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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 13 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

Tuesday 13 January 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Before I start questions, I must inform the House that I have received the sad news of the death of Colin Pickthall, who was the Member for West Lancashire from 1992 to 2005. We have lost another great Lancastrian.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

NHS Staff

1. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce levels of burnout of NHS staff. [907222]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):

May I associate Labour Members with your condolences, Mr Speaker?

I am hugely grateful to NHS staff for the shift that they have put in through what remains a challenging winter. It is because of them that waiting lists are going down and ambulance handover times are 14 minutes quicker this winter than last winter, and during periods of industrial action this winter, NHS providers kept approximately 95% of elective activity running. We have got to ensure that we invest not just in our service but in our staff, and we are working actively with health unions to achieve that goal.

Ian Lavery: Will the Minister join me in thanking the fantastic employees of Northumbria NHS foundation trust for their continued dedication and commitment, from the top surgeon to the ancillary workers? We know that the NHS is held together by their efforts, but that comes at a severe personal cost to many individuals. A recent YouGov poll showed that 73% of our heroes—the heroes of the NHS—reported suffering from burnout: that is severe exhaustion. Will the Minister tell the House what measures he is taking to ensure that those who put their own wellbeing on the line to protect the health of the nation receive the support and care that they so richly deserve?

Wes Streeting: I am hugely grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and he is rightly proud of his local trust. It is absolutely right that we cannot expect the NHS to rely simply on the goodwill of staff going above and beyond the call of duty to meet the needs of patients. That is why the Government are committed to publishing a new workforce plan, to create the workforce

that is ready to deliver the transformed service set out in our 10-year health plan. We are already working with health unions, both on issues around pay, as people would expect, and the conditions that people are working in, recognising, as my hon. Friend rightly does, that this is not just about doctors, important though they are, but about the entire NHS workforce that is delivering the improvements with this Government that the country is crying out for so desperately.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): One of the things that contributes to staff burnout is caring for patients in corridors. I recently visited St Helier hospital and saw that for myself, and it was very concerning and distressing. We are also seeing that at East Surrey hospital in Redhill, in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State confirm when we can expect to see the issue resolved for good?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is right to describe the appalling state of corridor care in this country. In fact, under the previous Government, not only was this allowed to emerge as an NHS issue, but it was normalised, with benign nomenclature such as “temporary escalation spaces” used to endorse that normalisation, which should never have been considered normal or acceptable. We will set out our plans shortly to publish data, so that the Government can be held to account as well as the system. I am clear that I want corridor care gone over the course of this Parliament, and I am confident that when we publish all the data for this winter, it will be better than last winter. However, I want to be honest with the House and the country: even on the best days of this winter, patients are still being treated in corridors and in conditions that I do not believe are acceptable and that we should never allow to be normalised. That is why we are committed to year-on-year improvement.

Community Hospital Services

2. **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to move clinics and routine appointments into community hospitals. [907223]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Rural and coastal constituencies, like South Dorset, are at the heart of our shift in the 10-year plan from hospitals to communities. Not only does everyone deserve care closer to where they live and work, but people in rural and coastal areas often see the sharp end of health inequalities. After 15 years of damage, this Government are determined to change the current postcode lottery of where people live determining the care they receive. As announced in the Budget, we are committed to delivering 250 neighbourhood health centres across every part of England. There are also now 100 community diagnostic centres across the country, offering out-of-hours services, 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Lots has been done but there is lots more to do.

Lloyd Hatton: I have been campaigning to restore the rheumatology clinic at Swanage community hospital and the chemotherapy clinic at Wareham community hospital. Both of those clinics were closed despite good health outcomes and high levels of patient satisfaction, and local NHS bosses agreed that they were successful clinics before they were mothballed. With all that in mind, does the Secretary of State agree that we must

deliver key services and clinics closer to where patients actually live? Will he take the opportunity to encourage local NHS bosses in Dorset to restore our much-needed chemotherapy and rheumatology clinics?

Wes Streeting: I can well understand why my hon. Friend is particularly concerned about the impact of changes on cancer patients. I know that his integrated care board has heard his representations, and it will have heard them again today; I am sure it will be happy to meet with him, as will my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Health. It is important that people have the services that they need on their doorstep. That is one of the reasons why we are devolving so much power, responsibility and decision making closer to communities so that services can be designed around the differing needs of communities in different parts of the country.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Vital services such as X-rays and scans have been removed from the Oak Park community clinic in my constituency without any prior warning or consultation from the ICB. Will the Secretary of State meet with me to discuss how we can restore those services locally so that my constituents do not have to travel to Portsmouth?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman should absolutely make representations to his local ICB if he has concerns about service reconfigurations. We are investing more in the NHS, but I recognise that there are none the less big challenges for ICBs to face. I am sure that the ICB would be happy to meet him to hear his concerns.

Puberty Suppressants

3. **Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind):** What discussions he has had with King's College London on the compliance of the PATHWAYS puberty blocker trial with the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004. [907224]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The PATHWAYS trial has undergone a thorough independent review and has received all the regulatory and ethical approvals. The sponsors of the study, King's College London and South London and Maudsley NHS foundation trust, are working to ensure that it is conducted in compliance with the relevant regulations.

Rosie Duffield: The United States Department of Health and Human Services' peer-reviewed report found that harms from paediatric medical transition are significant, long term and too often ignored and inadequately tracked, as testified by Keira Bell, who is here in Parliament today. What is the Government's rationale behind medicalising yet more vulnerable children, given that we have no evidence of any benefit to this approach and, in fact, plenty of evidence of harm?

Karin Smyth: As the hon. Lady knows, the Government are acting on the recommendations of the excellent report from Hilary Cass, which I think she would agree is world-leading evidence, and moving the model away from medical intervention towards a more holistic approach to care. The Government will continue to be guided by that evidence, as the whole House will appreciate. The hon. Lady referenced Keira Bell, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) has asked the Secretary of State to

meet clinicians and others who disagree with the trial. That meeting is being arranged, and we will continue to work under the guidelines for clinical evidence.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I remind the House that puberty blockers are still prescribed to young people who are not trans; I do not see some of my colleagues who are so exercised when puberty blockers are given to young trans people expressing the same concerns for their cisgender peers. Even Dr Cass herself acknowledged that puberty blockers are effective for some young trans people and recommended against a blanket ban. While the trial is ongoing, can the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking to increase funding and capacity for children and young people's gender services to address the unacceptably long waiting times, which continue to cause enormous harm?

Karin Smyth: We need to be very careful about our language, in line with Dr Cass's report. We are talking about children who are presenting with gender dysphoria and in gender distress. The Government support moving away from the medical intervention model towards a holistic approach to care based on the evidence, and that has cross-party support more generally, although I am not entirely sure of the position of the Liberal Democrats on supporting it. That is the model with which we are progressing. On the wider issues with regard to support for children and young people, particularly as they present across the board, this Government are investing much more than anyone else has indicated that they would in support for all services.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Part of the trial is to ask the child participants the Avon longitudinal study of parents and carers romantic relationships questionnaire. Is the Minister as concerned as I am that children under the age of 13 will be asked sexually explicit questions?

Karin Smyth: I think all Members across the House are concerned about the distress with which young people are coming forward for all of these services, and the need to support them and their families. Again, it is important that all parts of this trial follow clear ethical and clinical guidelines.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): The Government were right to bring in the indefinite ban on puberty blockers due to concerns over the past 15 years about the gender services treatment that was being given. Over that time, 2,000 children who were questioning their gender identity have been given puberty blockers, so could the Minister explain why we are not following up on their long-term outcomes before we administer these powerful drugs to 200 more children?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his constructive work in this area on behalf of young people. I think there is a further question on this topic on the Order Paper. The Government are looking at how we can best use the data linkage study from that previous work. As I think hon. Members understand, that data was collected for different purposes—it is not of the quality that might be needed for this review—but we will continue to use all the evidence that is available, both in this country and in others, in line with the best clinical practice and under the guidance that Dr Hilary Cass prescribed in her review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Secretary of State has previously said that he accepts all the recommendations in the Cass review. One such recommendation is that the Secretary of State mandate the release of data for the data linkage study. Can the Minister tell us what specific steps have been taken to mandate the release of that data?

Karin Smyth: We absolutely stand by that work, and we are working with NHS England to make sure it is mandated to do exactly that.

NHS Dental Services: West Dorset

4. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the accessibility of regular NHS dental check-up appointments in West Dorset constituency. [907225]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): This Government are committed to ending the gaps in teeth by filling the gaps in local provision, including in rural areas such as Dorset. We will work to introduce fundamental changes to the dental contract before the end of this Parliament, but already from April the reforms to NHS dentistry that I announced last month will mean more NHS appointments and better oral health.

Edward Morello: NHS dentistry in West Dorset is in crisis. We have just 15 practices offering any kind of NHS care, and only half of young people have seen a dentist in the last two years. Residents are writing to me about elderly people removing their own teeth and children in A&E with preventable tooth decay. What consideration has the Minister given to requiring supervised trainee dentists on placement at dental training schools to work exclusively on NHS waiting lists rather than taking private appointments, which would help reduce the backlog?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman will have noted that we have committed to tie-ins for future dentists going through the training programme. It costs the taxpayer hundreds of thousands of pounds to train a dentist, and we believe it is absolutely right that a significant percentage of their time should be put into NHS dentistry.

In terms of improving access, in financial year 2023-24 there was a shocking £392 million underspend on NHS dentistry at a time when demand was going through the roof. I made clear that every penny allocated to NHS dentistry must be spent on NHS dentistry, and I am very pleased to report that we have got that underspend down to just £36 million. The decrease in the underspend is leading to an increase in NHS dentistry, but I accept that there is still a long way to go.

Brain Cancer Treatment: Washington and Gateshead South

5. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve access to tissue freezing for brain cancer patients in Washington and Gateshead South constituency. [907226]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I also put on record my condolences to the family and friends of Colin Pickthall, the former Member for West Lancashire. As the current Member for that seat, it is my privilege to build on his legacy.

We are committed to furthering investment to unlock new treatments and improve outcomes for brain cancer patients, including by investing in cutting-edge equipment to improve access to samples for research. Individual pathology services in England maintain their own standard operating procedures, and they outline local capabilities and practices, but we are continuing to invest in England's pathology networks to deliver productivity and transformation improvements.

Mrs Hodgson: I welcome the Government's focus on improving survival rates for cancer, particularly in the forthcoming national cancer plan. Will the Minister agree to attend the campaign for Owain's law event here in Parliament on 3 February and meet the families, who will have travelled from across the country to brief Members of this House on the urgent importance of fixing the current tissue freezing postcode lottery?

Ashley Dalton: We are determined to ensure that everyone who receives a brain tumour diagnosis, regardless of where they live, has access to the latest treatment options. I look forward to meeting Owain's wife, Ellie, later this month to hear more about their story and the next steps on this topic.

Maternity and Neonatal Care

6. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve maternity care. [907227]

9. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve maternity and neonatal care. [907230]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): As the House knows, I am deeply concerned by the state of maternity care in the NHS that we inherited. While the majority of births go well, I know from the courage of families who have spoken up and the concern of staff that devastating impacts are arising from failures in care. That is why I asked Baroness Amos to chair an independent investigation into maternity and neonatal services to drive urgent action, but that has not stopped us from taking action in the meantime. We have invested more than £131 million to improve neonatal care facilities, brought in a new maternity care bundle, implemented a programme to reduce the two leading causes of avoidable brain injury during labour, and increased maternal mental health services. There is so much more to do, however, to guarantee safety now and into the future, and also to ensure truth, justice and accountability for past failures.¹

Paul Waugh: The new maternal care bundle, to which the Secretary of State refers, is rightly aimed at reversing the recent worrying rise in maternal death and ill health. In particular, the increase in obstetric haemorrhage concerns so many midwives and doctors and the families affected. Given that the Government want to help women

1. [Official Report, 26 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

to make informed choices about how they give birth safely, can the NHS do more to highlight the well documented risks of severe bleeding and placenta accreta caused by caesarean sections?

Wes Streeting: Everyone accessing maternity care should be offered a personalised care and support plan, informed by a personalised risk assessment. That is so women have more control over their own care based on what matters to them and their individual needs and preferences, as well as to ensure that every woman understands the risk factors that might arise in her case. A caesarean section is generally a very safe procedure, but like any type of surgery, it carries a risk of complications. All women should have the confidence of knowing that the doctors and midwives dealing with them are robustly trained to deal with severe complications, including haemorrhage. That is why the maternity care bundle, as well as other measures, will lead to greater safety, more information and, crucially, the personalisation of care and patient choice for the mother.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I welcome the new maternal care bundle and its ambition to drive consistently high standards of care for every pregnant and new mum. It is great that maternal mental health is one of the five elements prioritised; I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his focus on that. The challenge now is to drive forward its implementation. Can he say more about how he intends to do that, and in particular how he will ensure that NHS staff are trained and confident enough to better screen and support women who are struggling with their mental health?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue, and I commend her for the work she is doing in this area. There is a real risk of post-natal depression. Certainly where there have been complications in birth or, worse still, injury or the most unimaginable experience of loss, we need to make sure that women and their partners and the wider families are supported from day one. That does not just mean training and support for staff and making sure that they are doing emotional wellbeing screening; it also means thinking more thoughtfully about estates. One thing that has really struck me is the experience of women who have suffered loss during labour who are asked, during the care that follows, to go back to the very maternity units where their unimaginable pain was first endured. Those are difficult issues to challenge, and it will require investment, but those are the sorts of areas we are getting into as we think more thoughtfully about how to ensure that we take care of not just the physical health of the mother and baby, but the mental health and wellbeing of mother and the wider family.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): An Oxford midwife recently told me that sewage regularly rises through the floor and drips down through the ceiling on to a hospital maternity ward. This has become so common that it is now standard procedure for midwives to move the clinic whenever it happens so that patients are none the wiser. Obviously if the hospital had the money to fix the problem it would have already done so, but equally obviously, the staff should be looking after

mothers and babies, not shovelling sewage. Can the Secretary of State confirm that when the Amos review has done its work, there will be a flexible pot of money so that specific issues such as this in specific hospitals can be dealt with to improve patient safety and staff retention?

Wes Streeting: Without pre-empting Baroness Amos's work, let me say that the hon. Lady is absolutely right. We need to give staff the tools that will enable them to do the job to the best of their ability, and they need the right facilities and environment in which they can work and patients can be cared for. It is completely unacceptable that on top of the other challenges that staff and families face at such an important time—the unique moment of bringing new life into the world—they are having to do so against the backdrop of crumbling estates that the hon. Lady has described. We are putting the largest ever capital investment into the NHS, but she has made a powerful point about the need for capital investment in this area, which was impressed on me at Queen's hospital in Romford during one of my recent visits, and I will be looking at the issue very closely.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I recently visited the Dorset breastfeeding network at the Purbeck community centre, and it was fascinating to hear about the work that the team there are doing, but they told me that since covid, standard NHS antenatal classes have stopped and have never returned. As a result, women are not getting the information that they need in order to make informed choices, which is leading to various decisions about how they give birth and whether they breastfeed their babies. We know that the Pride in Place and Best Start in Life centres are going ahead, but they will not cover most of my area because they are covering only the deprived areas. How will we ensure that there is a universal offer for antenatal care for everyone?

Wes Streeting: I will make certain that my Department and the NHS look into what has happened to provision in the hon. Lady's area, and I will write to her about it. She is quite right about the need to ensure that parents are given high-quality information from the time of conception so that they can make informed decisions about everything from whether to breastfeed through to the steps that they can take in those formative first 1,001 days to secure the best possible outcomes. I welcome the appointment of Will Quince to lead the 1,001 Critical Days Foundation; although in the past we have crossed swords in the House, I know how committed he is to that agenda.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The maternity and neonatal plan is due in the spring, nearly two years after the Secretary of State took office. The maternity review has been delayed. There are no signs of the 1,000 additional midwives the Secretary of State said he would train. Gynaecology waiting lists are rising, with the number waiting for admission 6% higher than it was a year ago. The Secretary of State has an opportunity to save many lives, and I know that he wants to use all the opportunities available to him. May I ask him to concentrate on making more improvements in maternity care?

Wes Streeting: Let me just point out that in the 18 months for which I have had the privilege of holding this post, we have invested more than £131 million in 122 infrastructure projects across 49 NHS trusts to improve the safety of neonatal care facilities. We have implemented a new programme to reduce the two leading causes of avoidable brain injury during labour.¹ We have piloted Martha's rule in maternity and neonatal units in 14 trusts across six regions to give patients and families the right to request a second opinion. We have launched a package of initiatives and interventions to reduce the number of still births, brain injuries, neonatal deaths and pre-term births. We have held a culture and leadership programme. We have created targeted tools and schemes to promote midwife retention. We have increased the provision of maternal mental health services to help women. We have had to do all that—not wasting a single day in 18 months. Imagine how embarrassed we would be if we had wasted 13 whole years!

Brain Cancer Treatment: Hartlepool

7. Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve access to tissue freezing for brain cancer patients in Hartlepool. [907228]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): As previously stated, we are boosting investment to unlock new treatments and improve outcomes for brain cancer patients, including investing in cutting-edge equipment to improve access to samples for research. Each pathology service in England maintains its own standard procedures for tissue freezing, which inform local capabilities and practices, and we are investing in England's pathology networks to deliver productivity and transformation improvements.

Mr Brash: I thank the Minister for her answer, and for her positive response during a recent Westminster Hall debate on this issue. As she will recall from that debate, my constituent Trevor Jones died in September last year from glioblastoma. His widow, Samantha, learned only later that life-extending treatment options might have been available had his brain biopsy not been stored in paraffin blocks, but instead been flash frozen. Will the Minister recommit to examining how flash freezing can be made standard practice for brain biopsies across the NHS, and will she meet me and Samantha to discuss a way forward?

Ashley Dalton: As my hon. Friend rightly points out, I was privileged to answer for the Government in the Westminster Hall debate last week on this very issue, and I vividly remember Trevor's story. Last week, I did commit to exploring current arrangements for tissue freezing options and the options for change, and I recommit to doing that today. I would be more than happy to meet him and his constituent to discuss this further.

NHS 10-year Workforce Plan

8. Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): When he plans to publish the NHS 10-year workforce plan. [907229]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The Government will publish the 10-year workforce plan in the spring. This plan will ensure that the NHS has the

right people in the right places with the right skills for patients when they need them, and we are engaging extensively with partners to ensure that this plan delivers for staff and patients.

Aphra Brandreth: I have been contacted by concerned doctors in Chester South and Eddisbury who, after five or six years at medical school and a further two years of foundation training, are now struggling to secure specialty posts and are being forced to consider leaving the NHS altogether. While I will reserve judgment on the medical training Bill to be presented later today until I have seen it in full, I welcome the fact that the Government are finally treating this issue with the urgency it deserves. Can the Minister set out how this legislation will be accompanied by a credible plan to expand training numbers, so that the number of places is sufficient to meet the NHS's short, medium and long-term workforce needs?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Member for her almost support for the Bill that we will present later to address much of this problem. Again, we are clearing up the mess we were left by her party, which, by changing the rules in delivering a workforce plan in 2023, essentially ramped up the supply of staff by extrapolating existing trends without any reference to the constraints or needs of the service. Our workforce plan will be different. We do hope for support for the Bill to remove some of the problem with foundation and specialty training places, and we look forward to rigorous debate on that subject.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Unfortunately, my constituency is not unique in seeing long waits for diagnosis of neurodiversity. From 18 to 24 months is the expected waiting time in Thurrock, and some have to wait much longer. Given that, for a child, a wait of 18 to 24 months can sometimes be their whole lifespan or half their lifespan, will the upcoming workforce plan make sure that there is a plan for paediatric care, particularly for allied health professionals such as occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and clinical physicians?

Karin Smyth: The services my hon. Friend outlines cover a number of different areas in different locations, and I think it is very important that the workforce plan we are bringing forward reflects a different model of care. We have seen more services going into secondary care and particularly hospitals, at the expense of community care and particularly primary care. That needs to change across the age spectrum, and the new workforce plan will be designed in lockstep with a new service design, more staff in neighbourhoods and more digital support, as well as to address the issues she outlines.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): A study by the Health Foundation has found that the cost to the NHS of staff sickness and staff turnover is of the order of £12 billion a year. Will the Government's new workforce plan cover the issue of excessive cost through the entirely avoidable turnover of staff?

Karin Smyth: Yes, because those issues are a result of the shocking staff morale as a result of the policies of the hon. Gentleman's Government. As highlighted by Lord Darzi, staff morale, and issues around staff sickness and the huge increase in agency spending on their

1.[Official Report, 26 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 6WC.](Correction)

watch, are all signs of a system that is not functioning for patients or staff. We absolutely will bring forward measures to address those issues.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): When the Secretary of State was in front of the Health and Social Care Committee, he recognised that we will not solve the workforce problems in the NHS without solving the workforce problems in social care as well. There are 150,000 unfilled posts in social care—three times greater than in the wider economy. What are we going to do to help solve this problem?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend and the Secretary of State are right to address the fact that we need to look across the whole span, and at people moving between those workforces. As he will know, the fair pay agreement, with the £500 million increase to support it, is part of our work to ensure those issues are addressed across the piece.

ADHD Services

10. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve ADHD services. [907231]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): We know that many people with suspected ADHD—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—experience severe delays in accessing assessments. That is not right. We want people with ADHD to receive the right support in their communities. Our medium-term planning framework sets out expectations for local areas to improve access to ADHD services. The independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, ADHD and autism will work with people with lived experience to identify challenges and solutions. The final report is due to be published in summer and will build on the independent ADHD taskforce report, which we welcome.

Jo Platt: I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliament group on ADHD. ADHD providers estimate that untreated ADHD could cost the economy £11.2 billion over the next decade, largely due to avoidable impacts on justice, employment, education and health. Will the Minister commit to ensure that people with ADHD receive the support they need to succeed, and will she work with the APPG to develop strategies that will help individuals to reach their full potential?

Ashley Dalton: Through the medium-term planning framework, which we published in October 2025, we set out those expectations. We will continue to work with trusts to develop them to make sure that people with ADHD, or suspected ADHD, get the support they need. I am more than happy to meet the APPG to discuss these matters further.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Roughly 50% of the young people on the books of child and adolescent mental health services in south Cumbria have ADHD or autism. The integrated care board provides no funding whatever to acknowledge that. That is a huge burden on those young people and their families. It stops them getting back into school and so on, but it is also a burden on all the other young people waiting for treatment for things like eating disorders.

Will the Minister pay personal attention to this—obviously, it is her ICB as well—to make sure that children with autism and ADHD are properly supported through our CAMHS services?

Ashley Dalton: As it is the ICB shared by my constituency, I am equally concerned. This will be explored as part of the review and I am more than happy to ask the Minister responsible to contact the hon. Gentleman further on how we can take that forward.

Primary Care in Epping Forest: House Building Targets

11. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the Government's house building targets on the availability of primary care services in Epping Forest constituency. [907232]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Rapid housing and population growth can put real pressure on GP services. That is why we are investing an extra £1.1 billion in general practice, taking total GP funding to £13.4 billion. We are also creating 250 neighbourhood health centres, upgrading surgeries through a £102 million fund, and working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to determine how developer contributions from new housing, through section 106 and the community infrastructure levy, can be improved to enable the delivery of local health services as an integral part of new housing developments.

Dr Hudson: As my constituency neighbour, the Health Secretary will be aware that Chigwell parish has no GP surgery of its own, requiring many of my constituents to travel to his constituency to access primary care. Given the Government's top-down housing targets, what assurances can the Health Secretary provide that any new developments in Epping Forest will be accompanied by the delivery of adequate primary care infrastructure, rather than placing further pressure on already overstretched services? Will the Government support the long-standing call, championed by me, local Conservative councillors and Chigwell parish council, for the provision of a GP surgery within Chigwell parish?

Stephen Kinnock: I am not familiar with the details of that case, but I get the impression that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is. A really important part of our manifesto commitment was to end the 8 am scramble, which is all about access, and that is precisely what we are doing. In September 2024, patient satisfaction with ease of access stood at just 61%; today it stands at 73%. That is huge progress. It is all about getting better access, and building a primary care estate that is fit for purpose is a very important part of that. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the details of that specific case.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Community pharmacies are a vital part of the primary care infrastructure, including in Epping Forest. Using NHS Organisation Data Service data, can the Minister tell the House how many pharmacy contracts ceased in England last year?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and congratulate him on the addition of the facial hair. I am glad to see that he is joining that particular club—I think it is the only club we may both be a member of!

The Government are aware of the pressure on pharmacy; it is a major challenge that we are facing. We gave pharmacy a 19% uplift in the last spending review. Of all the sectors in my portfolio, that was the one that received the largest uplift. We are also looking to secure better progress with the use of technology, and we are looking at the medicines margin and the dispensing fee, recognising the significant financial pressures that pharmacies are under. Through reform and investment, we believe that we can turn the corner and rebuild pharmacy in our country.

Dr Evans: I appreciate the Minister's answer. However, the answer to my question is: 650 contracts across England and Wales. He only had to look at the newspaper headlines from yesterday to see that—this is his Department and his portfolio.

The chair of the Independent Pharmacies Association, Leyla Hannbeck, has specifically warned that higher business rates and increases in national insurance contributions, which are both set by the Government, are to blame and are driving up costs, while pharmacy income—which, again, is set by the Government—remains fixed. Does the Minister accept that those tax decisions taken by his Government directly increase the costs and contribute to the loss of pharmacy contracts, and will he therefore raise this matter with the Chancellor immediately?

Stephen Kinnock: I think there is some dispute over the number that was on the front page of the *Express*. We are looking into that number and will certainly come back to the hon. Gentleman on it. On his broader point about the decisions that the Chancellor took at the last Budget, I suppose I have a question back to him: would he be cutting the £26 billion that this Labour Government are investing in the NHS, and if not, how would he be paying for it?

Mr Speaker: I think just stick to the responsibility of being in government, Minister; don't worry about the Opposition.

A&E Waiting Times

12. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help reduce waiting times at A&E departments. [907233]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Regardless of the challenges this winter presents, this is a Government who are facing into them. We have vaccinated over 17 million people this winter, which is 350,000 more than this time last year and 60,000 more NHS staff. We are not out of the woods yet by any stretch, but I can give an example of how our investment in modernisation is paying off: new year's day was the busiest day in NHS history for 999 calls, but despite that, ambulances arrived to heart attack and stroke patients 15 minutes faster compared to this time last year. Backed by £450 million, our urgent emergency care plan will expand same-day and urgent care services. We are delivering new same-day

emergency care and urgent treatment centres, more mental health crisis assessments and 500 new ambulances. Lots done, but so much more to do.

Mr Speaker: And a 24-hour centre at Chorley as well, Minister!

Chris Vince: Will the Secretary of State to join me in thanking the extraordinary efforts of the staff at Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow for their work over the winter period? A few years ago, we saw the shocking statistic that people were waiting in A&E at Princess Alexandra hospital for 13 hours. Can the Secretary of State outline the changes that this Government are making to bring down waiting times, improve GP satisfaction levels and decrease ambulance waiting times, and explain how this Labour Government are ensuring that the NHS is fit for the future?

Wes Streeting: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking NHS staff in Harlow and across the country for their incredible efforts during the toughest winter weeks. I particularly thank all those staff who have supported their colleagues and worked throughout Christmas and new year, sacrificing time with their families to care for ours. Of course, Mr Speaker, I particularly thank the staff at Chorley and South Ribble hospital who facilitated our visit. Your representations from the Chair for longer A&E access have not been lost on me, or indeed the record.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to the keys being handed in.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Last night, Surrey Heartlands ICB and two hospital trusts in Surrey declared a critical incident, which means that some hospitals cannot guarantee that patients will be treated safely and operations could be cancelled to make urgent care a priority. Will the Secretary of State confirm what action the Government are taking to support those trusts and what funding will be made available to ensure that such incidents do not recur?

Wes Streeting: A number of critical incidents have been running across the country this week. To be clear, a critical incident does not mean that there is unsafe care or that we are unable to provide care. A critical incident means that there is a challenge, and the system mobilises in response to help meet that challenge so that people do receive safe care. As I have said, we are investing more in our urgent and emergency care services and we are seeing the impact of that through year-on-year improvements to date. We are not out of winter yet; we still have lots of hard yards ahead. I am confident that when we emerge from winter, we will be able to tell a story of year-on-year improvement. However, while the NHS is on the road to recovery, I would not want anyone watching—not least the hon. Member's constituents—to think that the Government believe that what we have seen this winter is acceptable every day, in every case everywhere. Until that is the case, we will continue to strive for further improvement day by day, week by week, month by month, and year on year.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Working my shifts in A&E over Christmas and the new year, like many colleagues up and down the country I experienced what has become the undignified norm of corridor care.

I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to ending it. The all-party parliamentary group on emergency care, which I chair, working closely with the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, is keen that the Government adopt our recommendations on ending corridor care. The Secretary of State previously agreed to meet us. Will he today reaffirm his commitment to meet us to end this scourge in our A&Es?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend can be absolutely assured of that. I thank her for her powerful advocacy in this place, as well as for putting her words into action on the NHS frontline. She does not need to do that—she could do the bare minimum to keep her licence going—but she always goes above and beyond to take care of patients and constituents, literally rolling up her sleeves and putting on her scrubs to do that. She has made a number of thoughtful recommendations in her report, and I look forward to engaging with her and the all-party group on that.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I genuinely welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is able to praise the efforts of NHS staff this Christmas and new year, but there is good news in Scotland, too: waiting lists have fallen for the longest waiters for the sixth month in a row and threatened industrial action by resident doctors has been called off. However, there is anxiety not just in Scotland but across these islands about the new UK-US medicines deal and its impact on the NHS. Will the Secretary of State change his habit this new year with a new year's resolution and answer my question? Where is the money coming from for the UK-US drugs deal?

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is about waiting lists, and I am sorry but we have got to stick to it. *[Interruption.]* Order. Mr Logan, I was very good in bringing you in, especially with health being devolved, so please let us not change the question before us. Helen Morgan will be a good example.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I always am, Mr Speaker; thank you very much. Recently, I have heard from Candice, who was interrupted while changing her stoma bag behind a curtain on the emergency ward; Lynne, who waited 17 hours for an ambulance after breaking several ribs; and Sandra, who has bladder cancer and spent 31 hours on a plastic chair in the “fit to sit” area. They all want to share their stories so others do not have to suffer like they did, in pain for hours and hours. Will the Secretary of State commit to ending the waits and back the Liberal Democrat call, welcomed by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine this morning, for a guarantee that no patient will have to wait for more than 12 hours in A&E?

Wes Streeting: We are striving towards meeting those standards, which were met so successfully under the last Labour Government. This Labour Government are having to pull out every stop to repair the enormous damage done by our predecessors. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson is right: safety, of course, is paramount, but so is dignity. When she describes those patients' stories in those terms, it underscores the fact that behind the two words “corridor care” are countless stories of indignity and treatment in conditions that neither we, nor they as patients, nor staff want to see those people treated in. We are determined to put an end to it.

NHS Dental Services: Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes

13. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of access to NHS dental services in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency. [907234]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): As my hon. Friend knows, we inherited an NHS dentistry system in crisis. This Government are determined to fix it with fundamental reform of that vital service by the end of this Parliament. Since last April, we have delivered extra urgent dental appointments nationwide, and last month we announced new measures to get the right care to the right people at the right time, incentivising dentists to offer more NHS care.

Melanie Onn: The latest NHS statistics show that the Government really have the bit between their teeth as 7,000 more children saw a dentist in 2024-25 than in the previous year in the Humber and North Yorkshire integrated care board area. However, the rate for adults has slipped from 43% to 41% over the same period. How quickly does the Minister think that my adult constituents in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes will benefit from more appointments and more dentists?

Stephen Kinnock: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the pun in her question. There is good news, in that we are making progress on children's oral health, but we accept that we still have a way to go on the broader picture. We are making 27,196 additional urgent appointments available in the Humber and North Yorkshire ICB area. Our reforms, which I announced in December, will kick in from April of this year. They will significantly increase the unit of dental activity fee rate that we pay for urgent care to incentivise more dentists to do urgent NHS dentistry. We also have the golden hello system and a number of other measures that we are taking to address underserved areas. A lot has been done, but there is still a long way to go.

Topical Questions

T1. [907247] **Tom Collins** (Worcester) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Today, we are bringing forward the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill. It implements our commitment in the 10-year plan for health to prioritise UK medical graduates and doctors with significant NHS experience for medical training posts. Taxpayers spend £4 billion training medics every year. It is time we protect that investment, ensure that we have a sustainable workforce and give home-grown talent a path to become the next generation of NHS doctors. On that note, Mr Speaker, I also wish to update the House that constructive talks with the British Medical Association's resident doctors committee are ongoing. Let us see if, collectively, we can do better in 2026 than we did in 2025.

Tom Collins: Patients in Worcester are struggling to access urgent care. Far too many are falling through gaps in our system, with devastating consequences and huge amounts of double work, and patients feel that they have to travel too far for treatment. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the results of my deep dive into the failures in Worcestershire's NHS?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is right; we have to shift care out of hospitals and closer to people's homes to make sure that we do not end up with the situation he describes. I know that he is doing a lot of work on that in his community, and I am very happy to meet him to hear about his findings and what we can learn and apply both locally for him and his community and elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): With one in five hospice beds no longer available because of increased costs such as national insurance contributions, it is hardly surprising that doctors are raising concerns about the increase in the number of end-of-life patients in our hospitals. It is therefore concerning to hear that the palliative care modern service framework will not now be available until the autumn. Given that the situation is increasingly urgent, will the Secretary of State commit to accelerating that timescale?

Wes Streeting: We are moving at pace on the modern service framework, but we have recognised those financial pressures, whether through the continuation of the children's hospice grant over multiple years so that hospices can plan or through the capital investment we have put into hospices, providing the biggest funding uplift for hospices in a generation. I recognise that there is more to do, and I enjoy a close working relationship with the hospice movement to look at what more we as a Government can do to support the vital work that it does.

