know a few people at the Home Office; in fact, when I was there before the reshuffle we launched the rural crime taskforce, which is doing great work and will carry on doing so. I agree, and the hon. Gentleman is right, that enforcement needs to be properly funded and not slashed as it was under the Conservative party.

I was talking about improving local transport links and pointing out that we have a multi-year investment, working with local authorities to provide a much better service in our rural areas. We know that those areas are already benefiting from the changes in the Bus Services Act 2025. For example, in York and North Yorkshire, the Labour combined authority is developing a rural bus franchising model to improve connectivity for villages that currently see only one bus per week. That is one bus per week, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is the kind of legacy that we have from the Conservative party in the areas it purports to support.

We know that bus services in rural areas can be a lifeline for many, providing the only means of getting around. That is why, in our multi-year allocations for local authorities, we have revised the formula to include a rurality element for the first time, ensuring that the additional challenges of running services in rural areas are taken into account. The Conservatives slashed local bus routes; we are putting them back, protecting them and promoting them.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The local government finance settlement is a huge problem for rural local authorities. In Shropshire, we have had 16 years of Conservative mismanagement, we have a surging social care demand and our allocation has been cut in cash terms over the next three years. The black hole is unfillable and a section 114 notice looks very likely for us. Will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government so that we can sort out that desperate problem for rural authorities?

Dame Angela Eagle: I am happy to pass on the hon. Lady's comments to the appropriate Ministers.

Access to digital services is crucial for rural areas. We are delivering high speed-capable broadband to UK premises that are not included in suppliers' commercial plans. Our aim is to achieve 99% coverage of a reliable, superfast, high-speed broadband by 2032. Over 1 million further premises have been—

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman please let me develop my point? Over 1 million further premises have been included within contracts to provide access to superfast broadband, with funding of over £1.8 billion allocated in the latest spending review to support the project. That helps end social isolation, provides access to healthcare and turbocharges rural businesses. Our focus on rural hard-to-reach areas ensures that the benefits of superfast broadband reach every corner of the UK, breaking down barriers that the Conservative Government failed to address. I must say—

Stuart Anderson: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: Go on, then.

Stuart Anderson: I thank the Minister for giving way. Only 40% of my constituency has gigabit broadband and that has a major impact. Does the Minister understand how detrimental it is to move the 2030 target to 2032? I will have many constituents who will still not be able to connect to the internet.

Dame Angela Eagle: The problem is that we inherited a system in which all the hardest-to-reach bits had been left till last. We are trying now, by investing £1.8 billion, to get that sorted, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Wessex Internet, which was founded by the late James Gibson Fleming, has done some great work in Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and Somerset, but the vouchers that are given out to areas that are not included are not available in Dorset. We have challenged that many times with the Ministry. Would the Minister mind seeing whether vouchers can be rolled out in every area that needs them?

Dame Angela Eagle: If the hon. Lady gets me the information, I will pass it on to the relevant Minister. I will make sure that we cover the point that she makes.

I was astonished to see that the Conservatives had pledged to scrap the Climate Change Act 2008 in the face of opposition from one of their own former Prime Ministers, Baroness May, who called their plans a "catastrophic mistake". This Government are committed to achieving clean power by 2030, while the Conservatives would leave us dangerously reliant on Putin's oil. Labour's ambitious clean power mission will create good jobs in rural areas, protect bill payers and ensure our energy security. Well-designed and well-managed solar farms have the potential to deliver a range of environmental benefits, with some solar farms delivering significantly more than the mandatory 10% increase in habitats required by biodiversity net gain.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con) *rose*—

Sir Alec Shelbrooke *rose*—

Sir John Hayes *rose*—

Dame Angela Eagle: I have given way quite a lot, so I am going to carry on with my speech.

We know that the roll-out of solar generation does not pose a risk to food security. Planning guidance makes it clear that developers should utilise brownfield land wherever possible. Where agricultural land must be used, lower quality land should be preferred. We also encourage multifunctional land use and are encouraged to see plenty of farmers ignoring the hysteria of the Conservatives and combining sustainable energy generation with arable and livestock farmers—

Harriet Cross: Will the Minister give way on hysteria?

Dame Angela Eagle: Perhaps if the hon. Lady had calmed down, I might have had time to do so. *[Interruption.]* No.

The total area of land currently used for solar is less than 0.1% of UK land. Communities are providing a service to the country when they host clean energy infrastructure, so there needs to be a benefit for them. Through Labour's clean power action plan, we have made it clear that where communities host clean energy infrastructure, we will ensure that they benefit from it. There are already voluntary community benefit funds running across the country, including the offshore wind farm at Norfolk Boreas, which has a community fund worth over £15 million. In addition, the Government have already announced bill discounts for communities living nearest to new electricity transmission infrastructure and published guidance on community funds for electricity transmission infrastructure and onshore wind in England.

After a decade of Tory cuts to frontline policing, this Government are also committed to driving down rural crime—

Wendy Morton: On policing, will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: Again, I am only just starting on that, but go on.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful, because this is a really important point. Before the Minister elaborates on policing cuts, will she give us her take on the Labour police and crime commissioners' funding gap, which will mean that areas such as the west midlands will have fewer police officers than in 2010?

Dame Angela Eagle: There are going to be 3,000 more police officers on the beat this year, which is far more than the right hon. Lady's Government managed after slashing 20,000 at the beginning of their time in office.

This Government are determined to crack down on rural crime. Last year, we published the rural and wildlife crime strategy, collaborating with the National Police Chiefs' Council. This strategy is a vital step in our mission to deliver safer streets everywhere—that includes rural areas—and comes as we give the police new powers to take on the organised criminal gangs targeting the agricultural sector. Only last year, rural

policing teams recovered more than £12.7 million-worth of stolen farm machinery, leading to 155 arrests. Interestingly, some of it turned up abroad, so there is clearly an organised crime element that needs tackling properly.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I join the Minister in congratulating our rural crime teams on their work. I invite her to pay tribute to Special Constable Susan Holliday who has served almost 40 years as a special constable and was awarded the British empire medal in the new year's honours. I am delighted to invite the Minister to my constituency to meet Susan Holliday.

Dame Angela Eagle: I add my congratulations to Susan Holliday. She sounds like a remarkable person, and it is good that she has been recognised for the work she has done in her local community.

It would be impossible to discuss rural communities without paying tribute to the vital work undertaken by this country's farmers. Supporting British farmers and boosting the nation's food security are key priorities for the Government. I understand that farmers do not just produce nutritious food; they also need to make a profit, and the margins of farm businesses are often tight, but we are taking action to help farms prosper. We commissioned Baroness Minette Batters to undertake an independent farming profitability review, and we published that last year. We have announced our new farming and food partnership board, which will bring together voices from farming, food, retail and finance to drive profitability, support home-grown British produce and remove barriers to investment.

While the Conservatives failed to spend £300 million of the farming budget, we are investing £11.5 billion over this Parliament into nature-friendly farming. While they sold out our farmers in trade deals with New Zealand and Australia, we are unlocking new markets for British produce in India, China and the United States. We are committing £200 million up to 2030 through farming innovation programme grants to improve productivity and to trial new technologies, and there is an exciting agenda of development out there in that area. We have appointed Alan Laidlaw as the first ever commissioner for tenant farming, giving tenant farmers a stronger voice than ever before.

We have continued to listen and engage with the farming community and family businesses about reforms to inheritance tax. Having carefully considered this feedback, we are going further to exempt more farms and businesses from the requirement to pay inheritance tax, while maintaining the core principle that more valuable agricultural and business assets should not receive unlimited relief. That is why we are increasing the inheritance tax threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million. Couples can now pass on up to £5 million without paying inheritance tax on their assets. That will halve the number of estates claiming agricultural property relief that will pay more in 2026-27, including those claiming business property relief. Of the remaining 185 estates affected in 2026-27, 145 of them will pay less than when the allowance was set at £1 million.

Let us be absolutely clear about what this Tory motion really is. It is not a plan for rural Britain, and it is not a serious attempt to fix the problems that our rural communities face; it is an exercise in political distraction.

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

Every single regret listed in this motion is the direct result of decisions taken by the Tories over their 14 disastrous years in government. They regret raising taxes after crashing the economy and blowing a hole in the public finances. They regret business closures after years of stagnant growth, poor investment and broken rural infrastructure. They regret changes to funding for rural areas after hollowing out public services, cutting rural transport and stripping away neighbourhood policing in the very places where visibility and response times matter the most. They regret the changes to the rural way of life, but sold out our farmers in trade deals and broke their funding promises. Even their own former Environment Secretary admitted that they had failed to defend our agricultural interests. They regret uncertainty when it was their chopping and changing, their political chaos and their lack of long-term thinking that created it in the first place. Rural communities deserve honesty, not selective political amnesia, and from this Government, they will get it.

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

4.54 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak for the Liberal Democrats on this motion. Around 10 million people live in rural areas, and the rural population has been growing faster than the population in urban areas since mid-2020. However, under successive Governments rural communities have largely been viewed as an afterthought in policy, yet rural areas present a wealth of opportunities that need to be optimised. If the Government really want growth, rural areas should and can play their part.

After more than a year of uncertainty and anguish since the 2024 Budget, which threatened to wreck family farms across the country, the Government have partially climbed down on the family farm tax. That concession is down to the sustained campaigning of the thousands of farmers who did not give up and made their voices heard. I know those voices because they are my family members, friends and neighbours. I have stood in solidarity with them as they took precious time away from their farms to attend Westminster rallies in protest at this ill-thought-through policy. For them, this is not a triumph; it has been a hard-fought fight to save their livelihoods, their homes and their futures.

This fight is about justice and security. If we undermine British farmers, we undermine our ability to provide food to feed the nation and to keep us secure in a volatile and uncertain world. Britain is not secure unless food supply is secure.

Sir John Hayes: I entirely endorse what the hon. Lady said about the family farm tax and the campaign that was waged against it, which crossed a number of political parties. Will she go further and join the campaign that is raging among the Opposition against the imposition of huge solar plants, pylons and substations on prime agricultural land? Thirty-five per cent of the land in this country is not of that kind; surely those things should go there.

Sarah Dyke: Renewable energy is vital for the future of this country. However, we must ensure that it is put in the right place and is fit for the future. Putting renewable energy on our best and most versatile land certainly is not the way the Liberal Democrats would go about it. However, there are places for renewable energy. I endorse a lot more solar on rooftops. That is certainly something that we can do for the future. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

The impact of the family farm tax has already been felt. Chris, who farms at Wheatlawn farm near Babcary, wrote to me recently. He is a fifth generation farmer with terminal prostate cancer, and he described the family farm tax as a dark “shadow” that has been hanging over him for the past year. He was terrified of leaving his son with a huge, unpayable tax bill. Although the financial burden might be avoided for now, Chris was still keen to point out that what little trust he may have had in the Labour Government has been lost because, in his words, the Labour party simply does not “understand the countryside”. Ministers are fond of saying that British farming is the best in the world, and they are right, but too many of them do not know why. The reason is farmers like Chris and the tradition of family farming in the UK.

Although common sense has finally prevailed, does the Chancellor recognise the damage that this whole dreadful episode has done to the rural economy? When will the Treasury publish an assessment of the impact of this policy on the agricultural sector? While the partial climbdown has limited the damage to the industry, it does not eradicate it entirely. Many farmers will still find themselves facing huge tax bills while operating on narrow profit margins. We Liberal Democrats were the first party to call out and oppose the unfair family farm tax after the disastrous 2024 Budget, and we will continue to stand alongside the farming community and demand that the Government scrap this unfair tax in full. If they refuse, we will submit amendments to the Finance Bill to bring it down.

Alongside producing food, farmers are the guardians of the countryside, but they cannot be green if they are in the red. They are critical to meeting DEFRA's legally binding targets to reverse nature's decline, so they need time to adapt and clarity on what to aim for to achieve profitable and nature-friendly farming.

As the Government prepare their new farming road map, we Liberal Democrats encourage them to make it practical, not theoretical. The UK should align with our partners in the EU, who are maintaining direct common agricultural policy payments to farmers until at least 2035. We must ensure that English agriculture is not an outlier, especially given that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also maintaining an element of direct support. Farmers in England are left with agri-environmental schemes that, under the Labour Government, are no longer comprehensively open to farmers.

This is the first time in 80 years that a Government have not provided support to produce food. That is a Tory policy being continued by Labour. It is absolute madness to disincentivise food production. I hope that today is an opportunity for the Conservatives to apologise for failing to treat food as a public good. We must ensure that British farmers have a fair deal. We can do so by adding an extra £1 billion to the farming budget,

guaranteeing high standards in all future trade deals, renegotiating the Australia and New Zealand trade deals, enforcing point-of-origin and point-of-production labelling on animal-derived products, giving the Groceries Code Adjudicator the teeth it needs to protect both customers and producers, and securing frictionless trade with Europe through new veterinary and plant health agreements.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I think it is great that, rather than just criticising the Government, the hon. Lady is outlining a set of policies that the Lib Dems would take forward to support farming communities. What is not clear, however, is how it would all be funded. How much would that list of policies cost, how would it be funded, and what would be the impact on the economy?

Sarah Dyke: The Liberal Democrats have set out a number of different policies to help shape that £1 billion investment. Being part of the customs union would certainly be part of that, and it would bring in billions extra, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. There is much more we can do.

Nothing has done more to increase the cost of living and of farming and to reduce farm incomes than the Conservatives' botched Brexit, which made it more expensive and burdensome for British farmers and fishers to export to their main markets in the EU, beleaguering their workforces and undermining their protections for animal welfare and the environment. The Conservative Government set a dangerous precedent for future trade agreements, given what they negotiated and how they went about it. They stripped away parliamentary scrutiny and forced terrible deals through, which gave unfair advantage to imports from countries with poorer standards over the higher-quality standards of British farmers.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): We have heard an awful lot of criticism of the Government's policies on farming from the Conservatives, but very little mention of the trade deals that they secured with Australia and New Zealand, which have made things so much harder for farmers—we will undoubtedly hear a lot about those from Labour Members. Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Government to commit to rejecting chlorinated chicken and hormone-treated beef from the United States?

Sarah Dyke: As my hon. Friend would expect, I totally agree with him.

The Liberal Democrats want to ensure that British farmers operate on a level playing field and can succeed. That is why last year I introduced the Dairy Products and Dairy Farming Bill. Farm-gate milk prices have plummeted over the past few months; now, cereal prices are also under serious pressure. The Liberal Democrats are clear: we need fairness in the supply chain. When farming businesses fail, there is a knock-on impact on local hospitality—pubs, cafés, restaurants and hotels.

Somerset is a tourism region. It supports nearly 10% of all jobs and contributes more than £1 billion to the regional economy. Many of the fantastic hospitality businesses in Glastonbury and Somerton are under immense pressure as they face huge rates increases from April. Miranda contacted me today. She manages the White Hart pub in Castle Cary, and faces her rateable

value going from around £19,000 a year to over £30,000 a year. Meanwhile, the British Institute of Innkeeping states that only one in three pubs are profitable, and warns that that could drop to one in 10 by April.

The hospitality sector already faces £4.5 billion in additional taxes due to increased national insurance contributions in the 2024 Budget. The Liberal Democrats have been calling for an emergency 5% VAT cut for hospitality, accommodation and attraction businesses until April 2027, funded by a new windfall tax on big banks. Combined with our policy to reduce people's energy bills by removing the main renewables levy, we could put £270 back into people's pockets, making it more affordable for them to heat their home, and allowing them to spend more on occasional extras. That would help to drive economic growth in rural areas, restore our high streets, and give the country a much-needed morale boost. It would also help rural areas to grow the economy.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Dyke: I will give way to my honourable neighbour.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to my neighbour for giving way. I share her support for a reduction in VAT for our rural hospitality sector, but does she get the irony that such a reduction would be illegal if we were still a member of the European Union?

Sarah Dyke: There are many ironies, but the benefit of being in the European Union far outweighs that cost.

Moving on to homes, to help grow the economy we must ensure that rural areas have places for people to live in. In Somerset, newly built homes make up just 3% of all properties recently sold, with an average price 20% more expensive than the UK average. Rural house prices have increased by 57% since 2013, while wages simply stagnate, creating an affordability gap and contributing to a higher need for affordable housing in rural areas than in urban settings. As a result, many first-time buyers and key workers simply cannot afford to live in rural areas, making it increasingly difficult for rural local businesses to retain staff, reducing local spending power, and threatening the viability of our rural communities.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that both the private and social housing markets are too expensive and insecure, with current provision simply not sufficient to meet demand. People in holiday destinations should not have to face higher rents and housing shortages, especially when they are among the hardest hit by the cost of living crisis. The Tories would offer tax cuts on second homes, making it harder for people who want to live in an area where they work, or where their family is from, to own their own home. That evidences their failure to understand what life is really like in rural areas. As part of a fairer housing system, the Liberal Democrats would allow councils to increase council tax on second homes by up to 500% if there are housing shortages in their area.

The Liberal Democrats believe that the Government must recognise the pressure that they have put on rural communities over the past 18 months, whether it is through the family farm tax, the broken agri-environmental schemes, the lack of support for hospitality or the failure to provide affordable rural homes. We must remember,

[Sarah Dyke]

however, that these are not new problems. The Conservatives failed to make improvements for rural communities, and that is why they were kicked out of huge swathes of the rural south-west.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. There is now a three-minute time limit. I call Michelle Welsh.

5.9 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I am incredibly proud of the agriculture element of our rural communities. In Sherwood Forest, we have lots of local farms that are part of our community and at the heart of rural life. It is vital that we hear their concerns and ensure that these local British businesses can prosper and thrive.

From Oliver Collingham and Richard Baugh to Michael Prendergast and Colin Bower, the constituency of Sherwood Forest has farmers, along with their families, who are dedicated, hard-working and decent people trying to make a living managing our countryside. They have had to battle for 12 months on inheritance tax, and I am incredibly pleased that the Government have listened. But we must continue to listen.

Farming is under pressure. Some of the main challenges raised with me by local farmers include persistent rural crime, limited policing capacity, low farm profitability, low morale, workforce insecurity, biosecurity risk linked to imports, and uncertainty around farm schemes and long-term policy stability.

On rural crime, farmers tell me that they are reporting persistent and escalating crime, including organised poaching gangs on quad bikes who at night are damaging livestock and fencing and intimidating farmers and gamekeepers. That is understandably causing significant risk to safety and animal welfare, as well as costing farmers for product, land, equipment and property. It is unsustainable for many farms for this issue to continue without prevention. The police are already overstretched, and without support from Government with frontline enforcement and prevention, the situation will only get worse.

Let me emphasise the need for every police force adequately to record rural crime and treat it seriously; the livelihood and safety of local farmers and communities deserve nothing less. I ask the Government to issue a mandate to all police forces—including Nottinghamshire police, which is not currently doing this—to record rural crime and provide regular reports that would guide resources to where they need to be. Will the Minister speak to her Home Office colleagues about a clear mandate on the reporting of rural crime, on the current support for Nottinghamshire police and on directing additional resources specifically for rural policing and crime?

The increase in rural crime is compounded by existing concerns about farm viability, low returns and workforce pressures affecting business confidence and employment stability. Very low commodity prices are squeezing margins, and many are worried about maintaining sustainable wages for staff.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Will she comment on the importance of rural bus services for the mobility of local staff in rural areas? In particular, will she commend the work done by Labour mayors on bus franchising and the work of Nottingham and Reading buses in providing excellent rural routes?

Michelle Welsh: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Certainly in my constituency, rural transport, including bus services, is not how it should be. I know that Claire Ward is having a conversation about that across the east midlands with regard to improving it.

If we are truly committed to supporting our local farms, we must ensure that jobs are available and morale is high enough so that people want to have them. Let me mention the current uncertainty about Government schemes, particularly the lack of clarity on the sustainable farming incentive scheme, payment certainty and capital grant availability. Perhaps the Minister can offer some insight on further long-term plans or announcements on support schemes for farms. We often say that small family farms are the backbone of rural communities—and they definitely are—but we need targeted support to ensure that they remain viable and that we do not lose them.

Another issue raised with me by farmers is the serious concern about disease entering the UK. Can the Minister reassure me and local farmers that she is working to ensure that there are effective controls on imported meat and that UK production and food standards are not undermined by imported goods that do not meet the same standards?

Rural communities are not a museum piece, and farming is not a hobby; it is the backbone of our country. If we fail our farmers, we cut off villages from transport, jobs and services. We do not just damage the countryside; we weaken Britain itself. Supporting rural communities is not charity, but a duty, and it is a duty that this country must finally honour. Behind every field is a family, and behind every farm is—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

5.13 pm

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, as a Bradford MP you know how sparse North Yorkshire is. It has the largest rural road network in England, and it has historically had special funding for rural schools. Almost all employment comes from small businesses and hospitality.

Huge efforts were made by the last Government to save businesses and agricultural areas during covid through the bounce back loan scheme and other loans, but covid hit in the context of existing long-term pressures, with farming undervalued, village shops closing, rural schools consolidating or federating, post offices going and churches shutting. In spite of that, communities worked hard, both to fight those trends and to continue to maintain the fabric of their local societies through coffee mornings, clubs and support for older people.

In the shadow of covid, and with the other pressures facing rural communities, the new Government had a responsibility to tread really carefully with this part of our country. However, since the election we have seen a series of hammer blows to our rural communities, such as the farms tax, which is causing massive stress to

small farms that rely on intergenerational leadership to survive. The Employment Rights Act 2025 places many more burdens on small businesses, disproportionately hitting areas such as North Yorkshire. Those businesses have fantastic ways of managing employee relationships—ways that are informal but robust, without the need for even more contractual arrangements. The rural services grant has been removed, and now the bad weather adjustment in the local government finance settlement has been removed too.

Turning to transport, fuel duty has been scrapped and the drink-driving laws are being changed. Public houses are also losing reliefs—the average increase in rates costs for pubs in North Yorkshire is £26,000—and the new Labour Mayor of North Yorkshire is hammering the tourism industry with a tourism tax. These places provide a place to meet in rural areas; they provide events for old people and fundraise for local causes. As we have heard earlier, they also provide jobs for the increasing number of people leaving college without opportunities.

Farmers, small businesses, pubs and hospitality venues are all just trying to make a reasonable turn using their private capital, but they are under such massive pressure from this Government. I urge Ministers to move quickly on the valuations issue; to triple-check parts of the local government settlement; and to reset the relationship with rural communities within Government and Whitehall, develop a cumulative impact test for these communities, and avoid the missteps we have seen over the past year.

5.16 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I may be biased, but I believe Norfolk is a beautiful place to grow up and grow old in. It is the place where I was born and raised, and it is where I call home. Like so many rural communities, it is a place that values co-operation, community and compassion, but for so many years those values were tested. We saw Conservative cuts to the very services that bind our communities together, without thought for the long-term implications. In Norfolk, cuts were driven by the Conservative Government and enacted by the Conservative county council—cuts to our children's services and our youth outdoor education facilities being just a few examples of that insidious decline.

One of the industries that underpins so many of our rural communities is, of course, farming. In a debate about rural communities, we must recognise that farming is in crisis; the Conservatives may be keen to suggest that this is something new, but the reality is that the decline started many years ago and got worse on their watch. It is of particular concern to me that fewer farms will mean bigger farms, and the further industrialisation of farming would trigger the next wave of rural decline. The farm is so integral to rural life, with farmers so often at the core of it. Who serves on the parish councils and the internal drainage boards? Who helps to sponsor the football club or the cricket club? Who gets the cars out of the ditches or the snow off the lanes, as we have seen just this week? It is hard to quantify that value—it cannot be recorded on a balance sheet—but I see it and feel it, as do many other hon. Members.

Farmers in my constituency remember all too well the failures of the past Tory Government and the lack of progress over so many years. Today, we are debating rural issues. If we read the text of the motion, we see

that it contains not a single mention of our NHS. It contains nothing about public services such as adult social care, or about dentistry. *[Interruption.]* Do rural people not get ill? Do they not grow old?

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): All the chuntering and laughing from Opposition Members rather indicates that they feel that the—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind Members that I cannot call their names if I cannot see their faces, even if it is an intervention.

John Slinger: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does my hon. Friend agree that the chuntering—*[Interruption.]* Does my hon. Friend agree that the chuntering and laughter, which the Conservatives continue now, rather belie the fact that they seem not to agree that members of the public in rural areas benefit from the very public services that were so decimated by 14 years of their failure?

Terry Jermy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That is telling—no wonder the Tories do not want to speak about their record on public services and the NHS. I can point them to the first league table for hospitals, which was published last year. My local hospital, the Queen Elizabeth in King's Lynn, was at the very bottom as the worst hospital in the country. It is not in some large city, but in rural Norfolk.

The hospital served constituents who until recently were represented by a Conservative Prime Minister, albeit fleetingly, and they were badly let down. It also served people represented by a Conservative Health Secretary. The Conservatives allowed our hospital, like our health services more generally, to wither and decline. Norfolk's other hospitals were not far behind. The East of England ambulance trust, which covers the rural counties of the eastern region, was the worst ambulance trust in the country, and the mental health trust was not far behind.

Rural communities remember all too well the decline they experienced under 14 years of Conservative Governments. Like the rest of the country, they voted for change last year at the general election in 2024, with my seat—a rural seat—recording the greatest swing from Conservative to Labour at a general election ever. It was a complete repudiation of the Conservatives' performance in rural areas.

There are huge growth opportunities in rural areas, and people are yearning for change. I urge the Government to tap into these opportunities and to allow our progressive Labour values to transform our green and pleasant lands.

5.21 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I start by declaring an interest as a farmer and as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on shooting and conservation. Rural communities such as those in the Cotswolds feel totally neglected by this Government. We talk about the cost of living, but the cost of rural living is even higher. We have the family farm tax and the rise in national insurance contributions, food bills, water bills, heating bills and business rates—I could go on.

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

Just before the recess, the Government stealthily announced the local government funding settlement, which included cuts for Gloucestershire county council, whereas many urban authorities have seen an increase. Under the so-called fairer funding three-year review, Gloucestershire county council will have a gap of £10 million in 2026-27, £20 million in 2027-28 and £30 million in 2029-30. As a result, Gloucestershire will have to rely on higher council tax, including a higher police precept. They will no doubt also have to make cuts to services, too. In addition to all that, my constituents also face inadequate funding for education. We are in the bottom 20% nationally for funding per pupil, which is unfair on our children.

The family farm tax was a cruel policy, and I am pleased that the Government have finally listened after 14 months and have compromised on it. Even though the threshold has been increased to £2.5 million, this policy will still break up farms. Is the £300 million to be raised for the Treasury really worth the destruction of the farming community? Food resilience must be the top priority. It is astonishing that the Government cancelled the food resilience annual report to Parliament, and I ask them to reinstate it.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is, as ever, making a valuable contribution to our considerations. Does he recognise that energy security and food security should not be made competitors? We need to invest in energy security, yes, but not at the expense of the most fertile, valuable farmland of the country, which we need to grow enough food to feed the nation.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention. As a chartered surveyor who has studied rural properties and farms, I do not think we should be putting wind farms or photovoltaics on the best farmland in this country.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): The wording of the motion seems to imply that the Conservatives are against any and all renewables in the countryside, but even the most ardent opponents of an oversized industrial-scale solar farm in my constituency of the South Cotswolds would still support rooftop solar. Could the hon. Member please clarify whether the Conservatives are indeed against all renewables in the countryside?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I have very little time, and it is clear that my constituency neighbour—uncharacteristically—did not listen to what I said, which was that we should not put solar panels on the best farmland in the country.

In my constituency, hospitality contributes an estimated £220 million to the local economy, and we know that business rates are rising by, on average, £32,000. An average of two pubs a day are closing; they are literally being taxed out of existence. Moreover, we should not be banning trail hunting, which adds £100 million to the rural economy. I am lucky enough to represent some of the most famous hunts. If we carry this policy through, how many people will, directly or indirectly, lose their jobs? How many thousands of hounds will be euthanised to support this unwelcome measure?

A further threat is to the shooting industry. Shooting directly contributes £3.3 billion to the rural economy and £9 billion to the wider economy. Last year we saw a staggering 245% increase in shotgun and firearms certificate bills. What is worrying the shooting community at present, however, is the moving of shotguns from section 2 to section 1 of the Firearms Act 1968, which will involve a huge amount of extra bureaucracy. A petition opposing the move, organised by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, now has well over a million signatories. I urge the Government to reconsider that damaging proposal.¹

Rural Britain is the backbone of our nation, yet it is being systematically disadvantaged by this Government. These issues—from food resilience to hospitality, from farming to country pursuits—are not niche. They are fundamental to our economy, our environment and, above all, our rural way of life. If we fail to act now, we risk losing not only livelihoods but the very fabric of our countryside.

5.26 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I think the fact that South Norfolk has a Labour MP for the first time since 1950 goes to show—[*Interruption.*] This is a key point, to which Opposition Members need to pay attention. I think it goes to show that there has been a huge change in rural representation in this country, and I also think some humility would be welcome.

I want to focus on three main issues affecting rural communities. The first is healthcare—it was not mentioned in the motion, which I think is a bit odd, because we get ill, too—the second is infrastructure and the third, obviously, is farming in South Norfolk.

Let me begin with healthcare. The Government have invested £9 million in the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS foundation trust in my constituency, which will make a huge difference for our local economy. It will stop people getting sick and ensure that we have the direct investment we need in our healthcare professionals. Moreover, £1.3 million has been invested in the Cotman Centre, a specialist centre dealing with cancer and prevention. There has also been investment in the health centre in Wymondham, which is in my largest market town, in Long Stratton health centre and in Cringleford surgery. Each of those investments means that my constituents can lead happier, healthier and longer lives.

Then there is infrastructure. Since my election as the first Labour MP in South Norfolk since 1950, I have secured more than £200 million for upgrades to the Thickthorn junction of the A11 and the A47. Norfolk has been waiting years for that to be done. It will directly improve connectivity for constituencies across Norfolk, including that of the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew). There has also been £289 million of investment in broadband contracts, which are being rolled out to villages throughout Norfolk—that will make a huge difference to me locally—and 131,000 houses have now been connected under Project Gigabit.

Farming is very important to me, because as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), will know, I have a bit of an obsession with biosecurity in the United Kingdom. We need to take it extremely seriously, and I urge my Front-Bench colleagues to continue their investment, in Harlow and other places, to ensure that our borders are kept safe

1.[*Official Report*, 8 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

and that we stop the threat of avian influenza and African swine fever in the United Kingdom. We cannot continue blindly walking down that alley and not protecting our farming industry. We must also look at how we take more action on planning policy as it relates to farming—to reservoirs and broilers, for instance. There should be easy access to development to help our rural economy.

5.29 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): It very much feels like we are back to the future, and like the Minister is channelling her inner Charli XCX and just wants to go back to 1999, because 27 years later, here we are with a Labour Government who are at war with the countryside, discussing issues like hunting, potentially enormously damaging changes to the pig industry, and enormous changes that could affect our countryside and rural economy.

We had the hammer blow of the family farm tax and family business tax over a year ago. I pay tribute to the Labour Members who quietly campaigned against those taxes and have achieved some changes, but the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away: although changes were announced just before Christmas, we also saw the arrival of the Government's animal welfare strategy, a document that could have been written by the non-governmental organisations and animal rights activists themselves, and which contains some potentially extraordinarily damaging measures that could harm farming well into the future.

These are often technical and quite complex matters. I mentioned 1999 because it is very important to remember what happened then. The Government at the time rightly took the view that there should be an end to sow stalls, but instead of phasing them out, they banned them overnight and destroyed 50% of the British pig industry. When we consider animal welfare matters, such as farrowing, it is very important that the Government work with the industry, so that any changes and transitions do not affect our ability to produce fantastic British pork and support our farmers, or affect British food security. There are other measures that need to be discussed, such as the use of CO₂ in stunning, another technical matter that needs to be worked through with food processors and abattoir owners to ensure that we do not damage our food security.

There are lots of other things to discuss. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) mentioned the issues with shooting, and the changes to firearms and shotgun certification and licensing. He said that 67,000 people are employed in that industry; there are over 600,000 people engaged in it. It is hugely important to my constituency of Bridlington and The Wolds, and to neighbouring constituencies such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). A town like Helmsley brings in around £1.5 million a week from shooting alone. It is very important that we take that into account.

It is important that we mention the sanitary and phytosanitary deal—that wonderful thing that is being trumpeted by the Government and the Liberal Democrats, and for which we sold out our fishing industry for 12 years. It has yet to be negotiated, and farming representatives tell me that it is likely to cost farmers hundreds of millions of pounds, reduce our food production and increase our reliance on imports.

I will always stand up for our farming community and for our rural economy, and I commend the Opposition motion.

5.32 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): We have had a bitterly cold start to 2026, but as always, farmers up and down the country have been out in all weathers, and at all hours, to help their neighbours and clear vital routes. I am delighted that just a fortnight ago we had the news that the threshold for agricultural property relief and business property relief, which is due to come into force in April, has been raised considerably to a total of £5 million for a couple, even if one of them has already passed away.

I very much welcome the fact that this Labour Government have listened to the farming community. I pay tribute to my fellow Back-Bench Labour MPs who raised this issue privately and constructively for many months before feeling that they had to voice their concerns publicly, as well as to farmers' unions in all four nations and many others for their steadfast and constructive campaigning. Above all, I thank the farmers in my constituency, who sat down with me and opened up about their very private family matters, as well as their businesses—two things that are uniquely intertwined in farming. I know the changes are a huge relief to them.

One issue on our roads that farmers cannot solve is a lack of bus services. The fact that the services on which people rely are further away is often part of rural life, but when public transport is non-existent or inadequate, that physical distance becomes deprivation. Most of our villages in Cannock Chase have just an hourly service and, as I have mentioned many times in the House, Slitting Mill has none at all. I am very proud that the Bus Services Act 2025—I served on the Bill Committee—allows local transport authorities to seize the opportunities of franchising and of publicly owned bus companies.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Villages in my Shipley constituency, such as Eldwick, Gilstead, Cullingworth, Harden and Wilsden, suffer from the same problems due to the decline in rural bus services under the Tory Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Labour Government's announcements on the rural transport accelerator fund will restore vital connections to our rural villages?

Josh Newbury: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I must confess that I am a little envious of her, because she has the Mayor of West Yorkshire backing up the Labour Government and using that investment wisely—and, I hope, making use of the powers introduced by that Act—whereas the Conservatives on Staffordshire county council took absolutely no interest in doing so during their time in power. The recent news of Reform UK's cost-cutting review suggests that our bus services will continue to be neglected.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his kind words and his campaigning on this issue. As I am sure he well knows, Rugeley Trent Valley train station serves a very rural area—the footprint of the station is mainly in my constituency—but it also provides access to the west coast main line for his constituents. It is not accessible

[Dave Robertson]

by a bus service. Does he agree that we should be extending bus travel, so that people can get to a train station by bus and get all the access and opportunities that come with that, rather than having what we do at the minute, which is a legacy of Conservative failure?

Josh Newbury: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. I would add that Rugeley Trent Valley also does not have disabled access, which is a big issue. The two of us are campaigning hard on that, and I hope to see some progress on it this year.

Following the shameful revelation that Reform chose a supporter of white supremacy to lead our county council and the fact that the DOGE unit has yet to visit, Reform has just announced a cut of £1 million to concessionary fares in the coming financial year. Transparency clearly is not in its vocabulary, because Reform refuses to say who will be affected by these cuts. We cannot slash £1 million from the concessions relied on by thousands of residents without having an adverse effect on them, particularly in rural communities. While this Government are giving councils more money for road repairs and public transport, Reform-led Staffordshire county council is filling even fewer potholes than the Conservatives did, and bus services are not improving as they should. The rural communities that were let down by the old Conservative party are now being let down by the new turquoise conservative party.

I would love to have said much more, including on mobile phone coverage and healthcare, but I will finish by saying that the clearest way to support our rural communities is by standing with the farmers who put food on our tables, and by ensuring that our constituents can get around on reliable buses and can access healthcare that is just as good as that enjoyed by people in big cities, because rural Britain is and will always be a vital part of our nation.

5.37 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): One of the best things about the boundary changes at the last general election is that Winchester is now 60% rural. I spent many happy years driving around the countryside of the Meon valley treating horses. It is very obvious that the communities—the towns and the villages—in rural areas are cut off in many different ways, because often where there is no mobile signal there is no broadband, or no fast broadband.

An added extra pressure over the last few years is that buses have been cancelled. In 2025, I spent a lot of time working with local communities trying to save or restore bus services, because they are an absolute lifeline. I took the last bus journey on the now cancelled 61 bus to Colden Common and Bishops Waltham, and the bus driver told me that the route had been going for 100 years, but Hampshire county council has withdrawn its funding. Buses are not only important for getting people to work and school, but vital for people's independence. I have met many elderly people who used this bus to get to Winchester for hospital appointments, to go to the doctor or to do their shopping, and they say that without this bus, they will not be able to remain living in a little village, or remain living independently.

It had not occurred to me that there are the communities that buses themselves create. Some people I met said that they met their friends on the bus, and they now go for coffee together and check up on each other, but they would not even have known each other had they not been on the same bus. [Interruption.] I have a lot to say about this bus, but I only have 45 seconds left, and it is not the only bus. Conservative Members may find it amusing, but the Conservatives on Hampshire county council have cut the funding for these buses, after they froze council tax for years. The Conservative Government cut funding for the local council, and now local people are paying the price of very poor financial decisions. The first things being cut are the buses that affect people's everyday lives and their individual experience. That is a good example of poor financial management, and individuals are now paying the price.

5.39 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am very proud to be the Member of Parliament for Banbury, where I was born and grew up. I am keenly aware that I am the MP not just for that town. I am proud to represent the small towns of Chipping Norton and Charlbury, as well as the villages and countryside of north Oxfordshire. Many people in those places put their trust in me and in Labour for the first time. They did so because the Conservative party lost the trust of the British people in rural areas, just as it did in the rest of the country. People in those areas remember the Conservatives dragging them out of the European Union on broken promises to reduce immigration, a better deal for farmers and more money for our NHS. They remember a Conservative Prime Minister who partied during lockdown. They remember a chaotic mini-Budget that sent mortgages skyrocketing and nearly crashed the economy.

I raise all that because the Tories try to pitch division between rural communities and our towns and cities where there is none. The reality is that while they are different, the people in those areas have exactly the same issues and concerns. The Conservatives left our communities with sky-high NHS waiting lists. They left village schools that were literally crumbling. They left terrible infrastructure and country roads riddled with potholes. They left rivers like the Cherwell in decline, clogged with sewage. Today we have been reminded that they have learnt absolutely nothing. We have learnt that they would do nothing for the residents in Claydon in my constituency who are suffering harassment because they complained about their pets being killed, their gardens wrecked and their children terrified as dogs and horses from the Warwickshire hunt run through their village under the smokescreen of trail hunting.

I will acknowledge that the issue of agricultural property relief has caused concern for many farmers, but the chief reason for their concern is not just changes to tax. They are concerned because they were let down by the Conservative party for so long. They know that the Conservatives sold out farmers and undercut them in the trade deals with New Zealand and Australia.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is not just the constituents of Banbury who know they were let down by the New Zealand and Australia trade deals, but the Conservatives themselves. My Conservative predecessor said of the Australia deal that it was "not actually a very good deal for the UK".—[Official Report, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Sean Woodcock: I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend's predecessor.

The farmers in my constituency know that the Conservative party allowed food inflation to reach 19.1%, while they continued to suffer from unfair market practices from supermarkets that prospered, rather than the farmers themselves prospering. They know the Conservatives bottled planning reforms that would have made it easier for farm businesses to invest, diversify and grow. They also know that the Conservative party likes to pigeonhole people who live in rural areas.

Our villages and our countryside are filled with different people who have one thing in common: their love of where they live and their desire to make it better. They want a Government who are committed to fixing and solving the issues that matter to them—the NHS, schools and the economy—but they also want better buses, better connectivity and an end to rural crime. People in villages across my constituency abandoned the Conservatives at the last election. The reason they did that was because the Conservative party abandoned them. Well, I can promise them one thing: I won't.

5.43 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The irony will not be lost on farmers—in Norfolk and across the border in Fenland in my constituency—hearing the hon. Members for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) and for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) say how important farming is, after they voted for the family farm tax. That builds on a contradiction we saw at the general election. The Labour party said that it wanted to offer a new deal for farming, yet that new deal has —[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) wants to intervene she can, rather than chuntering.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Would the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Barclay: Go ahead.

Samantha Niblett: I thank the right hon. Member for giving way—although he is perhaps slightly less honourable because he has made false accusations about some of my colleagues, who absolutely did not do what was said.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Would the hon. Lady like to withdraw that comment?

Samantha Niblett: I suppose so—for inadvertently calling the right hon. Member dishonourable.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I would like to think that the hon. Lady is not disrespecting me in that comment.

Samantha Niblett: I am certainly not disrespecting you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I do apologise if it came across that way. I wish to apologise to the right hon. Member if I have offended him.

Steve Barclay: That is fine. I do not know if the hon. Lady was referring to an abstention as opposed to a vote against, but the reality is that only one Labour Member of Parliament voted against the policy. People's voting records are there for all to see.

Ben Goldsborough: Would the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Barclay: Of course; if the hon. Gentleman also wants to give me more time to speak, I will take a second intervention.

Ben Goldsborough: Did the right hon. Gentleman read the article in the *Farmers Guardian* that highlighted that more than 20% of the Conservative Back Benchers did not even bother to turn up to vote on the day?