Stuart Andrew: Capital funding is welcome, but we cannot pay doctors and nurses with bricks and mortar. Hospice UK has said that without additional support, there will be

"more unnecessary hospital admissions, more unneeded A&E attendances and more patients not getting the care"

they need, so I push the Secretary of State again to accelerate the timescale. Their lordships are considering the assisted dying Bill and they need to see the palliative care MSF before making such an important decision. We must also make sure that we relieve hospices of this Government's NIC hikes.

Wes Streeting: I understand the point the shadow Health Secretary makes about capital funding, but I would also say that, through that capital funding, lots of hospices are able to free up their own resources, which would previously have been committed to rebuilding works, to spend on services. I recognise that there is more to do, and we are working closely with the hospice movement. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is reassured to learn that we will be reporting on the modern service framework initially in spring, so that we can then take on board feedback and reiterate. Then we will get to the autumn, but people will not have to wait until then to hear the direction of travel.

T3. [907249] **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): My South Norfolk constituents welcome the Government's commitment to 250 new neighbourhood health centres. For rural areas such as mine, where healthcare can be miles away, this is a real turning point. Long Stratton is a growing town, yet it is distant from Norfolk's main health hubs. Will the Secretary of State meet me to

discuss how delivering a neighbourhood health centre for Long Stratton will dramatically improve health outcomes in South Norfolk?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): We are committed to delivering 250 centres by 2035, with a progressive roll-out over this Parliament. Early sites are focused on areas of greatest need, with consideration of factors including deprivation and access. Integrated care systems are in the process of planning the best holistic local configuration of a neighbourhood service. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the potential for a neighbourhood health centre for Long Stratton.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The social care crisis is piling pressure on hospitals, with beds taken up by patients who are fit enough to be discharged. It is also piling pressure on local councils such as Shropshire, where 80% of the budget goes to social care, yet the Government are shifting funding from counties to cities and dragging their heels on the social care crisis. Will the Secretary of State take action by reinstating the cross-party talks on social care as a priority, because we need to fix social care if we are going to fix councils, care and the NHS?

Wes Streeting: Cross-party working on social care has never been un-instated. I know there is much more to do, but we have been in government for 18 months and we have put in £4 billion of investment, legislated for the first ever fair pay agreements with £500 million committed to that, made significant additional investment in the disabled facilities grant and, in building the workforce plan for the future, we have commissioned Baroness Casey to do her work. She will be reporting soon and we look forward to taking that work forward.

Mr Speaker: Ahem! I am getting a bad throat because of the Secretary of State.

T4. [907250] **Mr James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): Following my recent meeting with Bury's child and adolescent mental health services, can I ask the Secretary of State whether he has considered the merits of separating neurodiversity services from core CAMHS mental health provision? Will he meet me and Bury's health leaders to discuss this approach, given the rising number of referrals in the system, the long waiting times, the workforce pressures and the growing risk of overmedicalisation?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right that NHS mental health, ADHD and autism services have never fully met the needs of the population in a tailored, personalised or timely way. The independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, autism and ADHD will explore the current challenges facing clinical services. My hon. Friend the Minister for mental health is currently overseas on departmental business, but I am sure that he would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend on his return.

T2. [907248] **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): Over Christmas, I was contacted by constituents in North Devon who have been without NHS dental care for

nearly 20 years—one with a tooth held together with superglue. When will the Government reform the dental contract and properly tackle recruitment and retention, especially in rural areas, so that we stop the haemorrhaging of dentists from the NHS in the longer term?

Stephen Kinnock: We are in negotiation with the British Dental Association about the long-term contract reform that is so clearly needed, but I also draw the hon. Member's attention to the announcement I made in December about a range of interim reforms, particularly on urgent work, where we are significantly increasing the fee rate for urgent dental activity. That will kick in from April and will make a real difference in access to urgent care.

T5. [907251] **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his letter following the concerns I expressed about corridor care at the William Harvey hospital during Health and Social Care oral questions in October. He noted the decisive steps taken to reduce the pressure, including employing more doctors, freeing up beds and accelerating hospital discharges. However, after 14 years of under-investment, corridor care has become normalised in parts of the NHS. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that they meet their commitment and we see an end to corridor care at the William Harvey hospital?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his advocacy on this matter. I know that it has been taken seriously by NHS leaders nationally as well as locally, and they listen carefully to what he says on behalf of his constituents. I have reported to the House this morning on all the action we are taking to drive improvement. We are seeing improvement, but there is so much more to do. We are determined to consign corridor care to the history books, and not just in Ashford but right across the country.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Access to mental health services in rural communities is a challenge when services are stretched and underfunded. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to improve access to mental health services in Yeovil?

Wes Streeting: The Government increased investment in mental health by an extra £688 million in 2025, with all systems forecast to deliver the mental health investment standard. As our medium-term plan makes clear, we need a new approach to mental health to drive down waits and improve the quality of care, but our expectation is that integrated care boards will be required to protect mental health spending in real terms, rising in line with inflation year on year, ensuring that we meet the needs of constituents in all parts of the country.

T6. [907252] **Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking staff at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital for their commitment and patience over the past two years as we have seen our trust move from being the worst hospital in the country to the most improved? Thanks in no small part to the investment through the hospitals transformation programme, we have just opened two new wards. He could thank staff in person when he joins me on a visit, if he would be so kind.

Wes Streeting: I am sure that I will be able to swing by on my rounds. It is so important, especially against the backdrop of the crisis that the NHS has been through over many years, that as well as celebrating the best performance, we celebrate when there is real improvement. My hon. Friend knows as well as I do that there is of course more to do, but it is to the credit of leaders and staff that there has been improvement—lots done, and a lot more to do.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Last summer, Sussex ICB cut its IVF provision from three cycles to one due to budget pressures. There is currently a postcode lottery for IVF, and going through fertility treatment can be harrowing for those families. Given that additional cycles improve success rates, will the Secretary of State commit to a nationally consistent standard for IVF?

Wes Streeting: This is an issue that the Government are looking at. As with all treatments, we should be following National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, but I recognise that in this area there is a degree of regional variation in provision in a way that, frankly, I find difficult to justify. We are looking at this and, as we make decisions, we will of course report on progress to the House.

T8. [907254] **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): Currently, not a single NHS dentist in Hartlepool is taking on new patients, and many of my constituents are desperate. We have made real progress on urgent care, including a new urgent dental access centre, but it is not enough. What more will be done to fix NHS dentistry in Hartlepool and across the country?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right that, although we are making progress on urgent treatment with the urgent dental access centre that he mentioned, there is a real challenge with new routine care in Hartlepool. We are looking to improve that unacceptable situation, which we inherited, by offering dentists £20,000 to work in underserved areas and making it a requirement for new dentists to practise in the NHS. However, he is right to point out that the situation is not acceptable and we have to improve it.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Government's interim dental measures will of course be welcomed by residents in North Dorset, but they know, as I do, that we in this place have been discussing the inadequacy of the dental contract for years. What they and I cannot understand is why it will take until the end of this Parliament, as the Minister told us just a little while ago, and not sooner, to sort out that big problem and turbocharge NHS dentistry in rural North Dorset.

Stephen Kinnock: I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but I have to say that I am a little taken aback to be told about the lack of progress when the Conservatives had 14 years to sort out NHS dentistry. Nevertheless, we are engaging intensively with the BDA. The interim reforms, which kick in from April, will make a big difference, as I have said, but we are looking to put the long-term reforms in place from 2027 onwards. We want this situation to be rectified by the end of this Parliament, not to have a new contract by the end of this Parliament.

T9. [907255] **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Until covid, Hulland Ward had a local NHS clinic serving the community. However, it was closed, first temporarily and then permanently, leaving many vulnerable and elderly residents without healthcare and putting immense pressure on services in Brailsford. Will the Minister consider reopening that health centre? What steps is the Department taking to ensure that more people in Hulland Ward can access healthcare close to where they live?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I know that this is of great concern to my hon. Friend and his constituents. It is a matter for the commissioning officer at his local ICB. I recommend that he keeps talking with them about the best provision for his constituents.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I was fascinated by the Minister's earlier answer about the closure of pharmacies, because there has been fantastic news in Lee-on-the-Solent in my constituency: a new pharmacy wants to open there. Local people are desperate for a second pharmacy in Lee-on-the-Solent and the local GP practice supports it. The problem is that the Hampshire ICB has rejected it. Does the Minister share my disappointment that local people are not going to be served in the correct way by pharmacy provision, and will he meet me to discuss this?

Stephen Kinnock: That does sound somewhat baffling, given that there is demand for the service. Pharmacies play an absolutely vital role in our communities. I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the details further.

T10. [907256] **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): A number of local residents have been in touch recently following the announcement that a Cramlington dentist will no longer be offering NHS services and is moving to private practice only, which has led to a number of people being unable to access services locally. What more can the Government do to ensure that my constituents have access to appropriate local services?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out this issue. As I have said, the reforms that we announced in December will make a major difference, because dentists have not been incentivised to do NHS dentistry. That requires us to significantly increase the UDA, as we are doing, but there is a range of other measures that we need to take. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the specific details of that case.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Failed private finance initiative schemes from the noughties in three Leicester hospitals resulted in the NHS being sued for almost £30 million, despite no work being carried out. Leicester hospitals are still without any new buildings. I ask the Minister that expensive, inefficient financial packages—£60 billion of private money costing £306 billion of taxpayers' money—not be utilised for future projects.

Wes Streeting: This Government are putting record levels of capital investment into the NHS to correct more than 14 years of Conservative failure. We are

using public investment. We are certainly learning the lessons of the past in relation to PFI. We are able to do that only because people voted Labour and elected a Labour Government. I look forward to working with the city's Labour MPs to deliver the improvements in services that it deserves.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To date, Baroness Casey's review of adult social care has been pretty impenetrable, but in York we want to engage and innovate. Will my hon. Friend provide Parliament with a briefing on the progress, scope and scheduling of the review? The clock is ticking and the crisis is growing.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend and I have discussed this matter. I hope that her issues in accessing the commission, which I know has made contact with her, have been resolved. The commission is, of course, an independent body, but I am in no doubt at all that parliamentarians will hold it to account through the mechanisms at their disposal—the Select Committee, for example. The Government are not sitting on our hands; we are delivering the fair pay agreement, we have delivered the biggest uplift to unpaid carers since 1976, and we are pursuing a range of other measures to get our adult social care system fixed and fit for purpose.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): We have just been notified that William Blake House in my constituency—a residential home for people with severe learning disabilities—has been issued with a winding-up notice, and the court hearing is tomorrow. The families were given no notice of any of this, and no consultation was carried out, so naturally they are worried about what provision will be in place for their loved ones. Will the Minister meet me urgently to discuss putting a contingency plan in place for them?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I am not familiar with the details, of course, so might she write to me with the clear details? I am sure that officials will then take the matter up as a matter of urgency.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): Parents supported by Harry's Pals, a small charity, consistently describe the fragmented and emotionally exhausting system of accessing support for children with life-limiting conditions. Will the Secretary of State commit to exploring a dedicated national support pathway for parent carers, including better access to counselling and respite, and will he meet me and Hayley Charlesworth, the founder of Harry's Pals, who is watching at home today with Harry, to discuss how we can better support families in the Forest of Dean and nationally?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): Local authorities must assess disabled children's social care needs and provide respite care, including funding short breaks where appropriate. We are currently developing an all-age palliative care and end-of-life care modern service framework, and will consider the issue of emotional and practical support, including for parents who are carers, as part of that work. My hon. Friend the Minister for Care chairs a cross-Government meeting with Ministers from the Departments for Work and Pensions, for Business

and Trade and for Education, to consider how we can provide care as we improve recognition and support. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and the founder of Harry's Pals.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My local mental health trust is commissioned to deliver just 100 autism assessments and 88 ADHD assessments per year. The team is led by Clare, a constituent from Marple. There are approximately 1,600 people on the waiting list for ADHD alone—that is a 12-year waiting list. That is driving constituents to seek private diagnoses, but their GPs then refuse to sign up to a shared care arrangement, as the numbers just do not add up. What plans do the Government have to review the shared care protocols so that they work for patients and GPs?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the hon. Member for her question. Although of course we are considering prevalence and what is driving the apparent increase in conditions such as autism and ADHD, we are really driving at ensuring that we meet everyone's needs. I do not want for this country a future in which those who can afford it pay to go private and those who cannot are left behind. Nor do I want to see a situation in which people who have a diagnosis do not receive the care they need. We are looking at those issues with urgency.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I and a number of colleagues have concerns about the upcoming PATHWAYS trial. The Secretary of State has powers to use existing medical records for research purposes. Will he therefore consider using those powers to increase the evidence base and prevent the PATHWAYS trial from proceeding?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for her constructive approach to this difficult issue. She is right to challenge; we must have open and transparent debate. To be very clear—and to refer to my previous answer—the Secretary of State will use that power. We will have a retrospective data linkage study to identify the associations informing patient experience and outcomes, through the analysis of available digital information in health records and other nationally held databases. It will not establish causation but will be an important contribution to the evidence base.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am not ashamed to say that I have had a finger up my bum—not like that! In all seriousness, as a black man in the target age range, and with a family history, I am a keen advocate for prostate cancer screening. One of my constituents has been told by his GP surgery that, as there is no national screening programme for opportunistic testing, they follow national guidance and patients cannot request a screening without GP authorisation. What advice does the Secretary of State have for those of my constituents who are struggling to get screening for prostate cancer? I say a big thank you to the team at Kingston hospital for their swift action in moving my dad from active surveillance to treatment—he raves about them.

Wes Streeting: I certainly join the hon. Member in his final message and commend him for his declaration, because the more we can break taboo and stigma around these issues and get people talking more openly about

the telltale signs of risk, the better protected we will all be. As he will know, we are looking very carefully at the recommendations around screening. I will be convening a group of experts with the chief medical officer to probe some of the recommendations, and I will keep the House informed.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): Last Friday, I went on a visit to my fantastic local GP service, Hadwen Health. The team there are already using technology and AI to make sure patients get the right care that they need, but they told me that there is currently no technological solution that allows patients to both be triaged and directed to their hard-working family doctor when booking online. What steps is the Department taking to support the roll-out of technology in GP surgeries like Hadwen Health in Gloucester?

Stephen Kinnock: I am a little bit surprised; I think that that technology does exist. I have visited a couple of GP practices where the online booking system gives the patient the option to specify the doctor that she or he would like to see. I would be happy to connect my hon. Friend with relevant officials in the Department, so that they can connect with the GP surgery to resolve that issue.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): In NHS Providers data published just before Christmas, we learned that in East and North Hertfordshire NHS trust, the number of people waiting for treatment has fallen more than in any other trust in the country. That is fantastic news for my community. Will my right hon. Friend commend all the staff involved in this success, and does he agree that this is precisely what people voted for when they voted for change in the NHS?

Wes Streeting: Of course, I endorse what my hon. Friend said. Waiting lists are falling for the first time in 15 years. Lots done, and so much more to do, but with Labour, the NHS is on the road to recovery.

Zoe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): In Bellfields and Slyfield ward in my constituency, the local GP surgery is squeezed into a unit that is part of a parade of shops, and it is clearly no longer the size needed for the growing community. The team do a great job in spite of the challenges. Will the Minister set out the steps the Department is taking to support community health hubs in areas like this ward, in order to bring GP and wider services together locally and improve facilities and access for my residents?

Stephen Kinnock: We have the £102 million primary care estate fund, which can help with refurbishments and improving the functionality of primary care, particularly GP surgeries. If the hon. Member writes to me about the specifics of that case, I am sure that the relevant officials can give her the answer she needs.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Health Secretary has said he is “shocked” at the inability to acknowledge and then remedy state failures. It is now two years since the Hughes report was published, but no timeframe has been set for compensation for the valproate scandal. When will my constituents Colleen and Andy get the redress they need, so that they can make long-term provision for their son?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is quite right to hold the Government's feet to the fire on this issue. We are having cross-Government discussions about this issue and other groups of victims of state failure. We will keep him and the House updated.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): A constituent of mine who attends Dudley Voices for Choice has autism with complex mental health needs and is at risk of self-harm. Despite not being able to use a telephone, they are still required by mental health services to do so, and therefore they cannot be treated. They were told that they are non-compliant, so their support was reduced. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that mental health services offer alternative ways to communicate for those who cannot use a telephone? I would like to thank Sarah Offley and the team at Dudley Voices for Choice.

Stephen Kinnock: We are recruiting 8,500 more mental health workers by the end of this Parliament. The Mental Health Act 2025 reforms will ensure that people

with a learning disability, autistic people and people with the most severe mental health conditions have greater choice and control over their treatment and receive the dignity and respect they deserve.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Constituents of mine have been reporting that they have been directed to hospital for regular blood tests, rather than having them at their GP surgery. Will the Secretary of State outline how he will ensure that blood tests are done in a community setting, which surely must be much better value for the taxpayer and much more convenient for patients?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is absolutely right, and that is why a big part of our modernisation approach is to shift care out of hospital and into the community, making greater use of community diagnostic centres, community pharmacies and GPs. As his question shows, 18 months in, lots done, but a lot more still to do.

Chinese Embassy

12.49 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on the release of unredacted plans for the proposed Chinese embassy.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): This question relates to the proposals for a new Chinese embassy at Royal Mint Court. It is a decision to be taken by Planning Ministers, independent of the rest of Government. As I have said before in the House, this Government are committed to the probity of the planning process at all levels, to ensure robust and evidence-based decision making. Planning Ministers must take decisions following a quasi-judicial process, meaning that they must take decisions fairly, based on evidence and planning rules.

As the case is currently before the Department for consideration, and due to the statutory role of Ministers in the planning process, it would be entirely inappropriate for me to comment further on this live case. That said, I fully understand Members' interest in the case, so I will briefly set out the process that the case has followed to date. A public inquiry into the applications was held by an independent planning inspector between 11 and 19 February 2025. The Department received the inspector's report into the applications on 10 June that year. On 6 August 2025, a reference-back letter was sent to parties seeking further information, specifically in respect of the redacted plans and some issues raised by the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. That was recirculated for further comment on 22 August, and again on 16 October, 2 December, and 17 December. It was recirculated for information on 6 January 2026. Referring back to parties is routine when further information is required.

As you know, Mr Speaker, the Government do not provide a running commentary on planning casework decisions, and it would be particularly inappropriate to make any comment on material that has been received. The reference-back material will be available on request when the decision is issued. The timetable has been varied to allow for full consideration of the applications, given the detailed nature of the representations provided, and the need to give parties sufficient opportunity to respond. A final decision will now be made on or before 20 January 2026. Such variation to the timetable is routine when additional time is needed for determination. Members can be assured—I am afraid I will be required to state the following ad nauseam, Mr Speaker—that Ministers will take all material planning considerations into account when the final decision is made, and Ministers will inform the House of the decision accordingly.

Mr Speaker: In fairness, you brought me into this by saying that I would know about planning—absolutely—but I did not choose for you to be the Minister who answered this. I would have thought it would have been someone from the Home Office, and the Minister for Security. I call Alicia Kearns.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is very disappointing to get a technocratic history lesson rather than an answer to the meaningful question.

Two hundred and eight secret rooms and a hidden chamber, just 1 metre from cables serving the City of London and the British people—that is what the unredacted plans tell us the Chinese Communist party has planned for its new embassy if the Government give it the go-ahead. Indeed, we now know that it plans to demolish the wall between the cables and the embassy—cables on which our economy is dependent; cables carrying millions of British people's emails and financial data, and access that would give the Chinese Communist party a launchpad for economic warfare against our nation.

The Home Office and the Foreign Office say that security concerns have been “addressed”, so I put this to the Minister: had any Minister seen the unredacted plans before *The Telegraph* uncovered them? If not, why not? Was Parliament misled when we were told that all documents were publicly available? Is it true that in December a briefing was given to our Five Eyes partners on these risks? Does the Minister really have no concerns at all over plans to install heavy ventilation equipment parallel to those cables? What is that for? If the Government are as shocked as we are today, have Ministers already called in the Chinese ambassador to explain those secret rooms? If not, why not? The embassy would create a daily headache for our security services. What confidence can we have that the CCP's technological capabilities can be contained for a decade, let alone 10? I have consistently asked the Government to require the Chinese to pay for any re-routing of cables if they are to give this go-ahead, so will the Government commit to that today?

We understand that the Prime Minister is planning to visit Beijing this month. Is it true that the embassy will be approved this week? That the Prime Minister plans to reward the Communist party, which is holding a British national hostage and torturing him in confinement, and which put spies at the heart of our democracy, is bad enough, but to turn up with a gift in hand, begging for handouts, beggars belief. Labour promised a new relationship with China, yet UK goods exports are down 23%. Surrendering our security for Chinese trade was always a bad policy, but surrendering our security while exports plummet is, frankly, insanity. The Government can claim today they had no idea about the secret rooms, and we will take them at their word, but they cannot now say that they have no power to protect us. We must protect our economy, protect the British people, and deny the Chinese Communist party its embassy.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the shadow Minister for her questions. I am obviously not going to comment on speculation in the press. On the specific case before Ministers, at the application stage it was a matter for parties what information was put forward for consideration, and it was a matter for Tower Hamlets what information was put on the planning register and the inquiry website. We have not misled the House. All inquiry documents are publicly available on that website, and if new potentially relevant information is drawn to the Department's attention, it will be assessed. That includes consideration of its relevance, and whether it is necessary to obtain that information or refer back to parties. That is a routine process.

The Secretary of State transparently sought further information on the redacted drawings via a reference-back letter to parties issued on 6 August. I say again that no decision has been made on the case. I cannot comment on individual aspects of the case, and it would be

entirely inappropriate for me to comment on any matter of national security, or on behalf of the security services. All inquiry documents, including the redacted drawings put forward by the applicant at application stage, are publicly available on the Tower Hamlets website. When the final decision is published, the decision letter will contain a list of post-inquiry representations, including those received as part of the reference-back exercise, and those will be publicly available on request.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Multiple Government agencies and Departments have raised concerns about this mega-embassy. Our international partners have raised concerns about it, and every security briefing I have identifies China as a hostile state to the UK. I am in no doubt that this mega-embassy should not be allowed to go ahead. Internationally, China is terrorising the people of Hong Kong. It is terrorising democratic people in Taiwan, and it is terrorising some people already in the UK. I look to my local university of Sheffield Hallam, and also to what China is doing to parliamentarians right here. I want my Government to stand up to bullies, not to reward them. We need to put in place rules and limits around China to stop this behaviour, not reward it with the embassy that it so dearly wants.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions, and I note and appreciate her concerns. We need a consistent position on China, which cannot be boiled down to one word. We recognise that China poses a series of threats to UK national security, and we challenge those robustly. China also presents opportunities to the UK, as the world's second largest economy and the UK's third largest trading partner. We will therefore continue to develop a consistent and pragmatic approach to economic engagement, without compromising our national security. On Hong Kong in particular we will not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm their critics overseas, especially in the UK.

On the matter before us, which is the particular case in question, as I have stressed before—I am afraid I will have to do so repeatedly—no decision has been made. I cannot comment on any aspects of the case, which is a live case for Planning Ministers to determine. All material considerations will be taken into account when making a decision, but I am afraid I cannot comment on any specific national security concerns.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The redacted plans for the Chinese super-embassy provide new reasons to reject this application. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government had access before today to the unredacted plans showing the proximity of basements to critical communications cabling? Will he, and other Ministers, ensure that the intelligence agencies update their risk assessments before a final decision is taken?

On 16 December, the Government told the House that an urgent review would be launched into foreign financial interference in UK politics, including by China. Will the Minister now agree to pause any decision on the super-embassy until the Rycroft review has reported? The new super-embassy would also condemn Hongkongers living in Britain to more surveillance, more intimidation,

and more bounty hunting. On Saturday, hundreds of Hongkongers are expected to join a protest outside the proposed super-embassy site. Will the Minister, or a colleague, meet the protesters on Saturday outside the embassy, to listen to their concerns first hand?

Matthew Pennycook: I want to be very clear about what information the Department had and when it had it. As I said, an independent inquiry into this matter was held by an independent planning inspector. The onus is on the applicant to submit documents to that inquiry. At the point that the inspector's report was given to us, it was then in the gift of the Department to request further information via a reference back to parties. We did that on 6 August, specifically in respect of those redacted plans. I am not going to comment on live applications to the case, but all material considerations will be taken into account. Similarly, it would not be right for me to comment on the intelligence services or what input they have had into the decision, but the Minister for Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), is beside me on the Front Bench. A decision will be made on or before 20 January. At that point, the decision letter will be issued. It will contain a list of post-inquiry representations, including those received as part of the reference-back exercise, and it will be publicly available on request.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): China has used its national security law to criminalise political dissent and target Hongkongers in the UK. My constituency of Stratford and Bow is home to one of the largest Hongkonger populations in our country, and they tell me how scared they are of the proposed Chinese mega-embassy in our neighbouring east London constituency. What assurances can the Minister offer that this Government—the British Government—will stand up for the people of Hong Kong, and that this proposed embassy will not enable and embolden further coercion and intimidation of Hongkongers in the UK, particularly those in London?

Matthew Pennycook: I repeat what I said specifically about transnational repression. We will not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm their critics overseas, especially in the UK. The decision that is before Planning Ministers will be taken independent of the rest of Government. Planning Ministers must take decisions following a quasi-judicial process, meaning that they must make decisions fairly, based on evidence and planning laws. I stress again that all material considerations will be taken into account when reaching a decision.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is the national Parliament and it deserves answers. I have already asked this question to the Minister for Security, the hon. Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), and I got no answer at all. It may seem to be a subsidiary point, but it is important. On 14 January 2025, the Secretary of State wrote to the Chinese demanding an answer about whether there will be a perimeter wall so that the public can access the buried Cistercian monastery. With typical arrogance, the Chinese have not even replied. Why is that important? Because if Ministers insisted on what they wrote about last January, there would have to

[Sir Edward Leigh]

be an entirely new planning permission. The site is near the Tower of London, where so many prisoners of conscience died over the centuries, so—who knows?—maybe the prayers of medieval monks might finally stop this aberration.

Matthew Pennycook: I am afraid that all I can say to the right hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, is that all material considerations will be taken into account when reaching a decision on this case.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Joint Committee on Human Rights undertook an inquiry on transnational repression last year. It found that the Chinese state undertakes considerable transnational repression against the Chinese diaspora in the United Kingdom, much of it co-ordinated out of the existing Chinese embassy. The new super-embassy is a real threat to Hongkongers, Uyghurs and other members of the Chinese diaspora who do not toe the Beijing party line. Will the Minister reassure me that transnational repression of the Chinese diaspora is a material consideration when making this planning decision?

Matthew Pennycook: The Foreign Secretary has been robust on human rights, including those in Xinjiang. She has raised our concerns about the implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong and called for the immediate release of Jimmy Lai. When it comes to human rights, we are forthright with the Chinese Government. I am not going to comment on a live case that is in front of Planning Ministers as to what specific material considerations will be taken into account, but I can assure my hon. Friend that they all will be.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Has the Intelligence and Security Committee had an opportunity to question the National Security Adviser—not the deputy—about this matter? If the Minister says that he does not know, then he is the wrong Minister to be answering this urgent question. If he says that he does know, but he cannot say because that information is highly classified, let me assure him that the identities of witnesses interviewed at that level by the Intelligence and Security Committee are not private, but published whenever the Committee is minded to do so. Will he answer the question in a straightforward way: was the ISC given the opportunity to question the National Security Adviser?

Matthew Pennycook: It is for the ISC, not me, to comment on its proceedings. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that national security is the first duty of Government. It is not appropriate for me in this instance to comment on any specific matters of national security, but as I continue to repeat, all relevant planning considerations will be taken into account when making a decision on this case.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that I have written to the Secretary of State to highlight the concerns of my constituents about the proposed embassy in my constituency. While I recognise the planning dimension

and the limits on what he can say, will he none the less reassure me and the House that residents' concerns about security and human rights, as well as wider local concerns, will be taken seriously as part of the process, not least because the area has one of the largest Muslim populations in the country? We are all aware of the persecution of Uyghur Muslims, which this House has campaigned against, among wider human rights violations.

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said, all material considerations will be taken into account when making the decision. Any party can make representations on the case and a number of hon. Members from across the House have done so, and all relevant planning considerations will be taken into account when reaching that decision.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am exasperated by the Government's response to this urgent question. They are treating this development as a mere wrinkle in a bureaucratic planning matter, which is simply not the case. If this embassy is granted, it will be one of the largest and most prestigious embassies held by any country in Europe, and that has huge diplomatic consequences. Will the Minister reassure us that it is not merely planning considerations that are being taken account, but those of national security and diplomatic importance as well?

Matthew Pennycook: All material considerations will be taken into account, which include matters of national security, but the decision is being taken by my Department, in line with statutory provisions governing planning decisions and published propriety guidance. As I have said, the full reasons for the decision will be set out in the published decision letter, but as I continue to explain, no decision has yet been made.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I appreciate the limitations on what the Minister can and cannot say, but in the light of the publication of unredacted plans for the Chinese embassy, will the Government and the security services look again at whether it would be appropriate to allow the embassy to proceed?

Matthew Pennycook: I am not going to comment on behalf of the security services—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members are chuntering from a sedentary position, but I am not going to do that. It is not appropriate for me to comment on behalf of the security services, but as I continue to say, all material considerations will be taken into account. I am here answering the urgent question on the Chinese embassy, which is a decision for my Department and Planning Ministers within it.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The Minister talks about this being a planning decision, but essentially it is a political judgment. Many right hon. and hon. Members want to make strong representations to the Government and the National Security Adviser about the judgment call on getting a closer relationship with China and this embassy. The site of the proposed embassy is massive—I went around it over the past couple of days—and Mansell Street is really restricted, meaning it will be completely impossible to monitor what is going on there, so that judgment is wrong.

Matthew Pennycook: I note the right hon. Gentleman's concerns, and the Security Minister and other Ministers will have heard them too. However, the case is specifically a planning decision to be made in accordance with the propriety rules and other considerations that Planning Ministers have to take into account as part of the quasi-judicial process, but all material considerations will be taken into account as part of that process.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My constituent, Chloe Cheung, has to live with the fact that she has a £100,000 bounty placed on her head under the national security law in Hong Kong. She walks around every day knowing that anyone here could claim that bounty by taking her to the Chinese embassy and handing her over to the authorities. Now she is worried that she might find herself locked away in one of the secret rooms shown in the new embassy plans. What exactly are the Government going to do to ensure that Chloe is protected and kept safe, and that that never happens to her or anyone else with a £100,000 bounty on their head, if the new embassy is approved?

Matthew Pennycook: I recognise my hon. Friend's frustration and anger on behalf of his constituent. We will not tolerate transnational repression of the kind that he is concerned about. Specifically, the counterfactual here is not that the Chinese do not have an embassy; they have seven diplomatic premises in the UK already. Again, I come back to the fact that we will make a decision on this case on the material planning considerations that pertain to it.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Every single day, people from the Tibetan, Hong Kong, Uyghur and Falun Gong communities here in the UK already face intimidation through transnational repression. Their activities are under constant surveillance, and their families living under Chinese rule face arrest and prosecution. There are \$1 million bounties placed on them, and their neighbours in the UK are encouraged to pass on information or deliver them to the Chinese authorities. Given the increased threat to their safety that the mega-embassy poses, what action are the Government taking to counter those actions? What message do the Government have for those communities?

Matthew Pennycook: We have reviewed transnational repression through the defending democracy taskforce; we take it incredibly seriously, and I note the hon. Gentleman's concerns. I am here on behalf of my Department as the Housing and Planning Minister to make clear what the process is for making a decision on this embassy application.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): This debate on the mega-embassy is not just about a building and 208 secret rooms; it is primarily about national security and the safety of those from the Hongkonger, Chinese, Uyghur and Tibetan diasporas in the UK—approximately 700,000 people. We have learned that in 2018, the then Prime Minister committed to no delays in granting permission for the mega-embassy, which has an air of predetermination. What reassurances can the Minister give me and this House that that opinion has not compromised the independence of the planning process?

Matthew Pennycook: The planning process has not been compromised. We will make a planning decision on the basis of the relevant propriety guidance. On the delays, given the detailed nature of the representations provided and the need to give parties sufficient opportunity to respond, we have considered that more time is needed for full consideration of the applications. A variation to the timetable is routine when more time is needed for determination, such as when it is necessary to consider that additional information, but as I have made clear, our intention is to make a decision on or before 20 January.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The sentencing hearings of Jimmy Lai, a British subject, are taking place. China has abrogated every agreement that it made with us over Hong Kong. What outrage would China have to commit for us to deny any demand that it made? The Minister says that he could not distil our relationship with China down to one word, but oh yes we can. It is a very big word; it is no.

Matthew Pennycook: The UK condemns the politically motivated prosecution of Jimmy Lai. No state can bully and persecute the British people for exercising their basic rights. Following the court verdict, the Foreign Office summoned the Chinese ambassador to underline our position in the strongest terms, and we call again for Jimmy Lai's immediate release.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister is very artfully avoiding answering the question that my constituents and Hongkongers, Chinese, Muslims and Tibetans all over this country want to know the answer to, and it is not about the planning process. They are concerned about their safety and security, and they are concerned that the redacted photographs show just how close a foreign country is to critical communications cables. That is their concern; they want to know that they are safe and that this Government are taking that into account. That is the question we want to ask, so please do not tell me about the planning process.

Matthew Pennycook: With all due respect to the hon. Lady, this is an urgent question in relation to plans that are part of a planning process. I understand her frustration, but it was precisely to secure the information in question that a reference back was made to the parties on 6 August. Her constituents can be reassured that all material considerations will be taken into account by the relevant Ministers when a decision is made on this case.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am sure that Tower Hamlets building control is very good, but it is not a security expert. If this plan goes ahead—I very much hope that it does not—will the Minister at least assure the House that the agencies will be fully involved in monitoring the demolition of the wall along Mansell Street and around the Wapping exchange? Will the replacement be monitored closely to ensure that our critical national infrastructure is safeguarded?

Matthew Pennycook: I note the right hon. Gentleman's question. For obvious reasons, we do not comment on intelligence matters. I can assure him that national security concerns and all the representations that have been made along those lines will be taken into account as part of the decision-making process. He says that

[Matthew Pennycook]

Tower Hamlets does not have the relevant expertise to make the decision in the round; that is precisely why an independent public inquiry was held by an independent public inspector. The report was passed to the Government, and they had the chance to seek further information for a reference back, as we did on 6 August, so that the relevant Planning Minister in my Department can take the decision on the basis of all the required information.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The Minister has asked for a question about planning, so I will give him one. I am struggling to think of an innocent reason why important details would be redacted from the original application. Can he tell me what explanation has been given for those redactions?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said, it was precisely because the Department did not feel that it had all the necessary information to make a decision that we sought that further information via a reference-back letter to parties. As I continue to say, all material considerations will be taken into account when a decision is made.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Making the same mistake repeatedly is a form of stupidity. As a country, we keep doing the same thing. If we cast our minds back to the debacle with Huawei, we will remember that we let the Chinese Communist party essentially into our 5G network. We did not listen to our national security advice, but we stopped and pulled back, and we have done the exact same thing with civil nuclear. The Minister has responsibility for this matter; he can step in and pull the plug. At what point will Ministers wake up and realise that we are making the same mistake again?

Matthew Pennycook: Planning Ministers will make a decision taking into account all material planning considerations.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The proposed Chinese embassy includes a subterranean facility just centimetres from cables carrying highly sensitive financial data. Any hostile intelligence service designing an espionage target would struggle to find a better location. Northern Ireland has learned that strategic assets must not be put at unnecessary risk for the sake of diplomatic symbolism. National security cannot be an afterthought. At a time when this House voices concerns about foreign influence online, we must also confront the real-world threat of hostile states exploiting our critical infrastructure. Will the Minister do the right thing and agree that national security should trump planning? Will he therefore say no to this proposal?

Matthew Pennycook: I simply cannot provide a running commentary on a live case, but I assure all hon. Members that national security is the first duty of Government generally and that all relevant planning considerations will be taken into account when making a decision.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The Minister has recognised that China poses significant threats, yet this Government are prepared to welcome this Trojan horse of an embassy into the heart of our city, so close to the Link system. He talks about material planning considerations, but that means balancing

developing needs with community impact and ensuring that development aligns with local and national policies and site-specific details such as heritage, which was mentioned by the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). Not one contributor in this House can say that this embassy is not a threat to national security and that it is in any way a good and solid planning application. How can this Government be so naive as to accept it?

Matthew Pennycook: No decision has been made on this case.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) for submitting her application, and Mr Speaker for granting another urgent question on this issue. Although we are not yet happy with the answers, we have at least been given repeated chances to scrutinise the issue as it has progressed.

I am here on behalf of Hongkongers in Sutton and Cheam and across London who are aghast at the prospect of this project being given permission. We have seen the persecution and conviction of Jimmy Lai; transnational repression of Hongkongers in the UK through, among other things, the withholding of their mandatory provident fund savings that allow them to survive here; bounties placed on activists; and action taken against MPs, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) being prevented from going into Hong Kong, and sanctions being placed on other MPs. If a hostile state is rewarded for all these actions with permission to expand and increase its capabilities for surveillance, espionage and repression in our capital city, what hope can any of us have that the Government will stand up against hostile states for Britain and Britons in an increasingly hostile and dangerous world?

Matthew Pennycook: I simply note that all the points the hon. Gentleman has made could apply to the existing seven diplomatic premises in the UK. When it comes to this site, as I have said, a decision will be made on or before 20 January, and all material considerations will be taken into account. We remain steadfast in our support for the Hong Kong community in the UK. As I said in answer to a previous question, we have undertaken a review of transnational repression as part of the defending democracy taskforce—it is something we take incredibly seriously.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): For the thousands of British national overseas people in my constituency, the prospect of the Chinese super-embassy is deeply worrying, and that worry is compounded by these unredacted plans. With that in mind, can the Minister confirm whether any Government Minister has called in the Chinese ambassador to discuss these issues, and if they have not, why not?

Matthew Pennycook: I am afraid to say to the hon. Gentleman that I cannot provide a running commentary on a live case. All material considerations will be taken into account when making a decision.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): This is a complete farce, to be quite honest. We have seen reports in the media that there will be a secret room less than 1 metre away from sensitive cabling, and that since 2018, the

Chinese authorities have been cutting off utilities to the UK embassy in China. National security should surely trump the planning system. This is a decision that should be taken by the Prime Minister in Downing Street—it should be a very quick and resolute no. If the Government are not in a position to do that, the framework needs to be changed. If necessary, the Government need to come before Parliament to do that, where they will find a very warm reception.

Matthew Pennycook: I do not think I could have been any clearer: all national security considerations will be taken into account when making a decision on this case.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I will offer the Government some advice. It is one word: common sense. *[Interruption.]* Well, two words. Given the interest in national security, I am quite surprised that a Planning Minister is at the Dispatch Box to talk about this case, but the two issues are intertwined. The Minister has rebutted other Members' questions with "That is a security issue; it is not my portfolio", but given what we know, will he review the proximity of other countries' embassies to major underground fibre-optic cables? That is a big worry for the country's intelligence services and for many constituents throughout the country.

Matthew Pennycook: I note the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and I appreciate his frustration, but this is ultimately a planning case on which a decision is being made. As I have said repeatedly to hon. Members, all material considerations will be taken into account when reaching a decision on this case.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): London is a critical global financial centre; we all rely on it, as do all of our constituents. Does the Minister recognise the very serious risk that approving this Chinese super-embassy could, as my hon. Friend the shadow Minister said, pave the way for economic war—not just on our country, but on the western world, including by undermining the security of critical data travelling under the site to and from the City of London?

Matthew Pennycook: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said to other hon. Members, is that all national security considerations will be taken into account. He can be reassured of that fact.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Whatever statements have been made publicly, the unredacted plans for this super-embassy will fill our security services with dread, as well they should. The Chinese Communist party is not a friend to the United Kingdom, and nowhere is that more evident than in its consistent espionage—including on this very estate—and frequent cyber-attacks against national infrastructure. Given that the Minister's Department is responsible for the final decision in this case, can he tell the House whether he will do the right thing by national security and pull the plug?

Matthew Pennycook: I am not going to comment on specific considerations that will be taken into account. I have been very clear that we will continue to develop a consistent and pragmatic approach to the People's Republic of China on economic engagement, and we will not

compromise our national security. We have been very clear that China poses a series of threats to UK national security, and I have been as clear as I can be that national security considerations, along with all other material planning considerations, will be taken into account when reaching a decision. As I have said, it is for Planning Ministers to reach that decision, on or before 20 January.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): We seem to be in the Chamber every three weeks to address espionage and security concerns with regards to China, be it spying, hacking, or the Government's failure to add China to the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. China is not an ally, and it features as a security threat in our own security strategy. The Chinese previously stated that they would not resubmit their application after it was rejected unless they were given assurances that it would be approved. To that end, what assurances have been given to China; what are we expecting as a quid pro quo with regards to the rebuilding of our own embassy in Beijing; and what concerns have been raised by our Five Eyes partners, specifically the US?

Matthew Pennycook: I appreciate why the hon. Gentleman is tempting me on this matter, but as I have made very clear, it would be completely inappropriate for me to comment from this Dispatch Box on national security considerations in respect of this live case. On his specific question of whether China has been given a commitment that permission will be granted, the decision is being taken by my Department in line with statutory provisions governing planning decisions and published propriety guidance, and as I keep saying, no decision has yet been made on the case.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Why are this Government so evidently in awe of the Chinese Government and their requirements? Is one of those requirements that this mega-embassy be approved before the Prime Minister visits Beijing?

Matthew Pennycook: I simply do not accept that characterisation of the Government's approach to China. We have to take a consistent and pragmatic approach, but we recognise that China poses a series of threats. As I have said, no decision has yet been made on this case, and all material planning considerations will be taken into account when one is made.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): I have raised multiple times with the Government the harassment of a constituent of mine, Carmen Lau, by the Chinese authorities. This has included bounty letters, deepfake pornography and her family being interrogated by national security agents in Hong Kong. Every time I am told that the safety of Hongkongers is of the utmost importance to the Government. Given that, does the Minister accept that to approve this application while China is still committing transnational repression would be a kick in the teeth to Hongkongers such as Carmen?

Matthew Pennycook: The safety of Hongkongers is of the utmost importance to this Government, and we remain steadfast in our support for the Hong Kong community in the UK. I understand why the hon. Gentleman is asking me, but I cannot comment on a live planning case that is before Planning Ministers in my Department.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is no coincidence that a week ago, a Protestant church in Chengdu, in Sichuan province in China, was raided by Chinese authorities. The pastor, the elders, and those who attended the church were arrested. What are the Government doing? The facts revealed in the plans for the embassy show a potential risk that must be explored. By all means, the Chinese should have a consulate to enable their citizens to have consular help, but not one that seems so elevated that it poses a threat to national security. The planning question is whether a basement is a real requirement of a functioning consulate. Will the Minister prove that national security will always be the priority?

Matthew Pennycook: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's long-standing and passionate advocacy for people across the world to be able to practise their faith freely. In relation to the planning applications that are in front of us, all the relevant inquiry information was submitted as part of the independent public inquiry. At the point at which the inspector handed us a report, my Department sought further information specifically in relation to those redacted plans, so that we are able to take a decision that takes into account all the material planning considerations in this case. As I have said, we will issue that decision on or before 20 January.

Sir Julian Lewis: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was hoping to ask this point of order of Mr Speaker, because it is a little difficult for you, not having been here for most of the urgent question. At the start of the urgent question, Mr Speaker made it clear that he was surprised that a Minister was being put up who would not be able to answer questions, being a Planning Minister, rather than a Security Minister being put up, who would be able to answer questions.

In my 28 years in this House, I have attended many ministerial statements and the questioning that follows, and many urgent questions since they were introduced.

Never before has there been an occasion that I have seen where every question asked on both sides of the House was deeply hostile, as was the case today, regarding what the Government were proposing to do. My question is this: if my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) were to reapply to Mr Speaker for a similar urgent question in anticipation that an appropriate Minister—a Security Minister—will be put up to answer it, would that be within the rules of parliamentary order and practice?

Alicia Kearns: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. With due respect to the Minister, I submitted this urgent question as the shadow National Security Minister for the Security Minister in the Home Office to answer. How do we in this House get answers on the focus that we have? All questions bar two were on national security, not on planning. The more than capable and diligent Security Minister was forced to sit on the Front Bench, silenced, while his colleague attempted to answer those questions that should have been allowed to be put to him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank both Members for their points of order. As they will know—the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) made a salient point from his long-standing experience in the House—the choice of Minister and responding Department is a matter for the Government, not the Chair. Mr Speaker and I are frustrated and understand the frustrations that Members rightly have. Those on the Government Front Bench have heard those concerns and might reflect upon them. The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) is perfectly free, as is every Member, to resubmit an urgent question on this matter, but I obviously cannot comment on whether that will be granted; that will be a matter for Mr Speaker.

Storm Goretti

1.32 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement following Storm Goretti.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this urgent question. May I express my deepest condolences to the family and friends of the man who tragically lost his life in Cornwall during Storm Goretti? Last week, the Met Office issued a red weather warning for wind covering south-east England, with wider parts of the UK covered by amber and yellow warnings for wind, snow and rain. As is normal when these alerts are issued, the Government took action to ensure the necessary preparations for the arrival of the storm were in place. In view of the potential threat to life in Cornwall and in St Ives specifically, the Cabinet Office issued two emergency alerts to approximately 500,000 people on the Isles of Scilly and in Cornwall, both of which were under a red weather warning urging people to stay indoors during the severe winds.

Storm Goretti caused disruption across the UK. However, some of its most significant impacts were felt in the south-west. The storm saw a peak gust of 99 mph on the Isles of Scilly, and it was the worst windstorm in parts of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly for 30 years. It damaged infrastructure, resulting in impacts on transport, power and telecoms, particularly impacting rural communities in the south-west.

More than 250,000 customers lost power during the storm. This morning, 193 customers remained without power in the south-west as a result of Storm Goretti, with 82 identified as vulnerable customers who continue to be offered support by local authorities. The industry expects that all remaining customers will have their power restored by later this afternoon.

While reconnections are continuing at pace, I am aware that a small number of customers have been off supply for an extended period. They are in some of the hardest-to-reach parts of the network in remote rural areas. My right hon. Friend the Energy Secretary remains in close contact with National Grid Electricity Distribution on the progress of restoration and to ensure remaining supplies are reconnected as soon as possible. Support is being provided to vulnerable customers by local authorities while the power supply is restored. Yesterday, National Grid Electricity Distribution deployed 900 engineers and field staff across the south-west to further support restoration efforts and to reconnect those without power as soon as possible.

Overall, the response to the storm has been managed effectively and the local response mechanisms have worked well. That is testament to the work of the local resilience forum, which includes emergency responders and utility workers, as well as the local communities who have pulled together to work so hard in difficult conditions to keep people safe. During these periods of disruption and damage for so many, it is ordinary people looking out for their neighbours and those most vulnerable who help us to recover and repair and to begin to get back to normal life. I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to those communities and in committing to do all we can to support them now and when severe weather hits again.

Andrew George: I thank the Minister for his reply. He has described the impact that the storm has had on our communities. As he rightly says, west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly took the brunt of the storm, but it nevertheless had a devastating effect throughout Cornwall, south-west England and beyond. Nursing home patients were evacuated with haste, homes were without power for many days, and thousands of vulnerable people were isolated—indeed, they still are.

Many residents in my constituency have observed that if this same level of destruction, service outage and loss of life had happened in London and the home counties, the national media would have given it headline billing for days and the Government would have declared a national emergency. Frontline workers have been amazing and communities have come together incredibly well, but in spite of the Minister's optimism, I have discovered that utility company reports of figures for reconnected homes are unreliable.

I have also discovered that our society is more reliant on these utilities and services, and less resilient. Many places affected by these outages have not been able to communicate because all power, broadband and mobile signal had been cut. Higher authorities decided to turn off the analogue signal some time ago, and that has meant that people in vulnerable positions have not been able to communicate their vulnerability. That is a serious matter, particularly for people who are traumatised and isolated.

Service providers have told people to phone or follow advice on their website or just click the app. How can they do that if they are completely cut off? I must therefore ask the Minister: why have the Government not considered or viewed this as a national emergency? What additional support will the Government provide beyond the compensation that utility providers are obliged to provide? Will the Government review the Bellwin funding formula, which seems designed not to help neither very small authorities, such as the Isles of Scilly, nor very large ones, such as Cornwall? Finally, will the Government agree to review the resilience of systems that provide a means of communicating in such circumstances?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the Minister, I make it clear to Members that I intend to prioritise those representing areas of the country most affected by Storm Goretti. This may be a test of my geography.

Dan Jarvis: I very much appreciate the reasonable and diligent way in which the hon. Gentleman has made his points. He is absolutely right to come here to represent his constituents, and he has done so very effectively. While he will understand that it is not for me to take a view on how these matters are portrayed by the national media, I can give him an absolute, categorical assurance that the Government care just as deeply about his constituents in Cornwall as we do about residents right across the country. I personally know Cornwall incredibly well, and I think it is an extremely important part of the United Kingdom.

My own constituency also feels that it is a long way from the centre, and often feels that it is being neglected and that other parts of the country get preferential

[Dan Jarvis]

treatment. I can therefore say to the hon. Gentleman, and to other Members from the county of Cornwall, that we take the points they are raising today very seriously, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that Government Departments, agencies and local partners have worked, and will continue to work, very closely together to ensure that Cornwall has the same emergency support, recovery funding and resilience measures that would be available to other parts of the country, including the parts that he mentioned. Those measures include support for affected households and for businesses, the important co-ordinating activity that takes place with local authorities, and the engagement with utility providers and the emergency services, to ensure that we are working collectively to restore services as quickly as possible.

We fully recognise the particular vulnerabilities of coastal and rural communities like the one that the hon. Gentleman represents, and the fact that severe weather and the conditions that we have seen over the past few days will inevitably cause significant disruption to infrastructure and livelihoods in areas such as Cornwall. However, the Government remain absolutely committed to standing alongside Cornwall as the recovery effort continues, and to ensuring that no community in Cornwall—or anywhere else in the United Kingdom, for that matter—feels overlooked or treated differently because of where it is located.

I recognise that the impacts of severe weather like Storm Goretti are hugely disruptive and distressing for those who are affected, and of course that can be even more acute in the case of vulnerable individuals and those in more remote communities who may feel isolated from support. The Government took the decision to deploy an emergency alert following the Met Office red weather warning. I was in the situation room when we took that decision and issued that alert, which we did to ensure that all communities across Cornwall—including St Ives, the hon. Gentleman's constituency—were aware of the incoming storm and could take the necessary precautions to stay safe.

I am pleased to see that communities have been coming together to respond to the impacts of the storm. I know that the hon. Gentleman will join with me in commending the tireless work of the network operators to reconnect the remaining properties with power. For the final 193 customers, power restoration is challenging, because repairs may be required at individual properties in remote locations and access to those properties may be still blocked by fallen trees or debris.

I am pleased that the Minister for Energy is present; the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is continuing to work closely with National Grid to deploy generators to individual properties while repairs take place. That is in addition to the further 900 engineers and field staff who were deployed yesterday. Vulnerable people are being supported and have been offered alternative accommodation, transportation support and hot food. I can give the hon. Gentleman and the House an assurance that the Cabinet Office continues to work closely with the DESNZ, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that the recovery efforts are progressing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I very much appreciate the Minister's comprehensive response—as, I am sure, do Cornish Members—but it was twice as long as his initial response to the urgent question. Perhaps answers could be slightly shorter.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Let me first take this opportunity to thank members of the emergency services teams and the utilities, the volunteers and everyone across Cornwall who has looked after their neighbours and responded so brilliantly to a storm that tested the resilience of rural and coastal Britain to the hilt. It exposed vulnerabilities in our infrastructure and emergency planning that could affect any part of the country.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) mentioned the communications technology that proved unreliable after the shift from digital to analogue. It failed without power, leaving people completely cut off. Could that be taken into account for the purpose of future back-up, perhaps through satellite communication? Could we move towards that more quickly? The priority response services for vulnerable people rely on sign-up and the ability to contact those people. Will the Minister agree to look at that when it comes to future incidents, given that the climate is changing? This storm was incredibly ferocious and terrifying, but there are likely to be more like it.

Dan Jarvis: I am extremely mindful of your earlier guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, with regard to brevity. I hope the House will understand that I was just seeking to convey the seriousness with which the Government take these issues.

My hon. Friend has made an important point about telecoms, and I give her an absolute assurance that we will look carefully at this—as, I know, will the local resilience forums. Having discussed the matter with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government earlier today, I know that there is a process in place whereby the forums will conduct both a hot debrief and, subsequently, a cold debrief, in order to look carefully at what has happened and what lessons can be learnt from it. My hon. Friend has made an important point, and we will of course consider it carefully.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I join the Minister in thanking the emergency services, local authority and Environment Agency staff and volunteers, who have worked tirelessly to recover from the storm and to keep the public safe. I also join him in sending our condolences to those families who are grieving and whose lives have been upended by the storm.

Given the severity of this and earlier extreme weather events, what further preparations will the Government make for future storms and for adverse weather? Do they plan to carry out further storm preparedness exercises, and to implement lessons learnt from the previous test of the emergency alert system in response to these extreme weather events? What further discussions have they had, internally and with local authorities, utility providers and emergency services, to co-ordinate the continued response to this storm? Does the Minister

agree that the latest mass power outages in the south-west show that the Government should reconsider their drive for more electricity pylons and instead back faster undergrounding of cables, particularly in high-wind zones?

As we heard from the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), many people reported that when the power failed, mobile signal followed shortly after. What are the Government doing to ensure that telecommunications masts have enough battery or generator back-up to remain operative during 48 or 72-hour storm cycles? What assessment has the Minister made of the implementation and operation of the severe weather emergency protocol to support the most vulnerable, particularly those sleeping rough, in rural areas such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly? Storm Goretti has led to significant rainfall in many parts of the country. What assessment have the Government made of localised flooding, and will support be made available to those affected by the storm through the flood recovery network? I understand that the floods resilience taskforce met on 8 September. I should be grateful if the Minister could outline what actions were taken following that meeting to prepare for eventualities such as this.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for the points that he has raised. He is right to recognise the efforts of all those involved in the operations to support local residents and to restore power where it has been lost. I think it worth pointing out that while normal people will hunker down in these very difficult conditions, we should collectively pay tribute to those who do not that, but go out and brave the elements in order to restore power and provide support for residents who need it.

The shadow Minister made some good points about the importance of looking carefully at these matters and ensuring that Governments are properly prepared for future incidents. I have looked carefully at the response to Storm Arwen a number of years ago, and I think that the Government can learn a fair amount from that particular response. I will ensure through the Cabinet Office, working with colleagues across Government, that we look very carefully at the response to this recent storm and ensure that we are drawing lessons from it so that, as a country, we can be as resilient and as well prepared as we can be for the future challenges that we will undoubtedly face.

The shadow Minister specifically raised the issue of telecoms. While I know he will understand that telecoms equipment is usually highly resilient and major outages are extremely rare, most telecoms equipment relies on a power supply, which of course can be disrupted by severe weather. On the rare occasion that the sector does experience an outage, there are statutory obligations on telecoms providers to maintain the availability of services and report significant outages to Ofcom. However, in general terms, I give the shadow Minister an absolute assurance of the seriousness with which we take these matters. We will look very carefully at the response and ensure that we draw all the right lessons from it.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. Jutting out into the Atlantic, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have often found themselves on the frontline of nationally significant weather events. As my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) mentioned, the predictions are that

storms like Goretti will become more and more frequent. This is a reality that I am not convinced has been taken seriously enough by consecutive Governments.

The response from the people of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly before, during and after Storm Goretti has been nothing short of remarkable, but can I urge the Minister to please commit to a comprehensive cross-departmental review of the resilience of essential Cornish and Scillonian infrastructure, communications and priority list support?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the good and reasonable point he has made. I reiterate the point I made earlier to the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) about the Government's commitment to Cornwall. I absolutely recognise that Cornwall, like many other coastal communities, can feel geographically isolated and a very long way from the centre. The Government understand that, as do I as the Minister for resilience.

My hon. Friend made good points about looking in the round at the resilience of Cornwall specifically. Let me give him an assurance that I am very happy to continue the conversation with him and other colleagues. I will look carefully at the detail of the point he has made and, as I say, I am happy to discuss it further with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) for his characteristic passion and energy in defending his communities in St Ives. I also wish to send my and the Liberal Democrats' collective deep sympathy to the family of the man who lost his life in the storm, and to add my thanks to our amazing emergency services and frontline utilities staff.

The Minister rightly says that it is not up to him or the Government how the media cover things. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that when Storm Eunice hit London and the south-east four years ago, hitting 200,000 homes, Cobra was convened. However, 200,000 homes have been hit in the west country, and Cobra has not been convened. He will understand why people from Cornwall, Caithness and Cumbria sometimes feel that they are a bit of an afterthought.

Does the Minister agree that this storm exposes the frailty of our energy, water and communications infrastructure and the vulnerability of those who rely on them, especially in this entirely—and, dare I say it, foolishly—post-analogue age? Given that so much land, especially in our rural communities, lies saturated, causing water supply and waste water crises at the moment, will he ensure that this issue is reflected in the qualifying criteria for farming recovery funding? Does he agree that the damaging impact that flooding has on food security means that the environmental land management schemes budget should be increased by a minimum of £1 billion a year to underpin that vital resilience?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman is a proud representative not just of his party, but of his part of the world, and I know he speaks with great authority and experience on these matters. I want to respond to the specific point he made about Cobra, because I think that is an entirely

[*Dan Jarvis*]

fair challenge. I am incredibly keen to ensure that we are using all of the machinery of government to best effect, so I spend quite a lot of my time considering whether we need to convene Cobra and deciding whether the set of circumstances we face or are responding to requires that level of Government response. In truth, Cobra tends to sit when there is concern about the nature of the response. We took the decision last week that, because we thought the response was being conducted in an effective way, there was no requirement to bring Ministers together. However, I give him an assurance that we think very carefully about these things and keep them under constant review.

I thought the hon. Gentleman made a number of good and useful points about vulnerabilities and flooding. I can give him and others an assurance that we consider these things, both specifically and collectively, as part of the work we do on resilience. We work very closely on them with other Government Departments, including DEFRA, but should he wish to discuss them further, I would always be very happy to do so.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. I align myself with the previous comments regarding the tragic loss of life in Cornwall and add my thanks to the local emergency services, utilities companies and local people who worked tirelessly over the weekend to make sure that arms have been put around the most vulnerable in our community. With its ageing population, South East Cornwall has many vulnerable residents who rely on consistent power and water supplies. The extended outages during Storm Goretti left families in unmanageable conditions, and such storms are only likely to increase if we do not tackle climate change. Will the Government work with utility companies to prioritise vulnerable households and ensure faster restoration times during severe weather events?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the very important points she makes and, yes, I can give her those assurances. I mentioned earlier that currently—the numbers have probably reduced slightly—193 customers remain without power in the south-west, with 82 identified as vulnerable customers. Working with National Grid Electricity Distribution, vulnerable customers have been supported by local authorities and local resilience forums throughout the incident. This has included the provision of alternative accommodation, battery packs for medical equipment, transportation, warm spaces, crisis packs containing torches, blankets, hand warmers and warm clothes, and a welfare van providing hot food and drinks. I am also aware that National Grid Electricity Distribution is exploring the deployment of generators to get customers back on supply as quickly as possible. Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to say—and I know my hon. Friend and others will agree with me—that I am very grateful for the support the British Red Cross has provided to the most vulnerable customers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have to get through this business quite quickly as we have the Finance (No. 2) Bill later, so I urge the Minister to make his responses as brief as possible. We are

focused on calling Members from incredibly close to where the storm was, so if it was nowhere near you, please do not bob.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I place on record my thanks to the Met Office, which is based in my constituency, for its sterling work throughout Storm Goretti and all year round. It has international expertise and is a real asset to our country.

One of the main issues that comes up when we have big storms such as Goretti is rail in the south-west. Our main line from Paddington was cut off, and many constituents from across the south-west were unable to get home. There are practical solutions to put in place, such as a passing loop on the Waterloo line. I have raised that directly with the Rail Minister and the Prime Minister, and although I get warm words, no action seems to be taken. From a Cabinet Office perspective, what more can be done to add resilience to our train infrastructure?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the Met Office in his constituency. I completely agree with that, and I pay tribute to the vital work it does. He raises an important point about connectivity, and I agree with him. I want our country to be as resilient as it possibly can be, which is why I can say to him that National Rail's winter preparedness regime begins in September each year, when special trains and equipment are fully checked, any repairs are carried out and contingency plans are reviewed. I give him an assurance that we take these matters seriously, and we work closely with Transport Ministers.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I, too, put on record my thanks to the emergency services for their work over this long and difficult weekend. In particular, I thank National Grid for its swift work, at least in my part of Cornwall, in reconnecting people to the grid. However, other infrastructure has been unacceptably slow to come back online. With many of my constituents still without access to rail and some still without access to broadband and their phone lines, what assurances can the Minister give that he is working with Great Western Railway and National Rail to ensure that, four days after the storm, those closed railway lines can be reopened? Will he reiterate the commitment he made to my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) to work with us to continue to build infrastructure resilience in Cornwall?

Dan Jarvis: I reiterate the commitment I gave earlier. My hon. Friend is right to raise these concerns. I want the country to be as resilient and as connected as it possibly can be, and where services are lost there is an absolute requirement to work at pace to get them restored. I give him the assurance that the Government will work carefully to ensure that that happens, and I am very happy to work with him and other hon. Members to make sure that it does.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) on securing the urgent question and showing leadership on this crisis in the absence of a Government response. There has been no Cobra meeting and no declaration of a national emergency, and many of my North Cornwall

constituents did not even receive the emergency alert. I have great respect for the Minister, but he does not even seem to have the correct number for households currently without power.

The Bellwin scheme, which is activated in emergencies such as this, reimburses local authorities for the extra costs incurred, but the scheme is unfair for larger authorities such as Cornwall council, which can apply only once it has spent 0.2% of its budget—£1.6 million. If the storm had hit South Hams, for instance, the district council would need to spend only £260,000. Now that Cornwall council faces a real-terms cut in funding over the next three years, will the Government commit to emergency financial support for it to assist those who have been drastically affected by this storm?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Minister, please be short and brief.

Dan Jarvis: I have to say that I am disappointed with the point that the hon. Gentleman made at the beginning of his question, which I do not think is in keeping with the spirit of the debate. I could not have been clearer about the seriousness that the Government attach to these matters, or about the urgency and the pace with which we have worked, all through last week and weekend, and into this week. We take these matters very seriously. We want to work with Members right across the House to ensure the best possible response. Where there are lessons to be identified and learnt, we will of course take them on board, but the Government took this situation very seriously and I think that, in the main, the response was a good one.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Suffolk Coastal is in the east of England, but we did not escape the storms by any stretch of the imagination. The coastal erosion at Thorpeness has really sped up and we now have homes facing the worst-case scenario. Indeed, last night a home was demolished, marking four homes that have succumbed to coastal erosion since October. Three have been as a consequence of the rapidly eroding shoreline, sped up by the storm. Will the Minister arrange to meet me to discuss a number of issues, including the coastal erosion assistance grant? The owner of one of the homes, who will not qualify for the grant, may pay £40,000 for the privilege of demolishing their own home. That feels incredibly unfair, and East Suffolk council is working to ensure that does not happen, but will the Minister meet to talk about that and what can be done to support my community and others affected?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the points she raises. I am concerned to hear about the situation in her constituency. To ensure that she gets the best response and support from the Government, let me confirm whether it is a matter for DEFRA or for the Cabinet Office. I will then ensure that she gets a meeting with the most appropriate Minister.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Will the Minister join me in putting on record my thanks to West Mercia police, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service, West Midlands ambulance service and all the local government officers at Telford and Wrekin council and Shropshire council who helped? At its peak, 10,000 homes were without power. Currently, there are 200 homes throughout the county of Shropshire, some in my constituency, still

without power. Will he urge his officials to press National Grid to do far more, and to ensure that it is part of the generator scheme? He will know that many trees have fallen in many storms over many years, but this time there was a particular issue with trees falling throughout Shropshire. In high winds and heavy snow, they blocked the M54 for a large part of the storm and they blocked the main railway line into Birmingham. This might seem a minor point, but could we have a review of the number of chainsaws and the number of people available to operate them at Network Rail, Highways England and National Grid?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman made a significant number of very good and constructive points, including one about chainsaws. I am told that work has taken place to look at the number of chainsaws, so the Government are looking at that, working with partners. Let me join him in paying tribute to the organisations he listed, including West Mercia police, the fire and rescue services, and other local services that have been involved in the recovery effort. They do sterling work, they are the best of us, and I join him in paying tribute to them. He always takes the opportunity to raise a number of good and considered points. I will look very carefully at them and, as he knows, I am always very happy to discuss them with him, as is the Minister for Energy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who was also listening intently to what he had to say.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): My constituency is rather a long way away from Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, but I do live in a part of the country that is not immune to major storms. The Scottish Affairs Committee, which I chair, has undertaken an inquiry into connectivity, particularly in the islands and in rural areas. It has been reported to us that, after a recent storm, islanders on the isle of Tiree were without any connection to even the 999 service for six days. That is clearly unacceptable and should not be happening anywhere on these islands. The point made to us already in the early part of our inquiry is that people want resilience, and resilience is difficult when connectivity is very poor to begin with. Will the Minister look at the issue of resilience, so that people across the country have some assurance about future activity?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Resilience now sits within my brief, and it is something I take very seriously. I would be very happy to work with her and with colleagues across the House, including of course from Scotland. She is right about connectivity. We want the country to be as resilient as possible, and we are working at pace to ensure that it is.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Despite the best efforts of people on the ground, during the storm an entire county in the United Kingdom, namely Caithness, was completely cut off—no road access, no rail access, and flying a chopper in that blizzard weather was unthinkable. The House knows how appalled I am that pregnant women have to make a 200-mile round trip to give birth in Inverness. Frankly, it is a miracle that something horrible did not happen. May I suggest to the Minister that Cobra should, as a matter of some urgency, formally look at why the

[*Jamie Stone*]

Scottish Government were so utterly and appallingly ill-prepared for something that could have become a major disaster?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making those points and those representations on behalf of his constituents. He will understand that, from a UK Government perspective, we want to work very closely and co-operatively with the devolved nations right across the country. We want to work closely with the Scottish Government, as we do with other parts of the United Kingdom. I have heard the points he has made and I am very happy to discuss them with him further. He makes a good point and I give him an assurance that we will look at it.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Storm Goretti had a big impact back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme, made all the worse by the disgraceful response of Staffordshire county council. I wrote to the council on 28 November, asking what plans were in place to ensure that it was prepared for bad weather. I was told on 18 December that it was prepared. It was not—rural communities cut off, schools closed, vulnerable people stuck at home, empty grit bins all over my constituency, and roads left ungritted. What pressure can the Minister apply to Staffordshire county council, and what guidance can it be given, to ensure that it gets a grip in keeping my community safe the next time we have such bad weather?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is right about the important role that councils play during challenging circumstances. From work I have done recently with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, I know there is a process of review—what I described earlier as the hot review and the cold review—to look closely at what has happened in a particular set of circumstances. I am sure that there will be opportunities for him, as a local Member, to feed into that process, but I have heard the points he has made and I am very happy to discuss them with him further.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We need quick questions now.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I was very grateful to receive a phone call from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), on Friday afternoon warning that, because of Storm Goretti, Haywards Heath in my constituency might lose its water supply. In the event it was East Grinstead, which is not getting its water back until tomorrow. What are the Government doing to address the evident frailty in the resilience of our water treatment systems?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), who was with me on the Government Front Bench very recently. I can give the hon. Lady the assurances she seeks. We work very closely across Government, including with DEFRA, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that in a number of places in Sussex and Kent—including in your Sussex Weald constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker—people are still without water as a result of the power outages that occurred during the storm. The power supply to waterworks is interrupted briefly, but then the water supply goes off for days, if not longer, which is a really serious interruption for people. The national risk register, which the Cabinet Office oversees, currently ranks loss of water supply as the lowest form of risk—one out of five—which I think many of us who have constituents living without water for days would struggle with. Will the Minister have a look at whether it is ranked correctly in the national risk register, and what preparations there need to be for major incidents such as this?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes important points, and I will undertake to look at her specific point about the risk register. She will have heard the comments made by the DEFRA Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), in the House yesterday with regard to the water outages in Sussex and Kent. She will know that the Government take these matters very seriously. Colleagues in DEFRA continue to monitor the situation closely and are engaging with industry partners.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): A cargo ship lost a number of shipping containers along the shipping route off the south coast during Storm Goretti. It is the second cargo ship in a couple of weeks to lose shipping containers, which are now washing up on the shoreline in my constituency, posing a risk to the public and the environment. What lessons can the Government learn regarding maritime resilience during extreme weather events, which we know will keep occurring?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and it will have been heard by ministerial colleagues in a number of Government Departments. I will ensure that she gets a response from the appropriate Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Shannon, is this question about Storm Goretti?