Steve Barclay: The point is that the hon. Gentleman did not oppose it. There was also the opportunity to vote in the Finance (No. 2) Bill—there were two opportunities for the House to vote on it, and one should look at both votes to determine whether people were for or against it. That is a matter of public record. We have had a number of Opposition day debates on this policy and there have been a number of opportunities to vote in the House. People's voting records, and their records on the family farm tax more broadly, are there for all to see. However, the Government have done a only partial U-turn on that policy, so if the hon. Gentleman wants to show that he is opposed to the tax, he will hopefully support future votes to remove it entirely. We have had only a partial U-turn, so there will still be an opportunity for him to go further.

Of course, the family farm tax is not the only measure. We have also seen the sustainable farming incentive scheme stopped abruptly with no notice to farmers and no timeline for its reopening. We have also seen the farm to fork summit at No. 10—an important opportunity for the industry to have the ear of the Prime Minister—scrapped. We have seen schemes on productivity cut, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) spoke about a whole range of wider pressures. All that builds on the fact that there was only one paragraph—on page 59—on farming in the Labour party manifesto.

I turn to that paragraph first, because one of the few commitments the Labour party made was that 50% of food procured by the public sector would be locally sourced or produced to higher environmental standards. Given that a number of months have now passed since that manifesto, will the Minister commit to writing to me with a timeline for the implementation of that manifesto commitment? It could make a real difference to helping the farming community.

The second thing I want to highlight is the report of Baroness Batters, who is widely respected across the House and certainly within rural communities. In her report, she makes 57 recommendations. I think it is regrettable that it was slipped out right at the end of the year before Christmas; it is a serious report that merits serious attention, as I am sure the Minister would agree. Given the pressures that colleagues across the House have spoken of, could the Minister update the House on the timeline for the implementation of those 57 recommendations?

Thirdly, I want to touch on a theme that applies to both Opposition day debates today. Last year was characterised by a number of U-turns that the Government were forced to make on policies that the Prime Minister had asked his Back Benchers to speak about—not just on the family farm tax, but on welfare reform, the winter fuel allowance and national insurance, where

[Steve Barclay]

the previous Budget had triumphed the fact that tax thresholds would not remain frozen only for the 2025 Budget to do exactly the opposite. We can already see a theme here, with a number of U-turns that are pretty foreseeable—one of them from the previous debate on jury trials, where there are widespread concerns. In farming, too, we can see a number of potential areas.

The area I want to highlight in particular is rural pubs, and I commend *The Telegraph* for the campaign it has launched. I want to speak to the serious concerns that I am hearing from my rural pubs, as I am sure Members of all parties across the House will be hearing. I do not support the ban on Labour MPs from pubs; I do not personally think that is the right approach, as pubs are the heart of our communities and should be places that bring people together. I think the Government are making a serious mistake, and I would gently say to Labour Back Benchers that I foresee that this will be another issue on which they are marched up the hill only for their Prime Minister, under pressure, to change his mind. I think he will do it on digital ID and jury trials, and I think he will do it on rural pubs. We can save people a lot of anxiety if the proposals are changed.

5.49 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I represent a constituency that covers a small city, a town and a large rural area. Much of that rural area is the Roseland peninsula, and it is coastal. When I was researching for my maiden speech, I found that David Penhaligon wrote about the challenges that threatened rural Cornwall 50 years ago, and it was notable that they were very similar to the ones that threaten Cornwall today: roads, pressure on services, hospitals, sewage, lack of housing, summer lets, and the lowest average wage in the country, which Cornwall had at the time.

This Government are already acting on many of those challenges. Roads are being fixed, buses are better funded, and rural franchising is being piloted in Cornwall. Railways are being nationalised, and rail and bus fares are being frozen. The Government are putting in £39 billion for social housing, and we now have the Renters' Rights Act 2025, meaning that tenants can no longer be evicted from their homes for them to be flipped into holiday lets. Stamp duty is being raised on second homes, and for holiday lets council tax is being doubled and registration is being introduced.

The NHS is a big thing in Cornwall. This Government have created 5 million more appointments, and neighbourhood health is being prioritised. Services are being moved out of urban cities and into rural areas, and community health workers are going door to door. We are fixing our broken sewerage system, and we now have an increased minimum wage.

In Cornwall, rural energy infrastructure will be a boon not a bind. The strategy for critical minerals and sustainable mining will fuel our economy and give us energy security, alongside tidal, geothermal and wind energy, which will power and support our rural way of life.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): In my constituency, we have a number of infrastructure projects being planned to produce and transport energy. While Plaid Cymru

agrees that green energy production is necessary, the transition has to be made with community consent. The undergrounding of cables is project-specific and time-specific, depending on thermal rate values and cable type. Does the hon. Member agree that communities need to have a much greater voice when it comes to the cumulative effect of these projects?

Jayne Kirkham: I agree that communities must have a say, but they must also benefit, and that is one of the things that the Government will ensure.

Another type of security is food security. We had a very difficult decade under the Conservatives. Brexit caused real problems at the border, which our sanitary and phytosanitary EU agreement will hopefully untangle to a certain extent by 2027. There were also the terrible trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, which will allow an influx of beef in while very little will go the other way. It has been a time of flux for farmers since Brexit. We saw the rocky introduction of the environmental land management schemes. That money has been spent very quickly under this Government and is coming back in a new and improved sustainable farming incentive in April, which will hopefully give support to food production as part of that environmental stewardship.

Working with recommendations from Minette Batters, the Government can now focus on farm profitability, which is vital. Through the strategies that are due this year, the land use framework and the farming strategies road map, the Government will create a vision for farming in this country—and we will get there.

5.53 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I think we need to get down to some basic facts today. For all this Government's propositions, the reality is that people are feeling this on the ground. My constituency crosses the two counties of West Yorkshire and North Yorkshire. North Yorkshire, which is Conservative-run, has seen millions of pounds of grant reductions, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) touched on. A reduction in the services grant has knocked £14 million off the budget, and the fairer funding grant has knocked £20 million off it.

The reality is that people are starting to wonder whether the Government understand rural communities and rural counties at all. Within North Yorkshire there are huge areas of deprivation, but they have now seen their money cut because the overall situation of the county knocks them out of the picture. A county like North Yorkshire can also be very sparsely populated and have unique challenges that mean that funding needs to be in place.

That is against the backdrop of the attacks on farming. Ninety-two per cent of my constituency is rural or rural-related agricultural business. Through agriculture my constituency supplies £2.2 billion to the Exchequer and to GDP, and there has been huge concern and widespread disbelief at the policies that the Government have introduced. Even with the U-turns they knocked out just before Christmas, there is still huge uncertainty and, crucially—even with those U-turns—a lack of faith about investing in the future.

We are talking not just about farms; there is the whole ecosystem of rural economies. I have been to businesses in my constituency who hire out plant machinery

not just to farmers during the harvest but to help ensure that the countryside and landscapes are managed. North Yorkshire and parts of West Yorkshire, including where I live, have huge historic areas that people visit for tourism. If the countryside is not maintained, there will be less income from people coming to visit. People trying to make a living in these rural communities—as they have done for decades and centuries—have seen a huge attack from every angle.

Wendy Morton: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. Whether in rural North Yorkshire or on the edge of the west midlands where we have some fantastic rural landscapes, surely the fact of the matter is that we have a Labour Government who really do not understand the countryside or the countryside way of life. They are intent on covering it in concrete.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. That is the view of a lot of people we speak to in and around rural constituencies: they say that the Government either do not understand these communities or, worse, they do not care. People feel there is this constant attitude of, “You don’t need the money. We’re going to take it to the urban areas.”

At Prime Minister’s questions, we saw the Prime Minister trying to say, “We have got this bit of the economy and that bit of the economy.” That is all very well, but it does not feel like that for people sitting at home when the weather is freezing cold, wondering where they can make cuts to heat their homes. That happens in areas of deprivation in and around my constituency, which is deemed to be affluent—because of that people do not get the money they need.

I want to touch briefly on how good agricultural land is being taken over by solar farms. I am fed up to the back teeth of listening to Ministers say, “We must no longer be reliant on petrochemical dictators to control our energy.” China is a dictatorship, and it controls 90% of the processed materials for renewable energy. I would have a huge amount of respect for the Minister if, in her summing up, she admitted that the dictatorship of China is no better than some of the dictatorships of the petrochemical states. We are just transferring the problem from one region to another. Ministers should not pretend that they are any different.

5.57 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): First, I welcome the changes to inheritance tax, to agricultural property relief and to business property relief. Farming is essential to our rural economies, and with new investment I will continue to work with colleagues to champion food security, sustainability and the key challenges around the sector, which are a result of serious decline over the past decade. I thank Ministers for their time to discuss these important issues and for listening to my views and of those of my constituents.

As an MP of a semi-rural area, I am aware of the challenges faced by living in a rural community, which include connectivity, access to work, services and education. I am aware of the impact that the cuts to bus services and outreach services such as Sure Start had on my community and our ability to thrive. Further cuts are now proposed by Warwickshire’s Reform county council to our school transport, potentially making children

walk down unlit, unrestricted roads on their way home from school for a proposed 5 miles, which is simply dangerous.

I want to focus in particular on crime. I am proud to see a cross-departmental approach to addressing rural crime, ensuring that the Government’s safer streets mission benefits every member of our community. Local farmers have repeatedly raised concerns about the level of rural crime with me, so I was pleased to see that over £12.7 million-worth of stolen machinery was recovered last year, including £800,000 from abroad.

Theft of machinery is not the only criminality that our farmers face. One of my local farmers reported on the day a number of dogs from the local hunt broke away from the pack and ended up on his land, filled with sheep. Although none of the ewes was killed, two later aborted, losing two rare-breed lambs and thousands of pounds in stock and vet’s fees, before even considering the emotional damage. That farmer’s story is not isolated. Residents across Nuneaton regularly contact me concerned about the activities of our local hunts and matters such as missing pets and damage to gardens.

There are still many serious questions over Warwickshire police’s handling of those offences; indeed, they were forced to release details of a secret protocol signed in 2022. In spite of a subsequent review, residents tell me that the deal seems to have only emboldened Warwickshire hunt. Of the 5,000 reports of criminal activity, only 75 prosecutions against 58 individuals were successful between 2004 and 2024.

Perran Moon: On rural crime, earlier this week the Devon and Cornwall police and crime commissioner resigned from the Conservative party and is standing as an independent for the rest of her term. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is symptomatic of the Conservatives’ attitude to rural crime?

Jodie Gosling: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is symptomatic of just a disregard and a whitewashing of issues in my communities.

Rural communities agree with this Government’s aims to make farming more profitable, to reduce rural crime and to tackle the barriers to their prospering and thriving. If we are to achieve those aims, we need to continue listening hard to our farming communities and embed that into MPs’ communications, to make sure those communities’ views are heard. We need to make sure that the safer streets mission benefits everyone and take firm action to stop hunting, once and for all, and them acting with impunity.

6.2 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): When will this Labour Government’s attack on the countryside come to an end? Will it be when there are no village pubs left to tax? Will it be when the last family farm has shut the barn doors? Will it be when they have banned all English country sports and traditions? Will it be when their left-wing lobby groups have finally had their student union fantasies fulfilled? Will it be when the English countryside is filled with solar farms and onshore wind?

For months, the Government have put family farmers under intolerable stress over the tax proposals that everyone could see they had got wrong. There is not a

[Joy Morrissey]

country pub in my constituency, in Beaconsfield, Marlow and the South Bucks villages, that is not collapsing under the weight of the Government's national insurance tax raid and business rate tax hikes.

Stuart Anderson: Across South Shropshire, we will see pub after pub close with that rate revaluation. Does my hon. Friend agree that unless the Government look at the rate revaluation, there will be next to no pubs left?

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes a wonderful point that the Government are not just destroying the places where people go, but the pubs in the village where everyone comes together. They are destroying the local community, with no regard for something that we saved during covid and kept alive this entire time, only to die a death for what? I am not sure. Is it for ideological reasons? It is hard to say.

The Government have gone for the economic livelihoods of our rural communities; now they are coming for their traditions and character. I am a passionate animal lover. I care deeply about animals and animal welfare standards. I can therefore say with total certainty that the proposed ban on trail hunting is not about animals or their welfare; it is about petty, vindictive ideology and this Government's pathological dislike of rural communities. Now we find this Parliament in the absurd position of being asked to ban something that does not even involve hunting or killing animals. There has just been a debate in Ireland and they voted against a ban on hunting after a sensible debate, but not here.

We have to come to the real question—the unanswered question—on animal welfare: what exactly do the Government think is going to happen to the 170 packs of hounds in England when they are no longer in use? What is going to happen to the 20,000 hounds and numerous horses if the trail hunting ban goes through? Let us be brutally honest: many of them will be destroyed. If you have a hound, have you ever tried to have it domesticated? Have you tried to have a harrier—[*Interruption.*] No, please, I insist on you trying to have a hound come to your home and stay with you for a week. It is impossible. Put the blood of those hounds and those horses on your heads because you want to stand in ideological purity—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. There is an awful lot of “you”. I hope those comments are not being addressed at me.

Joy Morrissey: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is a very important topic and I am so sorry that I was carried away.

I feel that the Government do not really care about animal welfare. They do not care because they want to double down on attacking the English rural way of life. English rural traditions going back centuries are being sacrificed on the altar of left-wing student political ideology. Rural economies and livelihoods are being ruined. I say to this Government: “You will fail in your attempt to destroy the English countryside and our rural communities. They will outlast you and they will recover from the damage you do to them, but they will never forgive you.”

6.6 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate on behalf of the towns, farms and coastal villages of South East Cornwall. Our rolling hills and dramatic coastline attract visitors from across the country, but they also support our livelihoods, our daily lives and the wellbeing of local residents. A local economy that works for local people year-round means protecting our natural environment, which is vital to our key tourism sector. It also means supporting new industries such as critical minerals via the new Kernow industrial growth fund and providing a voice for traditional industries.

As a keen wild swimmer, I care deeply about our Cornish rivers and beaches, so last year I challenged the former chief executive officer of South West Water on the company's actions. I look forward to seeing stronger accountability and better outcomes for local residents as a result of the new measures on water put forward by this Government.

Poor connectivity has held back rural communities for far too long, and I welcome the work in that area. Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to tackle rural internet deserts, which I experience frequently in my village?

Transport also remains a major challenge for rural life, and in South East Cornwall residents often travel long distances just to reach essential services, work or education. Rural communities value our space and our close-knit society, but no one should feel cut off or face extra financial barriers simply because of where they live, so I welcome the £20 million allocated by the Government to Cornwall to improve our bus services and I am determined to ensure that local people feel the benefit of that investment. Under the last Government, rail fares from Liskeard to Paddington rose by 65%, placing yet another burden on rural households. We have put an end to that increase.

Healthcare access has been another real problem for my residents, and many residents travel long distances for care, often crossing the Tamar and paying a toll only to face staff shortages, stretched services and long waits. Labour is already bringing down those waiting lists, but rural access requires specific attention, so will the Minister set out how the Government are working to ensure that geography never becomes a barrier to care?

Rural communities remember who stands up for them and who delivers the essential services that they need, and in rural areas we have seen the legacy left by the Conservatives. Their mismanagement fed directly into stagnant growth and broken public services, with rural areas paying the price through long hospital waiting times, crumbling school buildings and a public transport network that simply did not work. I and other Cornish Labour MPs have made sure that Cornish rural voices are heard here in Westminster. I have spent time directly speaking with farmers and industry experts, listening to their concerns and building the case for change, and I am pleased to see the increase in the agriculture and business property relief thresholds. Farmers work tirelessly to produce food for our tables, yet their fields are too often used as dumping grounds for waste, so I ask the Minister to outline what further action is under way to tackle the waste crimes that blight our rural community.

Anna Dixon: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Anna Gelderd: I will give way—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady is out of time now. I call Cameron Thomas.

6.9 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Ahead of the election in Tewkesbury, considering my defence background, I recognised that I did not fully understand the experiences nor the lifestyles that come with rurality, so I began reaching out. I made visits; I spoke with people, listened to them and heard them. If someone wants to represent people or is likely to make decisions that will directly impact people, they should first exercise their due diligence. I am not convinced that this Government fully understood farmers, publicans or hoteliers prior to announcing their economic plans for the country, though if the Conservative party does understand rurality, its legacy is every bit as damning.

Following more than a year of consistent lobbying, the Government recently made some, to be fair, pretty significant concessions to farmers, and I credit Gloucestershire NFU and my local farmers, including Charles Day, for the part they played. Gloucestershire publicans and hoteliers, who are still reeling from the 2024 autumn Budget, feel no better off following the last Budget. I would not suggest that banning Labour MPs from their pubs is the right way to go about changing that, so I will make a suggestion shortly. My publicans do not have tractors that they can drive through Parliament Square, so to better understand the experience of Tewkesbury's hospitality sector, I would welcome a Government Minister joining me for lunch in any one of my 52 pubs. I guarantee that they will be made to feel most welcome.

To date when I have raised the pressures on hospitality with Ministers and the Chancellor herself, I have not felt listened to. When challenging some of Labour's most damaging taxes, such as the hike in employer national insurance contributions or unsustainable business rates, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are frequently challenged to offer financial alternatives to Labour's most damaging taxes—which we do. For one, we could undo an awful lot of this by having a customs union with the EU. Alongside consistent pressure from my colleagues, I have personally called in this very Chamber for increases in the digital services tax to raise money from some of the most profitable businesses in this country, rather than from the most desperate ones.

6.11 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): People would be forgiven, when reading the motion put forward by the Opposition today, for thinking that all was rosy in the countryside before the election in 2024, but in Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages—a countryside seat that is 85% rural—people know that that was not the case. They know just how important it is that Government take the concerns of rural communities seriously. They also know that despite more than three decades of representation by a Conservative MP, successive Conservative Governments have treated them with disdain.

There is perhaps no better example of the disdain that the Conservatives showed for communities like mine than the story of High Speed 2: Conservative Ministers asleep at the wheel while HS2 Ltd treated landowners in

areas like mine like they were a completely and utterly ignorable sideshow. It has gone on for decades. I have spoken to farmers in my patch who have been dealing with HS2 for 17 years and still have not had final payments made to them. Delay after delay, disruption after disruption—it is an absolute disgrace. Years of roadworks have caused massive inconvenience, farmers cannot farm their land despite it not being built on and business planning has been put on hold for years.

The Conservatives say they care about our agricultural communities, but what did they do when our farmers suffered under that project? Things got so bad at HS2 under the Tories that this Government had to bring in a new chair and a new CEO to clean up the mess that was left. In fact, Mark Wild, the new chief executive, has experience of cleaning up Conservative messes—we only have to look at Crossrail.

Beyond that, there are further transport issues that affect farmers and rural constituents in my patch. Chetwynd bridge is a fantastic example. It is a bridge that crosses from my patch into that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett). It is the largest cast iron bridge left in the country. It is grade II listed. It is a wonderful piece of architecture. It is incredibly useful and very pretty. Unfortunately, Britain's largest surviving cast iron bridge has been neglected for decades. Deterioration in the structure was first spotted in the '70s, but Staffordshire county council does not have a plan for how to fix it. It knows that it will cost £27 million, but it does not know how to fund it. The council did not speak to me before the spending review and, in fact, waited until Reform UK was in control to get in touch, after which spending review decisions had been made. I am working hard to try to find that £27 million to replace the bridge, and I will be meeting the relevant Minister next week.

These are real-world examples of where Conservative MPs, Governments and councils did not do the work. They said all the right things—they were quite happy to go out there and dance and make their statements—but they did not do the work. They did not go out there to actually defend communities like mine, and I will take absolutely no lessons from them.

6.14 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Living in a rural community is a brilliant way of life. It is beautiful, but it comes with remoteness and other issues. I have lived in an urban area and a rural area, and they are different, although there are things that connect them. I want to point out a few really important things that I have found in rural communities.

I have spoken before about hospitality and farming—they will always be up there—which are struggling and facing issues at the moment, but I want to speak about the upcoming consultation on changes to shotgun licensing, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) just spoke about eloquently. That will have a serious impact on shotgun holders who require the use of a shotgun not just for their job, but for pastimes. If a third of shotgun users do not renew their licences, it will cost the UK economy over £1 billion. I have one of the constituencies with the most shotgun licences. I would like the Minister to take this issue seriously. Any changes to the licensing rules for shotguns will have a huge knock-on impact.

[Stuart Anderson]

The other area I want to touch on, which a few people have spoken about, is trail hunting. The proposed ban on trail hunting will have a big impact on rural communities. I get that not everybody thinks the same way as me. I grew up hunting, shooting and fishing, although I have never been on a horse in my life. What trail hunting communities do to support their local areas is great—there are some great people. I have just launched a survey of my constituents, which has been filled in by almost 2,000 people, and 63% of South Shropshire constituents want trail hunting to continue. It is a rural way of life that gives £78 million to £100 million back to the rural economy.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that such a controversial piece of legislation is being wrapped up with other things that people would find it hard to disagree with, such as the puppy farming ban, and that this is just a cheap trick by the Government so that they can say, “You voted against the puppy farming ban,” rather than having a vote on this particular issue?

Stuart Anderson: My right hon. Friend raises a brilliant point. There are so many good things that can be done on animal welfare, but a trail hunting ban is not one of them.

Let us look at the facts that support trail hunting and at the incidents over the years. From 2004 to 2023, there were 44 convictions involving trail hunting, and there were 250,000 organised hunt days in that time. That is one conviction for every 5,680 trail hunting days. If there was one hunt a day, it would take 15 years to get a conviction. That is a serious statistic. The Government do not like trail hunting and they do not like the people who participate in trail hunting, so they want to ban it. Based on those statistics, they should not ban anything, because the stats do not support the idea that there is widespread criminality in trail hunting. There is no evidence of that at all. I am clear: if anybody breaks the law, they should be prosecuted.

There will be a huge impact on farriers, vets and other people. Can the Minister let me know who is going to pick up the bill for fallen stock? That is a massive impact that will fall on farmers. Trail hunting is supported in South Shropshire, but I get that some constituents will not support it—that is fine. If anybody wants to see what people are doing about animal welfare, they should go to my Facebook page and look at my post about it issue this morning. What people are saying in defending animal welfare is absolutely brutal, and I do not support that. Trail hunting is a key part of life in South Shropshire. I will stand up for it, and for shotgun licence holders, and it should continue. These rural pursuits are part of my community.

6.19 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I am delighted to be the first ever Labour MP for Suffolk Coastal, an incredibly rural constituency. Many of our previous MPs were helicoptered in from cities to represent the constituency, so I am even more delighted to be able to stand in this House and say that I am the first ever MP for Suffolk Coastal to have been born and raised there.

Back in 2004, when I was 17, the foxhunting debate was playing out. It has been incredibly interesting to hear so many Conservatives talk about Labour MPs not understanding rural issues or the foxhunting debate. I can tell the House that one reason I became a Labour member—let alone a Labour MP—was foxhunting. I remember how furious I was, aged 17, that Conservative Members were so angry about the foxhunting ban but did not care about lifting children out of poverty. I could not comprehend that world. That is what drove me to Labour. Those were my values, having grown up in a rural area. Now, I am incredibly proud to stand here representing a rural seat. I continue to stand on that ticket and I defend the Labour manifesto.

We need to separate the issues of conservation and shooting from hunting, as they are separate. I will continue to have those conversations with this Labour Government. Some of—well, all of—the elements in the motion before us are beyond ridiculous, particularly the point about net zero targets and energy infrastructure. If approval is granted, Suffolk Coastal is set to host Sea Link and LionLink. Sizewell C has just been approved, and so many other schemes were approved or proposed not just under the Conservative Government, but under the Conservative-led county council. There are many energy infrastructure issues in my constituency that need to be considered, but they relate to co-ordination and cumulative impact.

Terry Jermy: Does my hon. Friend agree that in places like Suffolk, and next door in Norfolk, hundreds and hundreds of good, well-paying green jobs are tied up in the renewable energy sector, and that the rhetoric from the Opposition, particularly the Conservatives and Reform, puts those vital jobs in our constituencies at risk?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I could not agree more. Some of the things we hear from the Conservatives are really dangerous.

If we are to have sensible conversations about our renewable energy infrastructure, they need to focus on co-ordination. In my constituency, there are seven nationally significant infrastructure projects in a 10-mile radius, but there has never been any attempt to co-ordinate them. I tabled an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to make it a legal duty for NSIPs to be co-ordinated when they are being built at the same time in a small geographical area. It seems crazy that that has never been seriously considered. I will continue to work with the Government to see how we can bring such proposals forward. I would be keen on the introduction of an energy infrastructure levy in order to promote co-ordination.

I urge the Government to go further on farming profitability. I was delighted about the changes to the thresholds, which many of my Back-Bench colleagues and I worked hard to secure, but there is more to do. Baroness Batters’ review addressed key issues, which I know the Government are taking seriously, and I am delighted about many of its recommendations and with the conversations that I have had about them. The Government have my commitment to continued work on those matters, on which I am delighted to support them.

6.23 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Given the time available, I want to read into the record, if I may, some key suggestions for the Government on this important issue. I welcome the fact that we have secured a debate on rural communities. In passing, it is interesting that we have been told in the media over the past few days that Reform UK is the party of the farmer. Its Members must be out tilling the fields! As always, they are all noise, no delivery.

I echo the call that many Members have made to reduce business rates for our vital rural pubs through revaluation and to reduce VAT for them.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Simon Hoare: Go on then.

Rupert Lowe: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me and more than 4,000 business owners, including hundreds of rural companies who signed my open letter to the Chancellor in the last 24 hours, that a root-and-branch review of business rates is now a matter of urgency if bankruptcy and misery is to be avoided? There should be no change to interim covid relief subsidies until that review is complete.

Simon Hoare: I agree, but I think those on our Front Bench go one step further, which is to get rid of the whole damn thing in the first instance, as that solves the problem at a stroke.

I urge the Government to do what they did slightly with the family farm tax. There seem to be noises off from the Treasury, the Department for Business and Trade, and others, about potential changes here there and everywhere, and that they are listening. Businesses are at the brink, and they need certainty now. Stop playing cat and mouse with rural businesses on these policies. Take a decision, announce it. If it is a screeching U-turn, perform it. Do it elegantly, but for the love of God, just do it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hoare: I will not, if the hon. Member will forgive me.

My second point is for the Government to please restore the listed places of worship scheme, which is vital for our rural churches. I echo the point that has been made: it is daft to merge sections 1 and 2 with regards to shotgun licensing—I declare an interest as a holder of one. As we know, a very serious issue happened in Devon a few years ago, but this is a draconian response to that and there are other ways to deal with shotgun licence safety.

Drop the family farm tax. It was the wrong policy. It was suggested by officials to Conservative Treasury Ministers every Budget cycle, and Conservative Treasury Ministers said no. It was never going to raise the amount of money that the Government told us before the changes, and it will now raise even less because of the changes to the threshold. Pull the plaster off that provision—and again, do it quickly. I say to those on the Treasury Bench that

it is not worth the pain to continue to torture small family farms. North Dorset is the “Vale of the Little Dairies” to quote Thomas Hardy, and there are lots of family farms. They will go to the wall even with the changes to the threshold that the Government have announced. Everybody within the dairy sector will be aware of the unsustainable fluctuations in milk price, and we need a Government-led dairy strategy to secure that vital part of our agricultural sector.

We need to restore funding for neighbourhood plans, because that will deliver the local vernacular housing that local communities wish to see. Finally, we need a fundamental ruralisation of the formulas that underpin important funding decisions, whether for schools, the police or Environment Agency projects. If they get all that right, the Government might begin to restore their reputation within the rural community; continue as they are, and they are on a hiding to nothing.

6.27 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I wanted to contribute to this debate to celebrate the brilliant food producers in Northamptonshire and across the UK, some of which you sampled on Northamptonshire Day, Madam Deputy Speaker. As chair of the all-party group for food and drink, I have seen first-hand how rural communities play a critical part in our supply chain, and set the standard for global food quality.

When preparing for today, I thought I might do as many Opposition Members have done: go and buy myself a fresh Barbour jacket and some shiny wellies, and film a social media video ranting about protecting farmers, completely tone deaf to the hammering that they got under 14 years of Conservative Governments. But no, I will be collegiate, Madam Deputy Speaker; instead, I will focus on supporting food producers, and particularly on how we support growth and prosperity in rural communities.

Many will know that my background lies in the construction sector. I am a proud yimby, and a supporter of this Labour Government’s necessary policies to correct the catastrophic and sustained failures of the last Government to “build, baby, build.” While many Opposition Members see development as a threat to communities, if they spent more than five minutes talking to farmers and rural landowners, they would know it is really important that we support sustainable development, which is critical to the prosperity of rural Britain.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman. He is putting forward good points about agriculture and how the economy can build off it. Northern Ireland has £6 billion-worth of manufacturing and exports, and it is critical for it to do well, as well. One thing that holds us back is veterinary and medicines, and the Northern Ireland protocol. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in order for us go forward with the rest of the United Kingdom, the Northern Ireland protocol should be addressed? Perhaps when the Minister responds to the debate she can give us some ideas on that.

Mike Reader: I am not familiar with the Northern Ireland protocol at all, but I am learning more about the SPS agreement in my role as the chair. I hope that Nick Thomas-Symonds will come to see us very soon to explain—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows better than that. He should refer to the right hon. Gentleman as the Minister.

Mike Reader: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The farming productivity review is very clear: if we want a sustainable rural economy, we can do much more to unlock its potential. Planning is one of the areas that we can look to tackle. A farmer can spend millions of hours filling in mountains of paperwork to build new sheds, slurry pits or barns to support better welfare, but our planning system does not support our farmers, the livestock that they keep or the British public, who love what they buy from their supermarkets, butchers and cafés.

As set out in the paper “Yes In My Farm Yard”, which I delivered with the YIMBY Initiative and with support from the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), we have identified some clear recommendations as to how the Government can help to reduce paperwork and speed up rural development; I will share a few of them. Through the permitted development regime, this Labour Government can put down instruments to improve part 6 of the regime by abolishing height and volume restrictions on land and machinery improvements.

We can change and expand class R regulations to improve anaerobic digestion and storage for digestates, which will help to enhance the circular economy for fertilisers, reduce our reliance on Russia and other states that we get our fertilisers from, and lower river pollution. We can also expand class Q regulations to natural landscapes to ensure that our farmers can build small, sensible and sustainable settlements for their agricultural workers, who in turn can protect these precious environments. Those are all practical steps that will help rural businesses to diversify and bring long-term stability to rural economies.

I am really pleased to see that many of the recommendations in our paper are broadly supported in the Batters review into farming profitability, which has also endorsed some of the policies in the paper. I encourage Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to bring forward these planning changes and let our yimby farming communities—or should that be yimfy farming communities?—say, “Yes In My Farm Yard”.

6.31 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on supporting rural communities, although to the casual observer who may have been here at the beginning to hear the Minister's opening speech, it may have appeared that this was a general rambling debate about covid. Later on, if they were here when we heard from the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), they might have felt that they were in a general debate on the NHS.

I understand why Labour Members do not want to talk about rural communities. Despite their protestations, they know that they have lost the trust of rural Britain. It is little wonder, given the family farm tax—what could be more damaging? It has taken them more than a year, from the first Budget when they introduced the tax, to finally U-turn on the majority of it. But before

that point, they voted four times against Conservative proposals to scrap it: on four occasions they had the opportunity to say, “Enough is enough.”

We will continue to campaign on scrapping the family farm tax in its entirety, until it has gone completely, but for rural and coastal communities such as mine on the Isle of Wight, it is not just farmers who have the worst possible deal from this Government; it is the fishing communities too. Just two decades ago, there were 30 fully crewed fishing boats in my constituency; there are now three. This Government rubbed the fishing community's face in it when they renegotiated with the EU, folded and gave away our fishing rights for 12 years. *[Interruption.]*

Those reading this in *Hansard* in the future should know that there seem to be smirks, expressions of laughter and jeering from those on the Labour Benches. This is a party and a Government who fundamentally misunderstand the damage they are doing to rural Britain. The Conservative party has always been and will always be the party of rural Britain.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the greatest examples of damage that the Government are doing to the countryside is the destruction of our best and most versatile farmland with thousands upon thousands of acres of solar farms?

Joe Robertson: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, and thank her for raising that point. The Government are also destroying many rural areas with a clamour for house building in the wrong places. We can all agree that we need more houses for future generations; the argument is about where we build them, and I am surprised to hear Labour Members say that they speak to farming communities and rural communities who are “yes in my back yard”—who want building.

People do not want the wrong type of houses built for people who do not live in their area and have no desire to live there. Most services are available in cities. That is where the majority of building should be taking place, and this Government should look again at the whole way in which house building and planning works in this country. Until they understand the damage they are doing to rural Britain, they will continue to haemorrhage votes.

6.35 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Too often, rural Britain has been spoken about and taken for granted, no more so than by the Conservative party, which over 14 years left many rural businesses—including family farms such as my own—operating on life support, including through its harmful pursuit of Brexit. As the Food and Drink Federation's 2024 trade snapshot notes,

“The UK's global food export volumes have declined significantly more than other major European countries, demonstrating that the UK's challenges aren't part of a global trend but rather unique to the UK's post-Brexit circumstances.”

That is why I welcome this Government's work towards a SPS agreement that will help food and drink producers in my constituency of Rushcliffe.

Doing things differently is extremely important. In government, we must think, talk and act differently in relation to rural Britain if we are to break long-standing cycles of poverty and under-investment. Rural Britain cannot be treated as an afterthought, not only because this risks the urban-rural divide growing even further, but because rural Britain is central to everything we do. Yes, food security, nature restoration, flooding adaptation and animal welfare all clearly depend on partnership with rural communities—everyone in the Chamber knows that—but the role of rural Britain goes much further. New homes, new energy infrastructure, new transport routes, new critical mineral extraction, and national security planning and preparation will all depend on rural space and resources.

That is why, in my view and that of many of my Labour colleagues, rural Britain offers a vital route—arguably the only route—to national renewal. However, that will happen only if its unique values, needs and potential are properly understood and acted on. For that reason, I will set aside the Opposition motion, which simply lists a set of things that the previous Conservative Government did not necessarily resolve, and focus on the amendment's mention of a “joined-up approach”.

I will continue to push the Government to commit to developing a proper rural strategy. The last one was in 2004, under the last Labour Government. I hope we will commit to a rural strategy that puts rural Britain at the centre of economic growth, meaning that we can finally ditch overused slogans about nimbys and yimbys and stop trivialising our rural communities, which are so important.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman is out of time. I call Harriet Cross.

6.38 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am really grateful to have been called to speak in today's debate. In any other week, I would focus on more substantive day-to-day, week-to-week rural matters such as the family farm tax. I am grateful that there has been a partial U-turn on the tax, but it should not have taken this long. It should not have taken the pain, frustration and hurt that it caused our farming and rural communities. The Government must go further—we must get a full U-turn. We have to protect our rural communities. There is a reason why over 6,200 farming, agricultural and forestry businesses have closed since this Government came to power. It is not just farms that are impacted by the family farm tax; it is our rural communities as a whole, including the suppliers and contractors. They are all important, they are all part of our rural matrix, and they are all being let down by the family farm tax.

Given the snow this week in north-east Scotland and Aberdeenshire, I will focus on what is happening there, and on support for our rural communities. Aberdeenshire is the fourth-lowest-funded council in Scotland, and the lowest-funded rural council. Because of that, Aberdeenshire council has had to make awful decisions in recent years on the provision of services. Many of those focused on our roads, gritting and winter preparedness, and we are seeing the results of that.

Aberdeenshire is under not a dusting of snow, but a few feet of snow. Our farmers are literally walking through waist-deep snow to dig their sheep and livestock out of snowdrifts. They are then getting in their tractors to clear the roads for communities. They are bringing people who are stuck and who need medical attention in their cabs to the main roads to try to get them to hospital. Our rural communities pull together in times of need and when it is time to take action, and they have done that for years. They will keep doing that, and they deserve our support, but support is not enough. We must ensure that rural communities are properly funded and supported, and able to act and prepare for situations like this.

I end with a thank you to everyone in Aberdeenshire who has lent a hand in the last week—farmers; council workers; organisations; volunteers such as the Community Off-road Transport Action Group, or COTAG, which has been amazing in getting people out of tough situations; and neighbours and passers-by who have pushed cars or dug roads. I thank the children who have been digging out their neighbours' driveways. It has been a massive effort in Aberdeenshire, and it will continue. We are getting freezing temperatures, and once the masses of snow start to melt, ice and flooding will be the next issue. We must be prepared. We need assistance and funding to make sure that when this happens again, which it will, Aberdeenshire and other rural counties are properly prepared.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

6.41 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It has been clear that this Government have been a disaster for rural communities. We have heard that loud and clear in the many excellent contributions from Opposition Members that have highlighted the deep concerns of many of our constituents. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) highlighted the challenge of the family farm tax, the challenge faced by pubs, and the challenge of funding rural councils such as North Yorkshire. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) highlighted the funding challenges that Gloucestershire county council faces and the implications of the changes to shotgun licences, which will be disastrous for our shooting community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst), who is a doughty campaigner for our rural community, highlighted the challenges associated with the pig industry, the shooting industry and the family farm tax. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who I was proud to serve with as a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs before the general election, highlighted the challenge of the family farm tax for his constituents, the way that this Government have cut productivity grants, the implications of the Baroness Batters review, and the fact that the Government have not even announced yet what they will do on the 57 recommendations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) highlighted the implications for many rural local authorities of measures

[*Robbie Moore*]

such as the cut to the rural services delivery grant. He also highlighted the impact of the family farm tax and the family business tax on the wider supply chain. That is impacting many of the family businesses that support our farmers.

Dave Doogan: Is the shadow Minister as aghast as I am to hear Labour Back Benchers taking credit for the substantial U-turn on the family farm tax, as though it was inevitable, when it was they who introduced the tax?

Robbie Moore: I agree with the hon. Member, and I will come back to that, because it is ridiculous. My hon. Friends the Members for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) made the critical point that this Government should stop playing cat and mouse with our rural businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) referenced the fact that rural Britain and our rural fishing communities have lost trust as a result of this Government's choices. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) rightly highlighted the challenges being faced in her constituency and the north of Scotland right now as a result of the bad weather, and the fact that it is our farmers who are doing the hard work to support our rural communities.

Throughout the debate, we have heard about the immense pressure that our entire hospitality sector is being put under. I heard it from my own constituents Michael, Kath and Jodie at the Dog and Gun pub in the Worth valley just before Christmas. We now know that since the autumn Budget alone, more than 1,100 pubs and restaurants have closed, and more than 89,000 hospitality workers have lost their job. The rise in employer national insurance, the rise in the minimum wage, the Unemployment Rights Bill—these measures are making doing business nearly impossible. The Government are robbing many young people of their first job opportunity and are tearing the heart out of our rural economies.

All that is in addition to the skyrocketing business rates being foisted on our pubs by this Government. Many are looking at 30% increases in their valuation rates, a staggering amount that they will simply not be able to afford. The Conservatives would scrap business rates in full, so why on earth will the Labour Government not do it? Is it any wonder that, up and down the country, it is harder and harder for Labour MPs to find a pub that will serve them? However, if they thought the situation was bad for pubs, it is just as bad for our farmers.

Let us look at what rural Britain has been hit by in the last 18 months alone through the choices of this Labour Government. De-linked payments have been dramatically reduced. Capital grants have been closed overnight. The sustainable farming incentive has been stopped with no warning—and how embarrassing was it when Ministers were forced to admit that they had wrongly refused SFI funding to about 3,000 farmers when they shut the scheme? That was pure ignorance and incompetence. The farming budget has been slashed, and is now referred to as the farming and nature budget, a combined term to create the false impression that the Government actually care and that funding has increased.

There are new taxes on fertilisers, and on double-cab pick-up trucks. There are plans to reclassify shotgun licences, making it harder and more expensive to renew and apply for a licence. Country pursuits and sports that drive the rural economy are to be banned, and a land use framework threatens to take 18% of our land out of UK food production. We have a US trade deal that totally destroys the UK bioethanol industry, and robs our farmers of a sixth of the domestic wheat market. Prime agricultural land is being covered in solar panels by the Energy Secretary, regardless of local opinion or food security concerns.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about a matter that I raised in another Opposition day debate before the summer? Not only are solar farms taking over agricultural land, but no research has been done on thermal runaway and what would result from the evaporation of heavy metal output on to that agricultural land.

Robbie Moore: My right hon. Friend's excellent point feeds into the narrative that this Government are not making the sound decisions that we want for our rural economy; they are industrialising much of our prime agricultural land with heavy metals that will damage soil nutrients.

Closer to home for me in Keighley are the plans to roll out England's biggest wind farm on our protected peatland. It is a disgrace that the moratorium on onshore wind has been removed by this Labour Government. The young farmers grant has been cancelled for the first time. Our rural councils have been hit hard too: the £110 million rural service delivery grant, which supported many rural communities, has been axed. Fairer funding for rural councils has been scrapped, and the £2 bus fare cap has gone, which makes it more expensive for people to travel around our rural areas.

To top it all off, there are the 14 months of anxiety over the disastrous family farm and family business tax—14 months in which families who have worked hard all their lives have been completely terrified about their future. Parents and grandparents of young farmers have been in tears, and yes, lives have been lost, only for the Government to finally admit what was obvious to everyone else from the start. It is disgraceful to see some Labour MPs treating this as a victory lap, and seeing others now come out of the woodwork to say that, actually, they supported these changes all along is even worse. The reality is that right up until Christmas, Ministers were adamant that there would be no changes in APR and BPR. Labour Members voted against this policy four times, and only one of them had the backbone to vote against the Chancellor.

Time and again, this Labour Government have failed to understand and, worse, have ignored rural Britain. As a result, family businesses' confidence is now at a 15-year low. The Government's own farmer opinion tracker shows that only one in three farmers in England feel positive about their future. A third of farmers are planning to scale back investment because of this Government's policies, a record number of farms have closed since Labour came to office, and the Government's own profitability review is being rolled out at the slowest of speeds.