Jim Shannon: It certainly is, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last night you asked me whether I got home okay last Thursday—and I did, but by the skin of my teeth, because the winds were blowing the tail end of the plane. Although I got home from London City airport, many of my constituents did not get home from Heathrow, because all the flights were cancelled at about 6.30 pm. They had made it to the airport, but unfortunately they did not get home.

Is it not time for British Airways and other airline companies to ensure that there is pre-warning so that people do not journey to the airport only to find that they are unable to travel? Given all the lessons we can learn from Storm Goretti, is it not time to have a co-ordinated plan from Westminster for the regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? The Minister said earlier that we can co-ordinate and learn lessons from Storm Goretti. Perhaps it is time to ensure that we all learn those lessons.

Dan Jarvis: I am pleased that the hon. Member made it back to Northern Ireland last Thursday. I know that ministerial colleagues in the Department for Transport will have heard his first point. To his second point, I can assure him that we take matters relating to resilience incredibly seriously, and we seek to ensure that it is an effort joined up right across the United Kingdom.

Business of the House

2.11 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): Madam Deputy Speaker, in the light of continuing discussions about tomorrow's legislation, I am announcing the following changes to business.

The business tomorrow, Wednesday 14 January, will now be a general debate on Ukraine.

The remaining stages of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill will now take place on Monday 19 January.

The business on Thursday 15 January will remain unchanged. There will be a general debate on new towns, followed by a general debate on financial support for small businesses and individuals during the covid-19 pandemic. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

I will announce further business in the usual way on Thursday.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

2.12 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement and for advance notice of it, but I think it should be noted by the House that this—I am sure he would agree—is a bit of a mess. The Public Office (Accountability) Bill was in Committee in December, and amendments should have been filed by the Government on Wednesday of last week, but in fact they came on Friday, too late for colleagues to be able to address them. Now we have had a sudden emergency rejig of business tomorrow, and we know not what is going to happen to the ping-pong that was planned for next Monday. Instead will be debating this Bill.

Can the Leader of the House explain why this has happened and what has gone wrong here? Can he also explain what will happen to the legislation and motions that were originally to be debated on Monday 19 January? Finally, can he assure the House that when these matters are brought in front of the House next Monday, the Minister will give a full explanation as to both the ministerial snafu and the substantive issues that have caused this in the first place?

Sir Alan Campbell: I appreciate the shadow Leader of the House's comments, not least because we spoke earlier at the earliest opportunity. He will be aware, as will the House, of the importance and sensitivity of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill. I recognise that it is not ideal for Members when we have to change business at short notice. Last Friday the Government tabled a series of amendments to further strengthen the Bill's provisions. We continue to listen to stakeholders on all sides of the debate, to ensure that our amendments strike the careful balance that is required and, where necessary, make changes. For that reason, I decided that we would move the Bill from tomorrow to next Monday. I am not going to provide a running commentary on what the changes might be, but the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), is sitting next to me and has heard what the shadow Leader of the House has said. We will be tabling new

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

amendments tomorrow. The Government will continue to keep all Members updated on this, and on Monday we will have an opportunity to debate these important matters fully.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Leader of the House. However, I am concerned that the Bill has been pulled from tomorrow's business and that there will be amendments. Watering down the duty of candour, especially for intelligence agencies such as MI5 and MI6, is completely unacceptable. Including the duty of candour in the Bill was meant to ensure accountability, prevent cover-ups and give victims and their families the answers that they are entitled to. If this law is not watertight and does not apply to everyone, it does not deserve to be called the Hillsborough law. Why are the Government pandering to the requests of the security services at the expense of families and the public trust?

Sir Alan Campbell: The short answer to the question is that we are not. My hon. Friend has been a very strong advocate on these matters and a great support for families. We understand the significance of the Bill, particularly in the region that she represents and wider still. The Government are absolutely committed to the duty of candour. I know that there have been questions about the application of the duty to, for example, the intelligence services. We have been very clear that the duty will apply to the intelligence services, but there is a careful balance that we must achieve. This is not about the principles of the duty of candour being applied but how the legislation will apply in practice and having the right national security safeguards in place. Nor is it about whether we can get there in the quickest possible time. It is about ensuring that we get to the right place and that we do it in the right way.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. The whole House wants to get the Bill right, and if a delay is what is required, I think the House will support that. I am glad that the Government have had the humility to withdraw it from tomorrow's business, even at this late stage, in order to get it right. However, it does seem extraordinary that it would be withdrawn at this very late stage, and it raises serious concerns about what kind of ongoing engagement there has been with key stakeholders up to this moment. Will he assure us that what needs to be worked out can be done meaningfully in less than a week? Will he also commit that the Government will deliver the Hillsborough law as previously promised, and not just a Hillsborough law in name only?

Sir Alan Campbell: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has approached this with understanding. In thanking him for that, may I say that there has been extensive debate on these matters, and I am grateful to everyone who has taken part. This is an ongoing situation, but it is important that we get the Bill right. It will be the meaningful Bill that we set out to achieve. It is not in the interests of the Bill to try to resolve the next stage by

tomorrow. That is precisely the reason I have decided to move it until the beginning of next week—to give that bit of extra time.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House shares my concern that families, including my constituents who have been repeatedly failed by the state, had arranged time off work and booked travel and expensive accommodation to make the journey to London, only to be told that there will now be no debate tomorrow. It is, of course, welcome that the Government are listening, but please can my right hon. Friend use his good offices to ensure that the Government listen to MPs, their constituents and campaigners sooner—before we reach such critical points in legislation—in order to avoid such upheaval?

Sir Alan Campbell: I can assure my hon. Friend that we have not taken these decisions lightly. Of course we try to ensure that any issues are resolved before they come before this House, which is the reason for this change to business, even at this relatively late stage. I am sorry that my hon. Friend's constituents have already made travel arrangements; I hope that they can be altered in a suitable way. I understand that the meeting with the Prime Minister that was requested will still take place tomorrow. I am sure that my hon. Friend's constituents will take an interest in the debate on Monday when we get to it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I completely understand that the Government will want to move business around given the circumstances they are under. However, as the Backbench Business Committee will be meeting this afternoon, will the Leader of the House update the House on whether we will be allocated Thursday 22 January for debates—hopefully we will decide that this afternoon—as well as 29 January?

On Monday, the Lords amendments to the Holocaust Memorial Bill will not be debated. From a personal perspective, as I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on holocaust memorial, it would be helpful to know when those amendments will be debated so that we can be ready for the discussion.

Sir Alan Campbell: Although I am not in a position to confirm either 22 or 29 January, my aim, to put it slightly differently and to answer the hon. Gentleman's point about other legislation due to be debated on Monday, is to create minimal disruption. Although Monday might have changed, I do not intend to make major changes to what I have already announced about next week. I am not in a position to say anything about 29 January, but I do not think his Committee should change any plans based on expectations for 22 January.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): This is an important and historic Bill about delivering justice for the families affected, so it is perfectly reasonable that we take the time to ensure that it is right. I commend the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is in her place, for her tenacity in taking the Bill forward. I have tabled a set of amendments to the Bill that would extend the scope of the offence of misleading the public to apply to members of this place. Will the Leader of the House confirm that because the

Bill's consideration has been moved to Monday, there is time until Friday for Members to add their names to those amendments, should they so wish?

Sir Alan Campbell: I confirm not only that the Government will be tabling amendments tomorrow but that there is time for hon. Members to table amendments as well. I would not discourage hon. Members from tabling any amendments that they had planned to do.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I appreciate the difficulties around timetabling, but this is no ordinary Bill—so important is it to the Government that the Prime Minister presented it on Second Reading. Given that, does the Leader of the House not believe that the House was entitled to something more than the chaos we appear to be seeing in how the process is being handled?

Sir Alan Campbell: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman when he says that this is no ordinary Bill. That is why we are taking this important step to ensure that it has proper time and continued engagement. As for the Prime Minister, he cares deeply about these matters—as the right hon. Gentleman said, he took part in earlier deliberations on these matters—and it is his firm view, too, that it is important that we get it right. That is why we are making the decision that the best time for the next stage is Monday, given the other discussions that have been had since, rather than risking rushing it tomorrow.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I have a particular interest in the accountability of public services due to the shocking treatment of some of my constituents by NHS trusts. I was pleased to sit on the Bill Committee, which was on the whole collegiate and comprehensive. I welcome the statement from the Leader of the House that we will be getting the Bill right, but will he assure me that there will be minimal impact on its implementation, notwithstanding that it must go to the other place?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I am happy to do that. I accept that, thankfully, there has been a collegiate approach on these matters, and I hope that will continue, even if the debates will be on a different day. I confirm that there is no great change to the plan other than the date on which we consider the Bill, which instead of tomorrow will be Monday.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This afternoon, I will present a Bill to strip Peter Mandelson of his peerage and kick him out of the House of Lords for continuing his friendship with convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein. Since tomorrow afternoon is now legislation-free, will the Government please schedule the Second Reading of my Bill for tomorrow afternoon so that we can kick Peter Mandelson and all those who are pals with convicted sex offenders out of the House of Lords as soon as possible?

Sir Alan Campbell: I commend the hon. Lady for her ingenuity in weaving something entirely unrelated into these matters. This is a statement on a very specific change to business. We have important plans for tomorrow, when there will be a debate on Ukraine. There have

been a number of opportunities for hon. Members to ask for that debate, and the Government now have the opportunity to grant it.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): The Hillsborough law has been a long time coming. It has been a journey, and for the families of the victims and survivors, as well as those affected by lots of other tragedies and disasters over the years, it has been too long coming. Will the Leader of the House please assure me and my constituents that this change is about getting it right—I think everyone involved can agree that we need to do that—and not about watering it down in any way?

Sir Alan Campbell: I agree, and I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that the purpose of the change is to get the Bill right. There is no watering down; it is about getting it right. The only difference is that we need a slightly longer time period to do that, so that when the Bill comes out it commands support and delivers justice for those who have campaigned on these matters for such a long time.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Given the existential importance of the subject of Ukraine, and presuming that the Prime Minister will be in the House tomorrow to answer Prime Minister's questions, will he be staying on to lead the debate, as would seem to be appropriate? Will the Leader of the House also explain what is happening to the Chagos Bill—the British Indian Ocean Territory (Sovereignty and Constitutional Arrangements) Bill—as there was a motion to regret yesterday—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. That is understood.

Sir Alan Campbell: I cannot confirm who will be leading the Ukraine debate tomorrow, but I said a moment ago that the Prime Minister will be meeting the families tomorrow, so that probably answers that part of the hon. Gentleman's question. In terms of the Chagos legislation that was scheduled for next week, as I have said I am expecting, hoping for and intending there to be minimal disruption, so while we will not get on to that important matter on Monday, it will not be long after that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. While I am here, may I thank the victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for her incredibly hard work on this issue? The Public Office (Accountability) Bill is hugely important, so I understand why the Leader of the House has taken this decision. Will he confirm that any changes made to the legislation will be thoroughly consulted on with the families of those who were tragically lost in the Hillsborough disaster? Will he also confirm that we will continue to ensure that we reach out to victims and their families when we look at dealing with such legislation in the future?

Sir Alan Campbell: I confirm that the Government and Ministers do continue to speak with stakeholders, particularly the families. A great deal of effort has been put into that both by hon. Friends on the Back Benches and Ministers; I commend them for that. If there are lessons to be learned, we will learn those lessons, such is

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the progress of legislation; and for future Bills, if there are lessons to be learned, I am sure that we will have done so.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Now that the Chagos Bill has been dropped from the Order Paper for 19 January, will the Leader of the House please confirm when consideration of the Lords amendments will be scheduled?

Sir Alan Campbell: It may have been dropped for 19 January, but it has not been dropped—as I just said to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), my intention is for minimal disruption—so the hon. Gentleman might want to think what might come shortly afterwards. I will confirm the business on Thursday as usual. If he is in his place on Thursday, he will hear that at first hand.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given that the welcome intervention by the UN Human Rights Council has arrived subsequent to our own deliberations on the Chagos Bill, may I urge the Leader of the House not to be so hasty and to consider pulling the Bill entirely?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government will not be tempted down that track. When the Bill comes before the House again—which will be soon—I am sure the right hon. Gentleman, if he catches your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, will make the point that he just started.

Iran

2.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on the disturbing developments unfolding in Iran. Horrific reports suggest that potentially thousands of people have been killed and many more arrested in the most brutal and bloody repression against public protest in Iran for at least 13 years.

On 28 December, protests began on the streets of Iran following a plunge in the value of the country's currency. Over the following week, the protests grew in scale, intensity and geographic spread. Crowds surged on to the streets, from major cities to rural towns, with voices ranging from shopkeepers to university students protesting for change. Instead, they have been met with the most bloody repression.

A total internet shutdown instigated by the Iranian regime from 8 January, together with restrictions on phone communications, mean that the full facts are not yet clear, but I am fearful that the reports that we have seen may underestimate the full scale of the horror, as further evidence and testimony reaches the outside world. Videos are still emerging, including of what appear to be protester corpses lined up in body bags outside a hospital on the outskirts of Tehran.

The Iranian regime has called for a three-day period of national mourning, but only for its security forces. There has been no acknowledgment of dead protesters; instead, the regime peddles its manufactured narrative of foreign manipulation and seeks to portray peaceful protesters as criminals and terrorists while pursuing a brutal and relentless crackdown on its own people. It takes huge bravery to protest and to speak out in the face of such oppression, especially for women who continue to endure severe repression in their daily lives. The United Kingdom therefore condemns in the strongest of terms the horrendous and brutal killing of Iranian protesters and we demand that the Iranian authorities respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of their citizens.

On Friday, the Prime Minister joined with the German Chancellor and French President in condemnation of the violence and to call for its end. I also delivered that message directly to Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi yesterday, setting out the UK's total abhorrence at the killings, violence and repression that we are seeing and urging Iran to immediately end the violence and change course. Today, as further reports come through, the Minister for the Middle East, at my instruction, has summoned the Iranian ambassador to underline the gravity of this moment and to call Iran to answer for the horrific reports that we are hearing.

This latest conduct by the Iranian regime is no aberration and it is no outlier; rather, it is all too in keeping with the fundamental nature and track record of the regime. It is consistent with its previous conduct towards its own people, as we saw during the lethal repression of protesters led by Iranian women following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's so-called morality police. It is consistent with Iran's destabilising actions towards its neighbours in the region, as we have seen in its backing of terrorist and extremist proxies—

Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis—and of militia groups in Iraq and Syria, and from Iran's barrage of missile attacks on Israel. It is consistent with Iran's malign global impact, whether in weapons support for Russia against Ukraine or its nuclear programme. It is consistent too with Iran's state threat activities on UK soil, posing danger to dissidents, journalists and the Jewish community here in the UK, with more than 20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots over the last year alone, as tracked through the vital work of the UK's security agencies.

Let me set out the action that the Government are taking in co-ordination with allies in response to the consistent threat that the Iranian regime poses to stability, security and freedom and to the UK national interest. First, on domestic security threats, we will not tolerate any Iran-backed threats on UK soil. In May, three Iranian nationals were charged with offences linked to the Iranian regime under the National Security Act 2023. I thank the police, security and intelligence services for their tireless work to keep us safe. Last year, we placed Iran on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme to detect, deter and disrupt malign and undeclared efforts to undermine our democracy, we sanctioned the criminal Foxtrot network for the violent threats it posed against Jewish and Israeli targets in Europe on behalf of the Iranian regime, and we have geared up the UK's security infrastructure to better tackle hybrid threats. As Home Secretary, I commissioned the review by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, into what more needed to be done so that we could apply counter-terrorism-style powers, including on proscription, to state-backed threats as well. We announced last year that the Government will take forward the recommendations so we can deal with all the UK-based threats that we face.

Secondly, on support for British citizens, the first duty of any Government is the safety and security of our citizens, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working tirelessly to ensure the safety of British nationals in Iran. I spoke yesterday with the UK's ambassador in Tehran about the vital work that he and the team are doing on the ground, and my Department is in contact with the relevant Iranian authorities regarding detained British nationals. Their welfare in Iran remains a priority. We are, of course, deeply concerned that Craig and Lindsay Foreman have been charged with espionage in Iran. Just yesterday, the Minister for the Middle East met members of the Foreman family, and we continue to raise the case directly with the Iranian authorities.

Thirdly, there is the co-ordinated economic and diplomatic pressure on the regime. This Government and our predecessors have continually raised human rights violations in Iran through the UN and international forums, including, most recently, in the autumn, resolutions calling for an end to the regime's reprisals against women, journalists and human rights campaigners. In October, alongside our E3 partners, France and Germany, the UK triggered the snapback process, which saw the reinstatement of six previously terminated UN sanctions resolutions on Iran. We did so because of the repeated failure by the Iranian regime to comply with its nuclear commitments. On 1 October, we updated domestic legislation to reapply extensive sanctions measures contained

in the resolutions, going further by designating 71 individuals and entities in sectors that have links to Iran's nuclear programme.

Overall, this Government have imposed over 220 Iran sanctions designations since coming into office, and we back strong sanctions enforcement. Just last week, the UK provided support to the US's seizure of *Bella 1*, accused of shadow fleet activities and Iran sanctions breaches. When the sanctions were reinstated in October, I also urged those in the Iranian regime, even then, to change their approach and to work with the international community to comply with their obligations. I told them then that it would take time to fully implement the UK sanctions and that, during that window, they should start compliance and engagement with the international community and end the deception and obfuscation. They have not done so. Weapons inspectors still have not been given access and, far from changing their approach, we have instead seen a reversion to the most brutal forms of repression on their own streets.

As a result, I can confirm that the UK will bring forward legislation to implement full and further sanctions and sectoral measures. The UK has already designated key players in Iran's oil, energy, nuclear and financial systems, and further measures will target finance, energy, transport, software and other significant industries that are advancing Iranian nuclear escalation. We will work further with the EU and other partners to explore what additional measures might now be needed in response to developments.

I also send a message to other countries that have sought to avoid implementing UN sanctions or to undermine the legitimacy of the UN sanctions reinstated following the snapback process. No one should be supporting the kind of approach that the Iranian regime is currently taking, and all member states should be fulfilling their UN obligations on such a grave and serious issue.

Let me say something else about the events of recent days. Just as in 2022, it is absolutely clear that the Iranian regime is trying to paint the protests as the result of foreign influence and instigation. It is using that accusation to try and whip up opposition to the protests among anti-western Iranians, and to try to justify the vicious and sickening attacks on the ordinary civilians marching in the streets. This is nothing but lies and propaganda being spread by a desperate regime and it must not be allowed to undermine a genuine grassroots movement drawing together people from all parts of Iranian society and spreading across multiple cities and regions.

That is why we and other Governments across the world are determined not to play into the hands of the regime or to allow our words or actions to be twisted to support its lies and propaganda. With a functioning embassy on the ground in Tehran and British nationals being held in Iranian jails, we recognise that responsibility, as previous Governments have always done. In the last 18 months, we have taken stronger action to tackle Iranian threats at home and abroad than any recent Government, and we have done so with broad cross-party support. That must continue. The world is watching Iran. The UK will continue to confront the regime's lies, to call out its repression and to take the steps necessary to protect the UK's interests. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.40 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving me sight of her statement earlier. Every day for the last two weeks across Iran, we have seen brave and courageous men, women and children standing in defiance of a cruel, barbaric and despotic regime that has suppressed lives and freedom for over five decades. People are being arrested, attacked and murdered in the streets. It has been reported that over 2,000 people have now been killed, with one report even suggesting that the real figure is over 12,000, and over 10,000 have been arrested, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran.

Towns have been flooded with soldiers to suppress protests, and hospitals are overwhelmed with the injured and murdered. Thousands upon thousands of Iran's young, including the 23-year-old fashion student Rubina Aminian, have been shot, killed and buried by the side of roads as they called for a free Iran. We have seen reports of executions due to take place for those arrested just days earlier. As we mourn the victims of Tehran's atrocities, we cannot let their dreams be buried. These were ordinary Iranians doing extraordinary things, fighting for their freedom. We stand with those brave Iranians. We back their calls for freedom, and we join in demands for the regime to end.

This is a regime whose cruelty goes beyond the brutality we have seen in recent days. The theocratic terrorists in Iran have for too long threatened regional security, with Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis backed by Iran. They have backed Putin's war in Ukraine and China's campaign of repression. They have ignored demands to stop their nuclear weapons programme as they circumvent sanctions. They are holding British nationals Craig and Lindsay Foreman in cruel captivity. Iran is a hostile state. It is a threat to our country, to the middle east and to the world, and Britain must have the resolve to deal with it.

I ask the Foreign Secretary: where is the Government's resolve to stand up to Iran, to back those protesting and to work to bring about the end of the regime's cruelty? As Iranian citizens are sacrificing their lives in the fight for their own liberation, what message of hope and reassurance does she give to those risking their lives on the streets of Iran each day? What is being done to challenge the Iranian regime over its violence? What is her assessment of the numbers killed and injured? It is right that the Iranian ambassador has finally been summoned, but why has this happened only today? The Foreign Secretary says she has spoken on the phone to her counterpart. What was his response? Did she raise the Foreman case with him? What was his response?

The Iranian regime now claims to have the protest under "total control". What assessment have the Government made of this claim? Britain and this House should stand with those campaigning for a free and democratic future, and if change comes, we should be ready to support this change. Given the statements from President Trump, what discussions have taken place with the US Administration over their plans, and are we aligned with the US and our regional partners? Are all scenarios being considered and planned for, including

the potential use of UK/US military bases to stop the brutality of the Iranian regime? If the regime is being weakened, what assessment has been made of the risk of Iran retaliating and escalating plots to undermine our security here?

Last year, the US and Israel took direct action to protect western and regional interests from Iran's nuclear threats. The Government refused to give a view on those actions at the time. They sat on the fence in a feeble attempt not to upset their Back-Bench MPs. As people die fighting for their rights and for democracy, this is no time for weakness. Britain should be robust in cutting off the Iranian regime and removing the funds it relies on. I know that the Foreign Secretary has touched on some of this, but will she state what further direct sanctions will be placed specifically on the regime and particularly on its key henchmen? Will she confirm that no one from that regime will ever step foot in our country and threaten the security of Britain, should they try to flee Iran? Why has it taken so long to implement the reintroduction of sanctions under snapback?

On the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, in opposition Labour said that it would proscribe the IRGC, but it has not done so in government. It is incumbent upon the Government to share with the House their reasons for not doing so. The Foreign Secretary referred to the report from Jonathan Hall, which she says they will take forward, but that was eight months ago, so when is this coming and why was Downing Street briefing yesterday that proscription would not happen? Will the IRGC be proscribed?

The Opposition will work with the Government in the national interest, and in the interests of global security and stability, to pass legislation and other measures needed to keep us safe from Iran and put maximum pressure on its despotic regime. I have a suggestion for the Foreign Secretary. Instead of legislating for the £35 billion surrender of Chagos, will she use the time we have in this House to deal with the IRGC and the Iranian regime, in order to keep us safe? Will she use that £35 billion to bolster our defences, because at this critical moment Britain must do all we can to stand with Iranians fighting for their freedom, and to protect them and us from Tehran's threat.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary in her condemnation of the brutality and horrendous actions of the Iranian regime and the threats that it poses. She will know that when she was Home Secretary and I was shadow Home Secretary, we strongly supported the national security actions on Iran. In fact, I said specifically that I hoped the House would be able to come together to support our national security and defend our democracy, and I urge Conservative Members to take the same cross-party approach to defending not only our national security but regional stability. The scale of the truly brutal, horrendous actions in Iran means that we should stand together in condemnation of that action, and in the action that we need to take in concert with our allies, including on further sanctions and further immediate pressure on the regime.

The right hon. Lady asked for my assessment of the scale of what is happening. Like her, I have seen the reports that suggest that 2,000 people might have been killed. There might have been more. My fear is that the number will prove to be significantly higher, because we

are currently getting so little information as a result of the internet blackout that the regime has instigated as it tries to hide what it has done and the consequences. That is why we are talking to other countries about what can be done swiftly to try to restore some sort of internet access or phone communication to people across Iran.

The right hon. Lady asks about the Foremans. I raised the Foremans' case directly with the Iranian regime just before Christmas, and we continue to raise it because it is a huge consular priority for us. We are also in close touch not just with the US but with other allies across Europe and the G7 to look at what further sanctions measures we need to take.

The right hon. Lady also asked about the snapback, and she will know that this has been a running issue for many years. Following the non-compliance over the nuclear regime, the previous Conservative Government did not take the snapback action. We took that action, and it was supported on a cross-party basis. I hope again that will remain the case, because it was clear that that compliance was not taking place. That work was done in conjunction not just with the E3—France and Germany—but with US allies; there have been many conversations about this matter with them as well.

The right hon. Lady also raised the issue around the IRGC. She will know that this issue was raised with the previous Government over many years. I have particularly raised the need to reform the legislation. That is exactly why I commissioned the Jonathan Hall review: I was concerned that legislation designed for terrorism threats was not applicable in the same way to state-backed threats, and we need to ensure that we can deal with the hybrid and state-backed threats that the country now faces.

The international community needs to come together on this. In the face of this brutality from the Iranian regime, we need not just concerted action around sanctions and the enforcement of existing sanctions, but overwhelming pressure. We will pursue that through the UN and through every avenue we can. The world is watching Iran, the world needs to be watching and the world needs to stand together against the brutality we have seen.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The question now is: what is Donald Trump going to do next? There must be many people in the Foreign Office trying to second guess what he might do. Will we give support to Donald Trump if he decides to take action against the Iranian regime in—what he would say would be—defence of the Iranian people, or will we take the same position we did in the summer, which was to give assistance when it came to defending American bases or Israel, if the Iranians retaliate?

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend will obviously understand that the US response will be a matter for the US Government and Administration, and it would not be right for me to speculate on the what and the how, or on the way in which they will respond. What I can do is set out the UK's approach around increasing the economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran, but also in calling on countries to come together to do so, because although a lot of countries have talked about sanctions, in practice we have not seen them enforced, and we need that concerted action together in the face of this brutality.

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

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of her statement. Like Members across the House, I feel humbled by the courage shown by so many Iranians to stand up to the tyrants in Tehran. That bravery was also shown after the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 at the hands of the religious morality police—a crime showed the regime's particular violence towards women.

It is abundantly clear that the regime in Tehran is utterly illegitimate in the eyes of the Iranian people, and it is deeply shocking to learn that thousands of protesters have now been killed by regime forces and that further executions have already been scheduled. At this critical moment, we must take all the action available to us to support these brave protesters. We must also ensure that those in the UK who campaign for freedom and democracy in Iran, and members of the British Jewish community, are safe here. I welcome the new sanctions that the Government have committed to today. In the light of the grotesque efforts to brutalise these protesters, will the Government now personally sanction Iran's senior leadership, including Supreme Leader Khamenei? I hear the Foreign Secretary's commitment to new legislation. When it is in place, will she commit to proscribing the IRGC—an organisation committed to suppressing dissent at home and exporting intimidation to our shores?

Iran's decision makers must be held to account for their attacks on peaceful protesters, and the UK must take a lead to ensure that justice is delivered, so will the Secretary of State call on the UN Security Council to open an International Criminal Court investigation into crimes against humanity committed by the Iranian Government against their people? Will this Government also commit to using the UK's satellite capabilities to record evidence of human rights abuses, which could be used to support such an ICC investigation?

The Foreign Secretary is right to avoid giving the regime any excuse falsely to claim foreign influence. Yet we know that Donald Trump has proposed direct US military intervention. Does the Government consider that that would be merited politically and legally, and would it reduce or increase the risk to the brave protesters? As evidence of the violence being perpetrated by the regime continues to reach international media, the safety of British nationals in Iran must remain a priority, so I welcome the Foreign Secretary's assurance that plans are in place to support British citizens in Iran, and I thank our ambassador and his staff for all their work.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member's support for the ambassador and his staff, who obviously work in very difficult conditions, but I also particularly welcome his support for the bravery of those who have protested and who have now, we fear, lost their lives as a result of their courage in the face of such a brutal regime.

The hon. Member asks about the process for the future. We will take forward the legislation around sanctions, and I have set out measures in the statement that we will take forward, but we will also look further in conjunction with the EU at what further measures we can take. He will understand that there are processes we need to go through around sanctions, and that the proscription process is always one for the Home Office,

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but I strongly want to ensure that we have legislation in place that ensures we can deal different kinds of threats. We now no longer face only terrorism threats; very often, we also face hybrid threats and state-backed threats on UK soil. We are looking further at the satellite issues, as I have said. We will continue to work closely with countries across the world, and we urge the international community to come together in condemnation and action.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): People in Hornsey and Friern Barnet have written to me in absolute desperation. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with partners to co-ordinate efforts to promote human rights even in these desperate times, including the treatment of prisoners, many of whom have been detained so brutally since last month?

Yvette Cooper: We have been having many discussions with our partners. On Friday, the Prime Minister put out a statement in conjunction with France and Germany, as part of the E3, because it was as part of the E3 that we took the action in the autumn on the snapback and on the introduction of new sanctions on Iran. In the autumn, we also pursued action through the UN and resolutions around human rights, particularly condemning the repression of women and journalists. We will continue to do that; this is the top issue that we are discussing with our international partners at the moment.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The technical issues around proscription are well understood, as they were understood by the last Government. But eight months ago, Jonathan Hall KC offered a remedy to get around them: his statutory alert and liability threat notice vehicle. When will the Government bring that forward because it is now urgent? Does the Foreign Secretary envisage it being used for the IRGC overall or simply its constituent entities that are particularly problematic, such as the Basij militia and the Quds Force?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member will understand that I cannot pre-empt the proper proscription processes that take place, or the use of future legislation in decisions that need to be taken by the Home Office and the Home Secretary, but I hope that I have conveyed to him that this is something I feel very strongly about. We need this legislation in place because of the nature of the complex and hybrid threats we face.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. It is good for us as a united House to send the strongest condemnation of what we are seeing—the little we are seeing; we know there is a lot more. She mentioned support for British nationals. Many of my constituents have contacted me, including one who said,

“In our household my partner is Iranian... I have seen the fear in her and her family, which I really understand given their experience... she fears for her family back home and—as a family here in Lambeth—it will mean the world if things change for the better... My son could then visit the country of his mother’s birth without fear of abduction.”

They equally want the mass shootings against the protesters to stop. The Foreign Secretary outlined additional sanctions. Will she ensure that those sanctions hit the Iranian authorities responsible for this brutal violence instead of the innocent protesters who are trying to get their points across?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the number of British citizens who have Iranian family who are deeply worried about their safety, and about the Iranian citizens who live lawfully here and have done so for a long time who have also been targeted by the Iranian regime. I can assure her that the UK does not sanction food or medicines, and we make targeted decisions to ensure that the sanctions focus on those responsible for the damage as opposed to ordinary people.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the attempts by the regime to suppress news of what is happening in Iran by shutting down the internet makes the work of external media such as the BBC Persian service and Iran International all the more important? Given that journalists from both organisations have been attacked and threatened, can she and the Minister for Security, who is sitting next to her, confirm that measures will be taken to step up the security of those journalists?

Yvette Cooper: The fact that the Security Minister has come to sit on the Front Bench for this statement shows how seriously we take the threats here in the UK. The right hon. Member is right to talk about the threats that have been made to Iran International. I know that he will join me in paying tribute to the work of our police, particularly our counter-terrorism police, and our security services for ensuring that people are kept safe. I also pay tribute to the BBC Persian service. It is clearly independent operationally and editorially. One in four Iranians have accessed the BBC Persian service to get the latest news despite it being banned in the country. That shows the impact that independent journalism can have.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): Iran is a remarkable country with a rich history and culture. Its people have been living under tyranny for decades. They are now fighting to rid themselves of their chains. Britain is a friend to the Iranian people. Our aim should be to stop the regime massacring its citizens and to set the people of Iran free for a democratic future. These are messages that the people of Iran would welcome. The Republic has declared war on its people. They are being murdered in the dark, and we must be a force for light. Given the internet blackout, what is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure that the people of Iran can hear her message, and this country’s message, of friendship and support? Some Iranians are talking about the return of Reza Pahlavi. What conversations have the Government had with him?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend’s point about the need to restore communications is crucial. It is crucial that we are able to find out the sheer horror of what is happening, and it is crucial for the people of Iran to be able to communicate with each other and to be able to speak out to ensure that their voices are heard. Obviously, the future of Iran is for the Iranian people, but at the

moment the regime is not allowing the Iranian people's voices to be heard. We need to see an Iran that does not repress the rights of women, kill peaceful protesters, aid Russia's aggression or support lethal threats on the streets of Britain.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement to the House. She is surely right that there are things that we can do to help the desperately brave people on the streets who want their country back. Should we not make it clear that the UK and all Europeans will impose every possible further sanction and restriction on this neanderthal pariah regime? Should we not help to break the communications blackout through Starlink, satellite and other technology, and ensure that details of the regime-led barbarity on the streets is widely known? Finally, as her colleague, the hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden), said a moment ago, we should stop ignoring Reza Pahlavi. His is a name that is being chanted on the street. He is not seeking a restoration of the Peacock throne; he wants to help to usher in a new era. Will she and her colleagues at least meet with him?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member is right to condemn the horror and brutality that we have seen. We are talking to other countries about what can be done through access to Starlink, for example, to restore some form of communications. We are also talking to our allies about what further sanctions, additional pressure and other measures can be applied. Clearly, for the reasons that I set out in the statement, the future of Iran is for the Iranian people to decide, but let us be clear: we need to see fundamental change and an Iran that does not repress its people so brutally but believes in the opportunities of its people for the future. That is not what we are seeing now.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): The hope on seeing the Iranian people fighting back for their freedom has turned to horror as we see the images of the body bags piled up. Over the weekend, anxious constituents have contacted me because they are unable to contact their friends and family after the regime's imposed internet blackout. The regime is using that as a weapon to enforce silence so that the world cannot bear witness to the horror and slaughter of its own innocent citizens. Can the Foreign Secretary assure us that the British Government are putting the strongest possible pressure on Iran's regime for its appalling human rights violations and the oppression of the Iranian people, and reaffirm Britain's steadfast support for the Iranian people in their fight for democracy?

Yvette Cooper: I can confirm that we are continuing to raise our total condemnation of what is happening through every possible avenue—directly with the Iranian regime, but also through the different international forums—as the horrors that emerge with each day become more deeply disturbing and troubling. That is why it is so important for the international community to come together and speak with one voice.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Iran is a remarkable country and its people are remarkable, but I agree with the Foreign Secretary that the actions of the Iranian regime are no aberration. She was absolutely right to say that. Will she consider proscription of the IRGC? As others have said, we proscribed Wagner.

That was the right thing to do. Will she bring us more information about the targeting of the shadow fleet, which is crucial? Finally, will she look longer-term at support for civil society, which will be crucial in any rebuilding efforts?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Foreign Secretary responds, I remind Members that we have six hours of protected business on the Finance (No. 2) Bill, so this has to move much faster—we need shorter questions. This statement will finish in about 40 minutes.

Yvette Cooper: I set out in another response the importance of changing the legislation around proscription. We are working on further measures on the shadow fleet. The hon. Member will have seen the action that we have taken to support the US interdiction on the shadow fleet. He made a really important point about support for civil society. That is where the strength of the Iranian people lies.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The scenes we have seen in Iran are heartbreaking, terrifying and, I fear, just a fraction of what is happening, given the media blackout. The Foreign Secretary says that the world must come together, and she is right. I understand her point that proscription in this country is a matter for the Home Secretary, but given the measures that are being talked about in the European Parliament, which has banned representatives of the Iranian Government from attending, can she confirm that she is talking to our European counterparts about co-ordinating proscription measures?

Yvette Cooper: I assure my hon. Friend that we are certainly continuing to talk with our close allies, including in Europe, on the action that is needed. We have sanctioned the entirety of the IRGC and placed not just the IRGC, but the whole of the Iranian state, on the enhanced tier of FIRS. That also gives us the ability to put in place all sorts of other restrictions and ensure that there is pressure in place.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Can the Foreign Secretary reassure the House that freedom and justice—rather than the pursuit of oil and gas, however important that might be—will remain at the heart of British foreign policy? I stand with her in standing up for those who are courageously and bravely standing up for freedom in Iran. Of course, freedom is not a western construct; it is a universal right. It does not emanate out of London or Washington; it emanates out of the hearts of men and women across this planet. I ask the Foreign Secretary to draw on the lessons of history going back to the 1950s and Operation Ajax—the Shah and his family have been referenced here today. It is important that, were we have seen regime change and changes of leadership in the middle east, whether in Libya, Iraq or Syria, we learn the lessons of mistakes we have made as a country, even though we stand by those in Iran today.

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member is right: there are many lessons to learn from history. He is also right to highlight the core values of human rights, freedom, justice and, frankly, basic humanity—people are being killed in the most brutal circumstances.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): It is telling that, in the past few weeks, we have heard absolutely nothing from Your Party, the Greens, the Socialist Campaign Group or the “stop some wars” coalition. Where have been the marches in solidarity with the Iranian people? You cannot claim to be a progressive and to care about social justice if you do not want to see the total and immediate fall of this despotic, theocratic regime. Will the Foreign Secretary listen to the advice of the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), who I think the whole House would agree is a fantastic advocate for the Iranian people, by talking with other partners and—I hope—with Iranian activists here in the UK, about what we can do, if the regime falls, to support the Iranian people immediately to build a better future, as we are trying to do in Syria?

Yvette Cooper: We want to see a better future for Iran and the Iranian people. We must be clear: it is the Iranian people who are expressing that urgent desire for a better future. The future of Iran must be in their hands. We will continue to work with international allies in support of action against the brutality we have seen. That is exactly why we are considering further sanctions measures.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): When the US President tells the Iranian protesters that

“help is on its way”,

as he has just done, does that include British help? Will the Government rule out the UK taking part in any planned US military intervention without multilateral authorisation?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Lady will know, I cannot set out the US foreign policy approach—that is for the Americans to do. What I can do is set out the action that we are taking, the further sanctions that we will implement, and the work that we are doing, with international allies, to sustain and increase economic and diplomatic pressure in the light of the regime’s brutality.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I place on the record my thanks to our diplomatic staff working around the world to support people during this difficult time. What conversations is the Foreign Secretary having with our G7 and European allies about what more we can do to use new technology to record, capture and document the horrific abuses of human rights that are happening, so that when the right moment arises, we can show our leadership by holding the current leadership of Iran to account for them?

Yvette Cooper: We are already talking to our allies about how communications could be restored. I will ensure that my hon. Friend’s question about technology is looked into.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I very much associate myself with many of the things that the Foreign Secretary has said, but may I ask her to move beyond people’s hope for regime change? A recent NATO Parliamentary Assembly visit to the Gulf highlighted how worried Gulf countries are about instability, and that it may not be one Government that runs Iran. What meetings and conversations are taking place for

the security of the whole region, including the states that will feel under threat in the event that the regime falls?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member is right to raise the broader instability across the region, which has been fuelled by the Iranian regime’s actions, including some of the extremist proxies that it has supported. He is also right to say that the instability in any country in the middle east has implications for the Gulf, causing much wider security ramifications and instability. We are alert to all those issues, and are discussing them with allies.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): After the false dawns of the Arab spring and the “zan, zendegi, azadi” movement, I ask my right hon. Friend to stand firmly with the Iranian diaspora here—many of whom came after the ’79 revolution—against this brutal, repressive and tyrannical regime, particularly those who are critical of it from here? The TV station Iran International—which is all the more needed at a time like this—had to move from its Chiswick headquarters because of kidnapping and threats to its journalists. It is at a fortress-like undisclosed location now that there is a communications blackout.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will be aware of the strong action that my hon. Friend the Security Minister has taken on transnational repression, including from Iran. People who live in the UK need to feel safe on our streets and safe to debate and communicate, and they should not feel that they are in any way under threat from an overseas regime.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): We sometimes talk about political courage in this country, but that pales in comparison with the courage shown by young people in Iran, such as 26-year-old Erfan Soltani, who reports suggests is to be hanged today, alongside other protesters. I know that these situations are complex and carry political risk, but given the risk that those young people are facing, will the Foreign Secretary commit to showing whatever political courage she can to help them in all sorts of different ways if opportunities arise in the coming days?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the incredibly disturbing reports of potential executions. We are urgently calling for the violence to end, including the reported executions and brutality. It is essential that this violence ends. The whole world is watching those horrific scenes.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Given the mass protests, blackouts, social media censorship and the estimated death toll of 2,000 civilian in Iran, will my right hon. Friend set out what co-ordinated diplomatic response she is pursuing with the US and middle east allies, and what contingency plans there are should a dangerous power vacuum develop?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important issue: the risk of instability and what happens more broadly. We want to see stability across the region, and safety not just for the Iranian people but for people across neighbouring states—the safety, basic freedoms and humanity that everyone should have a right to enjoy.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the fact that—rather belatedly, two weeks later—the Government have made a statement to the House about the situation in Iran, giving particular attention and praise to the women who have, at great personal sacrifice, led the opposition to the regime, which directs its ire at women in particular. This should stand as a warning to the people who wish to promote sharia law and sharia courts in this country. The Foreign Secretary has highlighted the impact of the Iranian regime on our citizens and our interests. What discussions has she had with the Iranian opposition, to ensure that there is a transition from this repugnant regime to a friendly, democratic and peaceful regime there?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I do not think that Members quite understood what I said earlier. Questions must be short.

Yvette Cooper: It is clear that some of the greatest bravery and courage has been shown by women in Iran, who face additional repression in their daily lives. I pay tribute to them for their bravery.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and condemnations. Some Exeter residents are desperately worried about family members in Iran, as will I. The Iranian regime is one of the chief exporters of violence and instability in the region. Of course, as the Foreign Secretary set out, we are not immune to that here. Money and effort are expended online in particular in order to undermine our democracy. What are the Government doing to combat the regime's malign activities in this country, including through the work of the new joint state threats unit?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise that. The hybrid threats that we have seen include Iranian state-backed activity such as proxies, interaction with criminal gangs and activity, and behaviour that can resemble terrorist threats. That hybrid nature is why we have been increasing co-ordination to deal with joint state threats and why the Security Minister has been driving forward action in this area.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): We can all see the brutality of the Iranian regime, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is not just who we are against but who we are for? If we look at the signatories to the Abraham accords—Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in particular—we see that they point to an alternative path for peace and stability in the region, so does she agree that we should be standing four-square behind them? While I am at it, does she agree with the excellent point from the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor)? Does she think that those hundreds of thousands of protesters who came out in support of the Palestinian cause might come out in support of Iranian dissidents? I will not be holding my breath.

Yvette Cooper: I hope we can see strong support for the people of Iran and for peace and stability across the region. It was significant that we saw so many countries come together around the peace process in Gaza, and we saw an international consensus build around that. It is still fragile, and there is much work still to do.

Nevertheless, there has been an international consensus around that. We are stronger when countries work together, including in standing firm against brutality and repression.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary will know that Hampstead and Highgate has a sizeable Iranian community, and they are very worried about their friends and family in Iran. One of the questions my constituents have asked is this: what is the FCDO's thinking in terms of an official registration service for dual nationals currently stuck in Iran? I know that the internet blackout makes this very challenging, but I would still like to know the Foreign Secretary's thinking, in case the situation escalates and those people want to come back to Britain.

Yvette Cooper: The point my hon. Friend makes is one of the reasons why I highlighted in my statement that the work of our embassy is so important because it is also about the safety of British nationals, and that includes the safety of dual nationals. This is something that we take immensely seriously. It is why we support the continuing work of our embassy, and I pay tribute to the work that our embassy staff are doing to consider all these issues.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): We join the Foreign Secretary in her support for the brave Iranian protesters standing up against this brutal regime. Will she confirm that if the United States does take targeted military action, she will join us in supporting it in that action?

Yvette Cooper: Obviously, it is for the US to set out its approach. I have set out the approach that we are taking here. I welcome the hon. Member's condemnation of the brutality that we are seeing not just in Tehran but across Iran. I would just say that her party's comments on this would have more credibility if its Members spoke with the same strength of feeling about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, especially given the close and disturbing links between Iran and Russia, which are one of the most troubling aspects of the Iranian regime. That is why we should stand firm on all these issues, and I am disappointed that she will not.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Reform Members should note that the Iranian regime, which they have decided to be against, very much supports their Russian friends with the Shahed drone.

I welcome the news that we are working with allies to discuss using Starlink to overcome some of the communication barriers. The British-Iranian community are trying to donate to people back in Iran, but they cannot do so because of sanctions. Can you assure me and the House that you are looking at the specific issue of how the British-Iranian community can donate back to Iran?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Thomas, you used the word "you" twice. I am not here to respond to your questions.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will understand the importance of having an effective sanctions regime. I am happy to talk to him further about the point he raises, but as he will understand, the most immediate

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issue is how to support the re-establishment of communications and end the brutality that is taking place.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): What assessment has the Foreign Office made of the Iranian regime employing foreign militias from countries such as Iraq and Lebanon to crush internal dissent? If that is happening, what is the international community doing to limit this activity?

Yvette Cooper: There is a wider issue of the impact of Iranian regime activity across the region, including supporting terrorist and extremist proxies and other organisations. We are particularly sensitive to that, and it is part of what makes this a broader issue about how we properly get peace and stability in the region. That will continue to be a central part of the discussions.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): When I was in Balerno on Saturday, a constituent politely reminded me that I had a moral obligation to be optimistic—not always easy when you are Scottish, I am afraid. But I do hope that what has happened in Iran will bring the international community together to take action and bring this horrible regime to an end. I hope the Secretary of State will commit to that. These murders are fuelled by oil exports, which were worth \$78 billion in 2024. To what extent can we reduce that in the coming years? We have heard about tankers being apprehended, but is there more we can do? Surely that is not just an event.

Yvette Cooper: As we have seen with the case of the *Bella*, which was interdicted by US forces with the support of the UK, there is often a nefarious link, including through the shadow fleet, with the Iranian regime, Russia and more widely. We are continuing to increase pressure on the shadow fleet and the broader threats posed.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The horrendous loss of life in Iran this week has to be mourned, as does the horrendous loss of life of Palestinians in Gaza over the past two years. The British intervened in Iran in 1952 and brought about regime change. Is the Foreign Secretary aware that external regime change attempts in Iran are very unlikely to work and will actually create a much worse situation? Will she give us an undertaking that Britain will not be involved militarily with either Israel or the USA if they try military activity in Iran now?

Yvette Cooper: Let me say again that the future of Iran must be for the Iranian people. We should also be clear that it is not currently—there is not currently any opportunity for the Iranian people to have their voices heard, because when they have sought to do so, we have seen this incredibly horrifying, brutal repression. That is why we are urging an immediate end to the violence and fundamental change in Iran.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I pay tribute to the people who have taken to the streets of Iran, particularly in the face of industrial-scale violence and repression

from this regime, as the Foreign Secretary stated. However, given the malign influence of Iran in the region, which she has acknowledged, and the risk it poses to British citizens, particularly those of Jewish extraction and from the Iranian diaspora, may I urge the Government to move at greater pace on the issue of proscription of the IRGC?

Yvette Cooper: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we take immensely seriously the state-backed threats here in the UK, including the Iranian-backed threats against Jewish communities in the UK and its own nationals in the UK as part of the transnational repression. That is why, as well as sanctioning the IRGC and putting it on the enhanced tier of FIRS, we have substantially increased the training for police forces across the country on state-backed threats. This is something that our counter-terrorism police, who do an excellent job, take immensely seriously.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Right now, peaceful protesters who are unarmed are being gunned down on the streets not just of Tehran, but of every city and town in Iran. They are being hunted down to hospitals if they are injured, or hunted down to where they live. The difference between 2022 and now is that this is a nationwide protest calling for regime change. What people desperately want to hear—I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement—is not more words, but action. We are told repeatedly that the Home Office and the Foreign Office cannot agree on proscription of the IRGC, but could the Foreign Secretary go away, speak to the Home Secretary and get that organised now as a demonstration that we will not tolerate this, and that we will stand four-square behind those brave people of Iran who just want liberty and freedom?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to talk about the difference being the way that this has spread right across Iran, including small towns in different parts of Iran as well as the capital city. On proscription, there is clear, strong agreement between the Home Office and the Foreign Office about the importance of ensuring that we have the right tools to deal with state-backed threats, just as we have for terrorism threats. That is what the Jonathan Hall review was all about. I gently remind the hon. Member that the previous Government did not address this issue, and did not change the legislation for many years. I know that is something he has highlighted over many years, and I hope there will be cross-party agreement on the importance of addressing it.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The people of Iran are courageously fighting for their freedom against an oppressive regime, and we all stand with them. The brutal response from Tehran highlights the need to take action against the IRGC. I know it has been addressed multiple times during this session, but when do the Government plan to bring forward the legislative framework proposed by Jonathan Hall that will give proscription-like powers to the Government to deal with the IRGC and its malign influence in the UK?

Yvette Cooper: We should be clear that this is not just about the IRGC; this is about the whole of the Iranian regime—we have looked at the brutality and at what has

been taking place. I have also set out the importance of us ensuring that we have a broad breadth of powers in the UK, and that we use the powers we have. That is why the IRGC is already sanctioned, and why counter-terrorism police and security services already pursue any threat and any malign activity here in the UK.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Annette from Wincanton contacted me at the weekend, deeply worried about her extended friends and family living in Iran. She told me that many there feel that they have nothing much to lose, as they come out on the streets to protest against the repressive Iranian regime. At this volatile moment, what measures is the Secretary of State taking to support ordinary Iranian citizens who are protesting against their Government, while holding the Iranian regime accountable for their repression and human rights abuses?

Yvette Cooper: As I set out in my statement, we have summoned the Iranian ambassador to account for the horrendous reports that we have seen emerging this morning. That follows the co-ordinated work that we have been doing with our international allies to make clear the strength of our condemnation of the brutality, and to pursue further sanctions and economic pressure on the Iranian regime.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary join me in firmly rejecting the instincts of some, including hon. Members in this House, who blame the current situation on the United States, the UK, Israel and the west, and does she further agree that blame for the current situation lies squarely with the oppressive regime in Tehran?

Yvette Cooper: Responsibility for what we have seen, and for potentially thousands of deaths and the killings that we have seen, lies squarely with the Iranian regime.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. Like her, I condemn absolutely the repressive, violent, vicious crackdown on protesters by the Iranian regime, and pay tribute to the bravery of so many Iranian citizens who, over so many years, have protested, advocated, campaigned and been on the streets calling for fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens. I welcome the new sanctions against the regime that she has announced today. She also talked about sending a message to other countries that seek to break those UN sanctions. Is she considering other concrete measures against such countries that engage in sanctions busting, such as sanctions against them?

Yvette Cooper: The action that we saw with the vessel that was interdicted by the US was an example of enforcement of sanctions that was supported by the UK, and as we saw, that vessel had links not just to Iran but to Russia. The hon. Member is right to say that we need to call on all countries around the world to respect the UN sanctions process and to realise that this is not a time to be supporting this Iranian regime.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her strong words. Like many hon. Members, I have been contacted by constituents who

are very concerned about not being able to contact friends and family who are still in Iran. I join my right hon. Friend in applauding and congratulating the female activists in Iran, who have been relentlessly targeted by this oppressive regime, on fighting very bravely for their freedom this week. When the time comes—I sincerely hope it comes very quickly—will she ensure that their voices and their actions can be part of building a new democracy in Iran?

Yvette Cooper: It is the 25th anniversary of the women, peace and security resolution at the United Nations. At the heart of that resolution is not just that we should stand up for women victims of conflict, repression and persecution, but that women's voices need to be heard as part of any positive peace and reconciliation process.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Not only is the despotic Iranian regime gunning down protesters in the street, but it continues to support terrorist proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, it provides drones to the Russian military in Ukraine and it remains a very real threat to this country. While I welcome the statement, will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that the police and the security services have all the tools that they need to keep Britain safe from Iran and its proxies?

Yvette Cooper: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the police and security services have our full backing in all the work that they do to keep us safe from state-backed threats, including Iranian-backed threats, on our soil. We always need to look at how we can keep up with rapidly changing hybrid threats, in order to ensure we can keep our country safe.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) about the regime's severance of communications adding to the distress of many of our constituents, who are trying to establish the safety and personal liberty of loved ones. I appreciate that there may be things that cannot be said in this place lest they inadvertently inform the regime, but will my right hon. Friend give the House the assurance that all practical measures are being explored to increase the quantity and the quality of information going into and out of Iran?

Yvette Cooper: We want the people of Iran to be able to communicate with each other. This is about the people of Iran, their courage and their most basic rights to be able to communicate with each other—that is what we want to support.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Dirprwy Lefarydd. We are appalled at reports of thousands of state killings in Iran, and we support the fundamental right of the people of Iran to self-determination. President Trump says that help is "on its way", and there are also reports that the Prime Minister is set to accept a place on President's Trump's board to run Gaza. Given that, can the Foreign Secretary guarantee that her Government's priorities in the region will be peace and stability alone?

Yvette Cooper: It is exactly because we want peace and stability in the region that we supported the 20-point plan to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza. As I have said, that is still fragile and there is a huge amount of work still to do, including a humanitarian surge in support and the decommissioning of weapons from Hamas, and it is important that the whole international community comes together to support that.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In March, it will be the fifth anniversary of the signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership between Iran and China, an unholy alliance between religious fanatics and communist totalitarians, to whom we are regrettably about to award a super-embassy, complete with secret dungeons, in London. Will the Foreign Secretary tell me what estimate the Government have made of the dependence of the Iranian regime's survival on its support from China, not least the huge export of Iranian oil to China?

Yvette Cooper: I urge China to support the UN sanctions process that was triggered by the snapback that the UK, France and Germany instigated in October. It is essential that China does so, because we have seen the pressure that is needed around the nuclear programme, which affects all our safety and is immensely important. It is not just China but countries around the world who should support that sanctions process.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I am appalled by the actions of the murderous Iranian regime, but I am deeply concerned that the financial secrecy of our overseas territories is enabling sanctions dodging. Will the Foreign Secretary assure me that she is doing everything

she can to secure greater transparency in the overseas territories, uphold effective international sanctions and end any complicity in the flow of blood money fuelling this regime?

Yvette Cooper: We have strongly pushed for greater transparency, including in the overseas territories. My hon. Friend the Minister covering the overseas territories continues to do that with all the overseas territories. The action that some of those territories have taken has been extremely important in implementing sanctions and has demonstrated what can be done and achieved. That is one reason why we are determined to see further progress around transparency more widely.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The people of Iran have suffered for far too long. They have made it clear that enough is enough, and we stand with them. For too long, this Government have remained largely silent on the oppression of Christians in the middle east generally. Many countries, including Iran, murder and maim any person who does not conform to their dictated religion. Will the Secretary of State assure this House that in her diplomatic efforts for peace in the region, she will prioritise religious freedom and the rights of Christians to exist and practise their religion without fear of persecution?

Yvette Cooper: It is exactly because we take so seriously the issues around freedom of belief that we have appointed a UK envoy to keep pursuing this matter, because it is so important. These are basic rights and a basic part of our humanity for Christians and for people of all faiths and religions across not just the middle east but the world.

Points of Order

3.41 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. Since Christmas, hundreds of my constituents have not received a single letter via the Royal Mail. That is causing huge anxiety for those waiting for medical results, important documentation, job offers and so on. The local post office team of postmen and postwomen have said that it is a result of management decisions at the most senior level. What advice can you give me to pass on to my constituents about the possibility of the Minister responsible for the Royal Mail and postal services coming to the House to make an urgent statement to ensure that this issue is thoroughly and fully investigated and that letters begin to land on doormats once again in Shropshire?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving notice that he intended to draw attention to this matter. As he knows, that is not a point of order. He is an experienced Member who serves on the Panel of Chairs, and he does not need any guidance from the Chair on how to take this matter further—no doubt he will pursue it. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his request for a statement or response from the appropriate Minister.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is it a short point of order?

Mr Holden: Always, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Cabinet Office guide to parliamentary work is clear:

“There should be no inconsistencies between the provision of information in answers to written questions and information given under the FOI Act”.

It also states that material disclosable under the Freedom of Information Act should also be disclosed to Parliament. On 2 December and 4 December in written parliamentary questions, I asked the Secretary of State for Transport what information the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency holds about third-party intermediary organisations acting on behalf of Oxford city council and Oxfordshire county council in accessing vehicle keeper data. In both cases, the Minister for Local Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), told

me that this information was not “appropriate to disclose” because of commercial sensitivities. However, shortly afterwards, the DVLA released under FOI the code of contract with Oxfordshire county council, confirming contractual arrangements involving intermediaries and third-party access, with only personal data redacted. I would be grateful for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on this apparent inconsistency. Might you raise it with the Leader of the House or the Departments concerned?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I take it that he has informed the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood) that he intended to raise the matter in the House.

Mr Holden *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Member is nodding accordingly. As he knows, the Chair is not responsible for the accuracy of ministerial answers—if only we were—but I am sure the Table Office will be able to advise him on how he might pursue the matter further. Once again, I have no doubt that those on the Treasury Bench will have made a note and will pass on that information directly to the Minister involved.

BILLS PRESENTED

MEDICAL TRAINING (PRIORITISATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Wes Streeting, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Yvette Cooper, Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Secretary Peter Kyle, Secretary Hilary Benn, Secretary Douglas Alexander, Secretary Jo Stevens, Anna Turley and Karin Smyth, presented a Bill to make provision about the prioritisation of graduates from medical schools in the United Kingdom and certain other persons for places on medical training programmes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 360) with explanatory notes (Bill 360-EN).

REMOVAL OF PEERAGES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Kirsty Blackman presented a Bill to make provision about the removal of peerages in certain circumstances; to provide that the removal of a peerage removes any right to sit in the House of Lords; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 March, and to be printed (Bill 361).

Emergency and Life-Saving Skills (Schools)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.45 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley)
(Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the teaching in schools of skills relating to emergency situations, including life-saving skills; and for connected purposes.

This Bill seeks to ensure that every child leaving school possesses the knowledge and skills to respond effectively in emergencies, including life-threatening situations. It is about equipping young people with capabilities that matter beyond the classroom—skills that can preserve life and, in certain circumstances, protect communities.

Every year, thousands of people in England find themselves at the centre of sudden, chaotic emergencies, such as a child at the roadside following a road traffic collision, a victim of knife crime bleeding out, or a medical emergency unfolding while onlookers wait for an ambulance, watching as precious minutes slip away. All they want to do is help, but too many do not know how. Not infrequently, the question asked afterwards is not what went wrong, but why no one present knew what to do. Most emergencies do not happen in hospitals; they happen in our homes, on our streets and on our roadsides. It is in those first critical moments, before professional help arrives, that outcomes are often determined—not by advanced medicine, but by whether those present can recognise what is happening, act decisively, and summon help effectively.

Evidence consistently shows that early recognition and rapid intervention save lives. Delay, confusion or failure to communicate accurately with the emergency services can be fatal, but despite this, our education system still leaves too much to chance. At present, whether a young person is taught how to recognise an emergency, to remain calm under pressure, to summon help accurately, or to apply basic lifesaving interventions depends largely on postcode, school discretion or family circumstance. Some pupils receive that knowledge, but many do not—there is simply no guarantee. That is not a criticism of our schools or our teachers, who already shoulder enormous responsibility; it is simply a recognition that we have not set a clear, national expectation that these skills matter. This Bill seeks to close that gap.

The Bill is built around three core aims. The first is to ensure that pupils can recognise emergency situations quickly and accurately. The difference between an accident and an emergency is not always obvious, particularly under pressure, so training pupils to assess severity, identify immediate danger and understand when urgent action is required is foundational.

Secondly, the Bill seeks to prioritise effective summoning of emergency assistance. Knowing how to contact the emergency services, what information to provide, how to remain calm, and how to follow instructions given by call handlers is not always instinctive; it must be taught. Clear communication saves time, and time saves lives.

Thirdly, the Bill seeks to ensure pupils receive practical, hands-on instruction in the most critical lifesaving interventions, with particular emphasis on the management of catastrophic bleeding. Uncontrolled haemorrhage is

one of the leading causes of preventable death in trauma. Pupils should learn how to identify severe bleeding, apply direct pressure, use tourniquets where appropriate, and act decisively to stabilise a casualty while prioritising their own safety. This should include formal “stop the bleed” training.

These lifesaving skills are not, of course, confined to domestic accidents. In mass-casualty scenarios, such as terrorist-style attacks, the rapid recognition of danger, safe decision making and early bleeding control can save multiple lives before the emergency services arrive. What is equally important is that pupils should be trained to assess risk to themselves, to avoid secondary harm and to act only when it is safe to do so. It is not about encouraging recklessness, but fostering informed, disciplined action. The importance of that cannot be overstated. In emergencies, well-intentioned but untrained bystanders can inadvertently worsen outcomes or place themselves in danger.

The training envisaged under this Bill should instil practical resilience: knowing when to act, how to act and when not to act. Evidence shows that repeated practice and realistic simulations significantly improve retention and the likelihood of effective intervention under pressure.

The Bill’s objectives are reinforced by the work of such organisations as citizenAID, which has led the way in educating young people on safe responses to major incidents. CitizenAID was founded by two of my former bosses: Professor Sir Keith Porter and Major General Tim Hodgetts. I had the pleasure of hosting them for a drop-in event in Parliament last year. Its programmes demonstrate that pupils can learn to recognise threats, manage catastrophic bleeding, communicate effectively and act without panic. Its work shows that structured training builds competence and confidence, particularly in high-stress scenarios.

This Bill is not about turning children into paramedics; it is not about overloading the curriculum; and it is not about replacing professional emergency services. It is about ensuring that every young person leaves school equipped with a core set of practical, age-appropriate skills: how to recognise an emergency, how to respond safely, how to communicate clearly with emergency services and, critically, how to provide basic lifesaving assistance until help arrives. Preparedness is not a niche concern, but a matter of resilience. One day, any one of us may depend not on a professional, but on a passer-by. That passer-by may be a young person standing there, willing and wanting to help, but uncertain what to do in the circumstances. That uncertainty is not inevitable.

Importantly, this Bill does not propose radical change. Many countries already include emergency response skills within their education systems. Here, we teach elements of first aid and health and safety in different ways, but we lack consistency and the assurance that every child will receive that education. Concerns about pressure on the school curriculum are understandable, but the Bill does not require wholesale reform, nor does it impose excessive burdens. Training can be delivered through a combination of classroom teaching, practical workshops and simulations, all supported by qualified instructors, the emergency services and voluntary organisations. The focus must be on gaining those essential, high-impact skills.

The intent behind the Bill reflects a broader societal responsibility. It is not about ideology; it simply recognises that preserving life is a fundamental public good. Pupils trained in these skills will carry them into their homes, their workplaces and their communities, thereby having a multiplier effect. In doing so, schools will contribute directly to national resilience and public safety. This Bill proposes clarity and coherence: a national expectation that lifesaving knowledge is a fundamental part of the curriculum, as much as literacy or numeracy, when it comes to preparing young people for the real world.

International experience reinforces that argument. Countries that embed emergency response training in schools see higher levels of bystander intervention, improved survival rates and greater public confidence. It also reflects a broader truth that resilience begins long before a crisis occurs and is built through education, confidence and preparation. By equipping young people with these skills, we not only improve outcomes in emergencies, but foster responsibility, calm decision making and a willingness to act for others.

This Bill is deliberately rooted in prevention rather than reaction, and in empowerment rather than fear. No legislation can prevent every tragedy, but we can ensure that when emergencies happen, as they inevitably will, the people closest are not left powerless. This Bill does not ask the House to make a dramatic leap in policy; it asks us to take a sensible, proportionate step to ensure that our education system reflects the realities of the world our young people will face. The hardest burden for any of us to carry is not that we tried and failed, but that a life was lost while we stood by, not through indifference, but through the absence of knowledge this House could have chosen to provide.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst, John Cooper, Lincoln Jopp, Charlie Dewhurst, Blake Stephenson, Bradley Thomas and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 May, and to be printed (Bill 362).

Finance (No. 2) Bill

[2ND ALLOCATED DAY]

(Clauses 63 to 68 and 83 to 86, schedule 13, and any new clauses or new schedules relating to the subject matter of those clauses and schedules)

Further considered in Committee (Progress reported, 12 January)

[CAROLINE NOKES in the Chair]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I remind Members that in Committee, they should not address the Chair as Deputy Speaker. I ask them please to use our names when addressing the Chair. Madam Chair, Chair, and Madam Chairman are also acceptable.

Clause 63

TAX TO BE CHARGED ON CERTAIN PENSION INTERESTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Clauses 64 to 68 stand part.

New clause 18—*Review of the effect of sections 63 to 68—*

“(1) HM Treasury must carry out a review of the effect of sections 63 to 68 of this Act (Pension interests).”

(2) The review under subsection (1) must include an assessment of—

- (a) the impact of those sections on individuals’ pension savings and beneficiaries, including on estate values and inheritance tax liabilities,
- (b) the administrative effects on personal representatives, pension scheme administrators, and HM Revenue and Customs, and
- (c) any behavioural effects on how pensions are used during life and on death.

(3) HM Treasury must lay before the House of Commons a report setting out the findings of the review under subsection (1) no later than six months after the date on which sections 63 to 68 come into force.”

This new clause would require HM Treasury to review and report on the effects of Clauses 63 to 68 of the Bill, which introduce inheritance tax charges on unused pension funds and death benefits, including their impacts on individuals, administrators, and behaviour, and to publish the findings to Parliament.

New clause 19—*Report on the impact of inheritance tax liability on personal representatives in relation to pension assets—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the passing of this Act, lay before the House of Commons a report on the impact of the changes to inheritance tax treatment of pension assets on personal representatives of deceased persons made under this Act.

(2) The report must consider—

- (a) the legal obligations of personal representatives to collect the assets of an estate, settle all liabilities (including inheritance tax), and distribute the estate to beneficiaries,
- (b) the extent to which personal representatives may be personally liable for inheritance tax due on assets, including pension funds, which do not form part of the estate and do not come into their possession,

- (c) any risk of increased litigation arising from the imposition of personal liability on personal representatives in respect of inheritance tax due on pension assets,
- (d) the impact of any such liability on the willingness of personal representatives, particularly those who are not beneficiaries of the estate, to distribute estate assets promptly,
- (e) any practical difficulties faced by personal representatives where pension assets, lifetime gifts, or other chargeable assets are discovered after initial inheritance tax calculations have been completed, including the requirement to recalculate inheritance tax liabilities and re-apportion the nil rate band,
- (f) any administrative and timing challenges associated with identifying multiple pension arrangements, particularly where a deceased person held several pension funds arising from different employments, and
- (g) whether the existing six-month timeframe for inheritance tax reporting and payment adequately reflects those practical difficulties.