I urge every hon. Member who has sought to defend the Government's record in this debate to get real and recognise the dire situation that rural Britain is in. This Government have chosen to ignore warnings, dismiss experience and gamble with the livelihoods of the people who feed this country and care for its countryside. Farmers and rural communities see exactly what is happening, and our pubs and hospitality sector are struggling. They feel it, and they are paying the price for it. Rural communities will not forget who stood with them and who turned their back.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):

I am grateful to have the opportunity to close this debate. I have to say that even in the deep, bleak midwinter, I do not recognise the gloomy, barren landscape that Conservative Members have been describing. They describe a litany of disasters. If only they had been in government for the last 14 years and been able to do something about them. As I go round our countryside, I see a quite different picture; I see millions of people in rural communities who were taken for granted and underserved by the Conservatives. That is why they kicked the party out at the last general election. We Labour Members are laser-focused on encouraging growth, and Labour is now the party of the countryside. The Conservatives should stop talking the country down and get behind our drive for growth.

Let us look at the inheritance that the Conservatives left local communities: broken public services, boarded-up post offices, crumbling schools and sky-high NHS waiting lists. They have learned no lessons, offered no apologies and shown no contrition, and that is why they were booted out of government. They had a Liz Truss mini-Budget that crashed the economy, sending mortgages, rents and bills soaring. And who was the Financial Secretary to the Treasury when food inflation hit 19%? It was the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Mark Pritchard: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I am not giving way, because I have only eight minutes to respond to the debate.

The Conservatives' former Prime Minister explicitly said that there was a deliberate policy of taking money away from deprived inner-city areas and giving it to rural areas. This Government are cleaning up the mess that they made, and we have stabilised the economy.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) is not in his place, because I cycled the 25 miles there from the New Forest during the covid lockdowns. He talked a lot about the 61 bus, but he did not mention anything about the rail fare freeze. His constituents will enjoy the freezing of rail fares, as well as the freezing of prescription charges, £150 off energy bills and the driving up of wages. What did the Conservatives do on each of those issues to help people in rural communities? They voted against each and every one of those measures. They left the health service on its knees, our schools were crumbling and they crashed the economy. We have done more in 18 months than they achieved in 14 miserable years, including delivering cheaper mortgages and new rights for workers, and lifting half a million people out of poverty.

I want to come back to bus routes, because under the Conservatives and Lib Dems, bus routes in England declined by 50% after 2010. Some 8,000 services were slashed on their watch. We have taken immediate action through the Bus Services Act, which includes provision to support the socially necessary bus services that are so important in rural areas. I am grateful to have the bus Minister sitting next to me, and we have maintained the national £3 bus fare cap. [*Interruption.*] Members are shouting from a sedentary position, but there was no cap under the Conservative Government.¹

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) about the problems of rural crime. During the 14 years of Conservative Government the recorded crime rate in rural areas of England and Wales increased by 32%. Our rural communities paid the price for the Tories being asleep on the job, and the 20,000 police officers that they and the Liberal Democrats cut in 2010. We are ensuring that rural communities will be better protected from the scourge of rural crime, such as equipment theft, livestock theft and hare coursing, which we know devastate communities, farming and wildlife. That is why we have collaborated with the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Home Office to deliver a renewed rural and wildlife crime strategy, which was published last November.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) asked about waste crime, and I have visited the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) to see the fly-tipping there. We know that waste crime blights our rural communities and undermines legitimate businesses. The last Government let waste gangs and organised crime groups run riot, with incidents rising by 20% in their last five years, but we have announced what are we going to do.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Announced!

Mary Creagh: Yes, we are announcing—[*Interruption.*] The Conservatives consulted on changes in 2018.

Lincoln Jopp: You've announced them.

Mary Creagh: We are bringing them in this year. We are introducing digital waste tracking—end-to-end tracking. It is going to be operational from April this year; the infrastructure is there.

We are introducing mandatory digital waste tracking, reforming the permitting system—a system that was so loose that Oscar the dog could be a waste carrier—and bringing in tougher background checks for people carrying waste. We will also require vehicles transporting waste to display their permit numbers. This was all prepped, planned and consulted on by the Conservatives, but the action is happening under this Labour Government.

We have heard a lot of talk about the land use framework. We are going to have to change the way we use land, because our landscapes need to change to support climate change mitigation and adaptation, economic growth, housing delivery, food production and clean energy, and to meet our statutory targets for nature recovery. That land use framework will be published later this year.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) talked about “informal” employment relations. I am old enough to remember when the

1.[*Official Report*, 12 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 5WC.](Correction)

[Mary Creagh]

Conservative Government, in coalition with the Lib Dems, abolished the Agricultural Wages Board and the Commission for Rural Communities, and their prime plan for rural prosperity was to sell off the nation's forests, which was met with uproar in rural communities and was the first U-turn of that coalition Government.

As the Minister for forests, I have visited Hexham and stood among the pines, spruce and firs trees of Kielder forest—a landscape bursting with growth, renewal and vitality. I met the men and women who make that possible, and some of the businesses, with my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris). We also met innovators at Egger in Hexham, one of Northumberland's largest rural employers, which turns timber into the panels found in homes and workplaces across the country.

We have announced the first new national forest for more than 30 years in Bristol, Swindon and Gloucester in the west of England, and we are not waiting 30 years to announce the next ones. In November last year, we announced the creation of two more national forests. The second will be in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, and a competition will be launched for a third new national forest in the midlands or the north of England in early 2026. Tens of millions of new trees will be planted in the coming years, alongside the new infrastructure and new homes that this country needs.

I want to come to some of the points raised in the debate. I was asked about the Batters review, which had 57 recommendations, by the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader), who taught me a new word: “yimfy”. Our priority is to get the implementation of this right, and we are considering all the recommendations. We will set out a detailed response to the Batters review in our 25-year farming road map.

On firearms licensing, the prevention of future deaths report into the fatal shootings in Plymouth said that there were problems in the firearms licensing scheme. The fees for firearms licensing were last reviewed in 2015, so it is important that the additional revenue from firearms licensing is used to—

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 105, Noes 332.

Division No. 397]

[7 pm

AYES

Anderson, Stuart	Bowie, Andrew
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Argar, rh Edward	Brandreth, Aphra
Atkins, rh Victoria	Braverman, rh Suella
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Burghart, Alex
Barclay, rh Steve	Cartlidge, James
Bedford, Mr Peter	Cleverly, rh Sir James
Bhatti, Saqib	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Blackman, Bob	Cocking, Lewis

Cooper, John	Morrissey, Joy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Costa, Alberto	Morton, rh Wendy
Coutinho, rh Claire	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Cross, Harriet	Mundell, rh David
Davies, Gareth	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Davies, Mims	Norman, rh Jesse
Dewhurst, Charlie	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	O'Brien, Neil
Duffield, Rosie	Patel, rh Priti
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Paul, Rebecca
Evans, Dr Luke	Philp, rh Chris
Fox, Sir Ashley	Pritchard, rh Mark
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Freeman, George	Rankin, Jack
Garnier, Mark	Robertson, Joe
Glen, rh John	Rosindell, Andrew
Grant, Helen	Shannon, Jim
Griffith, Andrew	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Griffiths, Alison	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Harris, Rebecca	Simmonds, David
Hayes, rh Sir John	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Hinds, rh Damian	Smith, Rebecca
Hoare, Simon	Spencer, Dr Ben
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Hollinrake, Kevin	Stafford, Gregory
Huddleston, Nigel	Stephenson, Blake
Hudson, Dr Neil	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy	Sunak, rh Rishi
Hussain, Mr Adnan	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Thomas, Bradley
Jenrick, rh Robert	Timothy, Nick
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Trott, rh Laura
Jopp, Lincoln	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Kearns, Alicia	Vickers, Martin
Lam, Katie	Vickers, Matt
Lamont, John	Whately, Helen
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Wild, James
Lopez, Julia	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Lowe, Rupert	Wood, Mike
Mak, Alan	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Malthouse, rh Kit	
McVey, rh Esther	
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew	
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	
Moore, Robbie	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Jerome Mayhew

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Apsana Begum</i>)	Atkinson, Lewis
Abbott, Jack	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Abrahams, Debbie	Bailey, Olivia
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Baines, David
Akehurst, Luke	Baker, Alex
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Baker, Richard
Aldridge, Dan	Ballinger, Alex
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Bance, Antonia
Alexander, rh Heidi	Barker, Paula
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Baxter, Johanna
Ali, Tahir	Beales, Danny
Anderson, Callum	Beavers, Lorraine
Anderson, Fleur	Begum, Apsana
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Bell, Torsten
Arthur, Dr Scott	Benn, rh Hilary
Asato, Jess	Betts, Mr Clive
Asser, James	Bishop, Matt (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Athwal, Jas	Blake, Olivia
Atkinson, Catherine	Blundell, Mrs Elsie
	Bonavia, Kevin

Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 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
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 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
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela

Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 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

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregor Poynton and
Nesil Caliskan

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).
That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the support that the Government is providing for rural people, communities and businesses; commends the continued support for farmers through investment in Environmental Land Management schemes which will boost nature and sustainable food production; recognises that the Government has listened on the subject of Agricultural Property Relief and made changes to support family farms; further welcomes the Bus Services Act 2025, which includes provision to support the protection of socially necessary bus services in rural areas; further recognises that the Government continues to invest in Project Gigabit with £2.4 billion available to ensure over one million premises have access to gigabit-capable broadband; and supports the joined-up approach with the weight of Government behind tackling rural crimes such as the theft of high value farm equipment and livestock.

Ukraine and Wider Operational Update

7.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

With permission, Mr Speaker, and with thanks to you for allowing me to do so at this late hour, I wish to make a statement to update the House on today's US operation and yesterday's coalition of the willing summit in Paris.

Today the US conducted a military operation to intercept the motor vessel Bella 1 in the north Atlantic on its way to Russia. The UK, at the request of the US, supported this operation as part of global efforts to crack down on sanctions-busting and shadow shipping activity. The Bella 1 was falsely flagged and subject to US counter-Iran sanctions. The vessel refused to comply with the US's exercise of its sanctions jurisdiction on 20 December, after which the US Coast Guard vessel Munro pursued the ship across the Atlantic. It is a sanctioned, stateless vessel that carries a long history of nefarious activity and shares close links with both Iran and Russia.

Following a request from the US, I authorised the use of UK bases and the deployment of Royal Navy and RAF assets to support the operation, including airborne surveillance and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship Tideforce. This was a US operation. No UK personnel took part in the boarding. I can update the House that the operation is ongoing, but the Bella 1 is now under the control of US forces, who demonstrated immense courage and professionalism in dangerous and deteriorating Atlantic sea conditions.

A stateless vessel may be lawfully intercepted and subjected to the law of the interdicting state. The US's enforcement action was based on counter-Iran sanctions aimed at stopping Iran from fuelling instability through the profits of illegal oil sales. The UK supported this action to achieve three objectives: first, to enforce counter-Iran sanctions; secondly, to tackle the global security threat posed by expanding shadowy maritime activity; and thirdly, to reinforce British homeland defence and security in this era of rising threats.

Let me expand. First, in 2024, the vessel was sanctioned by the US and subjected to a seizure warrant for illegally transporting Iranian oil. It has reflagged five times in the last five years and was falsely flying the Guyana ensign when it was intercepted by the US. Over a four-year period, reports suggest that the vessel moved some 7.3 million barrels of Iranian crude oil, the proceeds of which are used to finance terrorism, threat and instability across the world.

The Iranian regime continue to export violence across the region through their proxies and partners including Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iraqi militias. They maintain support for Russia by supplying Putin with weapons for his brutal invasion of Ukraine, including the Shahed drones and missiles that target and kill Ukrainian civilians. It is telling that the vessel, in an attempt to evade the seizure warrant, changed its name and tried to adopt the Russian flag.

Secondly, the UK also supported this military operation to counter the expanding global security threat. The vessel is part of an increasing web of shadow shipping that fuels and funds instability across the world, that undermines global trade and that threatens our national security. We know that Russia operates a vast shadow

fleet of its own to bankroll its illegal invasion of Ukraine. Last year, it is estimated that Russia sold \$100 billion-worth of sanctioned oil: money that is directly funding attacks against Ukrainian civilians, such as the onslaught during Christmas involving 600 Russian missiles and drones that killed at least three people.

We owe it to the Ukrainians to step up action on those shadow operations, and we are doing so. That is why we are deterring, we are disrupting and we are degrading the Russian shadow fleet as a priority for the Government. To date, we have imposed sanctions on 544 vessels. According to estimates, sanctions against the shadow fleet by the UK and our partners have forced 200 ships off the seas—almost half the Russia shadow fleet's overall capacity—while Russia's critical oil revenues are now down 27% compared to October 2024. That is their lowest since the start of its full-scale invasion.

Let me speak plainly: the UK will not stand by as malign activity increases on the high seas. Alongside our allies, we are stepping up our response against shadow vessels, and we will continue to do so.

Thirdly, this is not just about international security but about the threats to British national security. Iran presents a persistent danger not only to security in the middle east, but to us here in the UK. It poses a significant espionage threat, it sustains an aggressive cyber-attack campaign against us and, as our own Intelligence and Security Committee reported, since 2022 the Iranian regime has plotted at least 15 assassination or kidnap attempts on British soil.

More widely across Europe, we are seeing a pattern of flagrant maritime activity co-ordinated by Russia, so I applaud and welcome the fact that the Finnish authorities last week seized a Russian shadow vessel suspected of damaging a communications cable under the gulf of Finland. We have also exposed the Russian spy ship Yantar, operating in our waters and surveying our undersea cables. And, of course, by assisting our US allies in taking this ship off the seas, we are protecting the British people and our nation.

This is a stark reminder that our world is changing; it is less predictable and more dangerous. This operation and the shadow fleet show the global links between the security threats faced by the UK and its allies. The shadow fleet itself is vital to Putin's ongoing illegal invasion and war in Ukraine, which brings me on to the second topic in this joint statement.

Next month, we enter the fifth year of Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, yet the Ukrainian people—military and civilian alike—still fight with huge courage and defiance. I am proud to say that this House remains united for Ukraine, that Britain remains united for Ukraine. We know that if Putin prevails he will not stop at Ukraine, and we know that a secure Europe depends on a strong, sovereign Ukraine.

I am also proud of the UK's leadership on Ukraine. It started under the last Government and stepped up under this Government. Now we—the UK—lead the 50 nation-strong Ukraine Defence Contact Group alongside Germany, and secured £50 billion in military aid pledges last year. We, with France, lead the coalition of the willing, undertaking detailed military planning to help secure peace for the long term when a deal is agreed. I say to this House: let us make 2026 not only the year when peace is possible, but the year when peace is achieved.

This Government are leading that push for peace; this Government are building a new deal for European security. That is why in Paris yesterday, at the largest meeting yet of the coalition of the willing, with 39 nations, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister, alongside President Macron and President Zelensky, signed a declaration of intent. As the Prime Minister said,

"The purpose of the coalition of the willing is to help deliver a peace that can last and to work with the US to guarantee Ukraine's security for the long term. This work is now more advanced than ever."

Yesterday's declaration advances that work significantly. It confirms that the UK and France will "take a leading role": first, in using military, economic and diplomatic instruments to ensure the conclusion of a peace agreement; secondly, in supporting the development of Ukraine's defence capabilities; and thirdly, in commanding a multinational force for Ukraine that plans to deploy to Ukraine after a ceasefire has been agreed.

The MFU plans to deploy units from nations in the coalition of the willing to carry out defence and deterrence operations in the air, on land and at sea, and to conduct training, planning, recovery and regeneration of Ukrainian forces. The UK and France will also create military hubs to support that work across the country and build protected facilities within Ukraine for weapons and equipment. As the Prime Minister has said today, "If there were a decision to deploy under the agreement that was signed yesterday, I would put that matter to the House for a debate beforehand and for a vote on that deployment."

Yesterday, at this largest meeting of the coalition of the willing, we agreed further significant steps, including the signing of a joint declaration. We will also participate in US-led monitoring and verification of any ceasefire. We will support the long-term provision of armaments for Ukraine's defence, and we will continue to work with the US towards security guarantees to deter any further Russian aggression and to support Ukraine in the case of a future armed attack by Russia. In Paris yesterday, US Special Envoy Witkoff described these commitments as being

"as strong as anyone has ever seen".

I will travel very soon to Kyiv to continue these discussions with Ukrainian political and military leaders.

A secure Europe needs a strong Ukraine, but we can only get a peace deal if Putin is ready to make compromises. Over the Christmas period, he showed that he was still not ready for peace, with hundreds of drones and missiles being fired into Ukraine and Russian attacks continuing on the frontline, so in 2026 we will continue with other nations to step up our military support still further. Our mission is to support the fight today, as well as to secure the peace tomorrow. In conclusion, our Government will always act in the interests of national security. We are committed to countering the threats posed by our adversaries, to standing by our closest allies, and to keeping Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

7.26 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I begin by thanking the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement, and for the briefing he provided to me and other parliamentarians on today's operation.

[James Cartlidge]

As the Leader of the Opposition said earlier, there should always be a statement to Parliament when UK troops are committed abroad, and we hope that the Secretary of State can provide a little more clarity than the Prime Minister was willing to provide earlier.

In recent days, we have seen extraordinary international developments, particularly in relation to Venezuela, but it remains the case that the single most important military action of recent years affecting our nation's security is Putin's illegal and wholly unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. The ensuing war has led to terrible loss of life, and we all want peace, but it must be a lasting one on acceptable terms to Ukraine, and with credible security guarantees, so that any post-ceasefire settlement can endure. Having led the way in supporting Ukraine at the outset of the invasion, we will, as the Leader of the Opposition said earlier today, absolutely support any efforts to help bring peace to Ukraine. Specifically, it is entirely right to plan for a ceasefire. Just as we brought together an international coalition to provide weapons to Ukraine, we welcome the way the Government have worked with international partners to plan how a potential ceasefire will be supported militarily.

As to the detail of the plans, can the Secretary of State provide further information on the number of personnel involved? Earlier today, the Prime Minister did not give any specific details on troop numbers, yet *The Times* is reporting that the figure will be fewer than 7,500. What more can he tell us on that? Can he say more about the composition of the force that is to be deployed? Specifically, we note that British soldiers will be involved in logistics and training, but what proportion, if any, will be actively involved in the policing and patrolling of any border or demilitarised zone? What air and naval assets does he plan to provide as part of the multinational force for Ukraine?

On rules of engagement, we note from the joint declaration of intent that our service personnel will be granted

"the use of force to fulfil the mission"

of the MFU, and will

"co-operate in accordance with international law"

and

"respect for human rights...as reflected in other international agreements whose participants are the Signatories."

Can the Secretary of State confirm that this means that our soldiers operating in Ukraine will be subject to the European convention on human rights during any deployment? Can he also state the exact mission of the MFU? The declaration of intent refers to "other contributing nations", but does not name any countries from outside Ukraine other than Britain and France, so can he list those nations and tell the House what their primary contribution will be?

On the crucial matter of security guarantees, there appears to be no mention of any such guarantees in the declaration of intent. Can the Secretary of State tell us what explicit security guarantees the United States has agreed to, and will they involve US boots on the ground? Of course, this force would only be deployed in the event of a ceasefire being agreed with Russia, so what is his contingency plan in the event that the ceasefire is broken after the MFU has been deployed? Does this

not point to the most important consideration: that this whole plan is based on the assumption that there is a genuine ceasefire? Having personally passionately backed Ukraine's fight for freedom throughout, I would dearly love to believe that this peace is possible soon, but I fear that the occupant of the Kremlin is not interested in peace. Does the Secretary of State agree that in parallel with any preparation for the MFU, there must be no let-up whatsoever in the application of maximum economic pressure on Russia, along with all possible continued support for Ukraine?

Turning to other developments, we support today's operation by the United States to seize the MV *Bella 1* tanker in order to enforce sanctions on Iran. We also welcome the UK's enabling role, undertaken by Royal Navy and RAF assets, and I agree wholeheartedly with the Secretary of State on the objectives he set out, not least the objective of reinforcing our homeland security. I am pleased to hear that the operation has been successful, and on behalf of the Opposition, I pay tribute to all personnel involved, and I join the Secretary of State in recognising the skill and bravery of the US forces who participated.

On the wider matter of Iran, I take this opportunity to express our solidarity with all those who in recent days have had the courage to defy that nation's despotic and repressive regime. While I appreciate that the Secretary of State will not speculate on operational planning by us or our allies, can he reassure the House that his Department is conducting contingency planning in case of any further escalation of internal unrest in Iran?

On Greenland, we totally support Denmark's sovereignty over that territory. While the United States remains our closest ally, it is surely not in the interest of the US or any of our allies for NATO's shared commitments to be undermined to any degree. Given that the Prime Minister did not answer the Leader of the Opposition earlier, can the Secretary of State assure the House that he will be seeking an urgent meeting of all NATO members to provide mutual reassurance on the matter of Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland?

Finally, is not the common thread in all this that the world is becoming a more dangerous place, and we must therefore rapidly ramp up our defence spending and rearmament? When will the Secretary of State finally publish the defence investment plan?

John Healey: We are working flat out on the defence investment plan. We will complete it and publish it as soon as we can.

The sovereignty of Greenland is not at issue: it is clearly Denmark that has sovereignty. It is clear that Greenland and Denmark are a part of NATO. Greenland's security is guaranteed by its membership, and by all 32 nations of NATO. Any decisions on the future of Greenland are a matter for the citizens of Greenland and for Denmark.

Let me turn to the shadow Minister's more extensive questions and points about the declaration of intent yesterday and the situation in Ukraine. I welcome his commitment to and support for a lasting and just peace. He pledged his support for all efforts to bring peace to Ukraine, and I welcome his support for our work to do that. On the detailed questions, I will simply not go into detail on the nature of the activities in the deployment,

the numbers of troops that are likely to be deployed to Ukraine or the commitments that other nations have made. As a former Defence Minister, he will understand that well. The finality of this will depend on the details of the peace deal. He quite rightly said that we will deploy only if there is a ceasefire and a peace agreement. Disclosing, let alone debating, those sort of details would only make Putin wiser.

On the deployment in future of any British forces, I am proud to say that whenever British forces deploy, including abroad, they meet the highest possible standards of international law and professionalism, and they will continue to do so.

On the number of nations committed to and involved in the planning of the coalition, as the Prime Minister has said, and as I said in my statement, yesterday's meeting was 39 strong. It was the largest meeting of the coalition of the willing yet. Yesterday's declaration of intent signifies not just an advance in our work towards the security guarantees and peace, but a gathering of momentum behind that.

Although the hon. Gentleman welcomes our support and pledges his own for efforts to bring peace, he questions aspects of this deployment and of this coalition of the willing, though his party leader has still not publicly backed the coalition of the willing, and has still not publicly said that she would support the multinational force for Ukraine. If and when she does, we will gladly see that as support for the security of Britain, the future of Ukraine and the strengthening of our work with allies.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman said that Putin is not interested in peace. He is quite right to say that we will not, and should not, let up on intensifying the economic pressure. My statement dealt with the shadow fleet, which is part of that. We should not give up, or let up on increasing the pressure on Putin through the military aid and support that we provide to Ukraine. I can tell the House that I will co-chair the next meeting of the Ukraine defence contact group, alongside the German Finance Minister. We will do that at NATO next month, and we will look to ensure the strongest possible pledges throughout 2026, so that we can step up support for Ukraine, both for the fight today and to secure peace for tomorrow.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the advance sight of the statement from the Defence Secretary, and I thank the Defence Minister for the operational briefing this morning. I also welcome the Prime Minister's progress on the coalition of the willing. Of course, it does nothing to change the reality on the ground faced by our Ukrainian friends, nor the growing threats that we face. We await precise details, with respect to numbers. It is rumoured that approximately 7,500 British troops will be sent. Perhaps my right hon. Friend can allay my concerns about how our already overstretched armed forces will be able to meet their existing commitments, especially in Estonia.

The UK's support today for our US allies enforcing sanctions in the Atlantic demonstrates the strength and value of alliances. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the future of Greenland is for Greenlanders and Denmark to determine, and that any attempts by a NATO ally to seize NATO territory would not be in our collective interests, and least of all in America's interests?

John Healey: I welcome my hon. Friend's work chairing the Defence Committee. He, I and the Prime Minister are entirely at one: the future of Greenland is a matter for the people of Greenland. It is under the sovereignty of Denmark, a nation that is a full-scale, valued member of the NATO alliance.

My hon. Friend is right to question me on UK deployment and our commitments. He will get the chance to question me directly; I look forward to appearing before his Committee later this month. As the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions, the House will have the opportunity to debate the issues in detail if and when there is any commitment and decision to deploy troops, following on from what he made clear was a political statement—a declaration of intent that is significant in advancing our work to secure Ukrainians' future, but nevertheless a political declaration. The House would then have the chance to debate in full Members' concerns, the consequences of any future deployment to Ukraine, and the terms on which we would make that deployment.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): We all hope for peace in Ukraine. Years of brutal conflict, caused and perpetuated by Russia, have taken a terrible toll. There is therefore much to welcome in the announcement that the United Kingdom and France are prepared, alongside partners, to deploy forces to Ukraine after a ceasefire. That is not about escalation but about deterrence, reassurance and making peace durable rather than temporary.

We have been clear that Ukrainians are fighting not just for their own freedom but for all of Europe. In return, we should be prepared to secure a fair peace deal and make it durable. We should be clear about the purpose: any deployment must be focused on defending Ukraine, strengthening deterrence and supporting Ukrainian forces—not fighting a new war but preventing the old one from restarting. It must sit firmly within the bounds of international law, with clear rules, oversight and the consent of this House. That matters even more at a time when trust in American guarantees is under strain, rhetoric about the annexation of Greenland is escalating, and international law is treated as optional. Europe has a responsibility to step up in defence of the principles that underpin our security.

Does the Secretary of State accept that this announcement and other global events intensify the urgent need to increase defence spending to 2.5% and beyond? The Paris declaration states that the force would be deployed only after a credible cessation of hostilities. Can he give some detail on what that means in practice? If it refers merely to a ceasefire, would British troops be expected to conduct combat operations if hostilities were suddenly to resume?

Today's US operation to seize a Russian-flagged tanker, supported by the UK, reminds us of the deep and enduring security partnership that our two nations have built. That is important and worth defending, but not at the cost of our values and principles. The shadow fleet is one of the primary ways in which Russia funds its war in Ukraine. Legal action to diminish that fleet is welcome, and stands in contrast to US actions in Venezuela, which represent a blatant breach of international law. Does the Secretary of State recognise that distinction,

[James MacCleary]

and is he prepared to guarantee that UK bases will not, in any circumstances, be used to facilitate operations that breach international law, including any attempt to invade or annex Greenland?

John Healey: I think my statement made it clear that I took the decision to allow US forces to base themselves in the UK after we made an assessment of the legal basis for and the purpose of the planned US operation. That was a responsible thing to do. The hon. Gentleman should have absolutely no concerns on that front.

The hon. Gentleman rightly says that the shadow fleet is one of the primary ways in which Putin is funding his illegal invasion of Ukraine. That is why we are stepping up action on the shadow fleet, developing further military options and strengthening co-ordination with allies. In many ways, he is also right to say that the Ukrainians are fighting for the rest of Europe. They are fighting for the same values, and for the same hopes and aspirations to be a country free to determine its own future.

On the circumstances of any deployment, the Prime Minister has been clear—as have I in a number of updates to the House on coalition of the willing military planning—that the decision to deploy, and the military plans that are prepared, will come into action in the circumstances of a peace deal being agreed. That is one of the reasons that I stressed in my statement that we are working to support the securing of that agreement, as well as the long-term peace that we all hope will follow.

The hon. Gentleman urges me to support his argument on the imperative of increasing defence funding to 2.5% and beyond—I support it entirely. He will welcome the fact that this Government have made the difficult decision to switch funding directly out of overseas aid and into defence. We have done so because we recognise this new era of threat that we face—an era of hard power, strong alliances and strong diplomacy.

Finally, we are doing that at least three years before anyone expected us to do so. We have an ambition and a commitment to move beyond that to 3%, and we have made the solemn commitment, alongside all other 31 nations in the NATO alliance, that we will spend 3.5% of GDP on core defence, and a total of 5% on general defence and national security by 2035. That is a sign of the strength and unity of the NATO alliance, and its ability to help make Britain more secure as well as stronger abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I begin by thanking the Secretary of State for his statement, congratulating the brave men and women on the successful operation, and paying tribute to the Prime Minister for his clear leadership in the defence of Ukraine? My question is this: is there anything more we can do to ensure that Vladimir Putin is serious about peace?

John Healey: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. One man stands behind the continuing war in Ukraine and continuing civilian deaths and attacks on domestic infrastructure, and that is Vladimir Putin. One man has

talked of peace, but has yet to demonstrate that he is serious about doing what he says. To answer my right hon. Friend, important steps are keeping up the economic pressure on Putin, which is beginning to tell on his economy, on his oil revenues, and on his people. At the same time, we make clear that we will step up our collective military aid to Ukraine, as we are doing. Finally, we make clear, as this House has always said, that we will stand united for Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement, and specifically on Ukraine may I commend him, the Prime Minister and the Government for their continued efforts? The whole House will be proud of how Britain has led on this from the very beginning. The future of Ukraine, and indeed the security of Europe, is an issue of vital UK national interest—a point that the right hon. Gentleman, and others, have made. I believe there are three prerequisites for a lasting peace in Ukraine: first, a western military presence there; secondly, credible and durable security guarantees; and thirdly, a well-armed and resourced Ukrainian military. In his work with allies in the weeks ahead, will the Secretary of State ensure that any ceasefire or peace agreement does not give Russia a veto in any of those three vital areas?

John Healey: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's echo of my pride in the way that the UK, under his Government and stepped up again under this Government, has led on Ukraine, and his echo of my pride in the way that Britain remains united behind Ukraine. He is right about his three conditions. They are part of ensuring what this House wants to see, which is not just peace but one that is lasting and secure.

The importance of the discussions and agreements, and in particular the comments from Special Envoy Witkoff yesterday about the US's commitment to security guarantees that sit alongside and match European-led guarantees through the coalition of the willing, could not be more important. They will form the basis of the confidence that President Zelensky can have in going into the negotiations. We hope that they will add extra impetus to those negotiations, and in the end it will be a matter for President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people, and the deal that they strike with President Putin. In the meantime, we lend all the support we can to President Trump, who is doing what only President Trump can, which is potentially putting the pressure on Putin, bringing the parties together, and trying to broker the deal that will finally put an end to this terrible war.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the bravery of our service personnel, who will have to consequence-manage the result of such a military action. This ship was part of an expanding global security threat. It was used to fund the war in Ukraine and the nefarious activity that occurs here in the UK, such as the sub-threshold attacks and the payments received by Reform politicians such as Nathan Gill. We must wake up, because these attacks undermine our sovereignty and our way of life. It is asinine for the Opposition to use moments such as this to progress false arguments about the ECHR and rules of engagement for events that we are not at presently. Does the Secretary of State agree it is imperative that the Opposition stand up, show which side they are on and sack the shadow Attorney General?

John Healey: My hon. Friend speaks with great military insight and authority on the challenges of the deployment and the operation, which was conducted in some of the most extreme weather and seas that any military force can face. He is right to point out that this is a bad ship; it was sanctioned by the US in 2024, it has changed its flag five times in the last five years, and it turned off its transporter for almost two weeks on 17 December, so that no one could track its whereabouts. Last month, it was sailing with a false flag, before heading to Russia—it is very telling which country reportedly sent out a warship to try to escort it into a Russian port. No one should be in any doubt about the purpose of the US operation or the legal basis for doing so.

In relation to the question about the support for the deployment and the potential multinational force for Ukraine, I think the most serious equivocation has come from the leader of the Reform party. When he was asked about that today, he simply said, “Forget it.” Let me say to the two representatives from his party who are in the Chamber, the hon. Members for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice)—

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): That is not what he said!

John Healey: He did.

Let me say that that is an insult to Ukrainians. It does not do justice to the sentiment of the British people, who recognise the fight of the Ukrainian people and want to see them prevail, and above all want to see a peace that will last.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement this evening? I hope it is heard widely across the world, and I hope it is heard in Moscow and Washington. I hope it is heard particularly in Kyiv and across Ukraine, because I want the people of that country to understand that this House is totally united in support of their aims. I do not wish to see peace at any price; I wish to see Ukraine prevail. I hope that I speak for the whole House in that respect.

Given that context, I will ask my question. The Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister earlier today about the numbers that had been committed. The Prime Minister said: “Let me be very clear about what was agreed yesterday. Military plans were drawn up some months ago, and I have updated the House in relation to that.” Figures are being briefed to the newspapers, but I do not know whether they are correct. The Secretary of State owes it to the House to brief us on the numbers that he is considering. I may wish them to be higher, and some other Members of the House may wish them to be lower, but I want this House to hear what his plans are.

John Healey: I really welcome the hon. Gentleman’s response, his question, the way in which he speaks for the House, and his urging that this statement—and, indeed, the declaration of intent signed in Paris yesterday—will be recognised around the world and particularly heard in Kyiv; I am sure that President Zelensky will ensure that. I will play my part in doing that shortly as I visit the country, and I will discuss the further work that needs to be done with Ukraine’s military and political leaders.

On the question of detailed numbers, yesterday was a political declaration—a political statement. The detailed military planning that has been going on for months with the nations that are participating in, and contributing to, the coalition of the willing means that we are ready if and when a peace deal is signed. The deployment that will follow that will clearly depend on the circumstances and detail of that peace deal. I have certainly not been briefing the media at all, because any discussion of details of numbers and very detailed activities only makes Putin wiser and undermines the confidence that the Ukrainians can have in the guarantees we are developing, with them and for them.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s commitment to providing security guarantees for Ukraine, which are vital to the defence of Europe and to upholding peace on our continent. However, military resolve alone is not enough; deterrence requires financial guarantees that underpin our security commitments today and in the years ahead. Will the UK join other nations in seeking to establish a multilateral defence, security and resilience bank so that Britain can protect itself, stand firmly with Ukraine, and uphold our responsibility to defend peace in an increasingly dangerous world?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is entirely right that the long-term commitment we and other nations have made to Ukraine is not just about our military support or the deployment of a multinational force into Ukraine; it is about the financial support Ukraine will require for the long term. We are certainly interested in the proposals that she has been championing. Led by the Treasury, this Government have been in discussions with those who are developing such proposals, and we will continue to hold those discussions, because such proposals will potentially play a significant role in contributing the sort of financial investment that we must see in Ukraine for the long term.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The UK remains one of the chief facilitators of the export of Russian gas, with UK-owned or UK-insured vessels having enabled the export of £45 billion-worth of Russian gas since the start of the war. Will the Secretary of State finally agree to ban the provision of all UK maritime services for the transport and insurance of Russian gas exports?

John Healey: Where there are grounds for us as a nation and a Government to take action, particularly where we can do so alongside close allies, we have done so. We have done so against individuals, organisations and vessels, and we have sanctioned 544 ships that are part of the Russian shadow fleet operation. Wherever there are grounds to do more, we will look at that, but I will not get into speculation on hypotheticals about future potential moves that we might make on economic sanctions.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and pay tribute to his leadership on this issue, as well as that of the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister. I also welcome the statement by the coalition of the willing on their commitments to deter further Russian aggression. Do those commitments extend to preventing the further

[Johanna Baxter]

forced deportation and militarisation of Ukrainian children, and if—as has been widely reported—we are 90% of the way towards a peace agreement, does that mean that Putin has agreed to hand back the more than 20,000 Ukrainian children he has stolen from that country?

John Healey: My hon. Friend speaks with great passion and emotion about this issue. I have had the privilege of visiting Ukraine a number of times, and one of the most moving things I have done on any of my visits happened when I was there jointly with the then shadow Foreign Secretary. We met some of those children who had been abducted and kidnapped by the Russians and then rescued and brought back to Ukraine. The impact on them and their families was deeply moving. My hon. Friend is totally right to say that this issue must be at the forefront of our minds, and it is, as I know it is for Ukraine. We must ensure that this practice is prevented and that all Ukrainian children who have been kidnapped by Russia are returned in the very earliest stages of any peace negotiations.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State coming to the House to update us on the commitment made by the Prime Minister last night, but I put on record my serious concerns about the commitment to put British troops on the ground. Over the past 30 years, we have not learned enough lessons on how to pull troops out of locations from some of the deployments that I have been on. We could be setting up UK forces for a long-term sustained conflict or peacekeeping operation over in Russia, where we do not have the resources to sustain it. We need to look at funding, troop deployments and increasing numbers in the armed forces. The outgoing Supreme Allied Commander Europe at NATO believes that a full-scale global conflict will come between one and three years after the cessation of fighting in Ukraine. If that is the case, as many others believe it to be, our troops will be right on the frontline, and we will go from peacekeeping to full-scale war because we have put ourselves in there.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman speaks with military experience, and he is one of the authoritative voices in this House, so I respect what he says. I just say respectfully to him that that is exactly why the Prime Minister has confirmed today that in the circumstances of any decision to deploy UK troops into Ukraine as part of the leadership and commanding of the multinational force for Ukraine, this House will have the chance to debate that and vote on it.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's leadership and the signing of the declaration of intent, but the vicious attacks by Putin on Ukraine over Christmas suggest that peace is still a long way off. Will my right hon. Friend update us on the military aid and support we are providing to Ukraine? Can he reassure us that where there is depletion of stocks, that is being backfilled?

John Healey: Yes, I believe I can. This Government are proud of the fact that this year we have provided the highest ever level of spending on military aid directly to support Ukraine. We are also proud of the fact that we

are capable of and are delivering some of the most important military equipment that Ukraine needs, such as air defence systems and missiles. I am proud also that we work especially closely with the Ukrainians to help them develop new systems, new missiles and new weapons to try to stay one step ahead of the Russians. We will continue to do that.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement today, but I want to press him a little on a vote in Parliament. In his statement—it is pretty much the same wording as the Prime Minister's, as I would expect—he states that a decision on deployment will be brought to the House “for a debate beforehand and for a vote on that deployment”. That is not the same as having a vote before the deployment. There are very good strategic and military reasons for not making public an immediate, surprise or secret deployment beforehand, but this is a public, planned deployment, as set out in the Paris agreement. It could not be more public than that. Will he commit to a vote in this House before the deployment, and not a debate in the House only? He will know that in 2013—he was in the House; I think he entered Parliament in 1997—the then Prime Minister, now Lord Cameron of somewhere in Oxfordshire —[*Interruption.*] Under Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton in beautiful Oxfordshire, there was a vote, which was lost by 13 votes. As a result, the UK did not deploy RAF support of the Americans into Syria. It is right that the Government get the balance right, and I support what they are doing, although we have to see the detail, but will he commit to a vote before deployment, and not just a debate?

John Healey: I have to admit that I am struggling to follow the concern that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed. I quoted in my statement the words spoken by the Prime Minister in House earlier today, but I am happy to repeat them: “I would put that matter to the House for a debate beforehand and for a vote on that deployment.” I think that that is pretty clear, and could not be clearer.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and commend our incredible servicemen and women who have defended our interests here. I am increasingly worried, as are many other Members, about the shadow fleets and the way in which they are operating in the world. Given that there are two international ports in my constituency, I should like the Secretary of State to reassure my constituents by telling me how the United Kingdom will protect the workers, sailors and companies operating out of the Sheerness and Ridham docks at sea in future.

John Healey: My hon. Friend has rightly paid tribute to the professionalism of our UK forces. They played an important supporting role to back up what was essentially an entirely US operation today, but that is a demonstration of their professionalism and of the fact that we work together with the United States as the closest possible defence and security allies. That is something that this Government are committed to continuing to do, and something that our troops and our forces are proud to do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The Secretary of State knows of my support for the Government's persistence over Ukraine, and I welcome his statement. We have spoken endlessly throughout this process. I am, however, deeply worried about deploying British troops into what is basically a first-world-war war, as it were. The fact that more than 2 million are dead or wounded as a result of the conflict puts it on a wholly different scale from anything that we have done in the last 10 or 20 years. Afghanistan and the others are very small in comparison with what we are discussing now, and I have a certain amount of cynicism. I will support the Government's pursuit of this, but I worry desperately that we will get it out of proportion. Are we peacekeepers, or are we going to enforce the peace? These are big questions to be asked, surely, before full support can be given.

There is, however, one thing that I think the Government can do. The Secretary of State talked about Iran and the shadow fleet, the support that Iran has given to Russia and the brutality that it has, and I absolutely agree with all that, so I have a simple question for the Government: will they now proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is at the heart of everything that is bad, deceitful and despicable from Iran? Will the British Government now proscribe the IRGC, full stop?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman has returned to a subject that has been raised and debated in the House before. He was a member of the last Government, and he will know that in advance of any decisions, they are never disclosed or confirmed by Ministers. As for the concerns that he has expressed, I welcome his support for the Government's decision and their participation in and leadership of the coalition of the willing, and for the declaration of intent that was signed yesterday.

Let me make three points. First, there will be no deployment unless there is a peace agreement. Any deployment of a multinational force into Ukraine will take place only after a peace deal. Secondly, the role of that force is primarily one of reassurance, the regeneration of the Ukraine forces, and deterrence of any future Russian aggression. We would do this alongside the negotiation of similar commitments and security guarantees with the United States. Finally, the role of any British forces is to ensure that—as I have argued in the House before—Ukraine is its own best deterrence, and its own best defence, against future Russian aggression. That is why the primary focus of the multinational force for Ukraine will be to regenerate the strength of the Ukrainian forces, and we are ready to do that, alongside them, for the long term.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. For colleagues' information, I should say that I intend to take everybody, but how long that will take depends on the length of the questions; we could be here for quite some time. Can questions and answers please be short?