(3) The report must assess whether the current framework operates fairly and proportionately for personal representatives and whether legislative or administrative changes are necessary to reduce uncertainty, delay, or unintended personal liability.”

This new clause requires the Government to report on the impact of inheritance tax rules on personal representatives, including personal liability for tax on pension assets outside the estate and the practical difficulties of identifying and valuing multiple pension arrangements within existing time limits.

New clause 20—Administration of inherited pension pots—

“(1) HM Revenue and Customs must review the tax administration arrangements relating to inherited pension pots.

(2) The purpose of the review under subsection (1) is to ensure that—

- (a) inheritance tax and related tax checks do not cause unreasonable delays in the payment of pension death benefits to beneficiaries, and
- (b) bereaved families are able to receive pension benefits within a reasonable period following a member's death.

(3) In carrying out the review, HM Revenue and Customs must have regard to—

- (a) the cumulative administrative burden placed on personal representatives, pension scheme administrators, and beneficiaries,
- (b) the interaction between inheritance tax reporting, clearance processes, and pension scheme payment rules, and
- (c) any evidence of prolonged delays in the payment of inherited pension benefits.

(4) HM Revenue and Customs must publish the outcome of the review, including any proposed changes to its processes or guidance, within 12 months of the passing of this Act.”

This new clause would require the Government to address delays in the payment of inherited pension pots by reviewing HMRC's tax administration processes, with the aim of preventing prolonged waiting periods for bereaved families.

New clause 22—Statement on inheritance tax on pension interests—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed, make a statement to the House of Commons on the effects of the charging of inheritance tax on pension interests made under sections 63 to 68 of this Act.

(2) The statement made under subsection (1) must include analysis of the impact on—

- (a) pension saving levels,
- (b) household saving decisions, and
- (d) personal representatives.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor to make a statement on the effects charging inheritance tax on pension interests on pension saving levels, household saving decisions and personal representatives.

New clause 23—Consultation on changes to inheritance tax on pensions interests—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, before 6 April 2027, undertake a consultation on the potential impacts of the changes made by sections 63 to 67.

(2) The consultation made under subsection (1) must consider the extent to which the changes to inheritance tax on pension interests deliver better outcomes for UK savers and pensioners.

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report summarising the responses to the consultation.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor to consult on the potential impacts of the changes made by sections 63 to 67. The consultation must consider the extent to which the changes to inheritance tax on pension interests deliver better outcomes for UK savers and pensioners. A report summarising the responses to the consultation must be laid before the House of Commons.

New clause 24—HMRC guidance on inheritance tax on pension interests—

“(1) HM Revenue and Customs must, within six months of this Act being passed, publish comprehensive guidance on the implementation of sections 63 to 68.

(2) HMRC must establish a dedicated helpline for enquiries relating to inheritance tax on pension interests.

(3) The guidance published under subsection (1) must be reviewed annually and published in accessible formats.”

This new clause would require HMRC to publish comprehensive guidance on the implementation of sections 63 to 68 and establish a dedicated helpline for enquiries relating to inheritance tax on pension interests. The guidance must be reviewed annually and published in accessible formats.

3.57 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

It is a pleasure to open this second day of our Committee stage debate. Yesterday the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson), explained how the Bill gives effect to a Budget that took fair and responsible decisions to stabilise and strengthen the public finances, address the cost of living and renew our public services. We are clear about the fact that we will not repeat the mistakes of the last Government. That means no return to austerity and no completely irresponsible unfunded spending commitments, both of which, unfortunately, were features of the Conservatives' time in power. This Government wholeheartedly reject those failed approaches and choose a different path, one of fiscal responsibility and one that will strengthen our economy so that it delivers for people throughout the country. Today the Committee will consider a further set of important and targeted measures relating to pensions, gambling duties and alcohol duty, which reflect this Government's commitment to a tax system that is fair, modern, and aligned with the realities of today's economy.

Our approach to changes in gambling taxation is fair and proportionate, as the Committee will hear later this afternoon, and, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor explained in her Budget statement, those reforms will contribute significantly to the Government's efforts to lift an additional 450,000 children out of poverty. The pensions clauses will ensure that generous tax reliefs continue to support the core purpose of pensions, which

is to help people to save for retirement. They address long-standing inconsistencies, and will ensure that pensions are not used primarily as a vehicle for passing on wealth free of inheritance tax, but instead continue to protect the vast majority of estates and maintain strong incentives to save.

I turn to clauses 63 to 68. Pensions enjoy significant tax benefits, with gross income tax and national insurance contributions relief costing £78.2 billion in 2023-24. It is therefore crucial to ensure that these reliefs are used for their intended purpose, which is to encourage saving for retirement and later life. Changes to pensions tax policy by the previous Government over the last decade led to pensions being used, and increasingly marketed, as tax planning vehicles to transfer wealth, rather than holding true to pensions' primary purpose, which is of course to provide a way to fund retirement.

As hon. Members will know, there are also long-standing inconsistencies in the inheritance tax treatment of different types of pensions. Most UK-registered pension schemes are discretionary, meaning members can nominate whom they would like to receive death benefits, but the scheme trustees are not obliged to follow members' wishes. Under existing rules, any unused pension funds and death benefits from discretionary schemes are not subject to inheritance tax. By contrast, some pension schemes are non-discretionary, and these are subject to inheritance tax under existing rules.

The changes made by clause 63 mean that most unused pension funds and death benefits payable from a pension will form part of a person's estate for inheritance tax purposes from 6 April 2027. Clause 64 ensures that personal representatives are responsible for paying any inheritance tax due. Clause 65 means that personal representatives will be able to request that the pension scheme administrator withhold paying a proportion of benefits where certain conditions are met. It also allows both personal representatives and pension beneficiaries to make pension scheme administrators pay inheritance tax due on pensions directly to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs—again, provided certain conditions are met.

Clause 66 makes some consequential amendments to the Inheritance Tax Act 1984 to ensure that the existing exemption for spouses and civil partners and the treatment of payments to charities continue to apply. Clause 67 changes the income tax rules for pensions to provide for the payment of inheritance tax, including in respect of direct payment by pension schemes. Clause 68 ensures that the changes take effect from 6 April 2027.

These clauses ensure that pensions are used, as I have said, for their core intended purpose, rather than as a vehicle for passing on wealth free of inheritance tax. They also remove long-standing inconsistencies and deliver on the Government's promise to this country to build a stronger and fairer economy.

The Second Deputy Chairman: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): On behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, I wish to speak to new clauses 22 to 24, tabled in my name and those of my hon. Friends. As the Minister set out, clauses 63 to 68 introduce measures to apply inheritance tax to unspent pension assets and other death benefits for deaths occurring after 6 April 2027.

This Labour Government have taken taxes to record levels, with £26 billion in additional taxes in this Budget and £66 billion since the election. These tax increases were not mentioned in Labour's manifesto. Labour is increasing taxes on family businesses, farms, jobs, dividends, savings, motorists and now death. Removing the inheritance tax exemption for pensions could undermine efforts to encourage people to save at a time when people are not saving enough. And what do the Government do? They limit the salary sacrifice pension contributions scheme and introduce a new raid on people's pensions pots.

The Minister did not refer to the impact assessment, but it is worth pointing out that it estimates that 10,500 estates will now become liable for inheritance tax, raising £1.5 billion by 2029, and 38,500 estates will pay more inheritance tax than was previously the case. That is why we oppose this extension of inheritance tax and the underlying principle, to which the Minister seemed to allude, that people's money belongs not to them but to the state.

New clause 22 is straightforward. It would require the Chancellor to set out the impact of these measures on pension saving, household saving decisions and personal representatives. There is real concern—I am surprised the Minister did not address this—about the administrative burden being placed on personal representatives and the effect on the industry. Personal representatives will be required to identify every pension asset, calculate the inheritance tax due and ensure payment within six months, and they will be personally liable if they fail to settle all the liabilities due. In many cases, that deadline would be impossible to meet and must be extended. Furthermore, if a pension fund has to quickly sell illiquid assets, such as commercial property, it may not get the full market value, but the Bill does not introduce a relief where the underlying assets must be sold and the proceeds are less than the value of the assets at the time of death. Late payments will attract interest at 8%. By contrast, someone in self-assessment has 10 months to pay tax on the income they already understand.

Both the Association of Taxation Technicians and the Chartered Institute of Taxation have offered some practical solutions, the first of which is to extend the withholding periods. Personal representatives can ask pension administrators to withhold 50% of funds for up to 15 months, but that is simply not long enough for the complex cases I have referred to, particularly where business property valuations have to be agreed with HMRC. Will the Minister consider allowing HMRC to extend withholding in such complex cases?

Secondly, the Government should allow instalment payments for illiquid pension assets. Billions of pounds of pensions wealth are in illiquid assets. The Government allow inheritance tax to be paid over 10 years for illiquid estate assets. Why deny the same practical relief for pensions?

When this policy was announced, the Office for Budget Responsibility gave it a "very high" uncertainty rating and estimated that behavioural effects will cut the static yield by about 43%; the Government's own forecasters accept that the changes may well significantly alter saving behaviour. The new clause would simply require the Chancellor to assess that impact and come to the House to make it clear.

New clause 23 would require the Chancellor to consult on the impact of clauses 63 to 67, and whether they deliver better outcomes for savers and pensioners. The

[James Wild]

truth is that the Government rushed the consultation out after the 2024 Budget and followed it with a very narrow technical consultation, which did not consider the principled question of whether this approach to pensions being brought within the inheritance tax framework was appropriate. As the Investing and Saving Alliance told the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee in its inquiry to which the Exchequer Secretary also gave evidence:

“If we were consulted and listened to, we probably would not be having this discussion today, because I do not think pensions would be going into IHT.”

Both the chartered institute and the ATT have criticised the Government for consulting on pensions in isolation, rather than in the context of individuals’ wider inheritance tax position. Our new clause is explicit. Consultation must take place to assess whether these changes

“deliver better outcomes for savers and pensioners”

—wording that reflects the commitment the Labour party made in its manifesto.

New clause 24 is essential. It would require HMRC to publish comprehensive guidance on the new rules for pensions and to set up a dedicated helpline. Why does that matter? Because this measure will be incredibly complex in practice. The chartered institute has said that professional executors are already questioning whether they can continue to operate in the market at all. Some firms, we are told, are already leaving the market. If professionals step back, the burden falls on lay personal representatives: often grieving family members or friends, with more errors, delay and potentially a wider tax gap ensuing.

Professional indemnity insurers also need clarity, yet when is HMRC due to deliver detailed guidance? Not until spring 2027, just weeks before the changes take effect. That is completely outrageous and far too late. That is why the new clause requires guidance to be published within six months of the Bill being passed.

I want to touch on a broader concern that has been raised with me on the potential serious unintended consequences for unmarried couples. Today, couples can anticipate making financial provision for each other via pensions, but if this measure comes into force they will have to look at other options. If one member of an unmarried couple in their 50s or 60s dies with a pension at peak value, the survivor could lose up to 40% of that fund. Are Ministers talking to pension scheme administrators to mitigate the risks for such couples and to provide clear guidance?

These clauses increase taxes, add complexity, penalise saving and add stress for grieving families. Despite clause 67, we are also advised that there is still a risk of double taxation of inheritance tax and income tax, which could see beneficiaries paying an effective tax rate of 67%. Our amendments seek to mitigate their worst impacts. The Chancellor should assess the real impact on saving behaviour and personal representatives. She should consult properly on these provisions and she must provide clear guidance, backed by dedicated support. We should be incentivising saving and encouraging people to do the right thing. Extending inheritance tax does the opposite, and we will oppose the Government’s measures.

The Second Deputy Chairman: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): This is a retrospective tax without transitional protection. It upends plans for those who have already made sacrifices to build up their pensions, undermines confidence in pensions planning, reduces long-term investment and causes people to rush to withdraw money from their pensions.

As has been mentioned, the chartered institute and the ATT have raised concerns about this group of clauses, which shoehorn pensions legislation into tax legislation. There are major worries about creating personal liability without control for personal representatives, whether executives or administrators. Personal representatives are legally obligated to gather all the assets, settle any liabilities, including inheritance tax, and distribute the remainder of the estate to the beneficiaries. They are personally liable if they do not set aside enough money to settle all financial liabilities, including IHT. Experts have warned that someone being personally liable for IHT on a pension fund that never comes into their hands leaves the door open to costly and protracted litigation and will understandably make personal representatives, such as professionals or friends of the deceased, much more cautious before they distribute all of the estate.

Even more concerning is the fact that if representatives discover a new pension fund after settling the initial IHT liability, this would have a knock-on effect on not only the estate but all other pension funds. It means that IHT will have to be recalculated for every part of the estate and every pension fund. It is far from uncommon for people to have had different jobs with separate pension plans, so the risk of miscalculation is obvious. If someone passes away before they have had the chance to consolidate their pension funds, tracking down the unused pots within six months of their death will be very difficult for executors and will mean that the initial IHT calculations could be wrong. The Government must recognise that and amend this measure. If they do not, and Ministers simply ask future executors to sign some sort of disclaimer form, they will soon find that nobody will want to take on that role.

Our new clauses 18 to 20 raise the clear need for significant reforms and are a means of pressing the Government to protect individuals from being liable for private pensions that they did not know about and could not reasonably know about either. Finally, there is widespread worry that family members might have to wait up to 15 months before they are able to access their inheritance, during what is bound to be a hugely straining period of loss and grief. The Liberal Democrats’ new clause 20 urges the Government to recognise that reality and take steps to address it.

Lucy Rigby: I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate on this group of clauses. Before I respond to the specific points that have been raised, I will reflect briefly on the core purpose of the Bill.

The Bill contains fair and necessary reforms to the tax system, which unfortunately have been ducked for far too long. They will help to strengthen our economy for the long term, ensuring that we can cut the cost of living and inflation, and restore our public services and the public finances to health. The Tories and Reform—who are increasingly indistinguishable, it might be said—have

already set out their choice: a return to the chaos and instability of the past. That approach failed before, and we are not going back.

The clauses in this group restore pensions to their core and intended purpose, which is funding retirement. We are not allowing them to function as a tax-free vehicle for the transfer of wealth. Generous tax relief for retirement saving is preserved. The clauses ensure that pension wealth is treated fairly and consistently for inheritance tax purposes. They protect ordinary families, with more than 90% of estates still paying no inheritance tax at all each year after the changes.

Let me turn to the non-Government amendments in this group. New clause 18 would require the Treasury to review the effects of the changes to pension tax policy, including their impacts on individuals, administrators and behaviour. A report would need to be laid in Parliament no later than six months from when the Act comes into force. This new clause is not necessary. The Government have published a tax information and impact note on the changes in the normal way. It sets out the impact on individuals, and accounts for the impact on personal representatives.

As hon. Members know, the Government keep all tax policies under review through the monitoring of returns and communication with representative bodies and taxpayer groups. A review within six months of the policy taking effect on 6 April 2027 is not practical, not least because the data relating to inheritance tax in 2027-28 will not be fully available until the summer of 2030. That is the normal timescale, and it operates because tax liabilities data is available only with a long lag, partly because the filing of the relevant inheritance tax accounts is due 12 months after a death. For those reasons, new clause 18 should be rejected.

4.15 pm

New clause 19 would require the Government to report on the impact of the reforms on personal representatives. That would include the personal liability for tax on pension assets outside the estate, and any practical difficulties of identifying and valuing multiple pension arrangements within existing time limits. The changes that the Bill brings about are consistent with the process that already exists for administering estates and paying any tax due. Personal representatives are already responsible for administering the rest of the estate, including non-discretionary pension schemes, which are already within the scope of inheritance tax.

The Government have acknowledged that there are some challenges for personal representatives. The changes announced at the Budget mitigate the risks to personal representatives by providing them with the ability to direct pension scheme administrators to withhold taxable benefits for up to 15 months from the date of death and to make payments of inheritance tax directly to HMRC. That, of course, will not apply to pension benefits exempt from inheritance tax, including those being left to a spouse or civil partner, pension funds under £1,000 and continuing annuities. The Government will also publish regulations this year to provide the right framework to allow personal representatives and pension schemes to exchange all necessary information for inheritance tax purposes. The changes announced at the Budget also protect personal representatives from the risk that pension pots emerge later. For those reasons, new clause 19 is not necessary and should be rejected.

New clause 20 would require the Government to review the tax administration arrangements relating to inherited pension pots with a focus on any delays in the payment in inherited pension pots caused by tax administration processes. HMRC would be required to publish the outcome of the review within 12 months of this Act being passed.

The Government do not want payments to pension beneficiaries to be delayed unnecessarily. In the vast majority of cases, payments will be made as soon as pension schemes have completed their discretionary processes. Pension benefits that are exempt from inheritance tax, such as payments to spouses and civil partners or death in service payments, can still be paid as soon as the pension scheme is ready to pay.

We do, of course, need to strike a fair balance between the beneficiaries of the pension and of the wider estate. That is exactly why we announced that personal representatives will be able to direct pension schemes to withhold 50% of the taxable benefits for up to 15 months if they reasonably expect inheritance tax to be due. Pension beneficiaries will therefore still be able to access 50% of their taxable pension benefits as soon as their pension scheme is ready to pay, and the remainder once the inheritance tax on the pension has been paid or the notice to withhold has been withdrawn.

As I have set out, to ensure that the process of calculating, reporting and paying inheritance tax does not take any longer than necessary, the Government will introduce regulations setting out deadlines for the parties involved to exchange information. New clause 20 should therefore be rejected.

New clause 22 would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to make a statement on the effects of the policy on pension saving levels, household saving decisions and personal representatives within six months of the Act being passed. It is important to emphasise that the intended purpose of pension savings—indeed, it is one that the Government wholly support—is to fund retirement. That is why, to address the point made by the shadow Exchequer Secretary, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), we continue to incentivise pension savings with tax relief on both contributions to pensions and the growth of funds held within a pension scheme. Those reliefs totalled £78.2 billion in 2023-24.

Estates will continue to benefit from the normal nil-rate bands, reliefs and exemptions available. For example, the nil-rate bands mean an estate can pass on up to £1 million with no inheritance tax liability and the general rules mean that any transfers, including the payments of death benefits to a spouse or civil partner, are fully exempt from inheritance tax. As I said, 90% of UK estates will continue to have no inheritance tax liability whatsoever following the changes, and the reforms will only affect a minority with inheritable pension wealth. New clause 22 should therefore be rejected.

New clause 23 would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to undertake a consultation before 6 April 2027 on the potential impacts of the changes. The consultation would consider the extent to which the changes to inheritance tax and pension interest deliver better outcomes to UK savers and pensioners. The Government launched a technical consultation on the day of the autumn Budget 2024, following the announcement of the policy, to draw on the expertise of the tax, legal and pension industries. That technical consultation was

focused on the processes required to implement the changes and the Government have made changes as a result of that consultation.

As well as the technical consultation on the changes, there has been extensive and regular engagement with stakeholders, both from the pensions industry, and legal and tax representatives. I note the praise for HMRC officials from witnesses at the Economic Affairs Finance Bill Sub-Committee in the other place in respect of how they have engaged on these issues over the course of the last year. The policy problem with the inheritance tax treatment of pensions is well understood and we need to ensure that pensions continue to be used, as I said, for their core purpose, which is funding retirement, and that tax reliefs are directed to that effect. As I have set out, pensions will continue to enjoy significant tax benefits. For those reasons, new clause 23 should be rejected.

Lastly, new clause 24 would require HMRC to publish comprehensive guidance on the implementation of the policy within six months of the Bill being passed. It would also require HMRC to establish a dedicated helpline for inquiries relating to inheritance tax on pension interest. As I have set out, comprehensive guidance will be published in advance of April 2027 and HMRC will provide interactive tools to support personal representatives. Publishing guidance when policies go live is established practice, and it ensures that guidance is fully up to date when made available. HMRC will continue to work with industry on shaping that guidance and ensuring that the reforms are fully understood. People will be able to call the inheritance tax helpline for inquiries related to the reforms and, as we would expect, staff will be fully trained on each of the changes such that they can support customers. It is on that basis that new clause 24 should also be rejected.

The clauses we have considered preserve generous tax relief for retirement saving. I therefore urge the Committee to reject new clauses 18 to 20 and 22 to 24, and to support clauses 63 to 68.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 348, Noes 167.

Division No. 403]

[4.22 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Baines, David
Abbott, Jack	Baker, Alex
Abrahams, Debbie	Baker, Richard
Adam, Shockat	Ballinger, Alex
Akehurst, Luke	Bance, Antonia
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Barron, Lee
Aldridge, Dan	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Baxter, Johanna
Ali, Rushanara	Beales, Danny
Ali, Tahir	Beavers, Lorraine
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Begum, Apsana
Anderson, Callum	Bell, Torsten
Anderson, Fleur	Berry, Siân
Arthur, Dr Scott	Betts, Mr Clive
Asato, Jess	Billington, Ms Polly
Asser, James	Bishop, Matt
Athwal, Jas	Blackman, Kirsty
Atkinson, Catherine	Blake, Olivia
Atkinson, Lewis	Blake, Rachel
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Bloore, Chris
	Blundell, Mrs Elsie

Bonavia, Kevin	Foxcroft, Vicky
Botterill, Jade	Foy, Mary Kelly
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Francis, Daniel
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Frith, Mr James
Brickell, Phil	Furniss, Gill
Buckley, Julia	Gardner, Dr Allison
Burgon, Richard	Gelder, Anna
Burton-Sampson, David	Gemmell, Alan
Butler, Dawn	German, Gill
Byrne, Ian	Gethins, Stephen
Byrne, rh Liam	Gilbert, Tracy
Cadbury, Ruth	Gill, Preet Kaur
Caliskan, Nesil	Gittins, Becky (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Glindon, Mary
Campbell, Irene	Goldsborough, Ben
Carden, Dan	Gosling, Jodie
Carling, Sam	Greenwood, Lilian
Champion, Sarah	Griffith, Dame Nia
Charalambous, Bambos	Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Charters, Mr Luke	Hack, Amanda
Chowns, Dr Ellie	Hall, Sarah
Clark, Feryal	Hamilton, Paulette
Collier, Jacob	Hanna, Claire
Collinge, Lizzi	Hatton, Lloyd
Collins, Tom	Hayes, Helen
Conlon, Liam	Hayes, Tom
Cooper, Andrew	Hazelgrove, Claire
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Healey, rh John
Costigan, Deirdre	Hillier, Dame Meg
Cox, Pam	Hinchliff, Chris
Coyle, Neil	Hinder, Jonathan
Craft, Jen	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Creasy, Ms Stella	Hopkins, Rachel
Curtis, Chris	Hughes, Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Hume, Alison
Dalton, Ashley	Huq, Dr Rupa
Darlington, Emily	Hurley, Patrick
Davies, Ann	Hussain, Imran
Davies, Jonathan	Ingham, Leigh
Davies, Paul	Irons, Natasha
Davies, Shaun	Jameson, Sally
Davies-Jones, Alex	Jermy, Terry
De Cordova, Marsha	Jogee, Adam
Dean, Josh	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Dearden, Kate	Johnson, Kim
Denyer, Carla	Jones, Gerald
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jones, Lillian
Dickson, Jim	Jones, Ruth
Dixon, Anna	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Dixon, Samantha	Joseph, Sojan
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Juss, Warinder
Dollimore, Helena	Kane, Chris
Doogan, Dave	Kane, Mike
Doughty, Stephen	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Dowd, Peter	Kendall, rh Liz
Downie, Graeme	Khan, Afzal
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Khan, Naushabah
Edwards, Lauren	Kinnock, Stephen
Edwards, Sarah	Kirkham, Jayne
Egan, Damien	Kitchen, Gen
Ellis, Maya	Kumar, Sonia
Entwistle, Kirith	Kumaran, Uma
Eshalomi, Florence	Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Esterson, Bill	Lake, Ben
Evans, Chris	Lamb, Peter
Falconer, Mr Hamish	Lavery, Ian
Farnsworth, Linsey	Law, Chris
Fenton-Glynn, Josh	Law, Noah
Ferguson, Patricia	
Flynn, rh Stephen	
Footy, Emma	
Fookes, Catherine	

Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Logan, Seamus
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David

Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 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
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo

White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wishart, Pete
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mark Ferguson and
 Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Eastwood, Sorcha
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 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
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)

Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Susan
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
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca

Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stuart, rh Graham
Sunak, rh Rishi
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
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 Noes:
Lincoln Jopp and
Alicia Kearns

Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Eastwood, Sorcha
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Flynn, rh Stephen
Forster, Mr Will
Fox, Sir Ashley
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harriss, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lake, Ben

Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Stafford, Gregory

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 63 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 64 to 68 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 24

HMRC GUIDANCE ON INHERITANCE TAX ON PENSION INTERESTS

“(1) HM Revenue and Customs must, within six months of this Act being passed, publish comprehensive guidance on the implementation of sections 63 to 68.

(2) HMRC must establish a dedicated helpline for enquiries relating to inheritance tax on pension interests.

(3) The guidance published under subsection (1) must be reviewed annually and published in accessible formats.”—(*James Wild.*)

This new clause would require HMRC to publish comprehensive guidance on the implementation of sections 63 to 68 and establish a dedicated helpline for enquiries relating to inheritance tax on pension interests. The guidance must be reviewed annually and published in accessible formats.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 184, Noes 331.

Division No. 404]

[4.38 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett

Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory

Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 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
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Lincoln Jopp and
 Alicia Kearns**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
 vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
 Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan

Campbell, Irene
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 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
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill

Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast
 by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote
 cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote
 cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 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
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda

Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 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
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani

Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 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, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David

Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 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
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Ferguson and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 83

RATE OF REMOTE GAMING DUTY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Clauses 84 and 85 stand part.

Schedule 13.

New clause 21—*Review of the impact of sections 83 and 84: free bets and freeplays—*

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, undertake an assessment of the impact of implementation of sections 83 and 84 of this Act in respect of the treatment of free bets and freeplays for calculating general betting duty on remote bets.”

New clause 25—*Statements on increasing remote gambling duty and introducing a new rate of General Betting Duty—*

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed, make a statement to the House of Commons on the effects of the increase in gambling duties made under sections 83 to 84 of this Act.

(2) The statement made under subsection (1) must include details of the impact on—

- (a) sports and horseracing,
- (b) the number of high street betting shops,
- (c) the gambling black market,
- (d) the employment rate, and
- (e) the public finances.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor to make a statement about the effects of the increase in gambling duties.

Lucy Rigby: Clauses 83 to 85 and schedule 13 make changes to the gambling duties regime, to better reflect the modern gambling market and to raise more than £1 billion a year to support the lifting of the two-child benefit cap. I will first speak briefly to the broader context of the package, and I will then turn to each clause.

Gambling is a significant part of the UK economy, generating an annual gross gambling yield of around £16.8 billion in 2025, according to figures from the Gambling Commission. The industry has changed markedly in recent years, while the duty system has not changed since 2019. Most notably, there has been a structural shift from in-person to online gambling. Between 2015 and 2025, remote gambling grew by 80%, while land-based gambling has declined by 10%. At the same time, evidence of gambling-related harms has become even clearer.

The estimated cost to the Government and society of gambling-related harms in England alone is between £1.05 billion and £1.77 billion a year. NHS figures show that over 40% of gamblers using online slots, bingo or casino games are considered to be at risk, compared with less than 15% of those betting in person on horseracing. Referrals for gambling addiction have risen sharply—NHS England has doubled the number of clinics for problem gambling. I am grateful for representations from so many MPs and campaigners on this matter, alongside those with constituencies where horseracing plays an important role in the community and, indeed, the local economy.

In the Budget, the Chancellor made it clear that changes to gambling taxation are fair, proportionate and for a purpose, as they will directly contribute to lifting an additional 450,000 children out of poverty. This Government are very proud of that. Unfortunately, the Opposition showed little regard for child poverty when they were in government, and it is entirely in character, albeit no less shocking, that they oppose this Government's changes and would increase child poverty as a result. Reform UK is even more brazen.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way during an excellent speech introducing what I think is an extremely positive change. Like many Members, I have campaigned for some years to ensure that the most harmful and addictive forms of gambling attract tax that is commensurate with those harms, so I welcome this measure, as I am sure do others who have campaigned on this issue. As a member of the Treasury Committee, which recommended this change in a report just before the Budget, I am very glad to see it. Will the Minister confirm that some of the revenue raised will be used to help the Government reach their objective of lifting half a million children out of poverty, and say how that relationship works? The Treasury clearly does not want to see a hypothecation of that

sum, so how does the connection between the money raised by the tax and the lifting of children out of poverty work?

Lucy Rigby: The tax changes in the Bill disincentivise the most harmful forms of gambling. We have also introduced a statutory levy to pay for the prevention of some of those harms arising in the first place, and of treatment, and my hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has said that the tax change will disincentivise the most harmful form of gambling, but can she cite any evidence that will demonstrate that? I have no problem with taxing a profitable industry to pay for the wonderful policies that we announced for the sector, but the report from the Office for Budget Responsibility states that there will be a drive towards the black market as a result of these taxation changes. That is much more damaging, will raise much less revenue and, ultimately, will be much more damaging to our economy.

Lucy Rigby: My hon. Friend makes a good point. NHS figures show that over 40% of gamblers who use online slots, bingo and casino games are considered at risk, compared with less than 15% of those who bet in person on horseracing, so that is an important contrast, and the NHS figures bear that out.

Reform UK's position on the two-child cap is even more brazen. The party went into the election promising to scrap the two-child limit but has now abandoned that position, and its Members will be traipsing through the Division Lobby with their ideological bedfellows, the Conservatives. Indeed, on any given day it is hard to keep track of who is supposed to be sitting on the Conservative Benches, and who has moved to the Reform Bench.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) raised the important point that the OBR says that these measures will drive money towards the black market, potentially not benefiting the taxpayer and the Treasury as much as the Minister says. Will she explain what she will do to avoid the black market benefiting from these tax changes?

Lucy Rigby: The right hon. Member raises a good point, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), about the illegal market. We are reassured by the fact that the illegal betting market in the UK is relatively small, representing between 2% and 9% of legal online market stakes. The Gambling Commission is already tackling this risk and seeking to protect consumers. The additional £26 million that we will provide to the Gambling Commission over the next three years will go to better and further enforcement against the illegal market in this space. I hope that reassures him.

At the autumn Budget 2024, the Government announced a consultation on modernising the tax treatment of remote gambling, including a proposal for a single duty covering all remote betting and gaming. The consultation ran from April to July 2025. Respondents strongly opposed a single duty, arguing that remote betting and gaming significantly differ in operating costs and harms. The Government have listened to those concerns and

are not proceeding with a single remote betting and gaming duty. Instead, the Bill implements a targeted package of rate changes that will raise over £1 billion a year. It focuses on remote gambling, which has grown significantly, it protects UK horseracing and it supports lower risk community-based activities by abolishing bingo duty.

I will now turn to the individual clauses in the Bill. The changes made by clause 83 will increase the rate of remote gaming duty, which applies to online games such as slots and roulette, from 21% to 40% on 1 April 2026. Remote gaming has relatively low operating costs and has grown rapidly in recent years, with gross gambling yield rising significantly above inflation, from £2.5 billion in 2015-16 to £5.2 billion in 2024-25, based on Gambling Commission figures. It is associated with higher rates of gambling-related harm, relative to other products. As we have discussed, NHS data shows that online slots and casino games have much higher proportions of problem gamblers than betting on sports, for example. By increasing the rate on remote gaming more significantly, this measure intends to reduce the incentive for operators to push customers towards higher harm products.

Clause 84 will increase the rate for remote betting. General betting duty is currently charged at 15% for both remote and in-person betting, but the betting market has changed significantly in how it operates. Clause 84 will create a new, higher rate of general betting duty that will apply to bets placed remotely, such as online sports bets, from 1 April 2027. The new remote rate will be set at 25%, while the existing 15% rate will continue to apply to bets placed in person in licensed betting premises. The new 25% rate will not apply to remote bets on UK horseracing. Those bets will remain taxed at 15%, in recognition of the fact that operators already pay the 10% statutory horserace betting levy on horseracing bets, creating a de facto 25% burden when the 15% levy is taken into account. The new remote rate will also not apply to bets placed via self-service betting terminals in UK-licensed betting premises, pool bets and spread bets.

Finally, clause 85 will abolish bingo duty, which is currently charged on the gross gambling yield from bingo, including in dedicated bingo halls. Bingo is a much lower-risk and community-based form of gambling, often providing an important social outlet, and it supports local venues, including around 250 bingo halls right across this country. Clause 85 and the associated schedule 13 will abolish bingo duty with effect from 1 April 2026. The Bill also makes consequential changes to ensure that bingo played in UK licensed bingo halls does not become liable to other taxes or duties as a result of that abolition. This Government know the importance of bingo halls in our communities, and we are proud to back them with this tax change.

5 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on the changes that the Government have made, on tackling online harms and on excluding bingo halls, as she says. Bingo halls are often a community, and they involve a lot of people. Does she agree that this issue is about not just online, but offline? Will she consider ensuring that we make our high streets safer when it comes to gambling? Will she look at erasing the aim to permit from the Gambling Act 2005 as a next step?

Lucy Rigby: I confess to my hon. Friend that I will need to write to her on that specific issue, because I do not have notes in front of me to that end. We are on the same page in terms of the principles she raises and the values that she seeks to put forward, and I welcome her welcoming of this Bill.

Taken together, clauses 83 to 85 modernise the gambling duties regime. As I said, they raise more than £1 billion a year to support public services and lift children out of poverty. They also focus tax increases on higher-harm, fast-growing online products while protecting UK horseracing and land-based betting and supporting bingo halls.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): For clarity, bet365 is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), but—

Gareth Snell: He just read my notes!

Adam Jogee: It is one of the largest private sector employers in Newcastle-under-Lyme—that was not in my hon. Friend's notes. [*Laughter.*] Can the Minister touch a little bit on the engagement with some of these companies to ensure that the workers, many of whom live in my constituency and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, will not be adversely impacted?