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and pay tribute to the role of the Royal Navy and RAF personnel in taking out this rogue tanker flying under the flag of a rogue nation. The Bella 1 was taken just a few hundred miles out into the Atlantic, which is too close for comfort for those of us who come from the Western Isles.

I understand that we hosted the USAF maritime patrol aircraft Poseidon out of Stornoway airport and two V-22 Ospreys out of Benbecula. Can the Secretary of State give us more details on the role of Scottish airports in this operation? Does he agree that, yes, we have a frontline in the Donbas, but that the frontline for us against Russia is our backyard: the wild North Atlantic?

John Healey: Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for encouraging short questions and short answers.

My hon. Friend is right on both accounts: part of the British and European frontline is in the Donbas and part of the frontline for this nation, and for NATO, is the North Atlantic. I am proud that Scotland makes such a considerable contribution to the security of this country, and I am proud that part of the basing that was important for the US operation was indeed in Scotland.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I wholeheartedly endorse the resolve across this House to continue to help Ukraine to prevail against this aggression. By extension, I therefore commend the armed forces personnel who enabled and assisted the US in this very slick interdiction of a rogue vessel—a key element of the funding of Russia's war in Ukraine.

There are other challenges in the High North as we speak. Our allies in the United States are apparently very concerned about the vulnerability of Greenland to Russian and Chinese aggression. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with our partners in the Joint Expeditionary Force nations about discussing with the Greenlandic peoples and the Government of Denmark how the JEF may deploy to Greenland, to allay those US fears?

John Healey: I am sure that the US and the US military will welcome the strong support from the Scottish nationalists for their operation, and the congratulations that the hon. Gentleman offers; I shall ensure that the US Secretary of War is aware of that.

On the question of Greenland, I have been in contact with the Danish Defence Minister. The Prime Minister was very clear in the joint declaration that he signed yesterday in Paris that Greenland is part of Denmark. Its sovereignty is not at stake, and it is defended by being part of NATO. Its security is guaranteed by all 32 member states, and any future for Greenland is a matter for the Greenlanders and the citizens of Denmark.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to increase defence spending to the highest level since the cold war, and the Teesside defence and innovation cluster stands ready to support the national interest. Will the Defence Secretary do everything possible to ensure that British steel is used across the defence industrial supply chain, so that national security is also economic security for Britain?

John Healey: I welcome my hon. Friend's observation that national security is founded on economic security. Economic security is dependent on strong national security; as an MP from the proud steelmaking town of Rotherham, I am very conscious of the commitment that this Government have made and of the imperative

[John Healey]

to ensure that as much as possible of what we procure through defence and more widely within Government, uses, whenever we can, British-produced steel, which is among the finest in the world.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary refused to say when the defence investment plan will be published, and there is a tension between the statement about the immediacy of the growing threats and the lack of urgency on funding as other areas of Government are prioritised. Does he recognise that other nations are moving now on funding? Why are the Government so complacent on funding that they are prioritising other Departments over moving now on defence?

John Healey: I certainly do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation. We have made a commitment as a new Government to put an extra £5 billion into defence. We have made the commitment to 2.5% of GDP—three years before his own unfunded commitment at the election—and we will raise that further.

As for the work on the defence investment plan, we are dealing with a programme, which we inherited from his own Government, that was overcommitted, underfunded and unsuited to the threats we now face. We are working flat out to complete that defence investment plan, and I will publish it and report its details to the House as soon as I can.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): I welcome this statement from the Defence Secretary and I also welcome the comments from across the House about how the Prime Minister has been conducting himself in leading the coalition of the willing. At this time, we need consensus across British politics on how we support Ukraine. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that no British politician should ever be taking bribes from Russians, or advising Russian nationals on how to avoid sanctions in relation to money that should be used to support Ukrainian people?

John Healey: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The actions she speaks of bring discredit on that party—the party of Putin—and bring discredit on this country. I also welcome her comments on the importance of cross-party support and support throughout the United Kingdom for the actions we are taking to support Ukraine.

Richard Tice: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We congratulate all those involved in taking and boarding the rogue ship in the Atlantic. I also congratulate the Prime Minister and the Government on securing from the US the strongest security guarantees and the strongest commitments. That is clearly good news.

On the leadership of the coalition of the willing, many will be questioning why 37 of the 39 countries have not committed to put boots on the ground. Can I just gently correct the Secretary of State? What my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) said about putting boots and kit into Ukraine was that, to ensure we can do that on a long-term and durable basis, the Government need to increase their defence spending earlier and faster than currently planned.

John Healey: I am sure everyone in the House would like to hear from the Reform leader himself. If he would like to participate in a sitting in the House of Commons Chamber rather than in press conferences, let us hear from the leader himself.

Beyond that, I welcome the fact that the hon. Member is here, and I welcome his support for the actions that the Government are taking. He is completely right to point to the importance of the US statements in public. Special Envoy Witkoff has said that the security protocols being discussed, developed and agreed with the US, us and Ukraine are as strong as anyone has ever seen.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I thank him and the Prime Minister for their leadership on this issue. He rightly referred in his statement to the actions of the Finns last week in intercepting a rogue ship that was cutting, or suspected of cutting, cables. He also mentioned the operation of the Yantar, which has been spying on our cables. Given the activity of the Russians in the high north, does he agree with me that the deal with BAE Systems and Norway is important, not just because of the frigates that will be built, but because it is a sign of the co-operation between our two countries, and that our co-operation with NATO allies extends across the high north—with the exclusion, of course, of Russia?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I know she is very proud of her constituents who are part of the workforce that will build those frigates. This is not just the biggest ever warship export deal; it will set a new standard of countries, Norway and the UK, who are prepared to be able to combine and integrate their forces. By doing so, we will be in a stronger position to help deter Russian aggression and reinforce the security of the high north in future years.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary said that one of the functions of the MFU would be to deter aggression, but we only have a deterrent if we have the willingness to engage kinetically backing it up. If this matter comes back to the House for a vote, will he be clear on the rules of engagement for the deployment of our troops? Will the status of forces agreement with Ukraine be explicit? Does he envisage the triggering of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to sustain the sorts of numbers that have been floated in the press today?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right. The rules of engagement will be a critical part of the security guarantees, and the sorts of points he raises today will, I am certain, be at the heart of any debate if we reach the point at which we have a peace deal and we are making a decision to deploy a multinational force.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): We do not want an endless war in Ukraine. The people of Ukraine, and indeed the people here in the UK, need to see steps towards peace in the world, not more chaos, division and war. Will the Defence Secretary confirm whether, if the United States were to seek to seize ships taking, for example, oil to Cuba, where the US has unilateral sanctions in place, this Government would aid it?

John Healey: I think my hon. Friend would not expect me to be able to, or to be prepared to, answer hypothetical questions. What I can say to her is that if the US, as our closest defence and security ally, asks for UK assistance, we will always be willing to respond. We will ensure that any support we do offer, whether it is support or a combined operation, will have a strong legal basis, as indeed this one today, which has been mounted so effectively and—early indications—successfully, has had.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Secretary of State said in relation to Ukraine:

“we will continue to work with the United States towards security guarantees”.

I regret that President Trump has continued to undermine NATO this afternoon, writing:

“I doubt NATO would be there for us if we really needed them.”

That flies in the face of the experience post-9/11, when Brits and Danes fought alongside Americans in Afghanistan. How would the announcements from Paris yesterday differ if there was no prospect of a US backstop?

John Healey: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, things have moved beyond that point. Jared Kushner yesterday confirmed the readiness of the US to provide a backstop, and special envoy Witkoff said that the President “strongly stands” behind the security protocols that are being agreed. So I would first say to the hon. Gentleman: catch up. Secondly, he is right, of course, that the only time that article 5 has been triggered was when NATO responded to the US’s request following 9/11. We were proud to be a part of that and we are now proud to be a leading part of a 32-nation-strong NATO.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome the decisive leadership of the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister in supporting Ukraine. When the Foreign Affairs Committee met the Ukrainian Government, it highlighted the necessity of a strong sanctions regime that is joined up internationally. The actions taken today show just that: a sanctions regime with teeth that is joined up to stop the loopholes Putin uses to keep funding his illegal war, so I welcome the action taken today.

Will the Secretary of State assure the House that the Government will continue to increase the stranglehold of sanctions and action to freeze and seize the assets? What will be done with those assets to enable them to be used to rebuild Ukraine—both now and in the future, when peace comes?

John Healey: I can give my hon. Friend the reassurance that we will do everything we can, alongside other allies, to step up the economic pressure on Russia; that we will step up our activity and pressure and action in relation to the shadow fleet; and that, at the same time, we will step up, with allies, the military aid that we provide to Ukraine, so that Ukrainians can be in no doubt that we as a country, alongside others, will stand with them for as long as it takes, both in the fight and in the peace.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): In 1995, thousands of innocent men and boys were taken from a UN protectorate in Srebrenica and murdered. The main reason that that happened was because UN troops were unable to fire upon the Bosnian Serbs as they came along. May I therefore push the Secretary of

State further on the rules of engagement? The rules must not say, “Do not fire until fired upon”, or there will be no deterrent. I know this has to be worked out, so I ask him to take that into serious consideration when the rules of engagement are being put together.

John Healey: We will indeed. To reinforce the right hon. Gentleman’s point, the purpose of the proposed and planned multinational force is to deter Russia, and the rules of engagement will be entirely consistent with supporting that purpose.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): We are clearly facing the most dangerous times in almost a century in this country and across our continent. Since 1945, our safety and security have been guaranteed by being part of the most powerful military alliance in the history of humankind and sacrosanct borders in Europe. Times are clearly changing. Can the Defence Secretary assure me and this House that we will fulfil the aims of the strategic defence review in full, and fully fund it to protect both ourselves and our continent?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right that times are changing. He is also right that NATO, which has been outstanding in protecting us and preserving the peace for more than seven decades, is critical to that. NATO is not just the most successful defensive military alliance in history; as an alliance, it is stronger now, larger now and more united now. We are proud to play a leading role within it.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Given that the Americans were clearly perfectly capable of seizing the ship by themselves, I wonder why they were so keen to involve the UK. In a week in which Trump rode roughshod over international law on Monday and threatened a NATO ally on Tuesday, why is it on Wednesday that the UK was so keen to hang on Trump’s military coat-tails when it did not have the courage to call out and condemn his breaking of international law earlier in the week? If the UK is so very committed to enforcing sanctions, given the concerns in the report published last year by the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation about the extremely high likelihood of UK financial services companies being complicit in supporting breaches of sanctions, can the Secretary of State assure the House, hand on heart, that the UK has done everything in its power to prevent the complicity of the UK financial services sector?

John Healey: If there is sound evidence of breaches of sanctions, we will look at that and we will act. In response to the hon. Lady’s first question, quite simply, the US asked for our UK military support because it wanted and needed our UK military support to conduct this operation. The legal basis for us doing so was sound and the purpose for this action and operation was strong. We were proud to support that action, which is part of bearing down on the sanctions-busting shadow fleet operations.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for their leadership on defending Ukraine not just in wartime but in peacetime, which will really reassure the many Ukrainian families who have sought refuge in Milton

[Emily Darlington]

Keynes and across the UK. I would like to ask the Secretary of State's advice. It is clear that Russia is challenging not just Ukraine, but the UK. It is carrying out incursions into our airspace and our waters, using cyber-attacks to undermine us and using social media to undermine our democracy. What advice would the Secretary of State give the British public on creating vigilance against the Russian attacks we are seeing increasing, over and over, on the UK?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right; this rising Russian aggression is not just directed at the UK. At the same time as fighting a war in Ukraine, Putin is testing the boundaries of other NATO nations like the UK. The simple response to say to people is that we are in a new era of threat. This demands a new era for defence and it demands a stronger NATO, and that is exactly what we are working to deliver.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I welcome the action today, and I commend our armed forces on their action. Much of the discussion has focused on troops in the event of peace. I would like to take us one step further. The right hon. Gentleman said that yesterday the UK agreed that we will participate in US-led monitoring and verification of any ceasefire. Can he please clarify whether that means physical monitoring or remote intelligence? What if the terms of a ceasefire are unacceptable to Ukraine and to the UK? The agreement signed yesterday says that we “will” do so, but does it require us to accept, police and monitor any ceasefire, or would we be able to withdraw if the terms were not acceptable to either us or to our ally, Ukraine?

John Healey: I understand why the hon. Lady, who is very expert in these matters, asks those questions. She is getting rather ahead of the stage of the peace negotiations, and of the detail and technicalities of any potential ceasefire monitoring. The commitment was a political commitment that we would play a role. It is likely to be led by the US in the context of a peace deal. The important aspect is that what the Prime Minister was part of agreeing, signing and announcing yesterday significantly advances the work towards securing and putting in place security guarantees. By doing so, it also significantly advances the work towards peace.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The people of Rochdale are extremely proud of our long-standing Ukrainian community, which is made up of both those who fled Soviet terror in the 20th century and those who sought refuge from Putin's crimes in the 21st century. Does the Secretary of State agree that what Putin fears most is western unity, and cross-party consensus and unity in Houses like this one in democracies across the west? Does the Secretary of State agree, therefore, that if Reform MPs vote against deployment of our brave British troops in Ukraine, it would be the biggest gift to Putin since Nathan Gill took that bribe from the Russians?

John Healey: I do agree. My hon. Friend speaks warmly and rightly of the strong pride that Rochdale has in its Ukrainian community. He is right to point out that Putin's purpose is to divide and weaken NATO, and to set nations against each other and people within nations against each other. We in this House should all determine that we will not let that happen.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his update. He is a serious and experienced politician, and I have no doubt that he always acts in the national interest. What concerns me is the gap between the coherence of NATO and its approach—the approach that he has set out that we will take if a peace agreement can be found in Ukraine—and the determination that we are seen to have to meet the new level of threat from Russia and elsewhere in the world with respect to our commitment on defence spending. I respect that he asserts that the Government are committed to 3% between 2029 and 2034, but with the greatest respect, there is a great difference in the timeframe between the start and end of that five-year window. In previous generations this country has had to make sacrifices to defend itself. I think that he needs to think about whether we should be making that case now, so that we can be ready for what may be ahead of us.

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman was a distinguished Government and Treasury Minister in his time. He will recognise that the commitment we have made and the plan we have now mark the biggest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. He will also recognise that we are building a new deal for European security. It is an important part of NATO, but it goes beyond NATO, and we will continue to do that.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The unity of the House in opposing those states who would do us harm is a key foundation of our strong national security framework. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that when a senior leader in Reform accepts Russian bribes and when the shadow Attorney General is actively working to undermine a key policy in support of Ukraine, that damages public perception of the unity of purpose of the House and, in doing so, impacts our national security?

John Healey: It does damage the unity of this House—it damages the unity of purpose. It also damages the status of Britain when we have a party leader who says that the politician and leader he most admires is Vladimir Putin.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Many of our constituents will be anxious about UK involvement in US operations given Trump's vocal drive for American imperialism. Of course, Plaid Cymru is unequivocal that any action taken by the UK military must respect international law; that includes today's events and all others. With oil further politicised following the US seizure of the *Bella 1*, with UK support, what steps will be taken to secure critical UK oil and port infrastructure at key sites such as Milford Haven and Holyhead given recent global developments in energy and shipping?

John Healey: If the right hon. Lady considers and reflects on the strategic defence review that we published in June, she will see that it set out a strong case not just for the rising threats but for action to step up defence of the homeland. That strategic defence review sets out the vision that we will pursue and the action that we will take over the next 10 years.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I welcome the Government's statement this evening. I am proud that Suffolk is home to one of the largest air

bases in the country. British military families have been in contact with me this afternoon as they are alarmed at the deterioration in the security situation. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give to them?

John Healey: I say to my hon. Friend's constituents and those who are serving in the military that that growing anxiety is quite widely shared. It underlines the recognition of the new threats that we face, and it argues for exactly the sort of commitments to defence funding, for the strategy that the Government have set out, and for the actions and decisions that we are now taking. I hope that his constituents will both support the Prime Minister's declaration of intent in Paris yesterday—because of the importance of Ukraine to our long-term security—and support and recognise the professionalism of the US operation on the *Bella 1* today.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government accept that if you will the ends, you must will the means? The end of the cold war has been mentioned a number of times. It is a fact that at the end of the cold war, we were spending 4.3% of GDP on defence—that was 3.5% under the old way of calculating it—and in the early years of the cold war we were spending in excess of 7%. Can the Secretary of State at least indicate to the House: what is the earliest year in which a Labour Government anticipate spending 3% of GDP on defence?

John Healey: Of course, at the end of the last Labour Government, we were spending 2.5% on defence: a level that the 14 successive Conservative years came nowhere near matching. We have a job to make up for that lost time and to make up for the hollowed-out forces that the previous Government left. The commitment that the Government have made alongside other NATO allies—to see a path to ensure that by 2035 we spend a full 5% of GDP on our security and core defence—is our guarantee for strong defence and deterrence in the future.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): For five years, against Russian aggression, Ukraine has been bravely defending not only its own border but the eastern flank of Europe. That means that security guarantees for Ukraine are also security guarantees for all of Europe. Given that, does my right hon. Friend share my concern at the leader of Reform today suggesting that he would vote against those security guarantees?

John Healey: I do indeed. My hon. Friend is right: a secure Ukraine is at the heart of a secure Europe and at the heart of a secure UK. That will be a consideration for all Members of this House if we get to the stage when we have a peace deal and a decision to deploy and command the multinational force in Ukraine.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): President Trump is supposed to be working on a peace deal for Ukraine, but he has been so much more focused on invading Venezuela and making threats against Greenland. What assurance can the Secretary of State give to the House on the US's continued commitment to getting a deal in Ukraine? What contingencies are in place to revisit the EU-led proposals should they be necessary?

John Healey: I have no doubt, and I am surprised that the hon. Lady has any doubt, about the determination of President Trump to help secure that peace deal in Ukraine. In fact, he has a role that only he can play in making that potentially possible. It is our job to lend every support that we can both to the Ukrainians and to the US in securing that peace deal.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Given that what is proposed today is a peacekeeping force, does the Secretary of State wonder, as I do, when the leader of Reform will cease his adulation of Putin, ensure that there are no further traitors among his ranks, support the peace process in Ukraine and stand up for British interests?

John Healey: Just to be clear to my hon. Friend, the primary purpose of the multinational force for Ukraine is not peacekeeping; it is there to reassure Ukraine and help it to regenerate and rebuild the strength of its military for itself. In the end, Ukrainian forces are their own country's best deterrence and defence against potential future Russian aggression.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Given Russia's stated refusal to accept any deployment of NATO troops on Ukrainian soil, is there a danger that the agreement will make Russia less likely to accept a settlement and that it will instead step up its military campaign? If that is the case, will the Secretary of State say whether there was any agreement among the western allies about how we can massively increase the pressure on Russia—perhaps through further sanctions and their strong enforcement, as we have seen in the last 24 hours?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to comment on hypothetical what ifs. What I can say is that security guarantees that are being agreed at this point are an essential element of any potentially successful peace negotiations. If they reach agreement, those negotiations will test what, at the moment, Putin says is his approach to Ukraine and its future.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and leadership. As the Member for Portsmouth North, the home of the Royal Navy, I pay tribute to all our armed forces. Does the Secretary of State agree that continued strong UK leadership from our Prime Minister and commitment and consensus across the whole of this House with our allies is vital to enforcing sanctions on Russia and to strengthening security and achieving peace in Ukraine, and in doing so, ensuring security in my port city and in Britain too?

John Healey: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's support for the statement and the wise words that she has set out for the House. She speaks with great authority and great strength for her home city, and I think the House will have welcomed her words.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I start by recognising the US service personnel from my constituency, who played a part in the co-ordination of the interdiction operation to seize the *MV Bella 1* via the joint intelligence analytics centre, Europe at RAF Molesworth, which is part of the US-European command.

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

I am slightly worried that this might be a moot point, but turning to the coalition of the willing, the presence of boots on the ground in Ukraine was a red line for Putin, and potentially it might be a stick that he beats us with in order to push back on any peace deal. If we workshop that idea, with a force of 7,500, as is being reported in the press, we clearly cannot realistically maintain a deterrence force posture, which underlines the paucity of our anti-access and area-denial options. That would also explain the commitment to military hubs, and I would appreciate clarification as to what exactly they are. With Ajax off games for the foreseeable—maybe for years—and no viable recce-strike capability, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the urgency to bring forward the next iteration of Project Asgard from quarter 2 to quarter 1, given its urgent requirement as a force multiplier on the eastern flank defensive line?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to point to the importance of Project Asgard. It is breaking new ground. It is demonstrating new technologies and new military techniques. It is Britain at the forefront of creative military innovation and technology, and we are determined to accelerate it. On the wider question of the peace negotiations and red lines, the nature of any negotiations is always that declared initial positions are tested. If a successful process of peace negotiations is secured, we want to be ready, and we are ensuring that we are ready, to play a role in securing that peace for the long term through the multinational force for Ukraine.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that, despite Reform UK banning the showing of support for Ukraine in my county of Northamptonshire, my constituents and those across the whole of the UK should be proud of the extraordinary skill of our British men and women who are involved in this operation?

John Healey: I share my hon. Friend's dismay at the decision of his Reform-led council. I am proud that our Ministry of Defence building flies the Ukrainian flag.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The Secretary of State has explained that he does not want to be drawn on the questions from the shadow Secretary of State for Defence and others on troop numbers or the exact nature of the force that is being conceptualised and put together, but it is more than reasonable for Members of this House to want to ensure that the correct amounts of financial resources are being put in, so has the decision made yesterday changed his assumptions and plans regarding investment, procurement and spending over the next year?

John Healey: The political declaration that the Prime Minister signed with President Zelensky and President Macron will sit alongside, and is developed from, the detailed work on the military planning for the coalition of the willing and the deployment of the multinational force for Ukraine, and it is an important part of the contribution that the UK will make in the future to the security of the UK and the security of Europe.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Unlike the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), I am very concerned that the leader of Reform UK has gone on television today to reject sending British troops to Ukraine to help secure a sustainable peace—

Richard Tice: That is not what he said.

Alex Ballinger: That is exactly what he said. Does the Secretary of State agree that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) should be ashamed, because we owe so much to the Ukrainian people who have fought so hard to secure democracy in Europe, and that this shows for real how much closer the leader of Reform is to Putin's priorities than to the priorities of the UK?

Richard Tice: You are inadvertently misleading the House—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We do not need chuntering from the Back Benches, and I can determine whether the House has or has not been misled.

John Healey: I welcome my hon. Friend's observations. I think this is a test for the leader of Reform: are the interests that he declares closer to those of President Putin or closer to those of the British people?

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It is really reaffirming to see the whole House express its unwavering support for Ukraine, and we hope our Ukrainian friends take heart from it. We have discussed this evening the heartbreaking situation of over 20,000 Ukrainian children abducted by Russia. Is it the Government's position that, for this act alone, President Putin should be hauled in front of the International Criminal Court?

John Healey: Our focus at this point is to ensure that we give maximum support and step that up, alongside allies, to keep Ukraine in the fight, and that if there is a peace deal we are ready from day one to play our part in helping to lead efforts to secure that peace for the long term. That peace must involve the full return of all those abducted children. It must also involve the pursuit of justice.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the generosity of his answers at this late hour. I express my sincere gratitude to the British forces men and women who have helped seize this tanker—part of the Russian shadow fleet being used to fuel Putin's illegal war in Ukraine. I also thank this Labour Government for their record investment in our defence. Concerning the Russian shadow fleet specifically, can my right hon. Friend assure me that no stone will be left unturned in protecting our critical undersea infrastructure, which is at regular threat from the Russian shadow fleet? If it were terminally interrupted, that would cause absolute chaos here in the UK.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is gently chiding me for overlong answers, and I take that point. He is entirely right about how our way of life, the operation of our economy and the way we live are dependent on undersea infrastructure. That is why we are stepping up our vigilance, surveillance and defence of that.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): The Secretary of State will know that the NATO Secretary-General said in September that we must “prevent spreading” NATO forces “too thinly”. Could he provide some reassurance to the House on the implications of this potential deployment for the Joint Expeditionary Force and our leadership of that in Estonia?

John Healey: I hope the reassurance that the hon. Gentleman asks for can be provided by the fact that SACEUR has been at the heart of the discussions and developments, close to the military planning for the deployment of the multinational force for Ukraine, and an important figure in the discussions of security guarantees.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for the leadership they have shown both at home and internationally on this issue. I pay tribute to 3 Rifles from Edinburgh South West, which deployed to Finland late last year and trained right up to the border with Russia with their brothers and sisters from the Finnish army. Westminster might feel cold in some places today; it was -28°C when they were in Finland—absolutely incredible. I do not doubt, though, that the same troops are thinking about what this statement today means for them. I know from past deployments that their families will also be thinking about what it means for them. Will the Secretary of State commit to any plan coming to this House for a vote also including consideration of support for families, and that if troops are deployed from Scotland, that will include input from Forces Children Scotland?

John Healey: We are going out of our way as a Government to ensure that our British forces and their families can feel that we are a Government on their side and that we take seriously and want to hear their voices. It is one of the reasons that we have already legislated for a new Armed Forces Commissioner, which will be the independent challenge to Government and Ministers and the independent voice for those forces and their families.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We are all encouraged by him and what he has said, and encouraged by his and this Government’s leadership. That gives us heart, so I thank him for that.

Russian fighter planes are contravening fellow NATO countries’ skies, cables under the sea are being interfered with and damaged by Russian forces, and there has been interference with Royal Navy ships, but on the sea and in the air, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will not be messed with. It is time that Russia got a bloody nose, and today it got just that—not before time. This is a fraught international matter, and maritime laws are not my forte. However, something I am certain of is that Russia is no ally of ours. Its words never, ever meet its actions, and the sanctions need to be strengthened. Will the Secretary of State outline what discussions have taken place with the US and NATO on a way forward that sends a clear message to Russia that the time of pushing boundaries is over, and that today is a clear expression that we will stand firm against aggression within the confines of international law?

John Healey: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s congratulations on the operation. I hope that he will see that this is part of the UK working to support our closest defence ally and the US taking action to ensure that sanctions regimes that are designed to bear down on countries like Iran and Russia for illegal shipping activity will be stepped up and enforced, which will help to put economic pressure on those nations to change their ways.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I, too, commend the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister for their calm and determined resolve in defence of Ukraine. Beyond that, Ukraine has no truer friend than this country. Putin knows that too, which is why he would never tolerate a democracy such as ours, nor have a debate and questioning such as we have had here this evening. Because of that, he will do everything to undermine this country. What can not only my right hon. Friend’s Department, but the Government as a whole, do to ensure that we as a country have the resilience to take whatever Russia may throw at us?

John Healey: If my hon. Friend refers back to the strategic defence review that we published in June last year, he will see the identification and explanation of the sort of increasing threats and risks that we face, as well as the recommendations that we have accepted and will implement in full, including for how we deal with the need for greater resilience and the need for stronger homeland defence.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the strong diplomatic and military leadership that he set out in his statement, it is, wherever possible, the unity of this House, and indeed unity in the country at large, that really counts in sending a clear and strong message to our friends and foe alike that this country believes in the international rules-based system, international law, standing up to bullies and valuing our alliances?

John Healey: I do indeed, and my hon. Friend is right. This new era of threat also demands hard power, strong alliances and sure diplomacy, but all that is based on a domestic political unity of values and unity of intent. I am proud of the way that the UK sets the standard for that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Mark Sewards for the final question.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome this evening’s statement. I say, primarily to those outside this Chamber, that any deployment of British forces in Ukraine is not going to be a tripwire to a wider conflict. If we do not deploy those forces, put that deterrent in place and back Ukraine—if we allow Putin to take Ukraine either now or at some point in the future—there will be devastating consequences for British interests and global stability.

With British interests in mind, although I fully appreciate the answer the Defence Secretary gave on troop numbers—I understand his reasoning for not wanting to share those—can he reassure the House that this country has the soldiers, the resources and the equipment to ensure that we can provide an effective deterrent in Ukraine without compromising and undermining the other commitments we have made to allies around the world?

John Healey: I can indeed. In recent months, I have been making sure that Defence has been putting in the investment to ensure that, at the point of peace, we are ready to move and to deploy and, above all, with the safety of our forces in mind, that they are properly equipped and protected to do the job.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I left home in Newcastle-under-Lyme on Monday to travel down to Parliament, the weather was already very bad after heavy snow on Sunday night. However, for the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the situation at home has got worse, thanks to both the weather and the complete and utter failure of Staffordshire county council to grit our roads and keep those who live, learn and work in Newcastle-under-Lyme safe.

I have had reports of empty grit bins on Sterndale Drive in Westbury Park and on Plymouth Grove, of our town centre being an ice rink, of the A34 from Newcastle to Talke not being fit for purpose and of the roads through Chesterton, Audley and Madeley being cut off, just like roads in Wolstanton. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise me of the best way to raise this issue in the House? *[Interruption.]* This is serious. How can I get Staffordshire county council and its leadership to do what my constituents pay for and want: to do their job and grit our roads, and to do so now?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I do not doubt that the matter is indeed serious, but it is not a point of order or a matter for the Chair, whose powers do not extend to Staffordshire county council. The hon. Member has nonetheless got his very important matter on the record.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC ORDER

That the draft Public Order Act 2023 (Interference With Use or Operation of Key National Infrastructure) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 27 November 2025, be approved.—(*Sir Nicholas Dakin.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 14 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CORPORATION TAX

That the Corporation Tax Act 2010 (Part 8C) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 (SI, 2025, No. 1253), dated 1 December 2025, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 December 2025, be approved.—(*Sir Nicholas Dakin.*)

Question agreed to.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Ordered,

That Bobby Dean be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in place of Marie Goldman in pursuance of section 1(2)(d) of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978.—(*Sir Nicholas Dakin.*)

PETITION

Elections to West Sussex County Council

9.1 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): This petition is accompanied by an online petition. It calls for elections to West Sussex county council to go ahead this year. Were those elections not to go ahead, sitting councillors would serve for six years rather than the usual four, which makes a mockery of our democracy.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reject any request from West Sussex County Council to delay its election, enabling the election to go ahead as planned in May 2026.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of West Sussex,

Declares that if the Government were to agree to a request from West Sussex County Council to delay its election due this May, this would result in sitting councillors serving for up to six years, rather than the usual four, resulting in a democratic deficit.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reject any request from West Sussex County Council to delay its election, enabling the election to go ahead as planned in May 2026.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003155]

Bletchley Railway Station: Eastern Entrance

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Sir Nicholas Dakin.)

9.2 pm

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Good things come to those who wait, Madam Deputy Speaker. Despite the late hour, I am grateful for the opportunity to champion an issue of strategic importance to Bletchley—namely, the case for a new eastern entrance to our railway station to create a direct and welcoming connection to our town centre, for which local people have waited far too long.

This is about more than bricks and mortar. We need to strengthen our transport infrastructure and give Bletchley a modern shop window through which we can welcome visitors, businesses, investors and, ultimately, opportunities from across the UK and beyond. I thank the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and Lord Hendy—the Rail Minister in the other place, whom I met this afternoon—for their constructive engagement on this matter over the past six months. The Minister and his officials have taken the time to listen to us carefully, examine the evidence and understand the significance of this project, not just for Bletchley, but for Milton Keynes more widely. I know that the Department shares the belief that transport investment must go hand in hand with the revitalisation of our communities.

Bletchley is an incredibly proud town. From the wartime codebreakers at Bletchley Park to its foundational role in building the new town—now the modern city—of Milton Keynes, it has played an extraordinary and pivotal part in our national story. Yet while Milton Keynes has become one of the UK's most dynamic economies, Bletchley has not always shared fully in that success. As the city has expanded northwards, the town to its south, which helped to build it, has too often been left behind. That is not because of a lack of ambition or resilience. Walk through any Bletchley neighbourhood—be it the Lakes estate, Newton Leys, Eaton Leys, Fenny Stratford or the Links estate—and you will find that our town is home to strong and hard-working communities.

For too long, however, too many high quality and skilled jobs have clustered elsewhere. That is not to diminish the importance of Bletchley's core economic sectors, from logistics to retail and manufacturing, which employ many local residents and play a vital role in keeping our town and city running; rather, it is to recognise that they represent only part of Bletchley's potential. In technology, artificial intelligence and space-related industries, Bletchley has the potential to align directly with this Government's industrial strategy and growth mission. Indeed, some have already seen that potential—Starship Technologies, Envisics, Carnot Engines and Pulsar Fusion are just four of the high-growth innovative firms that call Bletchley home.

I want our town to be home to much more than that, which is why I launched our Bletchley investment taskforce last April to begin the process of attracting new investment, new businesses, and new jobs and apprenticeships from which local people can benefit. Yet to unlock that potential in full, we must start with how people arrive in our town. The current station at Bletchley literally turns

its back on the town's centre. Passengers exit to the west, into a car park, with no sightline to Queensway or the town centre. Reaching the town centre requires them to navigate an indirect, unwelcoming route, through an underpass, across a roundabout—we are in Milton Keynes—and along narrow walkways. It is cumbersome, inaccessible for many, particularly those with disabilities, and simply unfit for a growing transportation hub of national significance.

What should be a gateway instead acts as a barrier. That is why an eastern entrance is so important. This is not just a cosmetic change; it is a practical shift rooted in connectivity, regeneration and identity. A new eastern entrance facing the town would deliver, I believe, three clear benefits. First, it would reconnect the station with the town centre, linking directly to the high street and our bus station, increasing footfall and supporting local businesses. It would make the town work better for residents and commuters alike by shortening walking distances, improving accessibility and encouraging greater use of public transport.

Secondly, it would enable Bletchley to unlock early stage investment in our town centre, particularly in the Brunel Centre, but also in the old fire station site and other pieces of residential and industrial land located near the station, that otherwise may stall, as well as other forms of private and public investment that are key to Bletchley's future. Thirdly, it would create the proper gateway that Bletchley deserves: a modern, welcoming arrival point, especially for those visiting Bletchley Park and the National Museum of Computing, which is just a few moments away and acknowledges Bletchley's pride in its past, while reflecting its renewed ambition for the future.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I travel through Bletchley on my way to London, and have done so while commuting for many years. It has been amazing to see the station grow with the arrival of East West Rail and the high line. Does my hon. Friend agree that a fourth benefit of the proposal is that it sends a message that the Government are serious about investing in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, which is something the Chancellor has championed?

Callum Anderson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor is a critical part of the Government's growth mission, and key to the UK's long-term economic competitiveness. I know he will agree that if we are to realise the full potential of that growth corridor, we have genuinely to invest and promote the core and centre that is the engine of the Oxford-Cambridge corridor. That is not just Bletchley and Milton Keynes, but Northampton too.

The case for the eastern entrance is backed by evidence, and I place on record my thanks to the East West Rail team who have completed an incredibly thorough and professional strategic outline business case. It demonstrates high value for money, improved passenger experience, unlocked development potential and support for wider place-based investment, which I referred to a few moments ago.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making a fantastic speech and a good case for the eastern entrance.

[Emily Darlington]

It is a case that we have made for many years and that was promised by the previous Government—the previous MP even claimed that £6 million was set aside—yet it is another broken promise by a Conservative MP and a Conservative Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives have consistently let down Bletchley and have not seen the potential of the place and the people, which he demonstrates in his work?

Callum Anderson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that she served for many years with distinction as a councillor and an elected representative for Bletchley on Milton Keynes city council, and she also served as deputy leader of the city council. She and I, and our hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis), have been uncovering broken promise after broken promise in every corner of our city. This is just one example; the three of us have also fought for funding for a new hospital in Milton Keynes, again demonstrating the neglect of our city by the last Conservative Government and our predecessors.

The business case prepared by East West Rail confirms that it would cut the distance for visitors and commuters between the station and the high street by more than 600 metres, making a meaningful difference for thousands of daily passengers and easing pressure on existing station infrastructure. The time to act is now. Passenger numbers are set to rise incredibly sharply with the arrival of East West Rail, which will place Bletchley and Milton Keynes at the intersection of the Oxford-Cambridge line and the west coast main line. If we add the proposed and very exciting Universal Studios theme park development, the future demand is clear.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Callum Anderson: I will reluctantly give way.

Adam Jogee: I was about to be nice to my hon. Friend! I congratulate him on an excellent speech and on his dogged tenacity on behalf of his constituents in Buckingham and Bletchley. I saw that part of the world when he bought me a pint at his local in the summer, and I hope that he will extend an invitation to you before too long, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As my hon. Friend knows, the west coast main line goes through his constituency, as it does through mine. To unlock in my area the potential to which he has referred, a direct line between Stoke-on-Trent railway station and Manchester airport would do much for jobs, opportunities and investment. Does he support my calls for such a connection?

Callum Anderson: My hon. Friend is an extremely diligent and dogged campaigner both inside and outside Parliament, and he is absolutely right. Towns such as Newcastle-under-Lyme and Bletchley benefit from being located near to significant cities such as Stoke-on-Trent and Milton Keynes. It is also really important that they are connected to us, so that we can unlock the full economic opportunities and connections to which he refers.

A new eastern entrance at Bletchley station is also critical to unlocking the wider economic regeneration ambitions for Bletchley and Milton Keynes more broadly. Through the Bletchley and Fenny Stratford town deal, which was secured by our Labour-run Milton Keynes city council with the support of local councillors—including my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), who was serving at the time—real progress is already under way. From public realm improvements and business support to upgrades to routes on Saxon Street, we are already transforming the area and building the momentum we need. Put simply, the eastern entrance is the missing piece that will unlock a revitalised town centre, new homes, better roads and improved public spaces.

I have already thanked the team at East West Rail, but I want to place on record my thanks to the city council, to the whole town deal board, and to serving and former councillors, as well as council officers, for all the work that they have done over the past few years to help us to build a credible, ambitious plan, which now has comprehensive and unanimous local backing.

The case is clear. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and if we seize it, Bletchley will become a true gateway—not just for the town itself, but for the whole city of Milton Keynes. We do not want to let this opportunity for growth pass us by yet again. I urge the Minister to work with me, our community, and our local political and civic leaders to secure the public investment needed to take this project forward. I would be most grateful for his help in brokering discussions with those across Government and the relevant agencies and boards who will take the final financial decisions, so that we can move this project to its next stage together. A modest commitment now will deliver benefits for decades.

Bletchley is ready, our people are ready, and our plans are ready and in place. We just need Government to partner with us and help to build an eastern entrance that will ensure our railway station faces the town, just as its people face the future with confidence.

9.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on securing this debate, providing us all with the opportunity to discuss the case for an eastern entrance at Bletchley station as part of the East West Rail project. From the contributions of other Members, it is clear that this is a matter of great significance to Members across the Government Benches, highlighting how this Labour Government understand that locals in Bletchley and people across the country deserve an affordable and regular public transport sector that they can rely on.

I recognise the importance of this issue to my hon. Friend and his constituents. The town of Bletchley forms a key part of the Government's growth plans for the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, as well as forming an important part of Britain's national heritage, as home to the famous Bletchley Park. However, historically, Bletchley has been held back, missing out on the opportunities and investment experienced in other parts of the region, or in neighbouring cities such as Milton Keynes and Oxford. The Government are committed to

addressing this and realising the potential of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. East West Rail is an essential part of this, and can have a transformative impact by enhancing connectivity between key centres across the region.

When it opens in full, East West Rail will be a game changer for the Oxford-Cambridge corridor as a whole. By 2050, it will add £6.7 billion a year to the regional economy, supporting tens of thousands of new jobs and up to 100,000 new homes. It will create opportunities for new, sustainable and connected communities. For my hon. Friend's constituents, East West Rail will create direct rail journeys to Oxford, Cambridge and Bedford, provide more frequent rail services to Milton Keynes, and unlock better onward travel by rail to the rest of the country. It will provide the town with connections to these other key economic centres across the corridor; in turn, it will improve access into Bletchley for people coming there for work, education and leisure, unlocking opportunities for investment.

For all these reasons, the Government are pleased to have committed to the delivery of East West Rail in full, and £2.5 billion of funding was announced for the project at the spending review in June last year. The first phase of the project will provide services between Oxford and Milton Keynes via Bletchley, and when the first East West Rail services begin, Bletchley will form a key rail interchange in the region between East West Rail and the west coast main line, drastically reducing journey times and making rail travel across the region easier. The first freight train used this route in June last year, and a number of charter trains have also run along the line, marking a key milestone for the project. I understand that my hon. Friend's constituents are now keen to see passenger services starting over the route, and I can assure them that the Department is working closely with both Chiltern Railways and other industry partners to begin passenger services over this section of route as soon as possible.

In November last year, the East West Railway Company published its "You Said, We Did" report, which set out its latest proposals for the line following consultation feedback, including at Bletchley station. These included proposals for more frequent passenger services to run along the line, providing better connectivity for local people, and for partial electrification of the route to provide faster and greener services using hybrid battery electric trains. The East West Railway Company also set out plans for new and re-sited stations to provide more capacity, and modern and accessible facilities for passengers, including a station at Stewartby, which will serve the new Universal Studios theme park and the local community.

Emily Darlington: I thank the Minister for his commitment to East West Rail, which the Labour-run city council in Milton Keynes and the three Labour MPs for the area have been fully behind. Can he clarify that, alongside the commitment to amalgamate Woburn Sands and Bow Brickhill stations in my constituency is a commitment for the two bridges that are then needed to ensure continued access to housing and key industries, such as Red Bull Racing?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend highlights the significance of the fact that with hard-working Labour local government representatives and MPs working in concert, we can

unlock a lot of economic opportunity that otherwise would not be realised. I will be happy to ask the Rail Minister to write to her with further detail on the specific points she raises, but I give her the reassurance that whether it is Red Bull Racing or the economic potential of Universal Studios, the Government are committed to facilitating the transport improvements required to make a success for this region in economic growth, jobs and prosperity for her constituents and people across the local area.

There will be further enhancements to Bletchley Station, making journeys easier and more accessible, including a new accessible footbridge at the southern end of the station with lifts and stairs to all platforms. The East West Railway Company has also set out plans for extended platforms and an expanded western ticket hall and gate line, along with upgrades to the station forecourt to make travelling to and from Bletchley more attractive.

In addition to those improvements, the company set out proposals in its autumn announcement for an eastern entrance at Bletchley, which it is now considering, subject to securing third-party funding contributions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley set out in his speech, an eastern entrance is a key aspiration locally to kick-start growth and improve connectivity in Bletchley. I am aware that many respondents proposed the construction of a new entrance at Bletchley at the last consultation on East West Rail. As the East West Railway Company stated in its "You Said, We Did" report, the potential benefits of an eastern entrance include better connectivity to the town centre, supporting wider regeneration plans and providing a gateway for destinations such as Bletchley Park and Stadium MK.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the entrance is not currently considered to be necessary to accommodate passenger demand from East West Rail. It is right, therefore, that the Government control the scope of the project to manage costs and that other sources of funding outside of the Department's budget are considered for this additional investment. I understand that there have been positive discussions between the East West Railway Company and local partners about potential contributions towards an eastern entrance at Bletchley, although no formal agreements are in place.

As my hon. Friend will know, to help provide a more detailed assessment of the case for an eastern entrance, the Government have funded work on an outline business case to consider the benefits it could unlock in more detail. The Department looks forward to seeing the results of that when the work is complete. Given the potential benefits from a new eastern entrance and from securing third-party funding, the East West Railway Company will be consulting on these proposals as part of its consultation to be held later this year. I urge my hon. Friend's constituents to engage with that and to share their views on more detailed proposals.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend again for securing this important Adjournment debate.

Adam Jogee: We all look forward to seeing my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) cutting the ribbon with his very big scissors when the entrance is finally open. Before the Minister winds up, will he help me to secure a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss the merits of a direct line between Stoke-on-Trent railway station and

[Adam Jogee]

Manchester airport? He has touched on the importance of jobs, of opportunities and of unlocking investment, and that line would do wonders for my part of the world.

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for his timely intervention coming in so close to the finish line. I would be happy to facilitate a meeting with the Rail Minister to discuss the rail connectivity proposals that he describes. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) has asked to facilitate a meeting on a Leeds to Lille international rail line, and Stoke to Manchester is far more nationally focused. I would be glad to facilitate that meeting.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley for initiating this important debate, and for his continued engagement with both my Department and the East West Railway Company. I urge him to proceed with his work in exploring funding avenues that may help to facilitate the delivery of an eastern entrance at Bletchley station. He remains a champion for his constituents' right to frequent, affordable and accessible travel, and I look forward to working with him as he pursues those efforts further.

Question put and agreed to.

9.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 January 2026

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

Advanced Brain Cancer: Tissue Freezing

9.30 am

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered patient access to tissue freezing for advanced brain cancer treatment, diagnostics and research.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western—you look remarkably like the man I had breakfast with 45 minutes ago.

I am pleased that this topic is getting the attention it deserves, and I am grateful to open this important debate, especially ahead of Less Survivable Cancers Awareness Week, which begins on 13 January. I must confess I knew relatively little about the effects of brain cancer until I met my constituent, Ellie James. Ellie has travelled from Wales today and is in the Gallery. I admire how tirelessly she has campaigned in memory of her late husband, Owain, who has brought us all here today.

Owain passed away from glioblastoma, the most common type of malignant brain tumour in adults, in June 2024. He was just 34 years of age. Since then Ellie has been campaigning for what she calls Owain's law to be implemented in this country. Owain was young, fit and healthy, and he had his whole life ahead of him. He leaves behind a family, including a young daughter. Owain's story highlights the importance of informed consent from patients and their families regarding treatment and the storage of their brain tissue.

Owain was diagnosed with a brain tumour in September 2022. Half of Owain's 14 cm tumour was surgically removed, but only 1 cm of the removed tissue was stored fresh or flash frozen. The 1 cm was used to treat Owain with a form of immunotherapy treatment that requires the patient's frozen tissue. Owain received three rounds of the vaccine before the frozen tissue ran out, at which point further surgery was not considered possible. The remaining 6 cm of tissue was stored in paraffin, making it unsuitable for additional vaccines.

Owain died a few months later, despite his cancer showing signs of regression during the treatment. If all the removed tissue had been fresh frozen, around 30 vaccines could have been created. If Owain and his family had been more informed about the practices surrounding brain tissue freezing and storage, and if the hospital had chosen the flash-freezing method for all the removed tissue instead of keeping it in paraffin, Owain could still be with us. His story is truly devastating, but what most stood out to me was that there was a real, achievable potential to extend, if not save, his life.

The amount of grief that Ellie and Owain's family face must be tremendous and unimaginable. However, out of grief great change can take place, and I pay tribute to Ellie for her determination to turn her unimaginable grief into something positive that can help others. There is currently no consistent national guidance or sufficient infrastructure to ensure that brain

tumour tissue removed during surgery can be stored in the fresh frozen state required for advanced therapies such as immunotherapy and cancer research. It is fundamentally wrong that Owain and his family learned of the small proportion of tissue initially frozen only once the vaccines ran out. I am sure they are not the only people that that will have happened to.

For every patient diagnosed with a less survivable cancer, the average one-year survival rate is 42%. That is compared with a one-year survival rate of 70% for all cancers. Those statistics need to improve. There are procedures surrounding brain tissue freezing that can be changed, which would have an undeniably positive impact on survival rates. There are already groups doing research and drawing attention to what can be done to improve outcomes for people with cancer, such as the all-party parliamentary group on the less survivable cancers. There are also charities such as Cancer Research UK and Macmillan that conduct valuable research and support cancer patients and their families. Again, I pay tribute to them.

There are, however, specific recommendations that I would like to mention, which link specifically to Owain and many others who face similar situations. The NHS needs an appropriate number of medical freezers to store fresh frozen tissue. In many cases, there is not enough freezer space to facilitate this type of brain tissue freezing. That must change. That long-term investment would save lives.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Brain cancer is one of the deadliest cancers, and it disproportionately affects young adults: it is the big cancer killer of people under 40. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this proposal not only would save lives at a relatively small cost but has an economic benefit? The Brain Tumour Charity points out that most people diagnosed have to give up work, and so do their carers: 70% of carers also have to give up work to look after those afflicted. There is an economic benefit to doing this, at a relatively low cost, and of course it would save lives.

Chris Evans: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We have to remember that a cancer diagnosis affects not just the person, but their family and loved ones. A lot of people have to leave work to care for those people, and they have to deal with the emotional impact too. Her economic point is absolutely right. The wider point is that we lead the world in life sciences. If we did what I am suggesting, we could be a world leader in brain cancer care and we could save lives too, so it is a win-win for everybody.

As the hon. Lady said, the change is cost effective. It is estimated that it would cost £250,000 to £400,000 to ensure that all NHS trusts have the necessary capacity and capabilities for flash freezing. Every brain cancer patient should be able to access the latest treatment and research and the most accurate genome-sequencing techniques.

In Owain's case, there was enough freezer space, so storing his tissue in paraffin was a conscious decision not made out of necessity. That is why attitudes and established guidance protocols within the NHS about brain tissue freezing need to change. It should not be the norm to store removed brain tissue in something

[Chris Evans]

that makes it unusable for further research or treatment. I hope the Minister will commit to establishing national standards so that every suitable brain tumour sample is routinely frozen.

A brain tumour can happen to anyone. It could affect us or any of our loved ones. This change needs to happen now to save lives in the future. It needs to happen for people such as Owain who are no longer with us, for people who are currently unwell with brain cancer and for people who will unfortunately become ill in the future. This Labour Government have a real opportunity to enact meaningful, positive and feasible change. We must seize that, especially if it is achievable and affordable.

As I said earlier, we lead the world in life sciences, and brain cancer care is something that we can proudly be world leaders in. The national cancer plan, which will be published next month, must address the storage of brain tissue. Specifically, it must outline exactly how it will improve outcomes for patients with less survivable cancers. If we are serious about putting patients at the heart of cancer care, improving their awareness of the storage of their own tissue is one of the simplest places to start.

The way that treatment is allocated is deeply unfair. The postcode lottery of cancer treatment must end. It is wrong that a person's ability to access cancer treatment is dependent on where they live: 40% of people with cancer in the UK have struggled to access treatment or care because of where they live. That is ineffective, unfair and discriminatory. Those are not the values that a Labour Government should uphold. For the cost of a few hundred thousand pounds, we could eliminate the postcode lottery that affects brain cancer patients. We need to ensure that all types of treatment, including experimental ones involving freezers and vaccines, can succeed in all areas, not only some. That exceptionally small investment could have a lifesaving impact.

It is not only treatment that is affected by current protocol, but research. Owain's tissue was no longer suitable for research because it was stored in paraffin. It is also incredibly difficult for a person to have control over their own tissue post extraction. The confusion about who technically owns it makes it challenging for people such as Ellie to retrieve the remaining tissue for further testing or research. We need to stop putting unnecessary barriers in place. We are making things harder than they need to be, and these practices have a direct impact on people's everyday lives.

It is just as alarming that all this is done without informed consent from the patient or their families. The importance of the storage method for brain tissue cannot be overstated when someone's life relies upon it. Brain cancer patients and their families should have an absolute right to be consulted on and to give informed consent on how their tumour is stored. While we have the opportunity to make these changes in the national cancer plan for England, we must do so. It is a small, affordable change that could have a huge impact and improve cancer treatment nationwide.

This issue was debated in the Welsh Senedd in July, and I wonder if the Minister could liaise with the Welsh Government about introducing a similar plan. I understand that the Minister there said he was not minded to introduce legislation. Could she raise this topic with

him in bilateral meetings at some point? I was also hoping to get a commitment from the Minister today to meet me and my constituent Ellie, so that Ellie can explain in detail her husband Owain's experience and we can discuss how to prevent the same thing happening to current and future patients.

In matters of great importance like this, patients must be aware of what is happening to their tissue during treatment and afterwards. Families should be able to access their tissue if needed for future testing and research. I urge the Minister to think of real people like Owain, Ellie and their young daughter, whose lives could be so different now if patients were consulted, if the tissue was stored differently and if there were more medical freezers. I would specifically like to know the Government's plans regarding brain tissue freezing, given the impact it would have on diagnostics, treatment and research. Do the Government plan to invest in freezer capacity, and do they intend to make flash freezing the norm?

While brain tumours will continue to happen to people like Owain or anyone in this room, diagnostics, treatment and research can get better. The Government can lead the way and begin to change the attitudes and practices surrounding brain tissue freezing—in fact, we must do so. I do not wish to hear another story like Owain and Ellie's, which is absolutely tragic, and I want Ellie's campaign to succeed; it can and must. The most devastating thing is that Owain's outcomes could have been different if the established guidance protocol had been different. Perhaps if these things had happened, Owain could have been sitting with Ellie in the Public Gallery today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Matt Western (in the Chair): I remind Members that if they wish to be called in the debate, they should bob.

9.42 am

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for securing the debate, and I thank Ellie for all her work, as well as Hugh and the others who are pushing very hard on this issue—many thanks indeed.

I want to try to make this debate a bit broader in two directions. My sister, Georgie, also has a glioblastoma. She was diagnosed two and a half years ago and has been incredibly brave and determined, working with the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) and Ellie to try to get more brain cancer justice, and driving that debate. That also applies to many people in my constituency of Witney who have brain tumours but also tumours of all sorts of cancers.

We ought to be considering two things. First, I ask the Minister to consider making tumour tissue freezing standard for all cancerous tumour tissues, not just brain. However close the issue is to my heart, I think it is inequitable to just focus on brain tumours. We have to try to get all tumour tissues frozen as standard, and the economies of scale mean that makes sense.

The other thing is how we have equitable and public health-oriented access to that tissue once it is stored, which we as a country are massively failing on. I ask the Minister to consider reforming the Human Tissue Act 2004,

which could be broadened in terms of what is legally permitted in research contexts. That would create explicit legal pathways for retrospective clinical samples.

First, clinical tissue, such as biopsies and diagnostic archives, could be routinely made available for public health research under clear safeguards, without requiring separate project-by-project consent. Secondly, requirements for de-identified tissue could be simplified, clarifying that truly anonymised, non-identifiable samples can be used without consent or an HTA licence for a wider range of research, rather than just narrowly defined exceptions.

Thirdly, licences could be converted to broader authorisations. Instead of a licence for each tissue bank, accredited biobanks could be allowed to supply samples under nationally recognised frameworks. Fourthly, DNA analysis rules could be reworked. Barriers to genomic public health research could be reduced by redefining or narrowing the offence of having tissue for DNA analysis, provided that strong data protection is ensured. That is one big chunk.

The second big chunk I am asking for—there are only two—is that we reform the Human Tissue Act 2004 to apply a default system similar to the one we now use nationally for organ donation to tumour tissue data. To do so, Parliament would need to amend the HTA to introduce a deemed consent regime for residual tumour tissue and derived data. That would be limited to public interest cancer research, with a statutory and simple opt-out, strict purpose limits and enhanced oversight by the Human Tissue Authority.

The model would mirror the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Act 2019, but apply just to data derived primarily from tumour tissue. In plain English, that means that we have something that works for organ donations and saves lives day in, day out. If any of us die, our organs are taken and our next of kin can opt out if they choose. The great majority of people do not opt out. That has meant that many more organs have been available, which has saved lives. Somebody may want to dispose of their tumour tissue, but the great majority of us do not; we would want it used for public health and science, so having it as an automatic—

Monica Harding: I am sorry to stop my hon. Friend mid flow, because that is a really interesting concept. I draw his attention to a BBC article from today about using centuries-old samples of tumours from bowel cancer to work out why there is such a massive increase in bowel cancer among young people. I do not understand the science of it, but surely that is a step forward for our research as well.

Charlie Maynard: My hon. Friend speaks to the point. Of course, those people have been dead for many centuries, but we believe it is worth being able to access that information, and at the moment it is not accessible in most cases. That is something we really want to change.

I look to Denmark's registry-first legal architecture, with mandatory health registries covering cancer diagnoses, pathology, genomics, and treatment and outcomes. The Danish cancer registry automatically records tumour data, covers the entire population and is used for research, oversight and quality improvement. Participation is automatic, with opt-outs rather than being consent-based.

Our Government are seeking to rapidly expand our national genomics capabilities, and I applaud them for that, but without far better and more sensible access to the base tissue, with appropriate safeguards, there is no genomics-based, population-wide health service.

9.48 am

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Debates on brain tumours are a bit like buses—there are none for ages, then they all come one after the other. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for organising this debate—the second of two debates on this topic on consecutive days. I send my condolences to Ellie and her entire family on the death of Owain. I think, like a number of people in this room, I understand some of what she has experienced. I have to inform you, Mr Western, that a former Labour MP is close to dying of a glioblastoma—another politician after Tessa Jowell and my sister Margaret. I want to ask: when do we intervene to do something about this, rather than talk about it?

I am supportive of any measure that genuinely improves patient outcomes for glioblastoma patients. Anything that increases survival of this devastating disease is worth supporting, but in my own experience, working closely with clinicians and supporting my late sister through her glioblastoma treatment, the most effective way to improve outcomes for patients with brain tumours is by accessing clinical drug trials. Without trials there is no route to better treatment or lifelines, and for too many patients, no pathway at all.

I think we can all agree that the number of clinical trials under way for brain tumours is entirely inadequate. It is impossible to justify that, since 2018, the National Institute for Health and Care Research has invested just £13.7 million towards brain tumour research and none of the funding to date has supported using repurposed drugs—that is, using some of the immunotherapy drugs that are changing the face of the larger cancers and their outcomes.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to my constituent, Alex Davies, who sadly passed away last November, the day after his 50th birthday, two years after his glioblastoma diagnosis. He is survived by his wife Emma and their two daughters. Alex volunteered to have his brain tissue frozen after two surgeries, for ongoing research at the Christie hospital in Manchester.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's national cancer plan should include more and better-used funding for research and more clinical trials, particularly for poorly understood cancers such as glioblastoma on which she has campaigned tenaciously over many years?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let us be absolutely clear: there is no route for an improvement in any of the rare cancers unless there are more trials—and the system mitigates against that. There is a lot of talk at the moment about the Government of stakeholders. The stakeholders involved in drug trials—the major pharma companies and cancer charities—do not get involved in these trials because for pharma there is no money in it, and for the big charities, there seems to be more interest in primary science and mice work than there is in using some of these amazing drugs to find out whether they can provide some sort of support to people with rare cancers.

[*Dame Siobhain McDonagh*]

It is the lack of treatment options, and this inaction, that led me, alongside my sister's extraordinary network of friends and supporters, to launch our own trial in her memory. When the system does not move quickly enough, patients and families are forced to take matters into their own hands. We have an established clinical trial now under way at the University College London Hospitals clinical research facility with encouraging early indicators, a wider trial programme mapped out and further trials ready to follow with protocols written.

We are seeking to clarify how to secure the funding needed to repeat and extend this work using alternative drugs, so that more patients can benefit. We continue to raise funds to support that goal.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Yesterday the hon. Member outlined the tremendous work being done to privately raise about £1 million for research. Does she agree that that needs to be supplemented and complemented by statutory funding to make the dramatic difference that she, and hopefully all of us, agree needs to happen?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with the hon. Member. Anything that we have raised—£1 million over two years—is a drop in the ocean. It is an important drop in the ocean, and it has led to action, which is what we need, but in the longer term, it has to be the Government and the pharmaceuticals that are not intervened on if we are to make progress.

Monica Harding: May I pay tribute to the hon. Member for everything she is doing on glioblastoma? It has affected my own family: my brother-in-law, Pip Harding, was diagnosed with a glioblastoma. He has received oncothermia therapy, but only through crowdfunding. The cost of—I think—10 treatments was something like £40,000, which he got from his friends and family. That shows the generosity of the public, as well as how interested the public are in this, so does she agree that we should ask the Government to match the public spirit on this?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the hon. Member for all the work she does; it is thrilling to hear that her brother-in-law has made such progress with the Oncotherm machine. The machine is in the UK because my sister raised the funds to bring it over, but it cannot go into an NHS hospital because it cannot get approval from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, so it is for people who can raise the money to access it, as she rightly says. Forty thousand pounds is a lot of money, but in this world it is only a fraction of what other possible treatments may cost; people sell their homes, spend their pensions and leave themselves completely bankrupt on the death of a loved one. It is the wild west out there, as she knows.

We have established a trial at UCLH, and we have encouraging early indicators, but we need to do so much more. Our hope is to do 10 trials with repurposed drugs, and we want to clarify how we can bid for the money from the NIHR. We are not the only people doing this—we are not exceptional. Patients and families who see the lack of alternatives are getting involved and

raising money, as the hon. Member just said, but anything we can raise is insignificant in comparison with what the Government or big pharma can raise. How is it that, upon Tessa Jowell's death, the previous Government can have given the NIHR £40 million for research, in good faith, and none of it has been spent on testing out repurposed drugs?

I am grateful that in yesterday's debate the Minister highlighted the letter that I received from the head of the NIHR, Lucy Chappell, setting out the routes for funding and how they can be accessed. As a result of that debate, I went back to read the letter. It does not take us any further; the funding routes are still impossible to navigate in any effective way. I therefore thank the Minister for her commitment to provide further guidance. I do not want that just for me, for the work that I do, or for the work that Dr Mulholland does at UCLH; I want to encourage all the flowers to bloom, because somebody may actually hit on the progress we need.

Even for an experienced clinical team with an established research base, the funding process is complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate. If it is challenging for clinical teams in major London teaching hospitals, I worry deeply about how many other clinical teams, without the same visibility or support, will simply fall away before a trial even has the chance to begin. Will the Minister consider how clearer, more navigable routes to accessing funding can be set out, and provide clearer direction, so that the money committed by the Government can reach the trials that patients so urgently need?

9.59 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for setting the scene so incredibly well, and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for all that she does—I was impressed by her contribution yesterday, and she equalled it today.

I think we all know someone who has been touched by cancer. The youngest daughter of a close friend of mine was diagnosed with glioblastoma last Christmas, and she died a few weeks later. At that time, the diagnosis was bleak, and the lives of my friend and his wife were changed forever. Bleak does not even come close to the sense of loss.

Mr Campbell: I have personal experience of a very young constituent who lost her father for the exact same reason. The trauma affects not just the immediate family, but close friends too, and it lives with them for years. Hopefully, we can see some progress both today and in the next few weeks, whenever the cancer issue is addressed in the main Chamber.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend. That story makes today's debate that bit more impactful for me and for us all. My friend is a veteran. He served in the forces with great courage. He has shoulders as broad as a rugby player. He is a man who could take on anything. He laid his life on the line for the freedom of everyone here. Yet, he could do nothing but watch—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: The hon. Gentleman has been very kind to me in all these debates and has called me soft-hearted. If I am soft-hearted, that perhaps applies to both of us.

Jim Shannon: We are both soft-hearted, as many other Members in this Chamber probably are.

This man was so strong. When his wee daughter died, life became very focused on that; it will be always focused on that. I can understand how Owain's law has come about, because families are determined to ensure that their devastation is not replicated, if one single thing can be done to prevent it. I thank those in the Public Gallery for being here.

What can we do? Owain's law is an indication of what we can do. Tissue freezing preserves DNA. Without this key, simple and cost-effective step, patients cannot access the latest cancer treatments, diagnostics and research. There is a way forward.

As the Minister knows, I am always pleased to see her in her place. We are all very fond of her, and she understands things better than most—we all know the circumstances. I am looking forward to her response to the ask from the hon. Member for Caerphilly and from everyone else. To help end this preventable postcode lottery, hon. Members should please consider entering the current ballot for Health and Social Care questions, which closes today. If they can get their question in before noon today, that would be good. Next week, they would then have an opportunity to ask it on the Floor of the House, to help prevent more brain cancer patients in our constituencies from missing out.

In the NHS, most brain cancer patient samples are stored in paraffin wax rather than being flash frozen in medical freezers. When this happens, patients lose access to potentially lifesaving newer treatments developed using these samples, to more precise diagnostic methods and to advanced research, including future testing to find out whether a patient's condition is genetic and likely to be passed on to their children. That is important in the lives we lead. Some conditions are hereditary; they come from our mum or dad—maybe our grandparents—down to us, and may pass on to those who come after us.

I thank Ellie's campaign for giving me their paper before the debate, as it really does help us to understand things just that wee bit better. I know that the Minister has seen it and the three questions to her, so I do not need to repeat them—she is probably very aware of what they are. Those are the campaign's requests.

I have a couple of requests of my own, which will not come as a surprise to anyone in the Chamber, and certainly not to the Minister. New research from the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission shows that access to tissue freezing varies dramatically between trusts, meaning that eligibility for advanced treatments can depend entirely on where a patient lives. A postcode lottery is preventing my constituents in Strangford in Northern Ireland from benefiting from more precise whole genome sequencing, personalised immunotherapy and cutting-edge diagnostic options. My constituents are not the only ones affected—everyone is affected.

I have received information indicating that, for just £250,000 to £400,000, every brain cancer patient in the UK could have routine access to tissue freezing by default, unlocking the treatments the Government have committed to delivering. The three questions from the Owain's law campaign are the important ones, but can the Minister look at this issue? When we think about what we are trying to achieve in this

debate, it is important that we have some goals. I know that the Minister always replies helpfully and positively to us.

In Northern Ireland, funding for freezing brain tissue is primarily tied to research initiatives rather than standard patient care. A local charity called Brainwaves NI is currently funding a pilot scheme at the Belfast health and social care trust and Queen's University Belfast, which uses rapid nanopore sequencing. I do not pretend to understand what all these things are—I am not a medical person, just an MP who tries to represent his constituents when he can. That process requires specialised tissue handling, often involving freezing, to reduce diagnosis times from weeks to hours.

It is clear from all the contributions to the debate, including from those who have personal knowledge, that we do not need pilots but more equitable access to tissue freezing throughout the United Kingdom. I support the calls the hon. Member for Caerphilly has made so well on behalf of his constituents and indeed all the United Kingdom. Glioblastoma is a death sentence, but tissue freezing could change that. It is right and proper that we do all we can to see that change in all of the United Kingdom.

My last request is that the Minister liaise with the regional Administrations in Scotland and Wales, and particularly with the Administration in Northern Ireland and with the Assembly. Brain cancer affects us all; it does not stop at the border of Scotland and England or in the Irish sea. It is all of us together, so we need to work together to find a way of funding a cure for advanced brain cancer. With that, I look forward very much to the Minister's response.

10.7 am

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I start by saying how honoured I am to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who demonstrates so ably that the high-minded ideals of representation, compassion and decency run right through this place, and perhaps more often than is fully recognised. I thank him for his contribution.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for securing this important debate, and his constituent Ellie for her campaigning—I can say without hesitation that you have another signed-up supporter of Owain's law here today in me. As my hon. Friend demonstrated, MPs do not generally come to these debates to have abstract policy discussions, but to do our most important job: to be the voice of our constituents.

That is where I want to start. I want to share the experience of my constituent, Samantha Jones, who came to see me alongside her father-in-law, Garry Jones, following the death of her husband, Trevor, from glioblastoma. Trevor was just 41 years old when he suddenly became ill on Christmas Day 2024. Until that moment, there had been no warning signs and no symptoms that anyone could reasonably have recognised. Tests revealed stage 4 glioblastoma, and he was given six months to live. He lived for nine months and died in September 2025.

Like so many families confronted with this diagnosis, they were plunged into a world of shock, fear and urgent decision making. A biopsy was taken, which

[Mr Jonathan Brash]

confirmed and sequenced the cancer, and at that point the family believed that everything possible was being done. It was only later, through Samantha's own research and through conversations with an oncologist experienced in international practice, that they learned something that they found deeply troubling. There were treatments that may have been available to Trevor on the basis of his biopsy, but they could not be used because the tissue sample had not been flash frozen. Instead, the biopsy had been stored in paraffin blocks, which is standard practice in much of the UK, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly. By the time the family discovered the significance of that, it was too late: Trevor was too ill to undergo another biopsy, too unwell to travel and unable to take part in clinical trials.

Samantha told me that in Germany brain tumour biopsies are flash frozen as a matter of course. That allows for far more advanced genomic and molecular testing, which can open the door to a wider range of treatments. In the UK, by contrast, flash freezing is done only if it is specifically requested, or if the patient is part of a clinical trial. For families who have just been told that their loved one has an aggressive and terminal brain cancer, that is not a realistic expectation. They are in shock. They are terrified. They are placing their trust in the system to do everything that it can, without knowing that one unmade request could close off future options entirely.

That raises a simple but profound question, which I put to the Minister: why does the NHS not routinely flash freeze all brain tumour biopsies as standard practice? What can we do to change that here and now? I am not suggesting false hope. I fully recognise that glioblastoma remains a devastating diagnosis with limited treatment options, but when options are already so few, it cannot be right that patients are denied even the possibility of certain treatments because of how their tissue samples were stored.

This is also an issue of fairness and equality. Access to the best possible diagnostics and research pathways should not depend on geography, chance or whether a family happen to know the right question to ask at the worst moment in their lives. Samantha and Garry came to see me not only in grief but with a determination—one reflected by Ellie, in the Public Gallery this morning—that something good might come from their devastating experience. They want other families to be spared the same sense of missed opportunity and unanswered questions.

More broadly, brain cancers remain under-recognised and underfunded compared with other forms of cancer, despite their severity and poor outcomes. If we are serious about improving survival, treatment and research, we must be willing to look honestly at current practice and ask whether it is good enough, because I think the consensus is that it is not.

I hope that the Minister will engage constructively on this issue and consider making the flash freezing of brain tumour biopsies standard practice across the NHS, because that could improve patient access to treatment, strengthen research and offer families reassurance that everything possible is being done. For Trevor, such a change has come too late, but for future patients it does not have to.

10.13 am

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for securing this important debate, and all other hon. Members who have contributed. I would also like to highlight the incredible work done by the campaigners for Owain's law—you are doing a most remarkable campaign.

Owain was diagnosed with a grade 4 tumour in 2022 and sadly died in 2024. Despite showing success, Owain stopped receiving effective treatment because not enough of his brain tissue was frozen to make further immunotherapy vaccines. Owain's wife, Ellie, is calling for fair and equal access to brain tissue freezing, enabling every patient to access new treatments and research. The Government need to listen to the campaign, to act and to invest in brain tumour freezing so that we can start to save more lives.

Brain cancer is already the biggest killer of people under 40, and 45% of brain cancers are diagnosed in an emergency setting, meaning that the cancer has progressed untreated and that the patient is more unlikely to tolerate treatment.

Given so many factors affect survival outcomes for brain cancer patients, the Government need to start improving treatment of brain cancer now. Most brain cancer patients in Wokingham cannot access advanced technologies, such as personalised immunotherapy cancer treatments that rely on frozen tissue. The Royal Berkshire NHS foundation trust and the Frimley Health NHS foundation trust do not have any medical-grade freezers suitable for storing tissue samples, and they have no access to the rapid freezing equipment suitable for brain tissue. That situation needs to change.

The cost of providing the right freezers would be small for each hospital trust. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) and other Members who have today called for other tissues to be frozen, not just brain tissue.

Like many other Members today, I am really pleased to see the Minister in her place. I have a very simple question for her: can she confirm that equal access to high-quality tissue storage pathways will be addressed in the upcoming national cancer plan?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: On a point of order, Mr Western. I want to make a clarification. In my response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), I mixed up quangos. I suggested that it was the fault of the MHRA that the Oncotherm machine was not in an NHS hospital. It is, of course, the fault of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. I would not want anybody to think that that machine has not been approved and registered by the MHRA.

Matt Western (in the Chair): Thank you. Your point of order is noted.

10.16 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for securing this very important debate on equitable access to tissue freezing for brain cancer patients.

My constituent's son was first diagnosed at the age of 10 with a very rare brain tumour. When he should have been playing with friends and going to school, he underwent surgery and intense radiotherapy. After treatment, he returned to normality, but 13 years later the tumour recurred and he received the same treatment. Earlier this year, when he was 28 years old, and just three and a half years after his last treatment, the tumour was back again. Further radiotherapy was not safe, so he underwent six months of chemotherapy. His mum told me about the devastation of undergoing chemotherapy, knowing that it was never going to be a cure and that the tumour is expected to recur. In the 18 years that he has been living with the diagnosis and undergoing treatment, there has been no progress in treatment options, and a cure has not been found. Sadly, my constituent's son is not alone; every year, 13,000 people are diagnosed with this brutal condition.

Like many people, I was struck by the story of Owain, who was diagnosed with a 14 cm grade 4 brain tumour in his right frontal lobe. Similar to my constituent's son, Owain was told that the standard treatment of radiotherapy and chemotherapy could only hold the tumour back for a period of time, until he sadly died.

Owain's campaign is now run in his memory by his brilliant wife Ellie, who is here today in the Public Gallery. The campaign has exposed the lack of communication, clarity and consistency in brain tissue freezing. Fresh tissue freezing can help to deliver personalised treatment, research and diagnostics, but across the country there is unequal access to it. Brain cancers are difficult enough to tackle. Even when tumours are surgically removed, cancer cells have already infiltrated the brain, often causing a tumour to regrow, sometimes within just a few months.

We know that current drug treatments struggle to have an impact on tumour mass and that radiotherapy can only delay recurrence. Consistent access to brain tumour storage across the country could help to save future lives and improve outcomes for existing patients. A recent study by specialists from the department of neurosurgery at King's College hospital and Guy's cancer centre aims to implement a robust pathway whereby tumour tissue can be stored as a fresh frozen sample. Their report concluded that although the implementation of this pathway appeared to be straightforward, the limiting factor was the need for a fridge. There were also difficulties in liaising with the multiple teams involved, which was very time consuming, and disagreements about who should fund the freezer.

Such concerns have been reflected by the charity Brain Tumour Research, which highlighted the variations in the basic infrastructure needed to support brain tissue freezing. The Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission has also noted the numerous barriers to genome sequencing, which requires tissue freezing to enable precise diagnosis, prognosis and tailored treatments.

Therefore, we are not struggling with unknown barriers. The solutions are right in front of us. When battling brain cancer, every day counts. Because of the lack of communication with Owain, there was not enough tissue frozen appropriately to create the vaccines needed to help tackle his tumour. Now his young daughter Amelia must grapple with life without dad.

The Government have an opportunity to finally make a real difference to the thousands of people affected by brain cancer, by ending the postcode lottery of cancer

treatments. The Conservatives spent 14 years failing to make any progress on improving cancer outcomes, and now it is time for action. The Liberal Democrats urge the Government to pay close attention to the specific difficulties facing brain cancer patients in the delayed national cancer plan. This includes setting out tangible improvements for brain cancer patients and equitable access to tissue freezing. We also cannot ignore that quick access to treatment saves lives, which is why I once again call on the Government to make sure that 100% of patients start treatment within 62 days of urgent referral.

There can be no more families torn apart, left in the dark or blocked from possible treatments. With the UK lagging severely behind our peers on cancer outcomes, it is time for this Government to turn around the Conservative Government's failure to improve cancer outcomes, and finally to place the UK as a global leader in cancer research and outcomes.

10.21 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for securing this debate, and the cancer charities, including Brain Tumour Research and Brain Tumour Charity, who provide invaluable support to my constituents. I also thank Owain's family for their important campaign. I want to recognise the contribution of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), who has shown such incredible energy and dedication to the cause over the last few years. It is impressive to get a trial up and running that offers real hope to people, so I thank her for that work.

Each year sees around 13,000 new cases of brain and central nervous system cancers and 5,500 deaths. As has been said already this morning, brain cancers are the leading cause of cancer-related death for those under the age of 40. As a doctor and a granddaughter, I have witnessed the devastation that brain cancers can exact on patients and their loved ones. Despite advances in detection, neurosurgery and radiotherapy, the mortality for brain cancers has barely changed since 2000, whereas the most common cancers have seen substantial decreases over the same period. Demographics are working against us. Epidemiological modelling indicates that a quarter of the growth in brain cancer cases can be attributed to population ageing, a pattern that is expected to continue in the coming decades.

Research published last year found that in England the median survival for patients with a glioblastoma was seven months. It rose to 16 months for patients with the most aggressive treatments. The reason those patients survived longer is because they had access to personalised treatments, experimental drugs or trial pathways, and much of that begins with tissue freezing. Two people can be diagnosed with glioblastoma, but their underlying genetics can be completely different. Frozen tissue enables a pathologist to undertake gold standard genomic sequencing, which not only leads to a more precise diagnosis, but helps doctors predict how a tumour is likely to behave, identify more personalised treatment strategies based on the genetic mutations driving the tumour, and determine whether the patient would be able to benefit from clinical trials that are available.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

Unfortunately, as we have heard, access to genomic sequencing is characterised by stark geographic inequality. High volume specialist centres, typically in urban areas, are more likely to have established tissue freezing and integrated genomic diagnosis than centres serving more rural communities. A report by the Tessa Jowell Centre of Excellence found a nearly 300% increase in whole genome sequencing activity since 2021, and around three in 10 NHS centres within its network were still not requesting it. Among centres that do freeze tissue, the activity rates vary from zero samples to several hundred, and diagnostic times are worsening. The median time from tissue collection to final integrated molecular diagnosis in 2024 was 21 days, whereas the benchmark is 14 and only 30% met that. What does the Minister intend to do to improve that speed?

Tissue freezing is a basic requirement for advanced testing, but every year thousands of patients' tissue samples are soaked in formaldehyde and embedded in wax blocks. Although formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded tissue preservation has been used in pathology labs since the early 20th century, it is not adequate for molecular work because it causes the cross-linking and fragmentation of nucleic acids and protein, meaning that any DNA or RNA that is extracted is degraded and often unsuitable for genomic sequencing and creating those important personalised cancer therapies. The British Neuro-Oncology Society has described FFPE as "suboptimal". It results in patients being locked out of cutting-edge treatments, regardless of clinical suitability, with knock-on effects on patient outcomes and the pace of scientific research. Will the Minister explain why FFPE, rather than tissue freezing, is still determining access to personalised brain cancer treatment for some NHS patients?

The Government's 10-year health plan anticipates that by 2035 half of all healthcare interactions will be informed by genomics. That is a bold mission, but the contributions to today's debate show that there is a gap between where Ministers want to be and where we are at the moment. In response to a written parliamentary question, the Government acknowledged:

"Information on the number of NHS trusts in England that have facilities for fresh freezing brain cancer tissue samples is not currently collected."

That is a serious problem, because without the data it is difficult for Members and cancer charities to ascertain whether progress is being made, and for the Minister to make progress on delivery. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department has plans to start collecting that information? If it does not, why not?

Patients should always be fully informed before they have treatment, and it has been disturbing to hear today that some have not been given all the information, particularly about what will happen to the tissue afterwards and the potential consequences of that. What are the Government doing to improve the consent process in such cases to ensure that, before the biopsy, patients are fully informed about what is happening to their tissue and are given the choice?

We have heard that sometimes only a small percentage of the tissue is frozen, limiting the treatment options available. Will the Minister tell us why that is the case, and what she is doing to improve the proportion that is

frozen? Every trust taking brain cancer samples must have the capacity and facilities to freeze the tissue they obtain.

We are all waiting for the delayed cancer plan, which we expect to be published on World Cancer Day. I have said before that I think delaying it for presentational purposes is wrong, but I hope it will be published soon. Will the Minister confirm that the cancer plan will deliver fully informed consent, provide the necessary capability—both human resource and equipment—for freezing, and ensure that the research landscape improves, in terms of both ease of access and financial metrics, to encourage UK research investment?

Everyone in this House wants treatments to improve and a cure to be found. I know the Minister is hugely committed to this issue and is working hard on it. I am interested to hear her response and to see the cancer plan, which she has been working on, as soon as possible.

10.27 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) and all other hon. Members for their contributions, many of which were deeply personal and moving. I thank them all for their courage and soft-heartedness, and for bringing such compassion and insight to this debate.

Let me say how sorry I was to hear about the loss of Owain at the age of just 34. His story reminds us that many people lose their lives to brain cancer very shortly after diagnosis, and we are determined to do all we can to change that. I extend my deepest sympathies to his wife Ellie, who is here today, and his daughter Amelia. I would be honoured to meet Ellie and my hon. Friend to hear more about her and Owain's story.

Just yesterday, I was here for a debate on less survivable cancers. These debates and the petition show how much progress on cancer matters to Parliament and the public. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) said that debates on brain cancer are a bit like buses: there are none for ages, then suddenly three at once. I want to acknowledge that her work has led to the higher profile for such debates in Parliament, more of which are taking place. I thank and commend her for her efforts in this field.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly raised incredibly serious issues about how informed consent, tissue freezing and innovation are impacting patients. I will take those points in turn. I will primarily address the context in England, although I acknowledge that areas of this policy apply across the UK. On informed consent and tissue storage, as a cancer patient myself, I find it very troubling when patients say they have not been informed about their tissue storage, as campaigners have reported. I completely understand why the Owain's law petition calls for people to be properly informed about the choices available to them. Let me be clear: patients must always be fully informed about their rights, options and choices regarding the storage and future use of their tissue samples.

The Human Tissue Authority was established in 2004 to oversee and licence organisations in the removal, storage and use of human tissue in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Under the Human Tissue (Quality

and Safety for Human Application) Regulations 2007, consent must be sought to collect human tissues and cells that are to be used in patient treatment. The Human Tissue Authority ensures compliance against those regulations as part of its standards, inspection and licensing regime.

Consent should be sought in line with the suitable treatment options available to individual patients, which would be determined by their clinicians. That requirement extends to the collection of tumour samples that are to be used as the starting material in the manufacture of cancer vaccines. The Government expect establishments to be held to the highest standards to ensure appropriate and ethical use of human tissue. I understand that my hon. Friend is meeting with the Human Tissue Authority to discuss this matter further, and I know that he will keep me closely in the loop on that.

Owain's law also asks for every NHS hospital to freeze suitable brain tumour tissue to allow patients to benefit from emerging cancer treatments. Individual pathology services in England have their own processes, known as standard operating procedures, for fresh freezing of tissue samples. NHS procedures mirror local capabilities, which means the capacity for fresh freezing often depends on the availability of neurosurgery services in the local area.

The human tissue regulations were introduced due to concerns that pathologists were retaining human tissues without appropriate consent. Any changes will need to be carefully considered by the Government. However, as was requested by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I am happy to liaise with the devolved Governments on this issue, and I commit today to further exploring the current arrangements for freezing tissues and the options for change, particularly for brain tumour tissues.

Beyond improving access to emerging treatments through freezing, we know that the most effective way to improve survival rates from cancers, including brain cancers, is to catch them early. That is why we have agreed around £600 million of capital investment in diagnostics for this financial year. Over £100 million will go to histopathology services, automation and digital diagnostics to improve pathology laboratories.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I apologise for challenging the Minister's assertion, but in the case of glioblastoma, it really does not matter how early it is detected; the consequence is the same. It is a stage 4 tumour that is going to kill the person and the average life expectancy is nine months.

Ashley Dalton: I note my hon. Friend's clarification, but with that in mind, we do know that it is important to diagnose all cancers as quickly as possible, and the diagnosis of brain cancers is equally important so as to start treatment as quickly as possible. To that end, the Chancellor announced further investment in diagnostics at the autumn statement as part of a £6 billion capital investment to deliver constitutional standards.