Lucy Rigby: My hon. Friend raises an important point around jobs in the industry. He will be aware that employment in the gambling industry as a whole declined by around 20% between 2015 and 2023, so it is in gradual decline, and the trend predates this Bill. The jobs in his constituency are incredibly important, which is why the measures in this Bill deliberately focus on online gambling, rather than betting shops and casinos, which support more jobs and face higher operating costs, as I am sure the institutions in his constituency do.

Sir Gavin Williamson: In Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Central specifically, 5,500 people are employed by bet365. It is not just a significant employer; it is the most significant employer. What actions or interventions is the Treasury looking at taking to try to offset some of the potential job losses that these policies will cause?

Lucy Rigby: As I said, employment is an important consideration that has been borne in mind for the purposes of this Bill, and there has been considerable engagement on all these issues. If the right hon. Member seeks further engagement, I am more than happy to have it.

I was just about to conclude. I commend clauses 83 to 85 and schedule 13 to the Committee.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild: These changes were presented as some sort of simplification and modernisation, but clauses 83 and 84 nearly double remote gaming duty from 21% to 40% and increase general betting duty to 25%. We will have some of the highest rates of tax on gambling in the world. As we have heard from some Members, the industry has warned that that could have severe consequences for an internationally competitive sector

that supports tens of thousands of jobs, underpins horseracing and other sports and already contributes significantly to the Treasury. It is questionable whether these measures will lead to stable, long-term revenue gains for the Exchequer, and there is a very real risk that they will result in job losses and greater use of unregulated operators in the black market. New clause 25 would require the Chancellor to come back to the House and explain what the consequences have been for revenue, sports and horseracing, high street betting shops, the black market, jobs and the public finances.

Of course, the origin of these changes owes much to Gordon Brown, who encouraged the Chancellor to hike taxes in order to increase welfare spending. Proponents of higher taxes often suggest that they will not have any consequences, but it is the role of us in this House to scrutinise potential changes and assess the impact after the event. Independent modelling from EY shared by the Betting and Gaming Council suggests that the impact of doubling remote gaming duty could be the loss of 15,000 jobs, and a further 1,700 jobs could be lost as a result of the increase in general betting duty. In total, 17,000 positions located in Stoke-on-Trent, Leeds, Sunderland, Manchester, Nottingham, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Norwich and other areas could be affected. Of course, those are simply projections—they could prove to be pessimistic, and we certainly hope that will be the case—but when unemployment has risen consistently under this Government due to the jobs tax and other costs, such warnings should not just be dismissed. That is why the Chancellor must account for the impact of her choices, as new clause 25 requires.

There has been some mention of horseracing. I was pleased to join colleagues across the House in support of the “Axe the Racing Tax” campaign. That is another tax that the Chancellor wanted to introduce, but she was forced into one of her all-too-regular U-turns.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the proposal to harmonise gambling taxes, which the horseracing industry was most opposed to, was first proposed by his Government? It is something that they were proposing; we have just inherited it.

James Wild: We are debating the measures in this Bill, which was introduced by this Government. I was not involved in the changes that the hon. Gentleman refers to, and I certainly would not have supported hitting the horseracing sector in the way that was proposed. I do not remember that being in a previous Finance Bill introduced by a previous Government; it is this Government who sought to bring forward those measures, but they were roundly rejected, because horseracing supports around 85,000 jobs and contributes £300 million in tax revenue every year.

Despite the Government's climbdown in exempting horseracing from the higher rates, the industry could still feel the consequences of this Government's approach to gambling duties. When the online betting sector is squeezed, sponsorship is likely to be reduced, and because racing's funding depends heavily on those partnerships and that sponsorship, we could see an impact on racing. In my area of Norfolk, we are very fortunate to have Fakenham races—I went there to support the British Horseracing Authority's campaign against the Government's plans.

That venue is synonymous with the area and its identity, and is a source of local employment, not just at the track itself but for the farriers, the pubs, the hotels and the whole ecosystem that supports racing. That is why these clauses in the Bill continue to pose a risk to the sector and other sports, and that risk needs to be accounted for.

I now turn to the black market, an issue that was raised by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson). The Government have acknowledged the risks associated with taking this approach, which is why they quietly set aside £26 million for the Gambling Commission to combat expansion of the black market, but the same EY analysis suggests that over £6 billion in stakes could migrate to the black market, doubling its current size and undermining the progress that has been made through the existing regulatory framework. The Office for Budget Responsibility has identified potential leakage of around £500 million in lost revenue as activity shifts away from properly regulated markets. Those projections—which again could be wrong, but could also be right—raise legitimate questions about the overall effectiveness of the Government’s approach.

When taxes rise too far, behaviour can change and the yield can go down, which is what we will see with a number of the tax rises that the Government have included in their Finance Bill. Rather than reducing demand, activity will move to unregulated markets where consumer protections are weaker, fraud risks are higher, and tax revenue is not collected. I am not sure we have heard a convincing response from the Minister about how that will be addressed and whether those risks have been taken properly into account.

Let us look at what happened in the Netherlands, where the Dutch Government raised their remote slots tax rate to 34% last January. Within months, gross gaming revenue fell by a quarter and gambling tax receipts dropped to just 83% of the previous year’s figure, leaving a €200 million shortfall from the projections. Somewhat predictably, the Dutch regulator then reported a huge growth in the number of people accessing unlicensed domains, rising from 200,000 to a million. That should serve as an example of why we should be cautious about the Chancellor’s plans. Experience suggests that changes have unintended consequences, and those risks must be carefully assessed. In winding up, will the Minister provide a bit more clarity about how that will be monitored and what steps the Government will take if there are unintended consequences and those projections prove to be accurate?

There is some debate and confusion in the sector and some of the professional bodies about the treatment of free bets and free plays. The sector and those bodies have raised concerns about that. The Budget costings document calculates gambling duty using the gross gambling yield, which is the revenue retained by operators after paying out winnings to customers. However, current law uses a wider measure, which also counts the value of free bets and free plays. That means there is a potential mismatch. Will the Minister clarify that? I am sure she has had representations on it directly.

We need to strike a balance with the levels of taxation. The industry is warning that these increases will impact on sports and lead to job losses and more black market

activity. New clause 25 seeks transparency and an answer to those concerns. It asks the Chancellor to assess the impact of these rises on horseracing, the black market, jobs and the public finances. That is the minimum that Parliament should expect, and I hope Members will support our new clause.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I rise to speak to clauses 83 to 85 and schedule 13, which respectively outline: an increase in tax on online gaming, such as online slots or casino games; a new rate of general betting duty specifically for online betting, such as placing a bet on a football match; and, removing bingo duty.

Online gambling has evolved quickly, and legislation has simply not kept up. Before, someone might have popped down to their local high-street betting shop or organised a trip with their friends to the casino. It was confined to a specific place that people had to go to and then at some point leave. That does not mean that there were no problem gamblers—of course there were—but it did impose necessary social and physical limits on gambling. Online gambling has changed that beyond all recognition. Now, that casino fits into someone’s pocket. Online platforms know people’s habits, when they use their phone most and when they have not gambled in a while, and the platforms can tailor notifications to pull people back in. The technology is designed to prey on human instinct, using algorithms that make betting time-sensitive, compulsive and constantly available. In case the opportunity to gamble ever slips someone’s mind, gambling companies will be sure to remind them in a commercial break for sports matches, on the side of buses and emblazoned on the microphone at premier league post-match interviews.

People might see some of the seemingly generous offers they are given. For their first £5, the betting companies might give them £100 or even £200 credit to gamble with. That feels like a lot of money to most people, but it is pennies compared with what the companies are making from their current customers and what they might make from you, once you are hooked.

As someone who, to be frank, does not like gambling—I do not gamble, and I do not understand why people enjoy handing their money over to betting companies—I detest the tactics used by gambling companies to pull people in. As online gambling has evolved exponentially, the online platforms have been able to get away with dodging responsibility for problem gambling or for paying their fair share into the Treasury. As my dad always says, “You never meet a poor bookie.” That is why I support clause 84, which will introduce a new higher rate of tax on remote betting, so that online bets are more expensive compared with in-person betting. Those taxes will be paid by the platform, so that we can catch up, finally, with the reality of the gambling world, which has moved far beyond the traditional model of shops and casinos that the tax system was designed around.

Clause 83 raises the rate of remote gaming duty, the tax on online slots and casinos. That reduces the incentives for operators to push the most harmful forms of online gambling, making the system fairer and safer for everyone. I represent Morecambe, a seaside town with a host of gaming businesses on the front and a bingo hall. The evidence shows that it is not the penny slots or the weekly

[Lizzi Collinge]

bingo games that drive the majority of problem gambling, and I am pleased that the new remote gaming and betting duties recognise that.

5.15 pm

A focus on the evidence base is clear from the Government's responsiveness to feedback from the consultation on gambling, in which it was shown that different forms of gambling carry different levels of harm and, of course, costs to operate. Instead of imposing a flat rate across the sector, this Government will be taking a more nuanced approach, imposing the highest rates on remote gaming, which carries the biggest risk of harm, while protecting lower-harm forms of gambling such as the local bingo hall. Part of the revenue raised will go into research on, prevention of and treatment of gambling harms. That replaces a voluntary system that some operators exploited, contributing as little as £1 a year. The new levies will take into account differences in operating costs and the different levels of harm across gambling activities. It is estimated that £810 million will be generated from these measures in 2026-27, rising to £1 billion by 2030-31. This is money that, as well as tackling gambling harms, can go into our NHS, our social care and our schools. People will still be free to gamble if they choose, but these measures discourage the most harmful forms of online betting and gaming, while supporting lower-risk, community-focused activities. The abolition of bingo duty supports that too, as well as protecting jobs and local social spaces. This measure is informed by Labour values.

We have a long-standing principle that the polluter pays. In this instance, online gambling platforms are polluting people's lives, harming their health, draining their wealth and breaking up families. This must end, and clauses 83, 84 and 85, along with schedule 13, will go some way to achieving that.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper: We Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for the doubling of remote gaming duty, and we are grateful to the Government, who have finally listened and taken that on board. This measure will raise vital revenue in a fair way, while addressing the eye-watering profits of the big online gambling companies and standing up for the thousands affected by problem gambling. According to the latest figures from the Gambling Commission, the online gambling giants saw revenues reach an eye-watering £7.8 billion in 2024-25. Meanwhile, Public Health England has estimated that gambling costs the UK economy about £1.4 billion a year through a combination of financial harms and the impact on physical and mental health, employment, education and crime. About 300,000 adults in Britain experience problem gambling, as well as roughly 40,000 children. Those figures are stark. This measure finally takes action that should have been taken a long time ago, and it will raise about £1.8 billion a year by 2029-30 to fund our public services fairly.

Buried in the fine print, however, is a detail that makes it seem as if the Government are giving the big online gambling firms a get-out, and I should be grateful to the Minister for some clarification. According to the "Budget 2025 Policy Costings" document,

"The tax base for this measure is the Gross Gambling Yield",

which is the revenue retained by gambling operators after they have paid out winnings to customers. The tax base for remote gaming duty as defined in the Finance Act 2014 is a larger tax base. It is known as the gross gambling revenue, and includes the notional stake value of free bets and free plays. Can the Minister explain why today's tax measure will apply to a narrower tax base than the one currently targeted by remote gaming duty? How much tax revenue has been forgone by this narrowing of the tax base? Was it unintended, or was it a result of influence from the sector? Did any of the big online gaming companies meet any Ministers and discuss these measures while they were being considered?

New clause 21, tabled in my name, seeks to clarify this situation by requiring the Chancellor, within six months of the passing of the Act, to undertake an assessment of the impact of the implementation of sections 83 and 84 in respect of the treatment of free bets and free plays for calculating general betting duty on remote bets, so we can clearly see the impact of this difference.

Alex Ballinger: I want to speak in support of clauses 83 and 84 on gambling taxation. I of course strongly welcome these steps on remote gaming duty, which cover online slots, online casino games and other high-risk remote gambling products.

Ahead of the Budget last year, I was one of more than 100 Labour MPs, alongside Gordon Brown, who wrote to the Chancellor calling for a different approach to gambling taxation and one that recognises the reality of the modern gaming industry. We highlighted how taxing the social ills caused by online gambling could pay for the abolition of the two-child benefit cap, and I strongly welcome the action the Chancellor has taken to lift hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty on the back of these changes. For us, fairness was not just about asking those with the broadest shoulders to contribute more, but about ensuring those whose business models generate the most harm make a proper contribution to the cost of that harm. That is why clause 83 is so important, as it targets the most addictive and dangerous forms of gambling: online slots and casinos.

As a country, we are experiencing record levels of harm caused by gambling. The Gambling Commission's figures tell us that 2.5% of adults, which is more than 1 million people, are suffering from serious gambling harm. There are many types of gambling harm—debt, family break-up, crime and, at the most severe end, suicide—so it is extremely worrying that the Royal College of Psychiatrists has seen a threefold increase in the number of those referred for gambling treatment since gambling moved online during the pandemic.

In my own area, the Dudley-based Gordon Moody charity, which provides gambling treatment centres all over the west midlands, has seen a large increase in referrals, most worryingly among younger people involved in online gambling. This is not a coincidence, because online slots and casinos are designed to be high speed, continuous, psychologically manipulative and, for many, overwhelmingly addictive. So the Chancellor's decision to increase remote gaming duty targeted at these most harmful forms of gambling is absolutely the right thing to do. It sends a clear message that the tax system must reflect the level of harm caused.

There is another reason why this change—as well as clause 84, which increases general betting duty—is the right thing to do: many online gambling operators, particularly large global operators, have spent years offshoring their profits, booking revenues overseas, minimising their UK tax liabilities and contributing very little in meaningful employment or investment in our communities. In one example, at the end of last year the online operator Sky Bet moved its headquarters to Malta specifically to avoid UK corporation tax, cutting its contribution to the Treasury by tens of millions of pounds. In another example, an unnamed online bookmaker was investigated by the Gambling Commission for illegally directing customers to offshore-based platforms—indeed, to the black market itself—to avoid paying UK tax and to avoid UK regulations. Increasing these online duties means that it will be harder for unscrupulous operators to avoid tax by moving operations offshore. Online gambling in the UK will be taxed fairly in the UK.

Raising remote gambling duty to 40% and general betting duty to 25% for remote bets also puts us on a footing much closer to that of other European jurisdictions and many states in the United States. Until the Budget, the UK was behind the curve in taxing these highly harmful online products. For us, the Chancellor's move is a matter not just of revenue, but of fairness, responsibility and aligning our tax system with the reality of modern online gambling.

However, taxation is only one element of harm reduction. Raising duty alone will not of course prevent gambling addiction, stop children being exposed to online gambling advertising and ensure that families receive the support they need when a loved one falls into crisis. If we are to tackle these harms, we need a public health approach. That means proper funding for treatment, and I welcome the steps already taken under the statutory levy. However, it also means serious investment in prevention, community education and early intervention, and a modern regulatory framework that puts people, not profits, first and is fully independent of the gambling industry.

I want to highlight another pressing issue for the Minister, which is the continued prevalence of the B3 gaming machines on physical premises. These high-intensity machines, so often located in areas with higher deprivation, continue to cause significant harm, yet they remain under-regulated and undertaxed relative to the risks they pose. If we are to take harm seriously, B3 machines should be included in the next phase of gambling tax reform.

Finally, the most recent gambling Act was introduced more than 20 years ago, in a completely different era: before the smartphone, before the explosion of data-driven behavioural targeting, and before 24/7 online casinos in your pocket. A new Act is clearly needed. Our laws have not kept pace with technology, they have not kept pace with the scale or sophistication of online gambling operators, and they have not kept pace with the reality of the harm we now see every day in communities across the country. I welcome the measures in the Bill, but I urge the Government to move quickly to update advertising rules, strengthen affordability checks, protect children and vulnerable people, and ensure that tax policy, regulation and public health strategy on gambling are all aligned.

The measures on remote gaming duty and general betting duty are excellent steps in the right direction. They acknowledge the reality of harm, strengthen fairness in our tax system and take us closer to a modern framework that puts the wellbeing of the public first.

The Second Deputy Chairman: I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I would like to speak in support of new clause 25, which would require the Government to assess the effects of an increase in gambling duty, because just as I believe individuals have a right to spend their hard-earned money as they like, I believe it is important that they do so in a sensible, regulated and safe environment.

Whatever we may think about gambling companies, gambling is already a very heavily regulated sector. Since the gambling White Paper was published in 2023 by the previous Government, the industry has already absorbed over 62 policy changes. Those changes include a limit on slot stakes, financial risk checks on transactions, tightened market rules and the statutory levy. The sector is so well regulated that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee warned the previous Government that the finance risk checks should be as minimally intrusive as possible. The Committee concluded that the Government must strike a careful balance: preventing harm for all, while allowing those who gamble safely the freedom to continue to do so. I have concerns that this vast increase in taxation on online betting and gaming does not strike that balance.

The combination of an existing regime of strong regulation and a sudden jump in the levels of remote gaming duty from 21% to 40% is the kind of environment that I believe risks pushing people into the black market. As a floor, 40% is very high for remote gaming tax by international standards. It has been suggested that such high taxes could double the size of the online black market. Does the Minister recognise research from the Netherlands, highlighted by the shadow Minister, which found that after steep tax rises were introduced on remote slots, visits to black market domains increased fivefold over a three-year period? That is what we have to worry about if we are concerned about the oversight of those making bets and playing slots. That is why I am supportive of new clause 25, tabled by the Opposition. It requires the Chancellor to assess and report back on the effects of the increase in gambling duties on the number of high street betting shops, the black market, the employment rate, the public finances, and sports and horseracing.

On sports and horseracing, I was glad to see a carve-out from general betting duty for UK horseracing. I was among many Members calling for that in recognition of the unique place horseracing occupies in British cultural life, as well as the 85,000 jobs and £4 billion contribution to the economy that horseracing offers.

The Government have slightly dressed up their raid on gambling companies as being driven by concerns around gambling harms. In November 2024, I spoke to the Bacta convention about the then recently announced statutory levy and my concerns about how it would be distributed to organisations that conduct harms research. The Committee recommended the year before that the Government ensure that service providers, which were

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

operating via the voluntary funding system, were adequately supported to make the transition to the statutory levy. However, we have now received very concerning reports that voluntary organisations in particular are facing a funding cliff edge, with delays and a lack of information about the transition to levy payments from the NHS.

I am not entirely sure the Minister is listening to what I am saying, but I am hoping she will be able to address that point. She has not looked at me once while I have been speaking, but hopefully she is furiously writing notes about what I am talking about and will be able to address those concerns. Hopefully, she will tell me that she will discuss them with colleagues and act to ensure that no charitable organisation currently operating within the gambling harm prevention sector will have to fold due to delays with levy funding.

The Chancellor is looking around for money and believes that she can raise it from gambling companies, but, as with many of her other measures, such as national insurance rises, she will be a victim of the law of unintended consequences if she is not careful. On this occasion, the consequence will be that more people are dragged into the black market, where they will quite simply find better offers than those offered by gambling companies.

5.30 pm

The black market is completely unregulated. There is no maximum stake limit, and there are no financial vulnerability checks, deposit limits, prompts or transparent spending summaries. Having taken the opportunity to speak with many who have been impacted by problem gambling—in some cases, families who have been impacted in the most substantial way, as their relatives have taken their own lives—I can say that the black market is a wild west that any vulnerable person could easily be drawn into. These measures could represent a one-way ticket to that town. The Government already recognise that in their own statistics. As the Minister said, they are earmarking an additional £26 million for the Gambling Commission to investigate the issue, so clearly they recognise that it is a problem that needs to be kept an eye on.

This is really important. While the Chancellor believes that she is potentially pocketing a cool £1.1 billion from this increase, there is a risk that in reality she will lose out on the tax receipts from up to £6 billion diverted back to the black market. She might think that she is the winner, but in actual fact, under her watch we will all be losers.

Gareth Snell: As has already been pointed out by a number of colleagues, my constituency is home to bet365. My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) said something about there being no meaningful employment in gambling, but I would say to him that there are thousands of people in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), who put food on the table for their children as a result of the job they do in the industry. There are 109,000 people who go to work in the sector, whether it be in a betting shop, a casino, a bingo hall, or a high-tech company like the one in my constituency. To say that the work is not meaningful makes this sound like an ideological change rather than a taxation change.

Alex Ballinger: The point that I was trying to make was not at all that people who work in the gambling industry are not involved in meaningful employment. The online sector represents less than 10% of jobs yet makes enormous profits, so in fact, if online companies are taxed more, gambling companies are incentivised to put more people in the land-based gambling sector, which could increase employment and would be good for people in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Gareth Snell: That is nonsense, frankly. Some 7,500 people work for that company in my constituency. If they were all my constituents, that would mean one in 10 people in my constituency were getting paid a salary that is greater than the average for the region. Whether we like gambling or not, that company and the people it employs are driving the economic regeneration of north Staffordshire, because those jobs are the ones that give people money to spend on our services, shops and social activities.

I am sure we do not want to make this a debate about the moral rights and wrongs of gambling—that is not the nature of the debate we are having today—but I do think we need to consider the reality of the circumstances that the communities that host these companies will face as a result of the tax changes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen on being successful in his campaign to get to where we are today, but the consequence is going to be felt in my constituency with job losses. There are people who will not have a job this time next year, either because the company that they work for will have to reduce the number of people who work for them, or—worst of all—will move overseas.

There have been lots of comments about moving profits overseas and the prospect of bad actors, but the company in my constituency is probably an exemplar of how to keep the money in the UK. The owners of the company are paid incredibly well, but they still pay PAYE. They make a contribution to the state that is about equal to my entire local government budget. The idea that these are not meaningful organisations is slightly disrespectful to the people in them, and the economic damage that would occur in my city if such companies were to disappear overnight, which they could do, would be devastating. Frankly, it would cost the Government significantly more in the bail-out that would be needed than they would raise through the tax.

I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) who made the point that we do not do hypothecated taxes in this country. When it comes to spending, I support every measure that the Government brought forward at the Budget. The lifting of the two-child benefit cap will benefit 4,500 people in Stoke-on-Trent Central. My city has one of the highest rates of child poverty of anywhere in the country, so the benefit to those families will be enormous and immediate. However, everything goes into one big pot and then goes out from the other pot, and we should be careful about making the moral argument that specifically taxing gambling is the only possible way to fund how we deal with child poverty. That is a slight misapprehension.

Having visited bet365 and seen the work that it does, I know that it is worried about the impact that the changes will have on the black market. It—as does the entire sector—spends a lot of its time and energy doing research and development to try to work out how to

keep people playing and betting in the regulated sector, where there is support for people at risk from gambling, including lock-out mechanisms for problem gamblers, and where the tax receipts from the people who bet go back into the UK. To have £6 billion going into the unregulated sector could be a huge loss to the Treasury.

We are all only one or two clicks away from being in an unregulated gambling app. For Safer Gambling Week, the Betting and Gaming Council asked people to look at two comparable gaming sites, because without realising, people can easily find themselves on one site that is not regulated, whose revenue stream almost certainly goes into dark activity—probably funding some organised criminal activity—and not a regulated sector product, with all the support and safety measures that come with that. Because these things can now proliferate on phones, access to them for people of all ages is now much easier.

There is a genuine concern that we must think about: if that £6 billion is going into the unregulated sector and, as the result of the tax changes—as the OBR recognises—there will be an increase in unregulated activity and problem gaming, is the £26 million for the Gambling Commission enough? Will the £1.1 billion raised by the statutory levy be sufficient? As the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dineneage) said, there is genuine concern from some charitable organisations on the ground that they have not yet had their funding for this or confirmation about how they will be able to spend it. Does it just get sucked into the NHS pot to be spent on a medical solution? That might be the solution, but that means that some of the carefully crafted mechanisms to deal with problem gambling will simply lose out as a result of big structural changes to tax.

Alex Ballinger: I agree with my hon. Friend—I am also concerned about the black market in online gambling—and I welcome the extra money that the Chancellor has introduced for the Gambling Commission, which has powers including blocking ISPs and blocking payments, among other things, to crack down on unregulated gambling.

Does my hon. Friend share my concern about unregulated online gambling companies advertising in the UK, including in the premier league? Does he agree that the Government should be doing something about that so that we can better support the regulated sector?

Gareth Snell: Absolutely, we do need to do that. I am an old-fashioned state regulator; I like the idea that the state can regulate things. I like the idea of tax and spend as well, which is what we are doing in the Budget. It is a good thing—[*Interruption.*] I was so close—I raised the hopes of the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and then dashed them.

We should think about some of the changes that came in through the White Paper, including the whistle-to-whistle ban on promoting certain products, the premier league's voluntary opt-out on gambling company sponsorship, and the soon-to-be banning of gambling companies on football shirts. Again, that uniquely affects Stoke-on-Trent, because bet365 sponsors Stoke City. Therefore, should we ever make it to the premiership—we came so very close at the beginning of the season, but we are not quite there now—we would have to have a complete change of kit.

There is more that we can do about the unregulated sector, but that should be a collective effort. We should also not kid ourselves that what we are doing today is about trying to get on top of the unregulated sector. We are talking about the taxation of the regulated sector. As a consequence, we may inadvertently push more people into the unregulated sector. The consequence of that will be bad for society and bad for people who are problem gamblers. It will also be a challenge for the Gambling Commission to them try to regulate, and we need to be up front about that.

I recognise that there are some very addictive games that people can get hooked on and spend an absolute fortune, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen said, they are affected psychologically; they get drawn in, spending more money to make the experience worth while. But we may be in a perverse situation, because the machine gaming duty rate for a land-based product will be 20%, but the remote betting duty—for products where people can bet on a football match using one of the apps at home—will be 21%. Although we recognise that the gaming side is much more damaging than the betting side, we are going to have a lower rate for land-based gaming than for remote betting, when we recognise that betting as a product presents a safer, more cost-intensive situation. Was that by design, or is it a consequence that the Treasury has not considered? Will the Minister address that point?

The Minister has said that this is a fair levy, taking the gaming rate to 40%. That will make us an outlier compared with our European neighbours. The next on the list are Czechia at 35%, the Netherlands at 34% and Denmark at 28%. There is a point at which the taxation of a product becomes so de minimis in its return that it ceases to have an effect. I have never believed in the Laffer curve—I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Member for North West Norfolk again—but I can see that we will get to a point where we are trying to squeeze an increasingly large amount of money out of a shrinking tax base because more people are taking their spend elsewhere.

That would be damaging for everybody. It would be damaging for my constituents, because if the demand for the service and products made by the companies in my constituency dry up, the jobs also dry up. It would also be bad for the Treasury because the amount of money it can raise from the regulated sector will decrease, and that is not something that we want to see. Has the Minister looked at the evidence from the Netherlands? When the Netherlands increased its rate, which it did for good reason—a decision around tax and spend in order to raise money to pay for parts of its social programmes—it actually saw a huge spike in the use of unregulated products, with something like a fivefold increase over three years, and a huge decrease in the expected rate of return for its revenue.

There are similar examples in other European countries. I do wonder whether we have looked at those before making some of the decisions that we are making today. Do we have a contingency? It is not that we are hypothecating taxation in this country, but we have said that these changes are, quite rightly, to fund the reduction of child poverty through the removal of the two-child benefit cap. If the revenue rates from the changes decreases, where will the additional money come from?

[Gareth Snell]

Finally, will the Minister touch on the impact on Gibraltar? The decisions on gambling tax rates that we make today will have an effect on Gibraltar. Nigel Feetham, the Minister for Justice, Trade and Industry in Gibraltar, has repeatedly pointed out that 3,500 people in Gibraltar derive their job from the gambling sector. It makes up 30% of GDP there; one third of Gibraltar's tax receipts comes from the gambling sector. He has said only this week that the change will remove tens of millions of pounds from the Government of Gibraltar's budget. There is absolutely no way they can replace that from domestic sources in any reasonable time.

Given that Gibraltar is one of our important overseas territories, will the Minister set out and explain what conversations the Treasury has had with counterparts in Gibraltar? What are the contingencies if we find ourselves inadvertently creating a massive black hole in the budget of the Government of Gibraltar? Again, if we have to bail them out in some way, where will that money come from? If it is taken out of the revenue that is expected to be raised from this particular rate, that then undermines the figures in other parts of the Budget, which, in its entirety, I support.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): My constituents know all too well that there are some gambling companies that thrive on making vast profits from addiction, distress and despair, often delivered straight into people's homes through online platforms and their mobile phones—quietly but devastatingly tearing families apart. That is why I speak today on clauses 83 to 85 and schedule 13.

Remote gaming, including online slots and casino games, is the most addictive and fastest growing part of the gambling industry. Those products are deliberately engineered to keep people playing, spending and losing long after the fun has gone and the harm has begun. In Wolverhampton North East, through my constituency casework, I see the real-world consequences of parents trapped in spiralling debt, children going without the basics and relationships breaking under unbearable strain. The Bill addresses that harm head-on.

5.45 pm

From 1 April 2026, the rate of remote gaming duty will rise from 21% to 40%, targeting the most harmful and addictive parts of the market. For remote betting, a new rate of 25% will be introduced from 1 April 2027, while bets on UK horseracing are protected and remain at current rates. This reflects the lower harm of these products and recognises the contribution of operators to the statutory horserace betting levy. These targeted increases are not just about raising revenue; they are about disincentivising harmful practices and holding companies to account.

Just as important—especially for my bingo-loving constituents—is what the Bill does not tax. By abolishing bingo duty from 1 April 2026, this Government are recognising that not all gambling is the same. Bingo halls such as the one in Wednesfield are community spaces. They are places of friendship and connections, especially for some of our older residents, so supporting lower-risk activities while cracking down on the most harmful ones is exactly the balanced approach that our communities expect.

These changes will raise over £1 billion a year to support the public finances and Labour's mission to lift half a million children out of poverty, which will affect more than 4,200 children in my constituency of Wolverhampton North East. They will protect families from harm, support communities and make sure that those who profit from misery finally pay their fair share.

Lucy Rigby: I am grateful to hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate, and particularly to my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for their heartfelt speeches in favour of these measures. I also note the comments of the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), which I can assure her I did listen to in full, and of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), both of whom, I accept, have tremendous expertise in this area.

As I have set out, we believe that the measures in clauses 83 to 85 deliver fair reforms to our system of gambling taxation because they reflect the reality of how gambling has changed in our country, the harms that now exist and the need for the tax system to keep pace as these changes continue. The Government's objective is to strike a balance by raising revenue fairly while avoiding further pressures on land-based operators. New clauses 21 and 25 ask the Chancellor to review the impact of and make a statement on the effects of the increase in gambling duties.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will know that Northern Ireland has some of the highest rates of gambling, with 3% of adults classified as problem gamblers and 5% at moderate risk. I welcome her efforts in this regard, and the money that the proposals will raise. Will she give a commitment to the Committee that she will enter into conversations with the Communities Minister in Northern Ireland about Northern Ireland getting its fair share of this levy, to ensure that organisations that help those with gambling addictions are able to avail themselves of this funding to help people in that situation? I spoke recently to a constituent who had started gambling at the age of six, and it really struck a chord. Those people need help and I just ask her to do that.

Lucy Rigby: The hon. Member raises an important point. Before I commit to her that I will take that forward, I would like to check what discussions have already taken place. I hope she will accept that that is necessary from my point of view.

Both the proposed new clauses focus on the impacts of the changes to the gambling duty and ask for a commitment to update Parliament within six months of the Bill being passed. First, this Government did not announce, and are not proposing to make, any changes to the treatment of free plays or free bets through this Bill. Furthermore, the Bill does not make any changes to the duty charged on bets placed on horseracing in high street betting shops.

Secondly, on the illegal market, which has been raised a number of times, the Gambling Commission is already tackling that risk and is protecting consumers, but

we recognise that modern technology makes it easier for illegal websites to target consumers. To strengthen enforcement and protect consumers from dangerous illegal sites, we are providing an additional £26 million to the Gambling Commission over the next three years. I hope I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central that the £100 million a year in the form of the statutory levy is ringfenced for prevention, treatment and research in this area.

The Government published a tax information and impact note for this measure at the Budget. As is set out in that note, consideration will be given to monitoring and evaluating the expected Exchequer impacts of the policy after at least two years of monitoring data has been collected and analysed. More broadly, the Government continually monitor the operation of all taxes and keep them under review to ensure that they deliver on their intended outcomes and, indeed, are fit for purpose. For those reasons, the proposed statement and the impact assessment are not necessary.

The measures in clauses 83 to 85 deliver fair reforms to our system of gambling taxation. They reflect how gambling has changed in our country, the harms that now exist and the need for the tax system to keep pace as those changes continue. The shadow Exchequer Secretary, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), raised levels of employment. He will know that right across the piece, the OBR expects that employment levels will rise in every year of the forecast. Costings were also raised, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central. The OBR has taken account of behavioural impacts within its costing. Of course, those costings have been certified and scrutinised in the usual way.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), asked about engagement with industry. I can confirm that the Government, as I hope she would expect, engaged with a number of stakeholders, including from the gambling industry, as part of the consultation process. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central also raised Gibraltar. Of course we recognise that Gibraltar has a gambling industry that very much faces the UK. I can assure him that there has been engagement, not by me, but by some of my colleagues in the Treasury, with Gibraltar to that end.

Daisy Cooper: I am grateful to the Minister for confirming that she has consulted and that Ministers have had engagement with the industry. I was specifically wondering whether in the course of that consultation with the industry, there was discussion about using a different measure and choosing a different tax base for the calculation of this particular tax, because it seems as though the tax base could have been bigger if they had used the measure already in the Finance Act, rather than this new measure that seems to shrink the tax base. Did the Treasury have a particular reason for using a different measure for calculating this remote gaming duty?

Lucy Rigby: It was not me who had those engagements, but as I said, I confirm to the hon. Member that we are not proposing to make any changes to the treatment of free plays and free bets through the Bill, which I hope reassures her in that regard.

I urge the Committee to reject new clauses 21 and 25 and agree that clauses 83 to 85 and schedule 13 should stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 83 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 84 and 85 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 13 agreed to.