On genomics, I met the chief scientific officer for genomics yesterday to discuss how we ensure that the UK remains a world leader in genomics—which we are—and that we can apply genomics to improve cancer outcomes. We hope that our investment in diagnostics and pathology will mean that, in future, patients such as Owain will access a greater range of treatment options.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly and Ellie are entirely right to raise the importance of innovation, particularly for less survivable cancers such as brain cancer. The Government are proud to support the Rare Cancers Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur). Next Friday, Baroness Elliott will move its Second Reading in the other place.

We will go even further to ensure that all patients with brain cancer have access to cutting edge clinical trials, innovation and lifesaving treatments. As part of our action, the National Institute for Health and Care Research announced the pioneering brain tumour research consortium to accelerate research into new brain tumour treatments across the UK. The NIHR is backing the consortium with an initial £13.7 million and more money to come this year. The world-leading consortium aims to transform outcomes for adults and children who are living with brain tumours and for their families, ultimately reducing the number of lives lost to cancer. As I confirmed yesterday, I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden in detail regarding access to funding. I am happy to commit to seeking information and exploring how we can make access to funding much clearer and more transparent.

I am pleased to confirm that the national cancer plan for England will be published in just a few short weeks, in early February. It will focus on rarer cancers, including brain cancer, and will include further details on how we will improve outcomes and work with stakeholders such as the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission to do so. The plan will detail further action to speed up diagnosis and treatment in England, ensuring that patients have access to the latest treatments and technology and ultimately driving up survival rates.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply to all our questions. In my contribution, I mentioned that Queen's University Belfast and the Belfast health and social care trust are doing a pilot scheme, which I hope will benefit England, Scotland and Wales. Can the Minister ask her Department's civil servants to take that on board?

Ashley Dalton: I am happy to confirm that I will ask officials to look into that, and to give me some advice on that pilot and on having a conversation with those running it about what we could learn from them. I thank the hon. Member for raising that question.

I will close by paying tribute to our late colleague and Member of the Senedd, Hefin David. Through tireless campaigning, he brought Owain's story to the Senedd. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly has now brought it to this place and I thank him for that. I look forward to working with him and other hon. Members to make 2026 the year that we shift the dial for patients with brain cancer.

10.37 am

Chris Evans: In a debate where tears were shed, it was good to hear the Minister's positive reply. I look forward to meeting with her and Ellie to discuss Owain's case further. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for her work on this issue. From a position of great grief, she has tried to bring about something good. I think that we can all endorse what she has been trying to do in her campaigns.

[Chris Evans]

I am pleased that the Minister has committed to meeting with the devolved Administrations, because if one thing came out of this debate, it is that cancer is no respecter of age, where we live or boundaries. It affects everybody and we need a national effort to deal with it. I am pleased with the Minister's response; I thought it was very positive. I look forward to working with her and all other hon. Members to provide the hope that we so desperately need in cases like these.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered patient access to tissue freezing for advanced brain cancer treatment, diagnostics and research.

10.38 am

Sitting suspended.

Bromsgrove: Local Government

11 am

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government organisation in Bromsgrove.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. The reorganisation of Worcestershire councils will be the largest local government reshuffle in more than 50 years. It represents a defining moment for our county—one that offers either the opportunity to deliver better value for money to residents or the risk that parts of the county will be pushed, involuntarily, into becoming extensions of an urban city. The stakes could not be higher.

The required aims of the new council organisation are clear: financial sustainability, good value for money, high-quality services and an ambition of continued improvement. Those are not abstract aspirations, but the practical foundations required to protect our communities and safeguard essential services. Only one of the two options before us will achieve the wants and needs of the local community: one unitary authority—a single, united structure that provides the clarity, efficiency and strategic strength necessary to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand to get his thoughts on what he was trying to achieve. Does he agree that local government must be efficient, accessible and accountable, and that consolidation is worth while, but not at the expense of the accessibility of services? Hailing from the rural constituency of Strangford, where constituents do not have accessible local government, I support the hon. Gentleman in his quest to ensure that it is a priority in any restructuring.

Bradley Thomas: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. The disaggregation and loss of access to sustainable services is a profound risk in any case of local government reorganisation, but particularly in rural constituencies.

I acknowledge the recent survey shared around Worcestershire, and thank those who responded: local consent should always be a priority in any devolution process, including local government reorganisation. The results showed a clear split in opinions across the county, and must be considered in context. Some 48% of respondents supported two unitary councils, 29% supported one unitary authority and 19% did not support any reorganisation, yet the number of respondents—4,200—represents only 0.6% of Worcestershire's 621,000 population, meaning the survey is questionable as a true representation of Worcestershire as a whole. In short, it is a snapshot, not a consensus.

Worcestershire is a rural county—approximately 85% is classified as such—and a picturesque one, with a seamless mix of small urban cities, semi-rural towns, rural villages and uninterrupted green space. That is no less so in my constituency, which is 79% rural and 89% green belt. Serving the needs and wants throughout the vastly different parts of the county is a delicate balancing act, but it is a balancing act that allows Worcestershire to be so wonderfully unique. It is a balancing act that allows

my constituents to enjoy beautiful country walks and quaint villages on their doorsteps, alongside the convenience of more urban towns or cities not very far away. That harmony between rural tranquillity and accessible urban life is part of what makes Worcestershire a fantastic place to live.

That balancing act would be toppled by the forced use of a city template. A model designed for incomparable metropolitan areas cannot be imposed on a county defined by its largely rural character without causing catastrophic disruption. Keeping decisions local to Worcestershire is vital: it is the only way to ensure that local communities are not sidelined, that my constituents' voices are not stripped away and that the fabric of rural life is not sacrificed. Counties shaped by their rural character are rightly proud of their identities and traditions, and any local reorganisation that happens in Worcestershire must recognise and respect our distinct needs.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend and Worcestershire neighbour is making a strong argument about the risks of a north-south divide, in which the north could be subsumed under a greater Birmingham. That is a very important point. Is he as surprised as I am that, of the district and city councils across Worcestershire, Wyre Forest was the only one to advocate a single Worcestershire unitary authority rather than the split model?

Bradley Thomas: I am surprised but that must be seen in the context of the survey I referenced. Only a very small proportion of the Worcestershire population responded to any consultation about future options. I will refer later to the wider stakeholders that are supportive of a single unitary authority to deliver local government in the best interests of residents across Worcestershire, including Wyre Forest.

The creation of two unitary councils would do the opposite of respecting the distinct needs and rural identity of Worcestershire. It would see the north Worcestershire section become by default an extension of Birmingham and would fundamentally shift our identity. North Worcestershire is a neighbour of Birmingham, but is proud to be part of the adjacent countryside that so many Birmingham residents enjoy. Conversely, north Worcestershire enjoys a proximity to Birmingham, while maintaining its unique rural character and slower pace of life.

A divided structure would only weaken our voice, dilute our identity and place our future in the hands of those who do not understand us. One unitary authority is the only option that protects Worcestershire's integrity, strengthens its governance and secures its long-term ambition for prosperity. Many residents across Bromsgrove and the villages have chosen to live there because they value the way of life. That valued identity must be protected from being merged into an urban extension, or even treated as a subset of an identity that has existed for generations and delivered a footprint for successful local government service delivery until now.

We are already at risk of urbanisation and our local democracy is already being eroded by the unprecedented housing targets being forced upon us, despite consistent local objection. As a 79% rural constituency composed of 89% green belt and approximately 8% brownfield land, our housing targets have increased by 85%.

Meanwhile, our neighbouring city of Birmingham with at least 140 hectares of brownfield land and extensively established infrastructure, has seen targets cut by more than 30%.

If we were involuntarily to risk becoming an extension of Birmingham, it is highly likely that our precious green belt would be sacrificed even further. The character of our county, its landscape, identity and rural heritage would be placed at real risk. Despite that loss, it would still be the urban areas that would continue to receive the largest proportion of infrastructure investment, leaving my constituency questioning how it can be expected to absorb the growth when infrastructure is already at capacity.

Urban areas have the highest demand for housing precisely because they are urban. That is why urban densification remains the housing policy most genuinely representative of the public's needs and wants. When providing a common-sense counter to central Government decisions, such as unreasonable housing targets, one unified voice is essential. A single coherent authority can speak for the whole county, representing all our views and standing the strongest chance of securing greater funding for transport, housing and economic development. Multiple voices drown each other out; a united voice is harder to ignore.

Alongside ensuring that decision making is kept local to Worcestershire and that my constituents are not stripped of their voice—an action that would run counter to the principle of devolution—a single unitary council is also the most sensible financial decision. It would protect local democracy while strengthening our ability to shape our own future. Financial sustainability is vital for any council. Across the country, we have seen many councils struggle with rising costs; costs that inevitably become the burden of the British taxpayer. Without a sustainable model, residents pay the price through higher taxes, reduced services or both.

My constituents have already experienced a 4.9% increase in council tax this year, due to increasing financial pressures, and are set to face a staggering 9.9% increase from Reform's county council in the next financial year. A single financially resilient authority is the most responsible way to safeguard public money and ensure that essential services remain secure for the long term.

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend has been very indulgent of me. I suspect one interesting point was not taken into account by the survey. That would be the fantastic cost of splitting up all the county-wide services, which range from adult and children's social care to waste disposal. To divide that into two and then merge the district authorities would in itself be an unnecessary cost if we have two authorities rather than one.

Bradley Thomas: I agree with my hon. Friend and neighbour. He makes a very relevant point that the cost of organising two councils will be profound, and in the long term will prove to be a false economy. The figures that I will quote shortly will demonstrate that further.

Reorganising local government will not resolve all the financial challenges facing our communities, because even with structural change, there will continue to be rising demand on adult social care, persistent pressures in homelessness and temporary accommodation, a growing resource need for schools and increasing demand for

[Bradley Thomas]

children's services. That is why financial sustainability must be by design and not chance. Anything less will fail to meet the increasing needs of local communities and will ultimately result in deficits that must be paid for by hard-working residents. Financial sustainability cannot be an afterthought; it must be the foundation.

One council will have the ability to follow six key principles to achieve genuine and lasting financial sustainability. First, it could reduce the cost of leadership and governance by redesigning leadership from the ground up to reflect the needs of a new, modern unitary authority. Secondly, it could become prevention focused by embedding a long-term independence-based approach across all services, enabling people to get back on their feet and easing the burden on local provision. Thirdly, it could ensure that all commissions are intelligent and that services provided are appropriate and necessary, supported by the unparalleled buying power and market access afforded to one council, enabling strategic investment in better value services. Fourthly, it could nurture an accountable and high-performing workforce by bringing together the strengths of seven predecessor authorities and building on their collective skills. Fifthly, it could deliver responsible custodianship of public assets to maintain a balanced budget, safeguard the continued delivery of local services and preserve our historic culture. Finally, it could make decisions that are fully informed and grounded firmly in evidence.

The outcome of that approach is simple—£32 million saved by 2031 and a more balanced, less impactful increase to council tax. In comparison, the imbalance between service need and income from council tax would be significant under two unitary councils. A new North Worcestershire unitary council would face substantial challenges, with higher levels of need but a smaller share of the tax base, while a South Worcestershire unitary authority would experience significant council tax rises over the same period. It is simple to understand that improved financial results lead directly to improved services for the community.

With the stronger position created by one council, services could be delivered through a more community-centred approach, with simpler, more accessible pathways. Residents will no longer need to navigate multiple tiers of local government to resolve their issues. That is particularly beneficial for individuals who require access to multiple services at once. This model will not only increase transparency and improve local access, which are distinct components of British politics, but will also ensure that policies truly reflect what people actually want to see and expect their council tax to support.

Streamlining service delivery under one council removes the risk of a postcode lottery where access, cost, sufficiency and quality vary depending on where residents live. That is especially vital for young people, as many schools are reaching capacity, so students are being required to travel further, and for rural communities, which are already facing limited infrastructure compared with more urbanised areas. Key people services, including housing, family support and social care, are currently delivered across two tiers of local government, creating unnecessary complexities and inefficiencies. That is particularly important in Worcestershire, where demographic shifts are significant—an ageing population

exceeding the national average, with 22% of people aged 66 to 84, alongside a growing younger population of more than 117,000 children. Those trends place profound pressure on essential services such as GPs, hospitals, schools, nurseries and social care.

One council could integrate those services so that they work cohesively to achieve better outcomes for the community. A prime example, given the demographics that I mentioned, is the ability to align health priorities with housing and leisure, enabling preventive policies that improve quality of life and reduce pressure on health services later on. Removing duplication across services would also increase efficiency in the council's overall offering. It would allow organisations, including local NHS trusts and schools, to build stronger, more consistent relationships as they would be working with a single unified authority rather than navigating multiple structures. It is evident that one council would be able to deliver the improved and simplified services that my constituents called for.

The risk of disaggregation also cannot be ignored. The need for high-cost social care, the service that 42% of survey respondents cited as the one that they care about most, is concentrated in one half of Worcestershire, while the greatest proportion of the tax base is in the other half. The current degree of balance that results in residents paying relatively low tax would be disrupted, creating long-term instability for both households and essential services.

Not only is the disaggregation of social care a dangerous risk, but it would set back the progress on bringing its functions to the high standard that they are. Adults would be at risk of not receiving seamless community care. Service deliveries and assessments would be delayed. Children's services would be restricted by boundary lines, causing disruption for those not on the correct side to continue their current care; it would be a postcode lottery. Maintaining two recording systems for social care would be costly and take a long time to implement, diverting resources from frontline support.

Similarly, fragmenting the network of partnerships in Worcestershire would only complicate funding arrangements, commissioning plans, service eligibility and the ability to install an action plan. Those partnerships have taken years to build; dismantling them would undermine the very foundations of effective care. Instead, relationships should be preserved and built upon, and closer collaboration would be far more possible with a single service provider rather than numerous tiers. That is a key benefit that only one unitary council can provide; it would ensure continuity, coherence and a system that works for every resident across Worcestershire.

A proposal for a single Worcestershire unitary authority has been backed by local partner stakeholders, including the police and crime commissioner, the local NHS integrated care board, Worcestershire acute hospitals NHS trust, the Worcestershire local visitor economy partnership, and commercial stakeholders, including Worcester Bosch.

It is evident that the proposal for a single unitary council meets the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's criteria for devolution arrangements. The case is clear and compelling. A single council for Worcestershire would offer not only operational simplicity, but a renewed sense of purpose

for local government in our area. The one council would prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to residents.

This would not simply be an organisational reshuffle; it would be a commitment to ensuring that every community, from the most rural parish to the most urban centre, receives services that are consistent, efficient and good value for money. Councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views. This collaborative approach demonstrates a proactive start and an ambition to adapt and build a structure that is reflective of residents' realities.

Having one council would enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment. Removing unnecessary layers of bureaucracy would give residents a stronger voice and a more direct relationship with those making decisions on their behalf. There would be a single tier of local government for the whole area, simplifying it and making it more accessible. The new structure would resize in order to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. In an era when public finances are increasingly overwhelmed, the ability to operate with greater resilience and strategic oversight is essential. It cannot be doubted that one unitary council would significantly meet the criteria outlined by the Government, while being in the best interest of Worcestershire as a whole.

Keeping decisions local is vital, as is achieving long-term financial sustainability, offering consistent, high-quality services, and protecting our green belt and our county's identity. That is why I strongly support the creation of one unitary council that would streamline services, improve value for money for residents and work towards a strong future for Worcestershire. This is an opportunity to shape an efficient and community-centred system for our local government—one that respects our current identity while preparing us for the challenges and opportunities ahead. A single unitary council is not merely an administrative preference; it is a strategic choice for a more secure, more coherent and more prosperous Worcestershire.

11.19 am

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important debate on local government reorganisation in Bromsgrove and Worcestershire. I know that he has a keen interest in this issue, and we all heard the detailed argument that he made. I acknowledge the arguments, facts and point of view that he explained to us, which are on the record. He will understand that there is a limit to what I can say, given the process that we are undergoing, but I assure him that colleagues in the Department and elsewhere will read and understand what he has said. I thank him for putting forward his point of view.

For background, I will run through the reasons why we are reorganising local government and why we think that will benefit communities, although the hon. Member will know them already and he raised some of the issues. We want to streamline local government and

replace the two-tier system with single unitary councils, precisely in order to create councils that can reform public services, drive economic growth and empower their communities. The hon. Member mentioned the criteria that we set out for doing that. As he said, this is not some bureaucratic exercise or tinkering with lines on a map; these are the biggest reforms to local government for a very long time—the biggest in 50 years, as he pointed out—and we need to make the most of this opportunity. We want people to have preventive public services, and we want to give economies the chance to thrive. With single councils in charge over sensible geographies, we will see quicker decisions to build homes, grow our towns and cities, and connect people to jobs.

Strong local government is central to tackling deprivation and poverty. People living in neighbourhoods that are high on the index of multiple deprivation deserve responsive and joined-up services that help them reach their full potential. Unfortunately, in too many areas across England, we have multiple levels of confusing and inefficient structures, whereas one council can take responsibility for the places it serves. The Government will deliver unitary local government in all areas of England within this Parliament, and I am really encouraged by the progress we have made so far. We have already announced two new unitary authorities for Surrey, and our consultations on the final proposals for a further six areas are due to close on 11 January.

As the hon. Member will know, we received proposals for unitary local government from councils in Worcestershire on 28 November. Let me place on record my thanks to local leaders and officers in the Worcestershire councils for their positive approach to collaboration and data sharing to enable the proposals we have received. That collaborative approach will stand the area in good stead in the unitary implementation phase, which is very important for all the reasons that the hon. Member set out. There is shared commitment in the area to get the best possible outcome for the residents, communities and businesses of Worcestershire.

I expect to launch a consultation in early February on the final proposals I received on 28 November, including those from Worcestershire, that seek to meet the terms of the 5 February statutory invitation. That consultation will run for seven weeks. Decisions on the most appropriate option for each area will be judgments made in the round, having regard to the criteria in the statutory guidance, the consultation responses and any other relevant information. We have heard much more relevant information today and, as I mentioned, that will be taken into account as we proceed.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this debate. I know that he has spoken in the House on previous occasions to share his views, and we have heard them. I cannot comment further, but we are grateful that he has put those matters on the record. I know that there will be many opinions locally, and he has done an excellent job of representing his constituents this morning. When the time comes to launch the consultation, I know that he will engage with it to make sure that the views of his constituents are fed in. I am grateful to him and keen to hear those opinions.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

UK Town of Culture

2.30 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK Town of Culture competition.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I want to begin by saying why the UK town of culture competition matters to towns like Halesowen. At its best, culture is not a luxury for places that are already well off; it is the glue that keeps communities together when the economy is changing around them. It is the thing that turns a high street into a meeting place, a park into a shared memory, and local history into a source of confidence for the next generation. The town of culture award is not just a title for the tourist brochures; it can be a lever for investment, volunteering, skills and pride, and for the practical business of renewal, as well as the poetry.

It is right that the competition has arrived when it has, because anyone who has spent time in the Black Country will know that we have quietly been a centre of British culture for years. London may have the west end, but the Black Country was the birthplace of British rock music, with Led Zeppelin and Slade hailing from our part of the world. The capital may have art galleries, but we have the Black Country Living Museum to preserve the history of glass making, chain making and real industrial crafts. Through the Hawne Halesowen townswomen's guild we have probably the best yarn bombers in the history of the world.

We are not short on culture, but we have been short on other people noticing it. That is why I am proud to speak today about Halesowen, a town that deserves to be understood. Halesowen sits at a remarkable junction: a market town with the industrial inheritance of the Black Country and the green breathing space of the surrounding countryside. It is a place where in the same afternoon people can feel the legacy of making and the comfort of landscape. That combination is not accidental: it is the outcome of centuries of people working the land, working the forge, and creating a community that knows what it means to pull together.

When we speak about the Black Country, we speak rightly about manufacturing, and Halesowen has that story in its bones. In and around Halesowen, families built livelihoods through skilled trades and hard physical work done in small workshops and backyards, with a pride in workmanship that still shapes our local character today. It is tempting to describe that as history and move on, but that would miss the point. The value of that heritage is not simply that it happened, but what it tells us about the people of Halesowen today. It is a town where practical intelligence is still prized, where people understand the dignity of work, and where small and medium-sized businesses do not need lectures on resilience, because they have been living it for decades.

If Halesowen is a town that makes, it is also a town that imagines. One of the great cultural treasures of the constituency is the Leasowes, a historic landscape that was shaped by the poet William Shenstone. The Leasowes is not merely a park; it represents an idea—an early expression of the English landscape tradition where beauty, nature and the rhythms of rural life were brought together in a way that influenced English gardens far

beyond our town. Its remarkable beauty drew two former US Presidents to visit: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. I issue an open invitation to the sitting US President to follow in their footsteps—it is a much nicer place than Greenland.

Within the Leasowes is a place that is exactly what the town of culture competition should be about: the Leasowes walled garden. It is hard to think of a more fitting symbol of what we are discussing. The walled garden is Halesowen at its best: respectful of the past, practical in the present and quietly ambitious for the future. It is not just a historical feature; it is a demonstration of civic pride in action. The walled garden has been brought back from ruin through the determined efforts of the Halesowen Abbey Trust and a remarkable team of volunteers who have given their time, skill and patience to restore a piece of heritage for public benefit. That work has received national recognition: just last month, the Leasowes walled garden was listed as grade II by Historic England, recognising both its historic significance and its architectural interest.

Halesowen has not only landscape but cultural reach through literature. It is the birthplace of Francis Brett Young, whose writing helped to put our region in the frame. Culture is not only what happens in big cities; it is also the patient recording of lives and places that feel to the people who live there like the centre of the world.

Halesowen is also the world centre of music. I mentioned Led Zeppelin earlier. Robert Plant grew up in Hayley Green and went on to become one of the defining voices in British rock; indeed, he was voted the best lead singer of all time by *Rolling Stone* magazine. And no town is complete without sport. Halesowen Town football club is not merely a team but an institution. It is one of the places where community life is renewed weekly, through familiar rituals: the talk on the terraces, the work of the volunteers behind the scenes and the intergenerational bonds that non-league football clubs uniquely sustain.

That brings me to someone who deserves to be named in this debate—Colin Brookes, the long-standing chairman of Halesowen Town FC, who passed away at the end of last year. Colin was a towering figure at the club, and he is remembered by many as the embodiment of its spirit and in many ways the town's spirit, too. Colin guided Halesowen Town through many challenges, always remained close to the club and—fittingly—passed away while watching his beloved Yeltz.

However, the truth is that Halesowen's culture is not only what I can list in a speech; it is also the daily life of the town. It is what happens in community centres, churches, schools, parks, cafés and small businesses; it is the volunteers who turn up in the cold to help run a youth club; and it is the sense that the town is more than a collection of streets. That matters profoundly when we talk about a town of culture, because the competition should not be about parachuting in a programme of events, and leaving behind a banner and a few glossy photographs. Instead, it should be about enabling a town to tell the truth about itself: what it has been, what it is now and what it wants to become.

In Halesowen, one of the truths that we can express with confidence is that ours is a welcoming town. For generations, people have come to Halesowen to work, to build families, to contribute and to become part of the place. That is not a recent trend—it is part of the

Black Country story. We have communities who have shaped the local economy and culture over time, bringing traditions and different languages, food and faiths, that have widened the town's horizons.

That diversity is not a weakness to be managed, but a strength to be celebrated. It is seen in the way that communities support one another. It is also seen in the celebration of the Black Country Multicultural Day in the town centre, or at the Halesowen/Dudley Yemeni community association, which offers language classes and youth activities. Culture, after all, is a shared language that allows people of different backgrounds to recognise themselves in a common home.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has given an eloquent appraisal of why Halesowen is such a beacon for culture, and I note that Morgan Rogers, who plays for Aston Villa, was born in Halesowen. Will my hon. Friend join me in saying that this competition is not just about celebrating our past but about celebrating our future and people such as Max Stokes, a constituent of mine in Redditch, who curates the “Villa On Tour” YouTube channel, which has over 80,000 subscribers? People such as Max Stokes provide an outlet for our culture, including our sporting culture, to be seen by people across the world—culture with a Redditch accent and a Redditch voice. Does he agree that this competition should be about celebrating our future as well as our past?

Alex Ballinger: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating Max Stokes and his wonderful achievements in Redditch. My hon. Friend knows Halesowen well, because he has campaigned there for many years, so I hope that he will be an advocate for my town throughout the competition.

When I ask the Minister to recognise Halesowen's cultural claim, I am not simply asking for a prize; I am making a practical argument. The town of culture award can help towns such as Halesowen in at least four concrete ways. First, it can boost our local economy, bringing in visitors to spend money in our shops, cafés and venues, supporting jobs that are rooted in a place. Secondly, it can strengthen skills and pathways for young people, particularly in the creative industries, events, heritage, digital media and community enterprise. Those sectors are growing and towns such as Halesowen should not be left to watch them grow from the sidelines. Thirdly, it can drive investment in local assets—our parks, halls, libraries and heritage sites—that towns rely on for civic life, but that often struggle to receive sustained funding. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the award can restore confidence. A community that feels seen and valued tends to act like it. Pride is not merely an ambition—it is a catalyst that changes what a town believes is possible.

In that spirit, I will put on the record what Halesowen can offer this competition. We can offer the story of a town that helped to build the country through skilled work, honest labour, technical ability and enterprise. We can offer landscape and heritage that connects people to the long thread of English history, and not as nostalgia but as stewardship. We can offer a living and modern cultural identity, and music, sport and community traditions that are rooted in place but outward-looking. We can also offer a model of community cohesion that is quietly impressive—diverse, practical and neighbourly.

I would want our programme to reflect those truths. I would want it to celebrate the makers and their skills to revitalise green spaces and heritage sites, to open doors for young people into culture and creative work, and to showcase the everyday institutions and individuals—community groups, faith organisations and volunteers—that keep our town strong.

Halesowen has the story, the assets and the people. With the right support, we can turn that into a bid that does justice not only to our town, but to the wider Black Country. If we are serious about culture at the heart of renewal, we should start with the towns that have never lost their sense of community, even when the national spotlight has looked elsewhere. Halesowen is one of those towns. It has earned its place in the national story and I hope that, through this competition, it will be given a platform to tell that story with the confidence it deserves.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I ask Members to bob so that I can see how many people wish to speak in the debate. To start the debate, I call Jim Shannon.

2.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me so early, Ms Furniss. I was about to sit down, but I now have the unexpected pleasure of following the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger). It is wonderful to be here. I am sure that everyone is going to say that their constituency is the best, but mine is the best and I will try to explain why. The hon. Member has persuaded me of one thing: if I am spared, I will make it my business to visit his constituency and see if what says is true. I am sure it is—I do not doubt it for a second.

The debate presents a wonderful opportunity to showcase all our wonderful constituencies, and I am sure that we will all plead the case very well. However, I say proudly that my constituency of Strangford may just edge it—at least I believe that that will be the case—but we will see how the debate develops and whether others are persuaded by my words. The principle of the competition—and it is a competition—is a great idea. Of course, the heavy issues that we discuss daily are important—they are critically important to County Down—but it is also important that we celebrate our local towns and all that they do for communities across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Halesowen is right that the largest town is the core of a constituency. I often talk about my constituency in the House. I always try to relate the issues we discuss to the situation back home, because those issues matter to people across the whole of the United Kingdom, although sometimes their scope is restricted by area. I am grateful that we all have the opportunity to showcase culture and I will focus on the wonderful town of Newtownards, which is the biggest town in the constituency and where my advice centre is. There are other notable towns such as Comber, Ballynahinch and Crossgar. I am not sure if hon. Members knows where those places are, but they are all in my constituency, and I make sure that Strangford is mentioned in nearly every intervention that I make and in every debate in which I participate.

[Jim Shannon]

Comber has a long history that dates back to the 17th century. It played an important role in the agricultural and linen industries that Northern Ireland had for many years, although unfortunately that is not the same today, giving it a unique cultural and economic heritage that is preserved in local museums and historical societies, which the hon. Member for Halesowen referred to in his contribution.

Newtownards is home to my main constituency office, where I support thousands of constituents. It is a town where history, heritage and creativity come together to form a truly unique cultural identity. Newtownards is a canvas of heritage. Anyone walking through the streets can see the historical Market House, the Scrabo tower and the old buildings that frame Conway Square. The hon. Member for Halesowen referred to cafés, but we have created a coffee culture in Conway Square, where a large number of coffee shops have opened in the last four to five years. There are family-owned shops: Wardens has been going since 1877 and Knotts is there too. The Old Cross, now the Parlour pub, was first built in 1735. That means that Wardens is almost 150 years old and the Parlour is 291 years old, so there is history and culture that goes back a long time.

I am very proud of my Orange culture, which has shaped identities for generations. I am a member of Kircubbin Volunteers LOL 1900, and I am also worshipful master of the House of Commons lodge. The lodges and parades are more than tradition; they bring communities together and invite everyone to take part in their culture, and people do. People from different religious persuasions—maybe different political persuasions—see the pageant and the celebration of the Orange parades. From local theatre groups to vibrant music ensembles, from community murals to creative festivals, the list is never-ending.

Culture should be for everyone, and I celebrate the story of that 17th-century town established in 1605: Newtownards. It was established as part of the plantation of Ulster, when English and Scottish settlers were encouraged to establish towns and farms in Ulster. I always look towards my Scottish and Gaelic brothers and sisters in this place and say to them, if we go back far enough, we might be related—we might even be cousins. Today we see that fertile land and Strangford Lough, which provided access to maritime trade, still used and loved.

To conclude, I acknowledge and love to hear others' passion for the places that they represent. I adore my towns and, more so, I thank them for what they represent for the people who live in them and the businesses that hold them together. For the ones in my constituency, where else would you find more charm per square mile? I believe Strangford and Newtownards is that very place.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I can let you all have four minutes.

2.46 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): In Cornwall, we do not have big urban centres; we have towns with populations of about 20,000. That is why the UK town of culture competition is one that a large

rural area such as Cornwall can get involved in. I am taking it as a good example of the Government's commitment to, and awareness of, the rural parts of the country.

I am really lucky to come from a place with a distinctive narrative. We have our own language, which is now recognised again, and in Truro and Falmouth we have a beautiful peninsula town and a great little city, each with their own character and a strong sense of Cornish identity. Falmouth has a very distinct story. It is a vibrant place that has always turned its face outwards towards the sea. The packet ships took trade and parcels around the world from the late 1600s, and we have the two castles of Pendennis and St Mawes, built by Henry VIII, to protect Falmouth.

Now, Falmouth has an incredible arts and science university, stemming out of a 100-year-old art school, along with a thriving music scene and an active and young town council in lockstep with a strong business improvement district. The council runs an art gallery for all, a library, the peninsula headland, a newly built community radio station, and a theatre and venue. The team are award-winning and know how to run a world-class event, from international shanty festivals to the tall ships. Falmouth is inclusive and welcoming, from yacht to gig racing and from shanties and metal to Ukrainian soul. It hosts everything from the Lady of Shalott by Waterhouse to graduate shows of prosthetic props at Falmouth University in Penryn, where the Methodist chapel was recently converted into artist spaces.

Then there is Truro, Cornwall's capital and one of the smallest cities in the UK. Lying upriver from Falmouth, it has been shaped by its proximity to the coast, as almost everywhere in Cornwall has been. There is evidence that the Phoenicians and the Romans traded with Truro, and by the 14th century it had become a significant port and stannary town, exporting locally mined tin and copper. We hope that can now happen again thanks to our critical minerals strategy.

By the 19th century, Truro was a local cultural centre. The Royal Institution of Cornwall was founded in the city to promote the arts and sciences. It was intended to provide access to culture and learning for Cornish people at a time when there was no universal education. This aim resembles that of the town of culture competition: to break down the barriers to opportunity and open up culture to everyone, even if they live in a peripheral area such as Cornwall, where some of the high arts barely come down at all.

The Royal Institution of Cornwall still exists today in the form of the Cornwall Museum and Art Gallery. Truro is also home to Cornwall's beautifully renovated national theatre, which has just finished its Cornish panto, and our distinctive gothic revival cathedral, which hosts everything from art and silent discos to concerts. We have weekly markets, Bert Biscoe's walking tours, fantastic pubs, bars and restaurants, and so much more.

Cornwall's story has always been one of reinvention. When the packet service left Falmouth in the mid-19th century, the town adapted. As the river Truro silted up, the city became Cornwall's administrative heart. Our mining industry has seen boom and bust, and now resurgence. Creativity has always sparked in Cornwall, but rurality and peripherality have often limited our opportunity. We face deprivation, which is why cultural infrastructure really matters. Whether it is one of the

places I have mentioned alone, or as part of a hub-and-spoke model, they would all have my wholehearted support in the UK town of culture competition, and I urge them to apply.

2.50 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): It is a pleasure to listen to these wonderful encomia for our towns, and I am going to add my voice on behalf of Wiltshire, and particularly Amesbury. I would be delighted if Marlborough, the other big town in my constituency, were to win the competition, but I want to speak particularly for Amesbury.

I was struck by the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), who made a very good speech on behalf of his constituency, boasting about its important link with the history of heavy metal. Anyone who has seen the film “This Is Spinal Tap” will know that in fact it is Stonehenge that is the genuine heart of the history of heavy metal. On that ground, if nothing else, surely Amesbury should win, because it is the town of Stonehenge. I will return to that point in a moment.

The hon. Gentleman for Redditch (Chris Bloore) intervened to suggest that the award should be about the future. I disagree. Surely it should be about the history of our places. There is no place in these islands with a longer, and therefore greater, history than Amesbury, because it is the oldest continually inhabited settlement in the British Isles. People were living there a very, very long time ago, in 8820 BC. In fact, the grave of what we now call the Amesbury archer—a man buried with a bow and arrow and various other valuable artefacts—was discovered in Amesbury some time ago. DNA testing has demonstrated that he came to Amesbury from the Swiss alps many centuries ago, in the days when this country was still connected to Europe by a land bridge. Those who believe we should rejoin our continental neighbours under some sort of terrible political union might be inspired to think of Amesbury as a place where that was demonstrated millennia ago.

Thousands of years after the original settlement, Stonehenge was built, and it stands as the greatest monument to a now forgotten civilisation—the heart of England from which so much derived. The great world heritage site that is the central district of Wiltshire is to be found in Amesbury. It is the site of Romans, Saxons and the myths of King Arthur, whose wife Guinevere is apparently buried in Amesbury—who can tell? We do know that King Alfred left the manor of Amesbury to his son. A little later, in the pre-Norman era, the first church was built there, and its remains are still there. Subsequently, and significantly, the remains of the only monarch of England whose whereabouts are not precisely known are believed to be somewhere in Amesbury. Queen Eleanor of Provence, the wife of Henry III, died somewhere in the area in 1291. We are hopeful that in the coming years we will discover her actual burial place and have a fitting memorial.

Having made the point about Amesbury’s past, I want to conclude by saying that it is a very vibrant, genuinely warm community that is rich in existing possibility and, indeed, in prosperity. It is part of the world heritage site, although sadly bisected from Stonehenge itself by the A303. We had been led to believe there was going to be a significant investment in tunnelling that road, which would have connected the town more closely to the site,

but that is now not happening. Nevertheless, there is an enormous opportunity, and it is really important for Wiltshire that the town that hosts the museum for Stonehenge and is, as I say, the source of such amazing heritage should be able to benefit from the millions of tourists who come through every year. I hope that, through the town of culture award, we can recognise the importance of Amesbury locally, nationally and internationally.

2.54 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing this debate. I am delighted to speak today to shine a spotlight on Longton, a proud town in my constituency and a place where culture does not just sit in museums but runs through everyday life. Longton stands proud among Stoke-on-Trent’s six towns—five not six, Mr Arnold Bennett—all of which retain their own identity.

Longton’s culture is inseparable from its history. It made a significant contribution to the UK’s heritage and culture through our proud pottery industry, which to this day still ships British products all over the world. Duchess China provides its china to the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and Sarah Rose provides china to No. 10—we are everywhere. Longton was once at the beating heart of the industry, and visitors from all over the world now come to marvel at our pottery heritage at the beloved Gladstone Pottery Museum, home of “The Great Pottery Throw Down”. But Longton’s heritage is not just a relic of its past. The skills, creativity and pride forged through generations of pottery and craft continue to shape our future. The ceramics industry has faced real challenges, but there is an enormous opportunity to grow tourism and breathe new life into our many heritage buildings.

Local businesses are already capitalising on the opportunity to showcase our culture. The Kiln at Number 12 offers visitors pottery, painting and hands-on craft experiences. I am sure Members have seen those fish-shaped drinking jugs—they are from the Gluggle Jug factory, in my constituency. Roslyn works, a grade II listed pot bank, is now an entrepreneurial centre that showcases the work of brilliant local artisans and hosts the smallest pottery kiln in the country. Launch It, which operates in Longton town hall, is a local hub for young entrepreneurs, creatives, artists and makers to seek business and start-up support—supporting new arts, crafts and creative businesses to thrive.

Our culture extends beyond pottery to arts and music. In our town centre, we have beautiful murals commemorating the world wars, as well as commemorating the world-renowned Belstaff brand, which started in Longton and now sells clothes all over the globe. There are plans for another huge mural opposite our train station to commemorate our proud pottery heritage, plus a new statue outside our town hall celebrating female potters. Music is central to Longton. At Methodist Central Hall, we have frequent choirs, including Stoke male voice choir.

We are incredibly lucky to have Urban Wilderness, a charity that delivers place-based events and arts programmes to empower our local community. It has recently secured

[Dr Allison Gardner]

funding to turn an old bank into a new art centre, expanding on its Moony Club programme—a free-to-access arts programme in Longton Exchange. In 2023, Urban Wilderness started its famous Longton carnival and pig walk parade. It is based on a local heritage story about Mayor John Aynsley, who won a bet with the Duke of Sutherland by walking a pig through the centre of Longton, thereby winning the Queen's parkland for the people of Longton.

I thank Isla Telford at Urban Wilderness for putting forward Longton's bid for the UK town of culture, and Roz Ryan, in the vibrant Longton Exchange, for putting the idea forward. Their bid proposal will look into themes of work and play, young people, and the legacy of our great ceramic heritage, including our canals and our connections to coal. They will be working with multiple partners to deliver a future-focused bid that builds on the centenary of Stoke-on-Trent and celebrates Longton's unique blend of industrial manufacture, play and connectivity.

Longton's story is not just a local one. It is a story of British industry, British creativity and British communities refusing to give up. I am confident that, with the right support, Longton can continue to be a vibrant town centre, and that it would be a great UK town of culture.

2.58 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for his passionate pitch for his area.

I welcome the Government's announcement of the competition for the town of culture 2028. The nature of a community is defined by three things: its landscape and architecture, its hospitality and retail sector, and—mostly—its culture. Dorset is the home of the Jurassic coast, but it is also home to some incredible culture: from the literature of Thomas Hardy and Enid Blyton to the Arts by the Sea festival in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and the Inside Out festival, which pops up in the smaller towns and villages—not to mention Purbeck film festival, which is the oldest rural film festival in the UK, so lovingly curated by volunteers.

I agree with the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore), who talked about the future as well as the past. I celebrate both. The three towns of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, which are looking to bid together, offer a great story of togetherness. Christchurch has a history that dates back to AD 650, with its younger sibling Poole—with its fantastic links to Canada and fishing—receiving the first of its two charters in 1248.

Poole also draws on its local culture with the Folk on the Quay festival, which is the smaller sibling of the annual Wimborne minster folk festival. The harbour is also the setting for the amazing Poole harbour festival, which I am excited to confirm is being headlined this year by the Kaiser Chiefs, and will also feature my favourite band, Scouting for Girls, as well as many home-grown talents, such as Chris Payn, the Wonky Donkeys and the Mother Ukers.

Our incredible landscape also inspires visual arts. Our lord lieutenant even has an inspiring artist in residence, the lovely Dave Roberts, who pens everything that the lord lieutenant does throughout all the towns.

People often bemoan how our town centres have become identikit. As we move to online shopping, and as the high cost of trading makes it far more difficult, our towns and cities will become defined more by what we can do and experience than by what we can buy. That is why it is so important that councils continue to fund culture; it must not become something that only the wealthy can afford.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that economic regeneration through the arts and culture is a powerful way of showing the link between the past and the future in our national story? If so, would she agree that Folkestone is a prime example of that? Having been a port from which our troops went to the frontline in world war one, it became a commercial port, has been regenerated through the arts and is now the best place to live in south-east England.

Vikki Slade: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for raising that. Speaking of towns with incredible historical ports, much of the training for the D-day landings took place from Poole harbour. We now have the incredible Lighthouse cultural venue in Poole, where residents have mapped the town's history, its links to Canada and its future in an incredible community play, showing how the town grew up.

The Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, which is based in Poole, could not open up to the National Theatre schools programme without public funding. It could not send musicians into hospices, run its annual schools concert, which this year is based on the elements, or visit Exeter and Portsmouth without that local funding. It is absolutely crucial that we maintain that, so that grassroots groups can continue to meet in our draughty community centres to create the next generation of actors, musicians, authors and artists. They simply will not exist if we do not maintain funding for culture.

I am really pleased that the Minister is to confirm that the town of culture competition will come with £60,000 of funding; when looking into the city of culture scheme, I found that it can be incredibly expensive to enter these competitions; if a city does not get through to the final, they end up then having to cut the very services that they were trying to develop through the competition. It is a great decision to make sure that shortlisted places get a bite of the cherry.

I know that Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole will submit their own very vibrant and energising application, which will deserve support, but I must mention smaller groups too. Besides the UK town of culture, Dorset has its own town of culture competition, and I am thrilled that this year Wimborne, the heart of my beautiful constituency, has been announced as the town of culture 2026, with its incredible Museum of East Dorset—complete with a mummified cat—a chained library in Wimborne minster, the Tivoli theatre, the Allendale Centre, the annual Queen Elizabeth's school show, which this year is "Legally Blonde: The Musical", the Walford Mill Gallery, the annual folk festival and the Kingston Lacy stately home, which features incredible art celebrating its LGBT owner, who had to hide away in Spain when it was not safe to be gay in this country.

Wimborne really is the place to be in 2026 and can show other places how culture can be inclusive, relevant and fun even on a small scale. I would love to welcome the Minister and other hon. Members to come to Wimborne during 2026; I can assure them they will receive a warm welcome and leave enriched by a flavour of Dorset in our food and our culture.

3.3 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve, Ms Furniss. I want to tell a story about my own background and how it relates to the concept of culture-led growth.

I grew up in the '70s and '80s in the north-west of England in a town called Prescott, about 15 miles or so from my Southport constituency that was dominated for decades by the factory site of an industrial cable manufacturer. The town adopted the cable factory almost as a part of its identity. Ask anyone for miles around, and they would say, "Oh, Prescott—that's where they make the cables." The town's football club is still called Prescott Cables. When I was a little boy, I used to make Lego models of the machinery that I could see through the factory gates that I passed on my way to school. The factory hooter, telling the workers when their shift was open, could be heard all over the town, and on new year's eve it would blow especially at midnight to bring in the new year. The importance of that place to the town cannot be overstated.

Then they closed the factory down. Hundreds of well-paid jobs were gone. The next generation of lads growing up would not be making Lego models of the factory any more. There is nothing special about that story; it is one that is repeated everywhere. But there is a positive element, because over the last decade the town has been transformed through culture.

There has long been a rumour—probably untroubled by fact—that in the 1590s William Shakespeare visited Prescott to escape the plague. Based on that rumour, 20 years ago a small group of cultural practitioners decided to build an Elizabethan-style, 500-capacity theatre on the site of a big old bus stop in the town. People laughed; the council leader actually said,

"When I announced the plan in the council chamber, quite a few people started laughing".

They are not laughing now, because there is indeed a playhouse on the site of that old bus stop, training up young people in the creative industries, the arts and performance.

The £40 million capital investment that was brought in was only the start of the story, though, because the theatre is attracting people back into the town. It has a positive multiplier effect. The jobs are coming back; cafés are opening where there used to be bookmakers; a community arts organisation is now going into schools to inspire children into a career in the creative industries. It would not surprise me if some of those children started building Lego models of the playhouse.

Here is my point: the destiny of a town is not set in stone. It can be changed. Commitment to cultural infrastructure can reverse a downward slide. Change can happen off the back of cultural improvement.

My hometown proves that, but we have also done similarly in my new home in Southport since I was elected. We have a year of culture in 2026. There will be an incredible sound and light installation taking over

the town, turning it into a giant rainbow. There will be an outdoor ballroom in April, with 150 years of music and dance played out, and our favourite works of fiction are coming to life on the streets of the town in October—check out Southport2026.com for more details. We know that that is what a town of culture can do. It will allow the kids of today to look back in wonder in 50 years' time, and to tell their grandchildren that they were there.

3.7 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I must say how good it is to stand up in Westminster Hall to speak enthusiastically about an initiative like this one. I thank the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing today's debate, because investment is often focused on cities and larger urban areas, so the town of culture initiative is truly welcome.

Having spoken to interested groups in my constituency, I know there is real excitement about the initiative and the fact that it will draw attention to towns where creativity, heritage and culture are already thriving. Becoming a town of culture will act as a catalyst for growth, allowing hidden gems to shine. As well as boosting local pride, it could help to support high street recovery and create opportunities for residents, especially young people, who may never have considered employment in the creative sector before.

At its heart, however, the initiative is about empowering local people—artists, musicians and volunteers as well as schools, community groups and local businesses—to create a cultural programme that reflects the identity of their town. That sense of ownership, and the platform it gives to local organisations, is what makes the initiative so powerful. It invites groups in local communities to work together to showcase what their town has to offer, and to tell their own unique story to the rest of the UK—and their MPs are doing a stellar job on their behalf in this debate.

I can tell the Minister that I have a town in my constituency, Chesham, where community groups, volunteers and businesses are champing at the bit to get started on their application. Frankly, it is brilliant to see. In his remarks, will he answer the questions that they have asked me, by clarifying the timeline that he is working to and confirming which authorities must support a bid?

3.9 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing this debate, and warmly welcome the opportunity for Bishop Auckland to bid to become the UK's town of culture.

Bishop Auckland is the town that gave birth to the calendar. It was Bede who stood on a local hillside, looked at the cosmos and wrote "The Reckoning of Time", by which we decide when Easter is today. The north-east is the cradle of Christianity in the UK. The Faith Museum, the only one of its kind globally, opened in Bishop Auckland in 2023 and tells the 6,000 year history of faith, including Christianity, in the UK. It is based at Auckland Palace, the home of the prince bishops of Durham, who were the most important men in the kingdom after the king at the time.

[Sam Rushworth]

The town forms part of the camino ingles, or English way, a route trod by pilgrims since the middle ages. We have an Anglo-Saxon church, one of the oldest in the country, down the road. Following a community archaeological dig, the 14th century ruins of Bek's chapel were discovered outside the palace. The eponymous Bek served not only as bishop of Durham, but as patriarch of Jerusalem. The palace is also home to the famous Zurbarán paintings "Jacob and his Twelve Sons".

The connection between Bishop Auckland and Spanish art is perhaps best exemplified by the Spanish Gallery, where hon. Members will find the greatest collection of 17th century Spanish art anywhere in the world outside Spain. It was opened by the now King, alongside Queen Letizia of Spain, in 2022. Bishop Auckland's pedigree in the world of art does not stop there. Our town's proud industrial heritage is on display at the Mining Art Gallery, showcasing work of local artists such as former mineworkers Tom McGuinness of Witton Park and Norman Cornish from nearby Spennymoor, two prevalent figures in British social realism. The museum was founded by my constituent and neighbour Bob McManners to showcase his collection of art.

The town also punches above its weight in the performing arts. Stanley Jefferson, of Laurel and Hardy fame, was educated at King James I grammar school, while his father managed the Eden theatre. Renowned classical composer Edward Elgar played "The Music Makers" in 1913 at St Peter's church, and dedicated it to his friend Nicholas Kilburn, the organist. Is it possible that the rousing English anthem "Land of Hope and Glory" was also played for the first time in Bishop Auckland?

Witton Park features the start of the Stockton and Darlington railway, the world's first passenger railway, which celebrated its bicentenary last year. More than that, nearby West Auckland won the first world cup. It is suggested that the organisers had invited Woolwich Arsenal, but the initials WA meant the letter went to West Auckland—though we know it was really because they wanted north-east grit. Picture the scene: people clubbing together to send their boys off to Turin, selling what they had and huddling round the radio to listen. What is more, the team went on to win the cup—not once, but twice. Jack Greenwell from Crook Town went on to manage Barcelona, and Bishop Auckland's football team lent players to Manchester United after the Munich air disaster.

We also have the food festival, the Bishop Auckland heritage festival and so much more. I have covered history, faith, industry, music, arts, food and sports; frankly, no town tells the cultural story of Britain like Bishop Auckland.

3.13 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing today's important debate. I wholeheartedly support this competition; it is vital to celebrate our towns. I want to talk about my own town, Reading, and the incredible potential of turning Reading Gaol into an arts and heritage hub. I will also mention a number of other aspects of culture and heritage from our town, including its Georgian and Victorian history, the legacy of Jane Austen and other aspects of town life.

I am lucky to represent a wonderful, diverse and tolerant place, the second largest urban area in the south-east and one of England's largest towns. It is also the site of the medieval Reading abbey, where King Henry I was buried—like Leicester, we potentially have a king in a car park, although he has not been excavated yet. Henry was buried in the abbey, when it existed—after the Reformation, it was closed, and its stone was taken and used for other things. We are not sure exactly where his remains lie; it is believed to be either under the wall of the jail or possibly in what is currently the prison car park. One day, I hope we will be able to celebrate his history and the link with him in a fuller and deeper way, rather like our colleagues in Leicester were when they discovered their own king.

The jail was built on the site of the abbey in the 19th century. It is famous for being the place where Oscar Wilde was so sadly incarcerated at the end of that century. It was opened for art's use a few years ago by a charity called Artangel, and going inside was absolutely incredible. Imagine walking into this incredible Victorian jail—like me, some people are old enough to have seen "Porridge", while others may have seen it on UK Gold—which was designed by George Gilbert Scott, the same architect responsible for the Albert memorial and St Pancras station. Imagine looking along the metal walkways and into the individual cells, which are used for art installations, and going into Oscar Wilde's cell. It is an incredibly powerful experience that brings art and history to life, and I hope that we can see this wonderful old building used in this way in the future. I should also pay tribute to Banksy for drawing a picture of an escaping prisoner on the outside of the jail, which people currently visit to take selfies with, and which caused a massive stir several years ago.

There are many other aspects of art and culture in our town, and it is worth considering the other literary links between Reading and figures in English literature. This year is the 250th anniversary of the birth of Jane Austen, who was educated at what became Abbey school in Reading, and I had the privilege of attending a ceremony at the school to mark that. At least one and possibly two of her books are inspired by her time at school in Reading, including one of the less well-known ones, "Northanger Abbey", which I had to read as an A-level English literature student, along with "Persuasion". Her time in Reading is an important part of our local culture and history.

We also have links to Thomas Hardy. One of his novels partially features the town, and his novel "Jude the Obscure" is set in Oxford—a much lesser place. Reading has many other interesting historic links. It goes back to Saxon times and has a large number of Georgian and 19th-century conservation areas, which I would like to celebrate.

I look forward to hearing the Minister talk more about towns and how the competition would work, and to working with colleagues across the country and hearing more about this wonderful competition.

3.17 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing the debate. Being from and representing a

constituency in the Bradford district, I would like to take the opportunity to share some of the amazing highlights of our year as the city of culture. I particularly hope that some of the impacts I describe will be useful to those who are considering applying for the town of culture competition or hoping to be successful in it. It is a fantastic development.

Although we talk about the city of culture, it was really the whole district. Towns in my constituency of Shipley and Bingley were very much part of the Bradford 2025 experience, which celebrated both our rich history and the dynamic contemporary culture found across the Bradford district. Some people may not be aware that it is already designated a UNESCO city of film. It also hosts a wonderful collection of works by Bradford-born artist David Hockney at Salts Mill. That is a brilliant example of culturally led regeneration, which some hon. Members here may be interested in. Salts Mill is in Saltaire, which is also a world heritage site and which now hosts the Peace museum, a fantastic historical collection.

The year started in Centenary Square—it was minus 10°—with a celebration called RISE, showcasing some amazing spoken word poetry, as well as acrobats. It concluded in Bingley in my constituency with Brighter Still and fantastic stories of hope celebrating the diversity of people who are born and raised in Bradford or who have moved there and made it their home.

In the few minutes I have, I want to highlight the sense of community that that generated. With more than 5,000 events across the whole district, audiences in excess of 3 million, 650 local artists and organisations, and participatory projects that brought in some 87,000 people, there was something for everyone. We had Our Patch co-ordinators on the ground working with community organisations to involve them in everything from creating skate park murals to rap songs. That has resulted in eight in 10 residents now saying that the city of culture programme made them feel proud of where they live.

On top of that, we had a national profile. Great collaborations with the likes of the BBC meant that we hosted the “Antiques Roadshow” and “Songs of Praise”, and at some point in the year 38% of the UK population watched part of something featuring Bradford. Furthermore, the Turner prize 2025 exhibition is in Cartwright Hall—outside of London for the first time—and it has not quite closed yet.

Being the city of culture also brought huge economic and social benefits. With more than 2,700 volunteers involved as youth ambassadors, the hope is that the legacy of the city of culture will be the opportunities it gives our young people to gain skills in the creative industries, which West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin has made a critical priority in the West Yorkshire industrial strategy.

I conclude by asking the Minister to support the legacy of the city of culture in Bradford, and to congratulate the directors, Shanaz Gulzar and Dan Bates, who were honoured with MBEs in the new year honours for their fantastic work. I wish all colleagues here much success with their bids.

3.21 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss, and to speak in the debate.

Towns such as Crewe show exactly why the UK town of culture competition matters. For too long, places such as Crewe felt the consequences of decisions taken outside of their control: under-investment, economic mismanagement, rising costs and, of course, the devastating loss of High Speed 2. However, I am pleased to say that Crewe is turning a corner, and I am confident that 2026 will be the year—long overdue—when my constituents can lift their heads with pride in their town. We are seeing investment, ambition and real pride returning to our town centre, driven by our community and entrepreneurs, and supported by the economic stability that this Labour Government are delivering.

Culture is at the heart of our renewal. The strong and established Crewe cultural forum brings together Cheshire East council, Crewe town council, the Lyceum theatre, our libraries and archives, local businesses, the NHS and community partners. Through our successful Arts Council England placemaker project, the Crewe//Makes Artspace, we have already demonstrated that Crewe can collaborate and think big about culture. I am particularly pleased that those cultural institutions at the heart of our town will lead Crewe’s bid for UK town of culture.

That ambition is visible on our high street. The Crewe Market Hall has been reborn as a thriving hub for food, drink and entertainment. I was pleased to enjoy the festive pantomime at the Lyceum theatre—a jewel in our town, and Cheshire’s only surviving Edwardian theatre—and I will be back there in January to watch Russell Howard. It is now complemented by Lyceum Square, a purpose-built space for cultural events that has already hosted many events, including the Crewe Day festival, Crewe-on-Sea, Crewe Pride and many more. These institutions anchor a growing cultural quarter. The former Dorothy Perkins and Burton unit on Market Street—once another empty shell and a blight on the high street—now hosts CreweCreates, a vibrant space for arts and culture. That shows what can happen when creativity meets opportunity.

This year will see further developments in Crewe with culture at their heart. Spring will see the opening of the Dome youth zone, and later in the year Crewe will become the joint home of the Cheshire archives. Those two projects promise to breathe new life into our town centre. Together they encapsulate perfectly the point that several hon. Members have made: culture is about reflecting on our heritage, but also proudly embracing our future.

Crewe has the partnerships, infrastructure and working groups ready to move quickly, as soon as the town of culture competition formally launches. We have a proud heritage, a strong story to tell and a cultural future that we are desperate to seize. I look forward to the Minister saying more about what the competition will entail.

3.25 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for this opportunity for us all to talk about the UK town of culture competition and the benefits it can bring to our communities. It will be a pleasure to speak about my towns and my hope that they will consider a submission, but it has also been wonderful to hear about other towns, and the real pride in our local places.

[Amanda Hack]

This will be a hotly contested competition—not just in this room, but in my constituency. I have four towns, but I will talk about the largest, Coalville and Ashby-de-la-Zouch. They are separated by just six miles and have an amazing opportunity to go forward as a UK town of culture. They are both located in the heart of the national forest.

As I said in my maiden speech, Coalville is named appropriately, as it is at the heart of the coalmining industry in Leicestershire. The cultural heritage is centred on its industrial past and its hope for the future. The town has invested in the market square, which is called Marlborough Square. It was a central gathering place for the community, initially as a public market for farmers and producers, before evolving into a livestock hub in the 1840s. More recently, this lovely square has hosted some amazing family events, organised and supported by the local district council and our vibrant voluntary sector. Coalville's culture was clear to see at the Midland Red bus 100th anniversary event earlier this year, which was held just a stone's throw from Marlborough Square, at Snibston, the home of a theatre, a coalmining museum, a café and a park. In the centre of Coalville is the beautiful Mother and Child statue, and there are art installations across the town.

Coalville has so much potential to be the UK town of culture. However, it will have to fight off local competition from the second largest town in my constituency, Ashby-de-la-Zouch. A great market town originally known as Ashby in 1086, it was renamed in the 18th century after the La Zouche family. Around that time, Ashby castle was built. The town's beautiful historic buildings line Market Street, which is a thriving shopping destination. It was a pleasure to be shown around the original features in the lovely Tap at No. 76, which was built in the era of Queen Elizabeth I. Not long after I was elected, I also had the privilege of visiting the archives at the fantastic volunteer-led Ashby Museum. If anyone makes a pit stop there, I am sure they will enjoy the museum.

Ashby's rich history has been kept up throughout the generations. There is an active business improvement district and a great town council with an annual programme of events. That includes the Statutes, which is now in its 806th year, and the new soapbox derby, which is in its second year, to name just a couple of the great events that happen.

I have not had the opportunity to talk about my smaller towns of Ibstock and Castle Donington, but I am sure they will forgive me. This competition will be really important for our towns, and I will encourage my district council and others to consider how we get this amazing opportunity for growth and investment into my towns in North West Leicestershire. Will the Minister consider whether there is an opportunity to expand the competition to a wider range of towns, and perhaps include a UK town of industrial heritage and a UK market town of culture? Then I would be able to pick two towns in North West Leicestershire.

3.29 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing

this debate. The Liberal Democrats recognise the vital role that towns and communities throughout the United Kingdom play in shaping our rich and diverse cultural heritage. As a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I firmly believe that art, music, drama and sport bring people together across generations and backgrounds and that they are an essential part of any thriving society.

Crucially, culture also delivers tangible economic benefits. Investment in the cultural sector creates jobs, supports freelancers and small businesses and provides training and development opportunities, particularly for talented young people who may not see a traditional academic route as the right path for them. That is why the Liberal Democrats support sustained investment in our cultural capital and in nurturing the next generation of talent—so that people in every town can enjoy the benefits of sport, music and the arts. We believe that the cultural contribution of each town should be recognised, and that adequate funding must be available to support cultural programmes in every part of the United Kingdom.

We have heard so many wonderful examples of our cultural heritage today, including from my hon. Friends the Members for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) and for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), and the hon. Members for Southport (Patrick Hurley) and for Shipley (Anna Dixon). I am proud to be the MP for Eastleigh, the home of Hampshire cricket with the Ageas Bowl, which is both a world-class cricket venue and, in recent years, a growing events venue hosting acts such as Rod Stewart, Little Mix and the Arctic Monkeys. The Point theatre in Eastleigh puts on its own fantastic productions year after year, hosts national stand-up comedians and has been one of Arts Council England's national portfolio organisations for the past decade. We are also home to the Bishopstoke Players, the Concorde club in north Stoneham and Thornden Hall in Chandler's Ford. People from across Hampshire flock to Eastleigh every year for the Asian Welfare and Cultural Association's Mela event, Eastleigh Pride and the family-friendly festival Eastleigh Unwrapped.

However, despite this strong cultural offer, Conservative Hampshire county council has cut back funding for the Hampshire Cultural Trust, reducing its annual grant by £600,000 from April 2027. Arts and culture projects have been stopped in their tracks. This is incredibly short-sighted. I very much welcome the town of culture initiative, but I hope the Minister will agree that if we are serious about levelling up opportunity, pride and participation, cultural investment must reach every town. I look forward to seeing which towns will throw their hats into the ring to be cultural town of the year, so that we can all recognise and the celebrate their unique stories.

3.32 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing this important debate on the UK town of culture competition. Let me begin by welcoming the announcement of the UK town of culture programme. The UK city of culture initiative, first launched in 2009, is now in its fifth iteration and has supported places such as Derry/Londonderry, Hull, Coventry and most recently Bradford. In each case,

the investment has proved to drive regeneration, attracting investment and visitors, all while showcasing the unique character, heritage and creativity of those places.

Hull's year as city of culture generated an estimated £300 million for the local economy, attracted millions of visitors and created thousands of jobs, apprenticeships and freelance opportunities. Coventry saw renewed confidence and investment, while in Bradford, more than 5,000 events took place during the year, with around 51 million spent. Within the first six months of Bradford 2025, more than 11,000 schoolchildren benefited from the education programme, and 40,000 local people participated in cultural events. My colleagues visited Bradford during that year to join in one of 5,000 events that took place. The success of this scheme shows how well-funded support can have a transformative impact.

The UK town of culture rightly recognises that smaller and medium-sized settlements have powerful cultural stories to tell—we have heard a great variety of those today—and a vital role to play in our national life. Market towns such as Shrewsbury have long acted as bridges between rural and urban communities, serving as hubs for seasonal celebrations, sport, county dance and local trade. In my constituency on the Isle of Wight, our island's towns are increasingly recognised as destinations for film and the creative industries. We have vibrant organisations, including Ventnor Exchange, Monkton Arts and the new Department venue in Ryde, plus of course Brading Roman Villa. Shanklin theatre, a historic building, survives only through the tireless volunteer efforts of local people. I enjoyed the local pantomime "Dick Whittington" there only last week with my children.

Building on the success of the city of culture programme, the ambition to break down barriers to opportunity, drive local economic growth and create jobs is one that we strongly support. However, the last iteration of the city of culture competition demonstrated that the scheme could be open to places beyond cities, with examples including Wrexham, which bid as a town, and County Durham, which submitted a bid covering the entire county. Wrexham even became a city midway through its bid. This shows that the programme could already accommodate a broader range of places, without necessarily creating a town of culture competition separately. It raises the question: is it necessary to establish a separate competition when towns were allowed to bid in the last round?

Experience from the previous city of culture competition shows that the places that performed best were those with strong local authority leadership and capacity. The most recent competition, with 20 entrants, was the largest ever. Although expertise is spreading across local government, not every council starts from the same place.

Anna Dixon: The hon. Gentleman talks of the importance of local authority leadership in city of culture success. Will he join me in congratulating Bradford council on having the vision to apply to be the city of culture and on having taken the risk to invest in it and then crowd in further investment, which has benefited the whole district?

Joe Robertson: I am happy to join the hon. Member in congratulating the local authority in Bradford on its bid. She illustrates very well the point that I am trying to make: there is a financial risk in undertaking the process and, indeed, the risk of not being successful.

For smaller towns with less financial might, that could become a considerable issue, so will the Minister commit to supporting local authorities—in particular, smaller ones—in their capacity to bid and succeed in a separate towns competition?

Further to that, a long-standing challenge of the scheme has been the uncertainty about funding, with prize money neither guaranteed nor clearly set out at the point of launch. Although we welcome the approach taken under the previous Government, which enabled runners-up to receive £125,000, the current Government have not yet extended that commitment to the town of culture competition. In the past, even unsuccessful bidders, such as Sunderland, received support that helped to strengthen local partnerships and build capacity in their communities. If the Government introduce a separate towns competition, they must clarify whether funding will be guaranteed immediately for winners and runners-up, particularly for towns that may have less capacity to absorb financial uncertainty.

For many towns that are unsuccessful and receive little or no funding, cultural institutions remain at risk. Much of our cultural infrastructure depends on local authority funding, and discretionary spending on culture is often the first casualty when councils face financial pressure. If we are serious about supporting towns through culture, local authorities must be given the financial tools and flexibility to protect cultural and heritage assets.

This initiative must also be understood in the wider context of the pressures facing our cultural, creative and heritage sectors. Towns' unique characters are driven by their high streets and small businesses, ranging from historic pubs and craft workshops to independent creative venues and local cultural organisations. Yet this Government's punitive tax regime places increasing burdens on these organisations. Higher employer national insurance contributions, reduced business rates relief and rising wage costs all fall heaviest on small businesses, which have the least capacity to absorb these costs. We have already seen too many local businesses close over the past year, so how will the Government ensure that the very organisations that we rely on to deliver cultural programmes—indeed, they form the cultural fabric of this nation—are not priced out of existence, thereby reducing investment into the local area?

Thanks to the previous Government's £2 billion culture recovery fund, many arts and heritage organisations were finally back on their feet, yet this Government's job tax has hit them hard. I welcome the continuation of tax relief for theatres, museums and galleries, but the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's resource budget remains flat in cash terms, which of course represents a real-terms cut. At a time when 98% of adults agree that museums are important to UK culture, it is deeply concerning that the Government continue to fail to commit funding to major levelling-up cultural projects, despite announcing a UK town of culture competition, which we welcome.

3.40 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): As always, Ms Furniss, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing what I think has been a very enjoyable debate. It has not

[Ian Murray]

just been a debate about the town of culture; I think it has actually been the largest lobbying exercise from MPs that we have seen in this Parliament. It has been a geographical trip through everyone's wonderful constituencies. We heard from my hon. Friend about everything from yarn bombers to mosh pitters, in the form of Led Zeppelin and Robert Plant. Of course, he has invited the President of the United States to come and visit his wonderful green lands—I am glad about his intonation on that.

I pay tribute to the Halesowen Abbey Trust for its work on the Leasowes walled garden, which demonstrates the civic pride that my hon. Friend talked about in his opening speech. As he mentioned, culture is a shared language. Whether we are talking about yarn bombers, heavy metal, mosh pitters or some of the wonderful heritage buildings around the country that we have heard about, one thing is for sure: we all have that shared cultural heritage that we want to preserve. It is not just about celebrating the past; it is about shaping the future, as many of my hon. Friends and others have said.

I also pay tribute to Colin Brookes of Halesowen Town FC, and pass on our sympathies to his family. Those kinds of individuals drive local projects, institutions and organisations. Without those personal commitments from people like Colin Brookes, none of these institutions would continue to exist; we rely on local people's passions for that. It was not just a great speech from my hon. Friend; it was also a superb oral application form, which I hope *Hansard* will just pop, verbatim, straight into his application form for the town of culture competition.

This scheme will be delivered across the UK and in collaboration with devolved Governments. As we have already heard, the UK town of culture competition builds on the city of culture model for cultural placemaking, which was first launched in 2009, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), said, and is now in its fifth iteration. Derry/Londonderry, Hull, Coventry and now Bradford have benefited from the lasting and transformative impacts, including more than £1 billion of additional investment added to local economies of past host cities, increasing jobs, tourism and that local cultural pride.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) mentioned, Bradford 2025 has delivered a wealth of significant benefits, not just for Bradford itself but for the wider region. The highlights of its time as UK city of culture include delivering more than 5,000 events across all 30 district wards and attracting more than 3 million people with its world-class cultural programme. It commissioned and involved more than 650 local artists, involved 87,000 individuals in participatory projects, 2,700 volunteers—the Colin Brookes of this world—with more than 5,500 people benefiting from training, and engaging more than 160 schools and educational settings.

The direct positive impacts on people's lives in the local community are clear, as we have heard. More than 80% of people surveyed said that Bradford 2025 had a positive impact on their wellbeing; it made eight in 10 residents feel proud of where they live; and more than 70% of residents felt more connected to the people in their communities. I therefore echo the congratulations of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley to the

Bradford city of culture directors, Shanaz Gulzar and Dan Bates. I thank them for all that they did, and thank everyone who participated in that.

Anna Dixon: I thank the Minister for his congratulations. Bradford council has already committed about £13 million over the next five years to the legacy, but much more is needed for capital projects, such as the Bingley town hall creative workshop. Would the Minister agree to meet me and representatives of Bradford council to discuss how we secure the legacy of Bradford 2025?

Ian Murray: I am very happy to take up that invitation to meet with my hon. Friend and representatives to see how that legacy is lasting, because the legacy is actually the most important thing from the city of culture scheme. I hope there are also huge legacies from the town of culture scheme, not just for the successful town but for all the applicants. It may give another boost to all of that cultural heritage and cultural futures in those areas.

When the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport launched the UK town of culture, she said that “every place has a story worth telling”,

and we have heard those stories this afternoon. I have been struck by the depth of what has resonated from hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen said this is about telling the story of the past and today, but also about shaping the future. Indeed it is.

We have heard lots of wonderful stories. I will run through some of those, rather than going through what the town of culture will be about, because everyone seems to be reflecting. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) dropped a bombshell, and told us that he tries to get Strangford into every debate—who knew? He is a great champion of Strangford. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) talked about the history of opening up the arts to everyone—that is what the town of culture is about; it has to be about art for all—and reminded us not to forget about rural areas and those on the periphery, which I think is really important and what this is all about.

Turning to the town of Amesbury: we had heavy metal from Stonehenge, Romans and Saxons and Spinal Tap in a four-minute speech; who would have known we would have got there today? My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) talked about “The Great Pottery Throw Down”, which I thought was more Greek than Stoke-on-Trent. She talked about the art, music, charities and heritage, and the Longton carnival in the Stoke-on-Trent area.

We heard from the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) about the £60,000 of funding to help develop the approach for shortlisted candidates. It is critical that there is that support to ensure that we develop some of those. There is also £60,000 available for longlisted city of culture candidates so that they can develop their proposals. I join in congratulating Wimborne as Dorset's town of culture 2026. I would love to visit if I possibly can, but only if I get to see “Legally Blonde: The Musical”—I will maybe go down there to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) talked about the Prescott Cables FC, and the story he tells is a story from many places across the country. Who would have thought that

William Shakespeare, fleeing the plague, would have turned a bus stop into a playhouse for young people being trained, and for cultural heritage and outreach to schools? One of the key things he said, which drives the town of culture and the city of culture—indeed, it drives the Secretary of State and me in terms of culture across the country—is that change can happen. A big catalyst for change is arts and culture; it is a great advert. My hon. Friend also gave a great advert for Southport's year of culture in 2026. I cannot remember the website, but I am sure it is in *Hansard* for everyone to refer back to.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) talked about the whole competition empowering local people, and Chesham being a coiled spring champing at the bit to get their application in. Who knew that Bishop Auckland was the home of the calendar, and therefore the home of time itself? My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) made a reference to Laurel and Hardy, and the “Land of Hope and Glory”, which I think is a great combination to have there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) spoke about turning the Reading Gaol into a cultural and arts centre. I think that is absolutely fantastic, bringing arts and history to life. And who knows? The car park might be a famous royal cemetery. Rather than sending the town of culture prize pot to Reading, maybe we should just send a couple of spades and a digger, and we could do it on that basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley went through all those issues, and re-emphasised the fact that Bradford, as the city of culture, had something for everyone. Crewe and Nantwich is the home of the Cheshire Archives. It is absolutely fantastic to have those there, but the key thing is arts and culture being a catalyst for town centre regeneration. I think that is key. We tend to forget that arts and culture can be that catalyst: they can bring people together and regenerate footfall in our city centres.

Finally, we heard how hotly contested this competition will be in North West Leicestershire. I am not going to look at my officials when I say this—I do not know who will actually go through the application forms, but how they are going to determine who will win is quite extraordinary, given what we have heard this afternoon and the applications. I would say, to everyone who has spoken this afternoon and to anyone who is interested in the competition, to apply. There is such a rich heritage of culture and arts in every single corner of the country—north, south, east and west. We should celebrate that, and the kinds of celebrations we could have from that can be through this competition. The competition will not just be about winning, although I am sure that all Members present today will want their own town to win; just taking part in the competition will be a big celebration of arts and culture.

I will respond to the specific question by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham about the timeline for the competition. For now, I can merely say that we will launch the competition very shortly. Of course the first town of culture will be in 2028, so the timeline, as Members can see for themselves, is relatively short. Consequently, we will launch the competition as soon as we possibly can.

Each place has a unique story. However, there is also a shared conviction that through culture and creative industries we can share the stories of towns, and celebrate the contribution of towns to our national story. That is why the town of culture award is so important. I thought that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), was slightly curmudgeonly when he asked if we need a town of culture competition; I think he has heard today why we need it. Even if it is just an opportunity for local people, local arts and culture organisations and local MPs to talk about and champion their local area, that in itself is something we should champion.

Our vision for the UK town of culture competition is that the public know we see and value the contribution that towns make to our national story, and that there are benefits for all those who are able to tell their own story. At the end of the competition, a cultural programme will be delivered that draws on the best of art, heritage and creative industries, underpinned by compelling local stories that will be shaped by local people, delivered through local partnership, and designed to leave a lasting legacy through strong cultural infrastructure, increased participation in culture and the creative industries, and a renewed sense of local pride. Indeed, we know that that is what the award does. One of the key things that the Secretary of State and I are very keen to see happen is the bursting of the bubble between there being talent everywhere and opportunity not everywhere. That is something we want to build upon.

This has been a tremendously enjoyable debate and I look forward to all the applications coming in. I do not look forward to having to assess the applications, but I encourage people to get them in, because we know that our national story is not written by one city or one institution. It is not written by one town or one organisation. It is written in the places across the United Kingdom and shaped by the generations of people who have lived, worked, created and contributed there. The UK town of culture competition is an invitation to celebrate that story and invest in it, to ensure that in the future it continues to be told with creativity, confidence and pride.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I call Alex Ballinger to wind up quickly, because we expect a vote at 4 pm.

3.51 pm

Alex Ballinger: I will just say that it has been an absolute pleasure to hear all the pitches from various Members about the many beautiful, interesting and historical towns in their areas; indeed, it feels like I now have my bank holiday weekend plans for the next 20 years all sorted out. I look forward to visiting many of those places, although I also heard mention of a couple of cities—Truro and Bradford—sneak into our discussion. I think that cities have their own competition, so please allow us to compete among ourselves.

I thank the Minister for laying out so clearly the reasons for the competition. We are, of course, still keen to hear details; indeed, we are chomping at the bit to hear them, as we are to get our applications in. I say to those towns that are ultimately not successful in the competition that just going through this process is positive—it has been for the community groups in my area, and I am sure that that is the case across the country.

[Alex Ballinger]

I say a big “thank you” to DCMS. We await both the competition process and the celebration of Halesowen that is surely coming soon.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): Thank you all very much for a really respectful and interesting debate; it has been one of the best that I have chaired—and you all behaved and came in on time, which is always a pleasure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK Town of Culture competition.

3.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Meat Exports to the EU

[*Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, UK-EU Trade: Towards a resilient border strategy, HC 1297; and Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 9 December 2025, on Animal and plant health, HC 611.*]

4.17 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered meat exports to the EU.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on the export of meat to the European Union, and in particular on the ongoing difficulties faced by farmers and producers in constituencies like mine when exporting to markets such as Germany and the Netherlands.

This debate matters, because a system that worked well for Welsh agriculture has been replaced by one that is more expensive, more bureaucratic and far less reliable. It has become clear that, although progress has been made, a fully settled and implemented common sanitary and phytosanitary arrangement is not yet in place, and will not be in place in the immediate future. As a result, exporters remain subject to many of the same requirements introduced after Brexit, and those requirements are having real consequences on the ground.

Right now, there is only an intention to negotiate a framework for talks and announcements about what might happen in the future. But intentions do not move meat across borders, announcements do not pay veterinary bills, and frameworks do not stop lorries being delayed. That is what Welsh farmers are struggling with right now.

Before Brexit, exporting Welsh lamb to Europe was straightforward: there were no export health certificates, no mandatory veterinary sign-off and no routine border control checks. Welsh lamb moved freely into its natural markets, allowing farmers to plan, invest and grow with confidence. Since Brexit, that has changed completely. Today, a single consignment of lamb can require export health certificates, official veterinary approval, customs declarations and SPS checks at EU border posts. Every step adds cost, delay and risk, especially for a perishable, time-sensitive product.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): My hon. Friend is absolutely right: an SPS agreement would be an enormous opportunity for communities like his and mine that export to the European Union. But there are already significant divergences between the United Kingdom and the European Union, so does he agree that, if that SPS agreement is to be negotiated, then it is essential that the Cabinet Office does so much more than it is doing at the moment to consult and to bring British agriculture along with it; otherwise, the agreement will be full of unintended consequences?

David Chadwick: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The Government would do well to listen to his wisdom and knowledge, and indeed to that of the farmers, because they are the people experiencing these problems at first hand.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Chadwick: I am going to continue for a bit.

Welsh lamb is not a niche export; it is foundational to the rural economy. Welsh food and drink exports were worth £813 million in 2023, with around three quarters going to EU markets. The EU remains the destination for around a third of Welsh lamb exports, around 90% of Welsh beef exports and the vast majority of Welsh dairy exports. Markets such as Germany and the Netherlands matter because they are the natural entry points into the European food system, but lamb cannot sit at borders while paperwork is argued over. A delay of hours can strip value from a load; a rejected consignment can wipe out profit for a week. Farmers tell me it is now easier to export lamb thousands of miles away than to our nearest neighbours. That is not control; it is self-harm.

No doubt Ministers will point to headlines claiming that red tape has been slashed, but the reality for farmers tells a different story. Export health certificates are still required, veterinary sign-offs remain mandatory and checks are still taking place. Costs are still being borne by producers, and that eats into their profit margins. Because there is no settled SPS agreement, enforcement continues to vary from port to port and country to country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. To add to the complexity of the matter—there is always more complexity—on 1 January, new rules for veterinary medicines took effect in Northern Ireland, meaning that 40% of veterinary medicine pack sizes available to NI farmers could be discontinued due to the requirement for separate authorisations from Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does he not agree that the large part that Northern Ireland plays in the supply of lamb and meat—worth up to some £4 billion—must be considered as part of the UK's discussion with the EU? We should not be taken as a third nation—that is no solution. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer that question.

David Chadwick: The economic impact of this issue is being felt across the United Kingdom, and that is because there is still no settled SPS agreement. That has resulted in uncertainty, and uncertainty is poison for trade. Many smaller producers have already been cut out of EU markets, unable to cope with the administrative burden and added cost.

There is also a clear imbalance in how trade is being managed. Under the border target operating model, checks are meant to be risk based, yet medium-risk products of animal origin imported from the EU into Great Britain face physical inspection rates of around 1%, while equivalent UK exports to the EU face inspection rates of between 15% and 30%. That is not a level playing field. It places heavier costs on UK farmers, while leaving them exposed to unfair competition from imports.

That imbalance is compounded by repeated delays to the UK's own border controls. The transitional staging period for the border target operating model has been extended again, this time to January 2027—the sixth delay already. Farming unions have warned that, without effective border checks, the UK remains vulnerable to

animal disease. Those concerns have been echoed by Parliament's own Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

None of this is accidental. These barriers exist because the UK chose to leave the single market. That choice was driven by a Conservative party that was willing to sacrifice British farming, and it was championed by Reform, who promised farmers frictionless trade while delivering friction at every stage of the export process. Welsh farmers were told that they would keep their markets, that nothing would change for them and that they were taking back control, but what they got was more paperwork, higher costs and fewer buyers. In Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe, farming underpins entire communities. When lamb exports become uneconomic, investment stalls, confidence drains away and young farmers begin to question whether there is a future for them. Rural Wales is hollowing out through constant, grinding pressure on farming communities and the wider supply chains that they support.

Efforts to restore relations with our nearest trading partners and pursue an SPS agreement with the EU are welcome, but such an agreement must be developed in close collaboration with industry, and it must be delivered urgently. Farmers cannot wait indefinitely while negotiations drag on. Any agreement should be concluded as soon as is practical and no later than the end of this Parliament, in order to protect market access and prevent further damage to the sector.

Welsh farmers were promised certainty, continuity and opportunity. Instead, they got the Conservatives' and Reform's Brexit, and a deal that still does not exist. This debate is about facing that reality, owning the consequences and finally doing right by the people who feed this country and sustain our rural communities. Backing Welsh and British farming means more than slogans; it means restoring access to markets.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) on securing this timely debate on meat exports to the EU and thank him for his remarks. I agree with him that our farmers and processors produce world-class beef, lamb, poultry and pork. I completely hear and recognise his remarks about the importance of lamb in Wales and his constituency—he called it foundational for our economy.

The EU is still our biggest market and, despite recent challenges, demand for British meat remains strong. In 2024, British meat exports to the EU hit a record £1.65 billion, driven by growth in key markets such as France and the Netherlands. In the first 10 months of 2025, red meat exports to the EU reached £1.3 billion—up 16% on 2024.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In 2019, the amount of fresh beef exported to the European Union was almost 100,000 tonnes, whereas five years later it had dropped to less than 80,000 tonnes. Does the Minister suppose that a revised SPS agreement could get fresh beef exports to the EU back to where they were in 2019?

Kate Dearden: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I am going to get to the SPS agreement, and I will reflect on his comments when I get to that part of my speech.

Tulip Siddiq: When the Minister speaks about the SPS agreement, will she also comment on animal welfare? Of my constituents in Hampstead and Highgate, 87% voted to remain. I have had an overwhelming number of communications about animal welfare being at the heart of any SPS agreement with the EU, so will she please talk about that?

Kate Dearden: My hon. Friend makes an important point on animal welfare in the SPS agreement, which I will get to.

The figures I mentioned show the strength of this sector and why smooth, predictable trade with the EU really matters. The Department for Business and Trade has been working hand in hand with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and with industry—led by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board—to drive meat exports, and will be supporting meat exporters at SIAL Paris, the largest European trade show for food and drink, in October. We also have two DEFRA agri-attachés, based in France and Spain, actively working with DBT staff to unblock market access issues for food and drink producers exporting to Europe, including exporters of lamb and meat.

The Government's goal is clear: to make trade with the EU cheaper and easier while keeping high standards. That is why we are pursuing the UK-EU SPS agreement, which will create a common SPS area to cut border friction and boost competitiveness. Negotiations on the agreement have already begun. This is a major step forward. The deal will deliver real benefits, scrapping export health certificates for most consignments—saving up to £200 for each one—and ending routine SPS border control checks so that fresh meat moves faster with less paperwork. It will also reopen the EU market for trade in products like fresh sausages and burgers. These changes will strengthen supply chains, cut costs and help meat exporters grow.

We are not lowering standards. Border regimes protect animal and public health, and every consignment must meet rules for entry. I am really proud of the Government's animal welfare strategy, which colleagues across the House welcomed. The European Commission recently announced tougher checks on food, animal and plant products, including more audits, closer monitoring of non-compliant goods and a new taskforce for import controls. Those reinforced checks reflect long-standing EU policy. For British exporters, the message is clear: meeting standards is essential, and we will keep supporting businesses to get it right. Every consignment faces documentary, identity and sometimes physical checks before it can be allowed into the EU. Our strategy is to make those interactions faster and more predictable by cutting the need for certificates and routine checks through an SPS agreement, while giving traders clear guidance to keep standards high.

I need to be clear that the Government are not seeking a customs union with the EU. Our focus is on SPS, food safety, animal health and plant health. We will stay outside the EU customs union. What we want

is a practical alignment where it makes sense, including to cut friction in meat trade while keeping control of our own rules.

We must keep the industry competitive while negotiations continue, and EU markets can still buy high volumes and premium cuts from Britain. In 2024, beef exports to the EU rose in value by almost 11%, with volumes up by nearly 5%. That shows the strength of British quality and brand recognition in the EU. In the first 10 months of 2025, British export values grew further, even with tight domestic cattle supplies. For lamb, France remains our biggest market, and overall export value is up. These figures prove that with smoother borders our exporters can do even more.

Jim Shannon: I do not want to put the Minister in an awkward position—it is not the way I do things—but I asked a fairly complex question, in support of the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) but also to highlight the peculiarities of the Northern Ireland farmer, about the fact that, through some of the veterinary medicine controls, we will find ourselves disadvantaged and perhaps unable to sell our beef and lamb to the UK and, ultimately, the EU. If it is helpful to the Minister, I would be quite happy for her to come back to me with an answer.

Kate Dearden: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. As he knows, the negotiations are ongoing and we cannot comment on them. We are working hard to cut red tape for exporters. I will be happy to follow up with him on his specific point, and I thank him for raising that important issue.

Agrifood exports to the EU remain below 2018 levels in real terms. That is why practical steps such as an SPS agreement matter. They tackle the real-world frictions that hold back meat exports.

Although the focus of the debate is exports to the EU, colleagues know that Great Britain has introduced risk-based controls on imports, set out in the border target operating model. Those apply to goods entering GB and do not change EU rules for our exports. They ensure a level playing field and protect biosecurity, which is vital. Medium-risk EU animal products entering GB face documentary checks and risk-based identity and physical checks at border control posts, and high-risk products face full identity and physical checks. That is proportionate risk management that mirrors the system that our exporters encounter at EU posts, and shows our commitment to safe, fair trade.

DEFRA has worked closely with processors, hauliers and certification bodies to prepare for SPS talks and keep trade moving. We have expanded guidance on required standards and on intensified official controls for sites facing extra checks. We regularly meet the British Meat Processors Association and other trade groups to explain processes, gather feedback and fix issues quickly. Our goal is simple: to help businesses meet EU requirements the first time, so consignments are cleared without delay.

Our meat exporters have shown real resilience. The Government's job is to cut unnecessary barriers, keep confidence in our systems and open up opportunities in our closest markets. An SPS agreement with the EU is a practical way to do that, and I am glad that we are leading the way. It will cut costs and paperwork, reducing

delays and helping British businesses to sell more, while protecting standards and respecting our independent trade policy. This is about a sensible alignment that benefits farmers and processors across the UK, and I look forward to working with Members across the House, our European partners, industry and stakeholders to deliver an agreement that makes a real difference to meat exporters, strengthens our crucial supply chains and supports jobs and prosperity in every part of the country.

Question put and agreed to.

4.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Rural Fuel Duty Relief

4.40 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Rural Fuel Duty Relief scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce this debate, especially in the new year at a time when many people across the country will be watching the pennies closely.

As hon. Members representing rural constituencies will be aware, the rural fuel duty relief scheme was announced more than 15 years ago and supports people living in some of the most remote rural communities in Britain. Under the scheme, a 5p per litre tax relief on unleaded petrol or diesel is granted to specific filling stations in a small number of rural postcode sectors. That relief must be passed on to rural motorists, helping many with their commute, school run or weekly shopping. The scheme benefits around 125,000 local residents and many visitors across the United Kingdom.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Not a single part of Wales benefits from the rural fuel duty relief scheme, while rural areas in England and Scotland do, simply because of how the previous Conservative Government designed it. Does my hon. Friend agree that that unfair anomaly should be corrected and that the scheme should be extended to places such as Powys?

Ian Roome: I agree with my hon. Friend that more people could benefit from the scheme. I am sure the Minister will take note of that in his response. As I said, the scheme benefits around 125,000 local residents and many visitors across the UK, including the remote parts of the Scottish islands, Cumbria, Northumberland, North Yorkshire, the Isles of Scilly and Exmoor. That includes residents in my constituency of North Devon, who live in areas around Lynton and Lynmouth, Parracombe and Brendon, including many living in upland areas within the boundaries of Exmoor national park.

The tax relief is targeted at highly rural areas. A brief glance at a map shows that these are some of the most isolated and indispensable filling stations across the country. If someone forgets to fill up at Barbrook filling station in my constituency, while heading out over Exmoor, it is nearly 20 miles to the next fuel stop at Wheddon Cross or Minehead. When the rural fuel duty relief scheme was introduced under the coalition, and approval under EU state aid rules was granted in 2012, the relief was set by the Government at 5p per litre. That 5p per litre remains unchanged today in 2026, despite more than 30% of its purchasing power being eroded over that time because of inflation. An update to the scheme is now long overdue.

According to research by the Rural Services Network in 2023, transport difficulties in highly rural areas force households into paying high costs for motoring, which contribute significantly to rural poverty. A car is needed for daily life and for someone who earns a modest wage that is expensive. The research estimates that for every 10% decrease in public transport speed relative to motoring in any area, the average household pays more than £400 more for transport each year.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the relief scheme could be complemented by a pumpwatch scheme, whereby the petrol price comparison platform has rapid publication of all fuel costs for forecourt prices? That is approved by the Competition and Markets Authority and the RAC estimates it could take up to 3p off a litre, in addition to the specific rural relief scheme that he mentions.

Ian Roome: I know there are various apps that do that. There should be more awareness of them among members of the public.

Fuel duty is only part of the expense of running a vehicle, but many who fill up in areas impacted by the scheme have simply no transport alternatives. In my constituency, the households that benefit are 20 miles from their nearest train station, and bus passengers receive only the most limited bus service. Every January, those passengers are also hit by annual price increases from bus companies, which put extra strain on the cost of living.

The scheme is not particularly expensive. In the published list of non-structural tax reliefs, the Treasury estimates that the rural fuel duty relief scheme costs only around £5 million per year, and its uncertainty rating is considered low, yet during the past decade the scheme has been a roaring success. Barbrook filling station in my constituency tells me that this tax relief has made a massive difference to the viability of its business, keeping open an essential local service for many rural residents, local farmers and tourists.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): In my constituency, the price per litre of unleaded is 160p. When I was in Northern Ireland over Christmas, places were selling at 125p. We have a 35% premium on the cost of living where I live, and fuel is major part of it. In my constituency, there is a big question as to whether the 5p is actually getting to the customer or being kept, and I hope that the Minister will address that.

Ian Roome: Fifteen years ago, Barbrook in my constituency was officially one of the most expensive places to fill up in England, but thanks to the scheme it has stayed competitive on price, as a small business that employs four people all year round, in an area where employment can be highly seasonal. During the summer, Barbrook's fuel deliveries increase to several tankers per week because of extra demand, driven mainly by tourists visiting Exmoor national park and the famous North Devon coast on holiday.

I am also told that Barbrook filling station rescues many of those visitors—people who do not understand the extra challenge of driving long distances on small rural roads, or who do not plan for the extra fuel consumption of their journey. Many rural communities already suffer from very sparse public services, and fuel for transport is an important part of anyone reaching essential healthcare, such as their local hospital or dentist. As I know from speaking to chemotherapy patients at North Devon district hospital, where I worked before I was elected to this House, access itself is half the battle.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I—including my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), my hon. Friend the Member

for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and others—champion the real needs of rural communities, as do colleagues who are here today. We have argued for the rural fuel duty relief scheme's importance and for extending it to many more rural parts of the country.

However, support for the scheme should really be cross-party. By my count, at least 11 directly impacted rural constituencies are represented by MPs from Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National party. There are also many neighbouring rural constituencies with villages that rely on a filling station just over the border that is supported by this tax relief.

Since 2011, it has become a feature of Budgets under successive Governments that fuel duty will be frozen. That has benefited motorists across Britain, yet in March 2022, a further 5p cut in fuel duty was introduced and then held in place, even as the value of the rural fuel duty relief scheme continued falling in real terms. That means that in recent years we have gone backwards: many of our most rural taxpayers have effectively increased their support to motorists in some of the best connected parts of the country. Motorists in urban communities not only benefit from having more public transport alternatives but often have numerous filling stations to choose from—all competing on price, to the benefit of local people. By contrast, many of my constituents count themselves lucky to have even one filling station in their area.

The Government have stated that economic growth across the country is their top priority for this Parliament. In parts of the country that are distant from major infrastructure projects, such schemes are an important measure, supporting small businesses, farming and tourism, helping young people to access opportunities, and helping patients to access essential healthcare. At a time when the Government are increasingly under fire for their policies towards rural and farming communities, updating the rural fuel duty relief scheme would be one way for them to demonstrate their concern about those families who live in rural areas and the problems they face in their daily lives.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I sincerely thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. My constituency of Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber is 10,500 sq km in size, with 23 inhabited islands; it is absolutely vast. Life is difficult for people living in rural areas and anything that we can do to make life a bit easier for them should be considered. Does he agree that the scheme should not only be further extended to cover more people in rural areas, in order to stop the scourge of depopulation, but that the value of the scheme, which has declined by 35% since 2012, should be restored by this Government as soon as possible?

Ian Roome: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and thank him for that input.

When so many people are struggling with the cost of living, schemes like this one are a concrete example of how tax relief can have an out-sized impact. A relief of 5p per litre would be welcome anywhere, but it is particularly valuable to those constituents of mine who have no choice but to drive, in an area where gross median wages are £84 a week less than the national average.

Just last week, the Prime Minister stated that the Government would spend this new year proving to people that they can support them with energy costs, warm homes and the cost of living. My constituents see their fuel costs displayed digitally on a sign by the side of the road every single day. The rural fuel duty relief scheme makes a material difference to many of my constituents and to tens of thousands of people in rural communities across the United Kingdom.

I will close by asking the Minister some questions. Does the Treasury recognise that time and inflation have effectively bled the funding of the scheme by around 30% since it was introduced? Will the Government consider updating the value of the scheme in the coming year to rectify that gap, at least in part? Just a few weeks ago, it was highlighted in the Treasury Committee that the Treasury lacks a suitable review process for existing tax reliefs. What more can be done to ensure that in the future small but important schemes such as this one, which are a lifeline in rural areas like mine, do not get left behind again?

4.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Ms Furniss, for again inviting me to speak early. It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship. I also thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) for securing this debate on a very important issue.

When we look at the price of petrol at the pumps and consider that the price per barrel has dropped significantly, the question we all ask is when the dividend will come down to those who drive on the roads of the United Kingdom. Perhaps the Minister can put that question directly to the firms responsible.

This is an important issue, and it is clear that there are stipulations within the current legislation that do not extend to other rural parts of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, I am here today to support the hon. Member for North Devon, who is renowned for being assiduous and committed on behalf of his constituents—well done to him.

There is a strong case for extending the provision of the rural fuel duty relief scheme to some rural parts of Northern Ireland that have similar problems to those referenced by the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara). Just as in North Devon, a considerable number of areas of counties such as Fermanagh, Armagh and Down are sparsely populated. Furthermore, residents in these areas rely heavily on private vehicles because public transport is extremely limited. I am contacted weekly by constituents regarding rural bus services, so this issue is real and is felt throughout many areas in Northern Ireland.

Historically, we have witnessed a significant fuel price difference between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, sometimes as much as 15p to 25p per litre. There are times when rural Northern Ireland has significantly higher fuel prices, and families who live close to the border travel into the Republic of Ireland to get fuel as it saves them so much money. People in rural areas that do not have such access cannot do that.

I support local, and I always have. I live in a rural section of my constituency, too. I choose to support local businesses when buying fuel, rather than going to the likes of Asda where the fuel might be cheaper.

Independent rural businesses have no choice but to charge more, given that they are in less populated areas. I believe there is a duty on those who can to support their local independents.

Fuel is a huge expense that many families and individuals are not able to avoid. The hon. Member for North Devon made a point about the 5p a litre rebate simply not stretching as it needs to. He clearly outlined that case, and the Minister will perhaps listen. It has not increased in line with inflation since 2010, losing around 35% of its actual value. There is no doubt that a review is needed to ensure that rural drivers across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can benefit.

I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will not go on too long. Lower fuel costs can achieve better access to education, healthcare and services for rural residents who should not be left behind. At a time when money is tight and so many feel the stretch, there is more to be talked about and more that we can do. Again, I urge the Minister to engage with his counterparts to protect rural drivers in Northern Ireland as well as on mainland UK. The same benefits should apply to all rural areas of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

4.56 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss—apologies for not informing you of my intention to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) on securing this important debate on an issue that affects lots of rural seats, including my own in Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

The 5p a litre discount—"Danny's discount", as we called it on its introduction in 2012 when he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, shamelessly promoting his own constituency and other rural areas—was widely welcomed in the Scottish islands, and it has been adjudged a success, although forgotten by many. If I had been a Lib Dem, I would have taken out posters at every rural fuel station affected to tell people that they were getting 5p off every litre.

Since then, duty seems to have been mostly frozen in Budgets, which means that the rural fuel duty discount has been frozen as well. As the hon. Member for North Devon correctly pointed out, had it gone up by inflation the discount would have gone up as well. I had the Library do some research, and it estimated that in 2021 the scheme cost the Treasury only £5 million. Had it been increased by the consumer prices index, it would have gone up by 2p—£2 million—to 7p a litre. It was extended by the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition in 2015 and now affects 12 seats. The hon. Member estimates 11, but I estimate 12: four Labour, five Lib Dem, two SNP and one Conservative. The Conservative one is the seat of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak).

There should be wide cross-party support for a review of the rural fuel duty discount, as my colleagues in Scotland have attested. I checked today, and the cheapest fuel I could get in Stornoway, the main town in my constituency, came in at £1.34 per litre. In Glasgow it is £1.28. Far from being a rural fuel discount, there seems to be an urban fuel discount in Scotland, and I am sure that is true of other parts of the UK. So I join colleagues

[*Torcuil Crichton*]

from across the House in calling for a review of the scheme, and perhaps some gifts in forthcoming Budgets, or a signal from the Minister that such a review will be carried out.

4.59 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) on securing this important debate. Constituencies like mine, which borders my hon. Friend's constituency, are among the most rural in this country.

My constituents rely on their cars to cover vast areas to get to work, to take their children to school and to attend vital healthcare appointments, and they quite literally pay the price when it comes to the cost of fuel. People living in rural areas such as North Cornwall spend, on average, £800 a year more in fuel costs than those living in urban centres. These people make about 75% of their journeys by car. In Cornwall, about four times fewer people than in the rest of England are able to travel to work via public transport. Fuel can in some cases be 10% to 15% more expensive at the pump in Cornwall, compared with other areas. If we extrapolate that across a full year or several years, adding in our increased reliance on our cars, my North Cornwall constituents end up facing astronomical costs, at a time when money is extremely tight.

Under Liberal Democrat proposals, we would double the number of areas covered by the rural fuel duty relief scheme to include places, such as Cornwall, that are in dire need of respite in the face of these extremely high fuel prices. The Government, in the recent Bus Services Act 2025, missed a clear opportunity to ensure that vital healthcare routes have statutory protection, as schools and other education routes do, to ensure proper access to healthcare in Cornwall's hospitals and GP surgeries.

I have just got off the phone to Go Cornwall Bus, which explained to me once again that this Government are not providing enough bus funding. The logical conclusion is that we have to use our cars for essential trips such as for healthcare. These are not leisure trips; they are essential. My constituents have no other options. They are forced to drive for hours to access hospital and GP appointments in north Devon, Truro, Derriford and elsewhere.

Additionally, we would introduce an official, Government-funded pumpwatch scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) mentioned. That would allow Cornwall's commuters to compare fuel prices at nearby petrol stations to prevent them from being ripped off. As we have heard from so many Members, prices vary across the country and sometimes within the same region. Northern Ireland already has a comparison scheme in place and, as a result, benefits from some of the lowest fuel prices in the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) said.

Will the Minister kindly confirm whether he and the Government will adopt our proposals to double the number of areas included in the rural fuel duty relief scheme and launch an official pumpwatch programme? Please, Minister, give those proposals the consideration they deserve.

5.2 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. My constituency of Honiton and Sidmouth is predominantly rural. Residents live in villages, small towns and hamlets, rather than urban centres. It is classified as such by the Office for National Statistics—that is, as a rural or rural town constituency. Of course, the people I represent do not need to consult the Office for National Statistics to know that, because they need only look in their wallet.

A Department for Transport survey found that people living in rural villages and hamlets travel about 2.5 miles for every mile travelled by residents of an urban area. Put simply, rural life is more expensive. People pay more for journeys to school, work, the shops and essential services.

Fuel costs more in rural areas. A UK Government road fuel review found that rural motorists typically pay between 1p and 2p more per litre because there are fewer filling stations and less competition. The Countryside Alliance estimates that rural households spend between £700 and £800 more each year on fuel than their urban counterparts. And of course there are alternatives in urban settings as public transport is much more readily available. In many parts of Devon, public transport simply is not an option.

Let me take, for example, the West of England rail line in east Devon. Its services were reduced by 50% for months across the autumn, and it desperately needs investment—a passing loop—to enable services to run on time. Regular public transport on trains and buses is not an option. Many villages have no bus service at all.

The rural fuel duty relief scheme currently applies to just 21 areas across the UK. The Liberal Democrats propose that it should be expanded to 20 new areas to support motorists in rural communities. A Government assessment in 2013 concluded that the original scheme was successful in keeping pump prices down in, for example, North Devon, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) identified.

For isolated and rural communities across the UK it is imperative that the Government act on their past advice and extend the scheme to tackle the systemic disadvantages faced by rural residents.

5.5 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) on securing this debate and making a very strong case, of which I hope the Minister will take heed.

I will return to some of the prehistory, because I have campaigned on this issue for so long. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) and for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton), for reinforcing the very strong points advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon in his opening remarks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) made an interesting intervention about useful pump comparison apps and sites. One of the places that was originally designated to receive rural

fuel duty relief was the Isles of Scilly in my constituency, and I campaigned for it at the time. When the relief was announced in March 2012, it was very welcome. However, I am afraid that having comparison apps on the Isles of Scilly is pretty meaningless because there is only one pump and no competition. I do not think it can be argued that the monopoly supplier is taking advantage of that monopoly, because it is very much keyed into the community and has been running it as a public service.

When the relief scheme was originally established, I asked the supplier, Ian Sibley of Sibley's, which provides fuel for road use as well as for marine use on the Isles of Scilly, how he obtained his fuel. He basically takes tanks over to the supermarket in Penzance and has them ferried back, so he is buying fuel at retail prices and selling it on. We can see that it is and has been impossible for him and his business to be in any way competitive in those circumstances, and he has had to transfer the fuel to local people on the islands without taking much of a cut to cover the costs of freight and providing the service. We can see how difficult it is to provide this service in such locations.

It is also worth reflecting on the justification for the relief, because it is all about equity and fairness. I know that some people will say, "Hang on, are you not campaigning to combat climate change?" Indeed I am, as are others present here today. Those same people may ask if it does not contradict everything we are campaigning for when we say that we want to reduce fuel costs. It is not.

This is about geographic equity across the country. It is about wanting to make sure that in addressing the cost of living crisis, which has been going on for many years, we also address the geographic inequity in the prices that end up being charged in such remote and rural locations. It is not relevant to undermine the case in any way by comparing it with the vital campaign to combat climate change.

To go into the prehistory of it, on 8 January 2002 and 15 January 2003, I brought debates to the Westminster Hall Chamber on the issue of rural and island transport. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and Alan Reid from the Scottish islands made a very strong case for the importance of seeking equity in this regard, not only in terms of fuel duty but in relation to private car users and to community bus users and projects.

After that campaigning, I was pleased that the coalition Government agreed with the Liberal Democrat policy of investigating, as they put it, measures to help with fuel costs in remote rural areas, starting with pilot schemes. Indeed, in October 2010, they announced a 5p fuel duty discount for Scottish islands and the Isles of Scilly. In those days, that of course required EU approval—even post Brexit, any kind of parafiscal support or state-aid issue still requires some consideration and regulation, because it needs to meet competition rules.

Obviously, the case for the discount was made—the unfairness was acknowledged—and in March 2012, it was brought in. The pilot schemes were established, including on the Isles of Scilly as I mentioned. In October 2013, the project was, as promised, reviewed and it was identified to be working well, so the Government announced that they were going to expand the schemes to 17 additional rural areas in May 2015. I raised a petition to make west Cornwall one of those areas.

It got 2,500 signatures, and I presented it to Parliament in December 2013, but unfortunately the Government did not agree to do that in August 2014, which was a pity. I do hope the Government will look at an extension.

There is still a cost difference between the Isles of Scilly and the mainland in excess of 30p per litre. It is a very difficult administrative scheme to follow through. It does create some administrative pressures on the small businesses that operate it, but I hope the Minister will accept the request to review both the amount of the discount and the geography on the basis of evidence of need.

5.13 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) for securing this important debate and everybody who has spoken in it. There is a very strong message coming through about how much rural communities need this relief and how much they suffer.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) mentioned, rural life is more expensive, and that is because of the friction of distance and the scale of distance. This relief goes a long way to offsetting that expense, and it has been a huge help to communities, but it is becoming less and less of a help because it has not gone up with inflation or anything else, and that sits on top of all the additional pressures that our communities are under that are really stretching household budgets and causing a lot of trouble. That is the root cause, so we ask the Minister, in responding to this debate, to address whether the Government will consider uprating the scheme in line with inflation.

Secondly, if we look at the state of public transport infrastructure in this country after years of under-investment by the last Conservative Government, it is quite clear that there are many more areas, as many of my colleagues have pointed out, where people have no real alternative but to use cars for day-to-day journeys. That is far more widespread than just the 21 areas that currently benefit from the scheme.

Research published by the County Councils Network in 2024 found that the frequency of rural bus services in England had reached a historic low, with more than a quarter of rural routes having been lost in the preceding decade. In remote areas of Scotland, some of which benefit from the rural fuel duty relief scheme, low connectivity is having a clear negative impact on the population, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) mentioned earlier today in this debate and in the Chamber.

National Records of Scotland's "Population estimates by urban rural classification", which covered 2001 to 2021, showed a population decrease by 1% between 2011 and 2020, compared with increases of 3.1% nationwide and 8.4% in accessible rural areas. The population of rural small towns decreased by 3.6% over the same period. The implication is that the lack of connectivity and affordable transport is hollowing out those communities, and the reduction in real-terms value of the relief scheme is playing a part in that.

The Government's Bus Services Act 2025 will make some positive change, and I support the aim of revitalising rural bus services, but with the best will in the world we cannot turn this situation around overnight. New transport

[Charlie Maynard]

infrastructure takes months and years to create—my colleagues and I are trying to bring back a rail link in west Oxfordshire—and rural drivers up and down the country are struggling with this problem now.

To address the problem, the Liberal Democrats have called for the number of areas covered by the scheme to be doubled, so an additional 21 areas across the UK would benefit from the relief. That expansion should be supported by a clear consultation and evidence base to determine the areas that could receive the new relief: perhaps Devon, Cornwall, Cumbria, East Anglia, Yorkshire and Shropshire could benefit, alongside rural Wales, more of rural Scotland and, of course, Northern Ireland.

5.17 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) on securing this debate, and I thank all hon. Members for the contributions that we have heard. It was a Conservative Government that introduced the rural fuel duty relief scheme in 2011, and that was in recognition of the fact that remote communities face higher pump prices due to the high cost of transporting and distributing fuel.

The scheme was subsequently extended again in 2015 to include more areas across England and Scotland, providing a welcome 5p per litre reduction in prices to help families and businesses in those areas, particularly where they might have only one filling station to choose from. The scheme recognised that rural communities, especially isolated ones, face challenges that justify targeted support. As we have heard from hon. Members, it has proved effective and needed.

In the main Chamber, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), the shadow Environment Secretary, has been setting out the support that the Conservatives have consistently provided for people in rural Britain; many of my colleagues are speaking in that debate. In government, we demonstrated our commitment to those who live and work in the countryside, including my North West Norfolk constituents.

Our fuel duty record underlined that. As well as the rural fuel duty relief, we froze fuel duty every year from 2011. In March 2022, we went further and introduced a 5p cut to fuel duty across the board. That was not merely about tax policy; it was about recognising that, for rural communities, a car or a van is a lifeline, not a luxury. It connects farmers to markets, helps children get to school, helps people get to work or health appointments and keeps rural enterprises in business. Every penny added to the cost of fuel has a multiplied effect in areas where public transport is limited and journeys are longer.

Our support for rural communities extended far beyond fuel duty to infrastructure and supporting agricultural businesses, recognising their vital contribution to our country and to the social fabric—what a contrast to what we have seen under this Government. The Government say that the cost of living is their priority, but they are adding to the costs for families and businesses. Inflation was at 2% when the Government came in, and they have nearly doubled it. The much-vaunted promise of £300 off energy bills is nowhere to be seen.

In her Budget, the Chancellor announced that Labour would end the 5p fuel duty cut that we introduced. That measure will take effect from September this year, and will see the average family pay £100 a year more. The Road Haulage Association estimates that it will add more than £2,000 a year to the operating costs of a heavy goods vehicle. From April next year, the Government will scrap the 16-year fuel duty freeze that we introduced, and inflation-linked rises will follow. That marks the end of the support offered to motorists through the freeze since 2010, which has saved them £120 billion. That puts in context the modest £5 million or so cost of the rural fuel duty relief.

In November, the Chancellor also announced her pay-per-mile tax on electric vehicles, which is set to cost drivers an extra £255 a year. It is little wonder that the RAC has said that simply keeping vehicles on the road has become a significant financial challenge. The Prime Minister has been boasting about the £3 bus cap—a cap that he increased by 50%. Whether it is fuel duty or public transport, the Government are making things harder and more expensive for rural communities.

Rural communities are not only being punished at the pump. In the debate, we have heard reference to the family farm tax, which breaks up the farms that form the backbone of our rural communities. The modest change that the Minister has announced is welcome as far as it goes, but given the damage that the tax will do, the Conservatives are committed to reversing it entirely.

As well as the increases to fuel duty, business rates will increase, hitting rural pubs and businesses. UK Hospitality estimates that an average pub will pay an extra £12,900 over the next three years. The Minister was sent out to defend the farm tax, and he said there would not be changes, but then there were. At Treasury questions, I called on the Chancellor to look again at business rates increases, and the Minister ruled that out then, but we read today that there may be changes. Apparently the Business Secretary has even noticed the damage that the increases will do—presumably not after discussing them in a pub, given that many Labour MPs have been barred. Will the Minister therefore confirm whether the Government are considering making those changes, as the sector and many across the House have called for?

The rural fuel duty relief scheme reflects an approach to governing that recognises the distinct challenges and vital importance of our rural communities. We introduced the scheme and extended it, and throughout our time in government we demonstrated that we understand and support those who live and work in the countryside. Given that it is now more than a decade since the scheme was last expanded, and given its modest cost, I fully support a review of the relief. The Treasury often says that it keeps taxes under review, but this measure deserves a proactive review, and I hope that the Minister will commit to one.

By contrast, this Government's tax rise after tax rise make life harder for rural businesses and rural people. Against a backdrop of weak growth and rising unemployment, Labour's approach sadly threatens the fabric of our rural communities. Those rural communities deserve much better.

5.23 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) for securing this debate and speaking so passionately in support of rural communities and the people in his constituency, who I know he has much honour in representing. I thank him for securing the debate and giving Members on both sides of the House the chance to contribute on this very important topic.

This Government recognise the importance of rural areas for the UK economy, and will continue to consider how they can best support those who live and work rurally. Although my Barnet constituency, which is in the very north of London, lacks the beaches and moors of the hon. Gentleman's, it does contain 14 farms and have some rural areas, because of the large bit of green belt that extends into north London. Like all Ministers, I am fully committed to ensuring that the tax system works for everyone, whether they are in rural or more urban parts of the country.

Fuel duty is an important source of Government revenue and provides vital funding for public services and infrastructure. It raised £24.4 billion in 2024-25; as has been mentioned, fuel duty rates have been frozen since 2011, with a further, temporary 5p cut introduced in 2022. Fuel duty rates are therefore now, in real terms, about 40% lower than they were in 2011. Pump prices are at their lowest level since 2021, before Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine led to soaring prices and the introduction of the temporary 5p cut.

At the Budget, therefore, the Chancellor announced that the 5p cut would first be extended until the end of August, with rates then rising gradually, returning to March 2022 levels by March 2027. As well as that extension to the freeze, the planned increase in line with inflation for the coming financial year will not take place. Those decisions on fuel duty will save the average car driver across the country £49 in the coming financial year, compared with previous plans.

The Government also recognise the importance of competition between retailers in the road fuels market. Liberal Democrat Members, including the hon. Members for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) and for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) and others, mentioned a pumpwatch scheme. Sadly, that reveals that we need to communicate even better about some of the ideas put forward by Government: at the Budget, the Chancellor confirmed that from spring 2026, UK consumers will be able to compare prices more easily through the Government's new open-data fuel finder scheme, which I believe will achieve aims similar to those of the pumpwatch proposal. It will help to encourage competitive pricing among retailers and is expected to result in further savings for drivers of potentially up to £40 a year.

The Government, however, are well aware that fuel costs can be higher in certain more remote areas, so the rural fuel duty relief scheme provides a 5p per litre reduction to benefit motorists buying fuel in those areas. The areas included in the scheme demonstrate certain characteristics, such as pump prices being much higher than the UK average, remoteness leading to high fuel transport costs from refinery to filling station, and relatively low sales meaning that retailers cannot benefit from bulk discounts.

As mentioned by many Members, the scheme provides about £5 million in support per year, with about 165 fuel retailers registered with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to claim the relief. The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) mentioned the administrative costs, and I am interested to hear more from him and from any businesses that have ideas about how I, as Minister with responsibility for HMRC, can seek to reduce any of the administrative burdens that those 165 retailers may face.

One area included in the scheme is the EX35 postcode, which is part of Exmoor national park and in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Devon, who secured the debate. I confirm that the scheme in fact covers not just 11 or 12 constituencies, but 16—some of the postcodes sneakily cross over constituency boundaries, so that 16 Members of the House of Commons represent constituencies of which at least some elements are covered by the relief.

Andrew George: The Minister raised the issue of the administrative burden. I was referring to an occasion when an operator of the scheme was late in his submission to HMRC, in which case he was refused the rebate, which he had been taking. In such circumstances, he had to appeal. I was simply demonstrating the rigidity and lack of humour, as it were, in the system. We are talking about extremely small businesses that find the additional administrative burden quite onerous.

Dan Tomlinson: I note, as I am sure others in the Chamber will, just how forensic is the hon. Member's understanding of some of the small businesses in his constituency. That is to be very much commended. If he would like to write to me on that point, I would certainly like to raise it with HMRC. Of course, it is not appropriate for me as a tax Minister to get involved in individual tax affairs. That said, the general point is about administration, and the extent to which we are getting the balance right between ensuring that we stick to the rules as set out, and having an appropriate level of flexibility. That is something that I would happily raise with the Department, if he were willing to write to me.

The hon. Member for North Devon and many others have suggested that the Government should increase the rural fuel duty relief in line with inflation. As I set out earlier, since the relief's introduction, it has remained at 5p, but the main fuel duty rate has also remained at the same level—or, more recently, has fallen. I am aware that there are differences across the country, and there may have been differentials in the increase in fuel prices in some areas. However, the fuel costs are broadly the same as they were in 2011, if not slightly higher; it was roughly 130p for a litre then, compared with around 135p now.

Brendan O'Hara: The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) made the point that getting this rebate was one of the few successes of the coalition Government. The reason there was no political reward for it was that, at £1.60 a litre in rural Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber, it does not feel like a benefit. If the Minister will not make it index-linked, can he tell us what mechanism the Government have put in place to check that this rebate—albeit scant—is actually reaching the consumer? It does not feel as though it is for people living in rural communities.

Dan Tomlinson: Other Members, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), have asked the same question; I was going to come on to it, but I will happily do so now. As a Department, HMRC requires retailers to keep records evidencing that the 5p saving is being passed on to customers, but I would be happy to look in more detail at how that is done. Maybe we can catch a word in the Tea Room to discuss it in more detail, because the Government want to make sure that that is happening and that the 5p cut—although we can debate whether it should be higher—is passed on to consumers in full.

The Members who spoke in the debate have deep knowledge of their constituencies and have often talked about their trust in their small local businesses, many of which will be running the garages or forecourts in the more rural areas, such as the middle of the moors. I must say that the hon. Member for Strangford is doing a very honourable thing in going to more expensive garages to support the local businesses. That is a very commendable act; I must say that it is not one I always engage in, as I like to find a good price, but I commend him on it.

While fuel duty costs are broadly the same, I admit that they are slightly higher than they were in 2011. However, as foreshadowed by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), the Chancellor keeps all taxes under review; decisions on future fuel duty rates and rural fuel duty reliefs will always be made in the round and in the context of the public finances. That said, I have noted with interest all the points made today and again thank the hon. Member for North Devon for securing this debate and giving me the chance, as the Minister with responsibility, to reflect on these important issues.

A number of Members have also suggested that the Government should increase the number of areas in scope of a rural fuel duty relief—I can sense a potential Liberal Democrat local election campaign, although I would not possibly want to comment. I was going to say that neither I nor my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray)—I checked—had received any formal representations to expand the coverage of the relief since the start of this Parliament, but of course I have received some comments on that during the debate. There are no current plans to amend the list of eligible locations but, if Members strongly feel that their constituencies fall into the categories in the scheme's rules, I will always welcome representations, and they should feel free to write to me.

Richard Foord: If the Minister will not consider the geographical expansion of the rural fuel duty relief scheme, with a view to the Government's introduction of the electric vehicle excise duty in April 2018, might he consider a duty relief for the existing areas, but applying to the electric fuel duty?

Dan Tomlinson: That is not something that we are actively considering. That said, the details of the eVED scheme are to be consulted on in detail. We are still a number of years from its introduction, and there will be many fine decisions that need to be made in the coming months ahead of its implementation, and I note the representation that the hon. Gentleman has made today.

Andrew George: Will the Minister give way one more time?

Dan Tomlinson: I will happily do so, although I am sure that hon. Members would like me to make some progress, too.

Andrew George: On the question of geographical coverage, and given the Minister's comment that he has not received representations about further areas for inclusion, I urge the Government to review the scheme and to take an objective measure themselves of where else it might extend to, rather than inviting us to form an orderly queue in pleading for our own areas, which could result in a system based not on need, but on political advantage.

Dan Tomlinson: I am always glad to take interventions. The hon. Member's point is noted and I acknowledge his request. I ask Members to get in touch if they believe that an area meets the criteria. As the hon. Member has noted, there are not hard and fast rules here—there are not specific criteria within each of the categories that are considered in the round—and the Government do not intend to change to having hard and fast rules. I would be worried that that might lead to more complexity and change within the system, meaning that if one area's prices tipped slightly above or below, we might get into contestation of whether the additional costs of transporting fuel to certain places tips over or above the threshold. I hope that Members who have views on where relief should be extended to will bear with the current, less-rigid process.

I was going to say, in a slightly light-hearted way, that the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) suffers somewhat in tax policy debates, in that I know his constituency well, having been born and brought up in west Oxfordshire. As part of my joyful travelling to and from seeing my family there, I often fill up in his constituency, which is often cheaper than doing so in north London. I noted that the hon. Member was magnanimous in calling for the scheme to be extended not to west Oxfordshire, but instead to other areas represented by his Liberal Democrat colleagues.

I should mention the important speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—he will have to teach me how to pronounce his constituency, as that was the first time I have said it. His is one of the constituencies that does benefit from the relief. I am glad to hear Labour Members talking clearly about the benefits that the relief provides for constituents in some of the most rural parts of the whole country.

Again, I commend the hon. Member for St Ives for his engagement with businesses. We heard about the garage on the Isles of Scilly and how it gets petrol to and from. I think I have covered most of the points raised. If Members have a burning desire to ask me to clarify something, I will, but I am sure we all want to make some progress.

Let me make a couple of further points before I conclude. The fuel duty system supports rural areas in other ways as well. Households and non-commercial premises are entitled to use red diesel for heating and electricity generation, which includes off-grid homes in remote and rural locations that have limited alternatives.

Red diesel is subject to fuel duty, which is 10.18p per litre compared with the 52.95p for diesel used on roads. Farmers also retain the entitlement to use red diesel in machinery and vehicles used for agricultural purposes after that was withdrawn from most sectors under the previous Government in 2022.

Several Members discussed the need to ensure that public transport maintains a level of affordability. At the end of the last year, the Government confirmed a long-term investment of over £3 billion over the next three years to support local leaders and bus operators across the country to improve bus services for millions of passengers. That includes multi-year allocations for local authorities under the local authority bus grant. From 2026-27, we have revised the formula to include a rurality element for the first time to ensure that the additional challenges of running bus services in rural areas are taken into account.

I was surprised that there was no mention of potholes in a debate about transport, but I know that they are of particular concern to those in rural areas that are more prone to frost, meaning that ice gets inside the tarmac and the road breaks up. By 2029-30, the Government will have committed more than £2 billion annually for local authorities to repair, renew and fix potholes on their roads. That doubling of funding since we took office will mean that we can exceed our manifesto commitment to fix an additional 1 million potholes a year by the end of this Parliament.

The Opposition spokesperson mentioned the electric vehicle decision that the Government announced at the Budget. We remain fully committed to the electric vehicle transition, which will drive growth and help the country to meet its climate change objectives. Our public charging network is growing rapidly. We had more than 87,000 public charge points as of December last year, and, in the year ending 1 October 2025, the number of charging devices in rural areas had increased by 26%. In addition, the Government announced at Budget 2025 the immediate roll-out of a package of support worth £3.6 billion to help motorists to switch to cleaner and greener cars, to support the automotive sector through the transition to EVs, and to bolster British industry.

The Government are dedicated to supporting and promoting rural areas, particularly by providing support for transport costs, such as through the rural fuel duty relief scheme. I very much look forward to further

discussions—perhaps even further correspondence—over the course of the Parliament about how we can continue to do that. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon for securing the debate and all Members in the Chamber for their contributions.

5.41 pm

Ian Roome: I will be brief, Ms Furniss, because I know we are almost out of time.

I thank the Minister for his response and I appreciate his taking the time to engage with me and others on this issue. While we do not expect the Government to commit themselves ahead of a future Budget, I know that my constituents value the support that the scheme provides to very rural areas, and it would be good to see progress towards restoring the funding to its former level.

I also thank all Members for their contributions—what a debate! We have covered from the top of Scotland down to the Isles of Scilly and Land's End, which is absolutely fantastic. We have heard representations from Wales, Northern Ireland and England, obviously, so what a great and inclusive debate it has been, from across the whole of the United Kingdom and all our rural constituencies.

Fuel is very much part of my constituents' daily lives. It is an unavoidable cost; personal transport is much needed, because there is no regular public transport in any of the EX35 area, and people cannot walk to bus stops because of the terrain and the rurality.

Many accusations have been thrown at the Government over the past year to claim that they do not care about rural areas. When the next fiscal event arrives later this year, updating the scheme for 2026 will be a chance to counter those claims, at very little cost compared with other schemes. I therefore hope that the Government will take that opportunity, on behalf of communities that are often forgotten, to deliver good news at the pumps for rural people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Rural Fuel Duty Relief scheme.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 7 January 2026

TREASURY

Global Minimum Tax System

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

The UK has reached agreement with more than 140 members of the G20-OECD inclusive framework on a package of reforms to the pillar 2 global minimum tax system.

The reforms deliver on the June 2025 G7 statement, and subsequent G20 commitments, to address how the pillar 2 system should interact with US minimum tax rules, alongside an evidence-based stocktake process to ensure that a level playing field is maintained for all inclusive framework members. Further, the reforms provide an important first step on simplification measures for UK businesses, and make wider changes to the design of the framework to support its long-term stability.

The Government welcome the certainty and stability that this agreement brings, and the protection from retaliatory measures that it provides to UK businesses. This agreement underlines the continued commitment of the UK and others to tackle aggressive tax planning by multinational enterprises and preserve the level playing field.

Measures to implement this agreement in UK law will be subject to technical consultation and then brought forward in the next Finance Bill. They will apply for accounting periods beginning on or after 1 January 2026.

Details of the package as agreed by the inclusive framework are set out here: <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-sub-issues/global-minimum-tax/side-by-side-package.pdf>

[HCWS1224]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by RWE Renewables UK Dogger Bank South (West) Ltd and RWE Renewables UK Dogger Bank South (East) Ltd for the construction and operation of an offshore wind farm, made up of two array areas (Dogger Bank South East and Dogger Bank South West). The array areas are located entirely within the Dogger Bank special area of conservation in the North sea, approximately 100 to 122 km off the North Yorkshire coast.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report, unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

The statutory deadline for the decision on the Dogger Bank South offshore wind farms project was 10 January 2026. I have decided to allow an extension, and to set a new deadline of 30 April 2026. This is to allow time to request further information that was not provided for consideration during the examination period, and to give all interested parties the opportunity to review and comment on such information. While it is not my preference to extend, I am clear that applications for consent for energy projects submitted under the Planning Act 2008 must meet the necessary standards.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS1225]

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Wednesday 14 January 2026**

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