New Clause 25

STATEMENTS ON INCREASING REMOTE GAMBLING DUTY AND INTRODUCING A NEW RATE OF GENERAL BETTING DUTY

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed, make a statement to the House of Commons on the effects of the increase in gambling duties made under sections 83 to 84 of this Act.

(2) The statement made under subsection (1) must include details of the impact on—

- (a) sports and horseracing,
- (b) the number of high street betting shops,
- (c) the gambling black market,
- (d) the employment rate, and
- (e) the public finances.”—(*James Wild.*)

This new clause would require the Chancellor to make a statement about the effects of the increase in gambling duties.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 187, Noes 351.

Division No. 405]

[5.54 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Dance, Adam
Amos, Gideon	Darling, Steve
Anderson, Stuart	Davey, rh Ed
Andrew, rh Stuart	Davies, Ann
Aquarone, Steff	Davies, Gareth
Argar, rh Edward	Davies, Mims
Atkins, rh Victoria	Davis, rh David
Babarinde, Josh	Dean, Bobby
Bacon, Gareth	Dewhurst, Charlie
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Dillon, Mr Lee
Barclay, rh Steve	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Bedford, Mr Peter	Doogan, Dave
Bennett, Alison	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Blackman, Bob	Dyke, Sarah
Blackman, Kirsty	Easton, Alex
Bool, Sarah	Evans, Dr Luke
Bowie, Andrew	Farron, Tim
Brandreth, Aphra	Flynn, rh Stephen
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Foord, Richard
Burghart, Alex	Forster, Mr Will
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Fox, Sir Ashley
Cane, Charlotte	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Franklin, Zöe
Cartlidge, James	Freeman, George
Chadwick, David	French, Mr Louie
Chamberlain, Wendy	Fuller, Richard
Chambers, Dr Danny	Garnier, Mark
Chope, Sir Christopher	George, Andrew
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Gethins, Stephen
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gibson, Sarah
Cocking, Lewis	Glen, rh John
Coghlan, Chris	Gilmour, Rachel
Collins, Victoria	Glover, Ollie
Cooper, Daisy	Goldman, Marie
Cooper, John	Gordon, Tom
Costa, Alberto	Green, Sarah
Cross, Harriet	Griffith, Andrew

Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan

Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 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
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lincoln Jopp and
Alicia Kearns

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia

Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fokes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 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
 Gould, Georgia
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh

Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 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
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian

Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 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
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Simons, Josh
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex

Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet

Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Western, Matt
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Stephen Morgan and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 86

RATES OF DUTY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani):
 With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

New clause 8—*Review of impact of section 86 on the hospitality sector*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before the House of Commons a report assessing the impact of the measures contained in section 86 on the hospitality sector.

(2) A report under subsection (1) must include an assessment of the impact of section 86 on—

- (a) levels of employment across the United Kingdom within the hospitality sector,
- (b) the number of hospitality businesses ceasing to trade, and
- (c) the number of new hospitality businesses established.

(3) In this section, ‘the hospitality sector’ means persons or businesses operating in the provision of food, drink, accommodation, or related services.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to review and report on the impact of the alcohol duty measures in Clause 86 on the hospitality sector, including effects on employment and business viability.

New clause 9—*Review of cumulative impact on the hospitality sector*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before the House of Commons a report assessing the cumulative impact on the hospitality sector of—

- (a) the measures contained in section 86 of this Act, and
- (b) changes to taxation and business costs affecting that sector introduced outside this Act since 2020.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(b), changes to taxation and business costs include, but are not limited to—

- (a) changes to employer National Insurance contribution rates or thresholds,
- (b) changes to business rates, including reliefs and revaluations, and
- (c) any other fiscal measures which materially affect operating costs for hospitality businesses.

(3) A report under subsection (1) must include an assessment of the impact of the matters listed in that subsection on—

- (a) levels of employment across the United Kingdom within the hospitality sector,
- (b) the number of hospitality businesses ceasing to trade,
- (c) the number of new hospitality businesses established, and
- (d) the financial sustainability of hospitality businesses.

(4) In this section, ‘the hospitality sector’ means persons or businesses operating in the provision of food, drink, accommodation, or related services.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to assess and report on the cumulative impact on the hospitality sector of alcohol duty measures in the Act alongside wider fiscal changes, including employer National Insurance contributions and business rates.

New clause 26—Statements on increasing alcohol duty—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed, make a statement to the House of Commons on the effects of the increase to alcohol duty made under section 86 of this Act.

(2) The statement made under subsection (1) must include details of the impact on—

- (a) the hospitality sector,
- (b) pubs,
- (c) UK wine, spirit and beer producers,
- (d) the employment rate, and
- (e) the public finances.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor to make a statement about the effects of the increase in alcohol duty.

Lucy Rigby: I am pleased to open this session—the sixth and final session in Committee of the whole House on the Finance (No. 2) Bill—on clause 86, which concerns alcohol duty. This Government’s approach to alcohol duty is one of proportionality. Indeed, we are taking a fair and coherent approach to alcohol taxation as a whole. The measures in the Bill take account of the important contribution of alcohol producers, pubs and the wider hospitality sector; the Government’s commitments to back British businesses, and the need to maintain the health of the public finances.

Clause 86 makes changes to alcohol duty rates from 1 February 2026. Specifically, the clause changes the rates of alcohol duty for all alcoholic products in schedule 7 to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023 to reflect the retail prices index.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister says that she has considered carefully the fairness of the changes in this clause. Has she considered at all the compound effect of this and all the other taxes that are currently killing hospitality businesses?

Lucy Rigby: We take all impacts on the hospitality sector and the pub sector extremely seriously, and this Government are proud to be backing British pubs across the piece.

The changes we are making will help to ensure that, as a country, we live within our means, that we balance the books and that we properly fund the public services we all rely on. On Second Reading, concerns were raised about the impact of alcohol duty on the hospitality sector and British pubs. We have made it clear, as I just have, that we are steadfast supporters of British pubs and the wider hospitality sector, including through the introduction of the new pro-growth licensing policy framework that was announced at the Budget.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): The Minister just said that the Government are pro-pubs, but any pub she speaks to in my constituency will tell her that this Government are not pro-pubs. The amount of profit left at the end of a pint for a pub is minuscule, and it is so far from reality to say that the Government are pro-pubs. How does she respond to all the pubs across the country that are crying out for change?

Lucy Rigby: I was talking about our new pro-growth licensing policy framework, which was announced in the Budget. If the hon. Member is referring specifically to business rates, as I think he might be, we have made it clear that we are continuing to talk to the sector about any support beyond the existing £4.3 billion support package that the Chancellor announced in the Budget.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the Minister for speaking about an imminent decision on business rates, but this is not just about business rates. The Victoria Inn in Mumbles in my constituency has not banned me as a Labour MP—it has not banned any Labour MPs—but it would like to extend an invitation to those on the Front Bench to visit Mumbles, come to the pub and have that conversation, because it is a positive conversation about how the Government are listening and moving forward.

Lucy Rigby: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that invitation. It is one that I will be taking up, as I would love to join her in that public house in her constituency.

Importantly, continuing to freeze alcohol duty would primarily support cheaper alcohol in the off-trade—for instance, alcohol sold in shops and supermarkets—and have only a small indirect impact on the hospitality sector. That is because, as hon. Members will know, alcohol duty is paid by producers, not by pubs, and 73% of alcohol consumed in the UK is purchased from shops, rather than in pubs, restaurants and bars. The Government’s decision to uprate alcohol duty in line with inflation is therefore not only prudent for the public finances; it also balances important considerations, and the contribution of alcohol producers, pubs and the wider hospitality sector, with the need to support public services such as the NHS.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I appreciate the Minister giving way. I have noticed that more and more of my constituents are drinking non-alcoholic beer, and that there the number of people taking alcohol is reducing. That sometimes puts pubs under particular pressure, but people can still go out socialising and have a meal and a non-alcoholic drink. Would it be possible to promote that through this Bill, because I believe we should be looking at that growing market?

Lucy Rigby: I am grateful to the hon. Member, as always, for his intervention. I was about to talk about the strength-based duty system introduced by the previous Government on 1 August 2023, following the alcohol duty review. The new alcohol duty system taxes all alcoholic products according to their strength, so duty increases with alcohol content, which represents a progressive shift. The reforms introduced two new reliefs: the draught relief, which reduced the duty burden on draught products sold at on-trade venues; and small producer relief, which replaced the previous small brewers relief and aims to support small and medium-sized enterprises and new entrants.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Minister rightly refers to draught beer and cider relief, and she said earlier that her concern about freezing alcohol duties was that most of the benefit would be going to supermarkets and other places that sell beer cheaply. Surely she recognises that what the Chancellor should have done is reduce the draught rate, as happened last year, so that the full benefit would have gone to licensed premises, as they are the only venues that can sell the draught drinks covered by that rate.

Lucy Rigby: My point was that the benefit of the decision not to update alcohol duty will be felt mostly in the off-trade, which is a point that the hon. Gentleman appears to understand.

The small producer relief aims to support SMEs and new entrants by permitting smaller producers to pay reduced duty rates. Clause 86 maintains the generosity of the small producer relief, compared with main duty rates. The changes introduced by the clause maintain the real-terms value of alcohol duty, and balance the need to support alcohol producers, pubs and the wider hospitality sector with the need to support the public finances. Further to that, the changes also support smaller producers by maintaining the generosity of small producer relief. I therefore commend the clause to the Committee.

6.15 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild: It feels like we are getting warmed up for scrutinising the 536 pages of the Bill upstairs in the Public Bill Committee shortly. It is good to see that the popularity of the topics we are debating has increased as we move on to alcohol duty, which clause 86 increases in line with the retail prices index from 1 February.

I am proud to confirm that His Majesty's Opposition are big supporters of beer, wine, spirits and hospitality businesses. As such, we oppose these tax rises. This £26 billion tax-raising Budget piles pressure on households and businesses that are already struggling because of the decisions of the Chancellor. Prices are high, growth is sluggish and now the Chancellor has chosen to impose another duty hike.

Our new clause 26 would therefore require the Chancellor to publish a statement on the impact of increasing alcohol duty on the hospitality sector, on pubs, on UK wine, spirit and beer producers, on jobs and on the public finances. These sectors are already being hammered by this Government's economic choices. A Government

who say that the cost of living is their priority are raising alcohol duty, putting more cost on to people and businesses that keep our rural communities and high streets alive.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): May I start by wishing everybody taking part in dry January good luck? I admit that I am not one of them. It is fantastic that the shadow Minister is talking about the impact of these changes, but I am surprised that his list did not include alcohol harm. Many charities and campaign groups are pleased that the Government are trying to move people away from drinking at home to drinking in the hospitality sector. Does he accept that that is a good thing and its benefits should be evaluated?

James Wild: Indeed. When we brought in the new duty system, we focused on the strength of alcohol in terms of the tax. We want to encourage more people into the hospitality sector, but the Government seem to have a policy of driving people away from going into pubs—and not just Labour MPs.

In government, we recognised the importance of those sectors to jobs, to our communities and to growth, and the simplified duty system, including the two new reliefs—draught relief and small producer relief—were warmly welcomed. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) made the point that the Government are choosing not to implement similar measures on draught relief. At the 2023 autumn statement we froze alcohol duty rates, and we extended that freeze in the spring Budget of 2024. I am proud to support that record: we had a Government working with the sector, not against it. It gives me no pleasure to say that this Government have chosen a very different path.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My hon. Friend and I both represent large, rural constituencies. Could Members across the House think creatively about how we are going to save the great British rural pub? That could be by giving special credence to those who sell draught beer, rather than selling it in supermarkets, or through national insurance—all that sort of thing. Otherwise a great institution, which most people have to drive to, will be in danger of extinction. Are those pubs not part of our history?

James Wild: They absolutely are. I would be happy to come to my right hon. Friend's constituency to discuss this over a pint in one of those small rural pubs, which are the hub of our villages and hamlets. Once they are gone, it is very difficult to replace them. The Government clearly have the hospitality sector in their crosshairs, and clause 86 is just the latest salvo.

This is no small corner of the economy. Some 3.5 million people are employed directly in the sector, which invests £7 billion a year, yet the industry is being punished by the Chancellor's decisions and this clause. UKHospitality's "#TaxedOut" campaign has highlighted the nearly 90,000 jobs lost in this sector. With unemployment now above 5%, young people in particular are paying the price. That is a consequence of the Chancellor's damaging tax rises, which were supported by Labour Members.

Higher alcohol duties, the jobs tax, energy bills and soaring business rates are layering cost on cost. It is little wonder that UKHospitality has called the Government's approach a "hammer blow".

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Does the shadow Minister agree that as a result of this policy, lots of local pubs, including lots more in the hospitality industry, will go out of business?

James Wild: That is very clearly the risk.

The British Beer and Pub Association has said that the proposed increases will be damaging to the sector, and we may well see more closures as a result. New clause 26 would shine a light on the real impact that these decisions will have on rural pubs, jobs and businesses. I hope the Minister will consider the new clause and not simply dismiss it by referring to the tax and information impact note, as she did with an earlier group of amendments. That is a prediction of what will happen; it is not a review of what the actuality is.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): This new clause is even more important given the fact that the Government, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister understand the impact that the Bill will have on pubs. They have said that they will bring forward measures to help and support pubs, yet we have not seen those measures, because they are not in this Bill. We therefore need to have some form of accountability to be able to understand the impact of not only the measures before us, which we can vote on, but the proposed ones that will come in to support the measures that the Government are already looking to put in this Bill, which will have an impact. Does that make sense? Does my hon. Friend agree?

James Wild: I think that makes sense, and I certainly agree with my hon. Friend.

The Government are having to try to put in place solutions to deal with problems that they have created. If Labour MPs were welcome in pubs across the country, they would hear quite how difficult—

Gareth Snell: I am!

James Wild: I am sure that the hon. Member is welcome, but let us be clear that some are not.

If I go into a pub, I do not think I will find many publicans who think that this Government are pro-pub. We have a Chancellor who said that she did not understand the impact that her Budget, the revaluation and the removal of the discount on business rates would have. That is staggering. Frankly, it shows once again that she does not understand business and was not listening when the sector and many others warned that that was precisely the impact that her policy would have.

The Chancellor is reportedly about to do a U-turn on her business rates raid. She has not come to the House yet to inform us or the sector, but what is being briefed is likely to be wholly inadequate. On the radio this morning we heard Ministers saying that the impact will be limited to pubs, but the hospitality sector, leisure businesses and retail all face huge increases in business rates.

Mr Joshua Reynolds: Does the shadow Minister agree that if this Labour climbdown is happening, it is not enough for there to be a smaller increase than the one that was planned? There needs to be no increase in business rates.

James Wild: The hon. Gentleman tempts me on to my next paragraph.

Instead of tinkering, the Chancellor should adopt Conservative party policies and abolish business rates for pubs, hospitality businesses, retail and leisure businesses, as well as slashing the average pub's energy bill by £1,000. That is real help—the Minister can have those ideas for free.

The duty increases will also have an impact on the UK's world-class wine and spirits producers, which together generate £76 billion in economic activity. Across our wine sector, there are more than 1,000 vineyards, including some excellent ones in North West Norfolk, which I recommend. Despite that success, we see the Government putting yet more costs on to the sector; some 60% of the price of a bottle of wine already goes to tax. Instead of listening to calls from the sector to freeze duty, the Chancellor has decided to increase it, and she has failed to fix the small producer relief so that it works for wine makers and distillers.

The picture is no rosier in the spirits sector. The Scotch Whisky Association has said that the increase piles additional pressure on to a sector already suffering from job losses, stalled investment and business closures. It estimates that the lost revenue to the Treasury as a result of the previous rise in spirits duty amounted to about £150 million. The UK Spirits Alliance has called the Budget

“a sad day for the nation's distillers, pubs and the wider hospitality sector.”

WineGB joins its ranks in pointing out that higher prices will likely lead to lower sales and reduce the Treasury revenue, so the sector could not be clearer. The only people still pretending this is good economics are those on the Government Benches.

When the Government should be backing businesses, they are instead choosing to add to their costs. Increased taxes have consequences—they depress demand and revenue. In October, YouGov found that one in four regular drinkers was likely to reduce their alcohol spend this year due to price increases, and the Wine and Spirit Trade Association has called for the OBR's forecasting assumptions to be reviewed. The Government are putting themselves and the UK on the wrong side of the Laffer curve, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) should read more about—he will be persuaded. Ministers should take fresh advice on the impact of these changes.

The UK's brewers, producers and hospitality businesses are resilient. Frankly, in the face of this Government's onslaught, they need to be. They are at the heart of our communities, creating jobs, driving local growth and giving many young people their first opportunity in work. Now is the time to support the sector, not tax it more, which is why we will be voting against these measures this evening.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I draw attention to my chairship of the GMB parliamentary group, a union that represents workers in the distillery and retail trades. I will limit my comments to the uprating of excise duty, but I welcome this Budget more generally. It represents the right choice—investment and renewal over austerity and decline.

Clause 86 of the Finance (No. 2) Bill represents a simple uprating of alcohol duty in accordance with the retail prices index. In that sense, the clause represents continuity with the policy of successive Governments over many years, going back to the early 1970s, and of course the principle of excise duty predates that by many more years. Having noted the shadow Minister's comments, it is telling that none of the amendments we are considering today would actively reverse that increase. The effects of the escalator is also softened to an extent by the reduction for draught products, which, combined with pre-existing changes to the tax system, amount to a somewhat more favourable regime for the drinks most sold in pubs. This direction of policy is welcome, given everything we know about the attendant health and social harm that can be the result of solo drinking.

It is worth noting that the increase is in line with international best practice. It is timely that just today, the World Health Organisation published a new report titled "Global report on the use of alcohol taxes". That report says that

"specific excise taxes need to be regularly adjusted for inflation or their real value risks erosion over time."

It also establishes that the UK's effective tax take is firmly in line with many other European countries, including Belgium and much of central and eastern Europe, and of course it is significantly lower than in Scandinavia. As such, uprating the duty strikes the right balance between the different objectives of encouraging social activity, supporting the hospitality and manufacturing industries, and not encouraging excessive consumption. It is true that there have been changes in alcohol consumption rates among the general public, changes that have been particularly marked since covid. As the 2024 living costs and food survey found, there has been a notable fall in real-terms alcohol consumption, both in and out of the home, which is why specific measures are needed to support the pub trade.

If I may, I will say a few words about the revaluation 2026 process. I have raised questions about this before, and the Minister has indicated that—as the phrase goes—discussions are ongoing, so in the interests of time I will not repeat my questions today. However, I would like to note two things. First, the Valuation Office Agency has been genuinely independent since the days of the increment value duty, and secondly, valuation 2026 has been coming for a long time. It was the last Government who changed the law to introduce three-year valuation exercises, and as successive annual reports of the VOA make clear, the risk of valuations in individual sectors that are not of sufficient quality was foreseen. A delivery plan was developed before the 2024 general election to mitigate that risk, as the VOA saw it. Presumably the Government of the day did not have concerns about the VOA's approach, because if they did, they would have raised them on the record.

I will make two further brief points, the first of which is about the tax system's treatment of different types of alcohol sales. Something needs to be done about the sale of high-strength drinks on our high streets in proximity to betting shops. If you were to go to Northfield high street, Ms Cummins, you would see a succession of small betting shops immediately next to off-licences where very low cost, but very high strength beers and ciders are sold. There is a revolving door between those premises, and it is a major contribution to some of the

antisocial problems that we have on our high streets. I hope that future exercises will look at different treatments, whether that is powers for local authorities or changes to the tax system to try to remedy the problem.

6.30 pm

Dave Doogan: I remember precisely the dynamic that the hon. Member sets out in his local high street. We used to have it in Scotland, too, until we introduced minimum unit pricing, which took the very large volume, high-strength alcohol products off the shelf in Scotland, or at least put them way up in price. He can check with the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), who I am sure would endorse that SNP policy.

Laurence Turner: I sit on the same Select Committee as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), and I know better than to speak for him. I have a degree of personal sympathy with the case that the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) sets out. I also think there is something to be said for giving more powers to our councils, because these decisions—particularly when they relate to areas at risk of complex interactions between homelessness, lack of mental health provision and the sales of these at times dangerous products—are best made locally, in addition to national policy setting.

My final point is that there have been calls outside this place for uprating to be moved to a different inflation index, principally the consumer prices index or the consumer prices index with housing. That important matter has not been raised in this debate, so I will touch on it briefly. Although CPI and CPIH are both of use as macroeconomic indicators, RPI remains the only measure that is in general circulation and is updated regularly that actively seeks to measure the cost of living as it is experienced by working people. Criticisms can be made of the retail prices index, but it is important to place on record that in the early 2010s, regular changes to the methodology for RPI were discontinued. That is behind the formula gap that has led to the widening between the headline rates of RPI and CPI. I am not convinced that moving to a different rate at this time is appropriate, given some of the limitations of CPI and its twin CPIH, which we can discuss on another occasion.

The Office for National Statistics has been developing the alternative household costs indices measure. That is particularly useful, because it captures the different rates of inflation experienced by households of different income levels. I hope that in future we can look at the HCIs as an alternative means of uprating the various charges, levies and escalators that the Government apply. We are not in that place yet, and it is important that the ONS makes progress in this area.

On the whole, I welcome the Minister's statement. Compared with some of the other debates we have had in this Parliament—particularly on the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, where it was suggested that there was some secretive and sinister plot to change sales of the pint to some metric measure—this has in contrast been a sober debate. I look forward to voting for the Finance Bill tonight.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper: Clause 86 increases the rate of alcohol duty in line with RPI inflation. On paper, that measure might look like a normal, simple uprating policy, but it must be seen for what it really is: in the broader context, it is yet another tax on struggling hospitality businesses and financially stretched customers.

Hospitality is being hammered over and over again with sky-high rents and soaring energy bills, the Government's unfair jobs tax, and now this business rates bombshell buried in the fine print of the Budget. It matters, and hospitality really matters. It is the only element of pre-pandemic spending that has not recovered. The sector employs huge numbers of young people and part-time workers, often giving people their very first job and their way into longer-term employment.

This is one of the sectors that make life worth living. We all remember the place where we fell in love, or had our first date. I remember the music venue where I found my favourite band. I remember the pub where I sat with my girlfriends and one told me that she was not going to survive her stage 4 cancer—and I remember the spa day that we had when she did. Hospitality is part of who we are as human beings. It is unique in what it contributes to our economy, and we must do everything to support it.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): If this debate had taken place before Christmas, I would have had to declare an interest, but my father has now sold his majority share in our local pub in our home town, which I think goes to the core of today's debate: publicans are leaving the sector. My hon. Friend has been talking about the importance of hospitality. My father's pub used to host bingo nights on Thursdays and bingo on Sunday afternoons, and on those occasions we would see people there who would never go at other times of the week. Does my hon. Friend agree that the sense of community that pubs build is crucial, and is under threat from this Labour Government?

Daisy Cooper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Pubs are irreplaceable, and when a pub goes a community falls apart. Pubs are vital as part of the social fabric: they are the glue that holds our communities together, and we must protect them. We tabled new clause 9 because we want the Government to look at and

“report on the cumulative impact on the hospitality sector of alcohol duty measures”

alongside all the other “wider fiscal changes”, including the higher national insurance contributions and the business rates changes. This really matters.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Back in November, the Chancellor promised to support the great British pub by introducing permanently lower tax rates in more than 750,000 retail and hospitality properties. In my constituency, the Half Moon will experience an 157% rise in business rates, the Inn at West End an 87% increase and the Frog in Deepcut an increase of 128%. Does my hon. Friend agree that this feels less like support and more like last orders?

Daisy Cooper: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. One of the points that I have made repeatedly to other Ministers is that businesses heard the promise that there would be permanently lower business rates, and made decisions based on the fact that they had heard the

word “lower”. The Government gave themselves powers to introduce a lower multiplier for retail, hospitality and leisure—20p less—and it was understood by the hospitality industry that if they used those powers, that would effectively cancel out the loss of the RHL relief. Businesses made investment decisions. They made hiring decisions. They made all sorts of decisions based on what they thought was going to happen. But the Government have not used those powers that they gave themselves, using a multiplier of minus 5p rather than the maximum of minus 20p.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I recently met Richard, a publican in my constituency, and he told me the trade had never been so tough. He said:

“The truth of the matter is, for the first time I'm thinking I shouldn't have bothered taking the risk of going into business. I should have stayed with the big brewer, taken my salary and relied on my pension.”

He is right, isn't he?

Daisy Cooper: I hope so very much that he is not, but I understand why he said that, and I hear the same from many hospitality owners and pub landlords on my own patch.

It is because we Liberal Democrats care so deeply for hospitality, and recognise the vital role that it plays in every community in the land, that we were campaigning ahead of the Budget for an emergency VAT cut for hospitality accommodation and attractions until April 2027—a measure that would have brought growth into every corner of our country, saved jobs and our high streets, and given a real boost to consumer confidence. That is why, since the Budget, we have been fighting tirelessly against the Government's devastating business rates hikes, and pressing Ministers to implement the full 20p discount for which they legislated last year.

Dr Luke Evans: The hon. Member rightly points to the cumulative effect, but I am interested to see that her new clause 9 does not mention the Employment Rights Bill or the impact of the national living wage increase. Is it by design that the Liberal Democrats have not put those in, because they do not agree that they will have an impact on hospitality, or was it an oversight, and they are other cumulative effects that need to be considered when holding the Government to account?

Daisy Cooper: I am grateful for that question, but if the hon. Member reads the explanatory statement closely, he will see that it says “alongside wider fiscal changes”. The Government could of course widen that to other legislative changes, if they chose to do so. However, on that basis, I hope the hon. Member and his colleague will be supporting the new clause when we push it to a vote later.

Dr Arthur: As an important point of clarity on the living wage, which of our constituents on low pay does the hon. Member think do not deserve that uplift in living wage? Is she saying they do not deserve it?

Daisy Cooper: Absolutely not. During the passage of the Employment Rights Bill, we Liberal Democrats said repeatedly on the record in both Houses that we supported a higher minimum wage. The problem we are hearing from businesses, particularly small businesses, is that they are getting lots of changes from the Government

all at once. It is business rates changes, higher contributions, wages, the new regulation and now alcohol duty as well. It is the cumulative impact of all of the employment changes and the fiscal changes that means business owners and pub landlords just cannot cope.

This is about the cumulative impact. We have made very clear which measures we support and which ones we do not, but the cumulative impact is felt by small businesses. That is why, during the passage of the Employment Rights Bill, we tabled a number of amendments asking the Government to report on the impact on small businesses in particular. I hope that has clarified the matter for the hon. Member.

Dr Arthur: A wide range of concerns has been developed, and I get the point that these are costing the hospitality sector money—I absolutely get that—but all that the Lib Dems are promising is a review. What I do not hear is what they would do to resolve this and how much it would cost, apart from the broad assertion that they would cut VAT in some undefined way. What is this going to cost, and where is the money coming from?

Daisy Cooper: I have explained all those measures in this Chamber before, but I am happy to spell them out again, including the remarks I made a few minutes ago.

The very first thing we called for was for the Government to use the powers they gave themselves in the Budget last year. I would love to know the costings for that measure, and I have tabled written parliamentary questions to ask the Government to give me those numbers. If the Government will not answer written questions, how on earth are opposition parties supposed to come up with modern proposals? We have tabled written questions time and again, but we have not received any answers.

On the VAT point, we have costed it. We said it would cost £7 billion over 17 months, and we would fund it with a windfall tax on the big banks, which is a proposal backed by the Institute for Public Policy Research and independent economists. So we have answered all of these points and explained where the money would come from. The suggestions are fully costed and fully funded. We have made those points in this Chamber on several occasions, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman will see if he has a look at *Hansard*. My point is that, if we are going to put questions to the Government asking them for data so we can make informed policy suggestions, I very much hope that they start to answer them.

On that matter, it has been reported in various newspapers, on the BBC and in other places that the Chancellor and Ministers did not understand—those sources have quoted the Chancellor and Ministers as saying they did not understand—the impact that revaluation would have on business rates bills, especially for pubs. I find that impossible to believe, and I cannot understand how that can be the case. We know for a fact that, at the very least, the Valuation Office Agency gave the aggregate data to the Treasury. We know that because it says it in black and white—or in black and slightly red—on page 81 of the Red Book. It says that the VOA gave that data to the Treasury.

I tabled a number of written questions asking the Government whether they had received that information broken down by sector, and I did not receive any answers. I wrote a letter to the Leader of the House and I made a point of order, but again, that information was

not forthcoming. Then we had a bombshell revelation today when the VOA, in giving evidence to the Treasury Committee, confirmed upon questioning that it had given data drops on the sectoral impact starting a year ago. It also confirmed to the Treasury Committee today that 5,100 pubs have seen their rateable values at least double. It therefore seems, if the VOA did provide that information to the Treasury, that the Treasury should have had that information. It is not clear to me why I did not receive data-rich answers to my written questions asking for that breakdown by sector. It is also not clear to me how the Chancellor and Ministers can say that they did not know or did not understand the impact that the revaluation would have on bills if they had had that data over the course of the past year.

I urge Ministers when they come to the House, as they are indicating they will, to provide some kind of a U-turn—we do not know what that looks like—to bring some clarity to all those questions. In the meantime, I hope the Government do support new clause 9, because we need to see the cumulative impact not just of alcohol duty changes, but their impact alongside national insurance and business rates.

6.45 pm

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Lady is giving a very good speech. I hope, as the Liberal Democrat spokesman, she will say just a tiny bit more about rural pubs. I think a lot of urban Members do not understand the context. Where I live here in Westminster, it takes me one minute to walk to my local—one minute. Where I live in the Lincolnshire Wolds, it takes me one hour to walk to the pub—one hour. Everybody who accesses pubs in rural England has to go there by car. We do not ride horses any more, and it is too dangerous to walk on the road or take a bicycle. The Government have to understand that the rural pub is in real danger from the alcohol limits and other measures.

Daisy Cooper: I am incredibly grateful to the right hon. Member for making that point. I am the MP for St Albans, which is a small city, but I am a Suffolk girl born and bred. I know how valuable rural pubs are. They provide all sorts of services: they look after older people and single people; they are a fantastic community hub; and they provide employment for young people—one of my first jobs, aside from apple picking, was working in a pub—so I understand the vital importance of pubs in every single village, town, parish and hamlet up and down the United Kingdom. I am grateful to him for making that point.

In closing, I hope that when the Government respond this evening they provide answers to some of these questions. What did Ministers know and when? If the VOA sent that sector information on valuations, when was it sent? When did it send the information on pubs, specifically? If the VOA did tell Ministers that rateable values had at least doubled for more than 5,000 pubs, how is it possible that Ministers did not know? Why have we still not had a statement from the Government on what they are trying to do? Will their announcement extend to the rest of the hospitality industry, or just to pubs? Will the Government now use the full powers that they gave themselves? I cannot cost this, because I have not been given the numbers despite repeated attempts to get them. Will the Government consider a VAT cut?

[Daisy Cooper]

Finally, the only rumour we have heard about what the Government may be considering are the changes to licensing laws, so let me close with this point: if your pub is empty, you do not want to keep it open for longer, paying more money to keep the lights on, the radiators heated and the staff behind the bar. That is not an answer to this problem.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): As the MP representing the home of British brewing, Burton-upon-Trent, it will come as no surprise that I will speak to clause 86, and focus my contribution on pubs and hospitality. For me, this is not just political; it is personal. As a Burtonian, I grew up with the smell of hops permeating the air and Burton's famous water flowing from the taps. My very first job was in a pub. This industry is who we are.

Pubs are woven into the very fabric of our country. They are the heart of our high streets and villages, and are among our last shared spaces. When we talk about growth, and supporting wellbeing and employment, pubs and hospitality sit at the heart of that conversation. Yet this is an industry that has faced years of challenge. Navigating the pandemic, absorbing high energy costs and managing rising prices have left many venues operating on very low margins, if any at all.

That is why the decisions we make in this clause matter so much. We must look carefully at the overall effect of alcohol duty and how it interacts with consumer behaviour. There is a case for strengthening differential rates of duty between supermarkets and pubs, known as draught relief. Drinking in a pub is not the same as drinking at home. Pubs are supervised, regulated spaces. Landlords ensure responsible drinking, with pubs providing social connection and supporting mental health in our communities. Pubs give character to our high streets and town centres, yet the tax system makes it cheaper to buy alcohol in bulk from a supermarket than to go down the local pub. If we are serious about encouraging people back into our town centres, into these shared protected spaces, alcohol duty must work in favour of pubs.

I encourage Treasury Front Benchers to read the letter from those of us on the all-party parliamentary beer group, which calls for the multiplier to be increased from around 13% to 20%. Our proposal is supported by the Campaign for Real Ale, the Society of Independent Brewers and Associates and the British Institute of Innkeeping. This is not about encouraging more drinking; it is about encouraging better drinking in places that strengthen our local communities and our local economies.

I recognise that the Government have put in place the permanently lower multiplier on business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, but any wins in this space have been wiped out in many cases by the new rateable values published by the VOA. In my constituency, the rateable value of the Devonshire Arms—the Devvie, my favourite pub—is set to increase by over 60%. Down the road at the Roebuck, the rise is more than 70%. At this rate, I am not going to have much of a pub crawl.

We must stay true to the manifesto commitment we made to level the playing field between online retailers and the high street. An average 76% increase for pubs compared with just 14% for online retailers means that

we must think again on this policy. It is no good having transitional relief in place when the bill at the end of the three years is simply unaffordable.

Industry voices are clear that further support is needed in the short term while longer-term changes and reforms are worked through. Operators such as Punch Pubs, which is headquartered in my constituency, have called for a higher business rates discount—up to the maximum permitted—to help offset the valuations and the cumulative tax burden that pubs face. UKHospitality has similarly warned that even after reduced multipliers and the transitional relief that the Government have put in place, the average pub faces a significant increase to its business rates bill, alongside other cumulative impacts that hon. Members talked about earlier.

The Government are right to listen to Labour Members who have been raising the voices of pubs, brewers, restaurants and small business owners. I want to thank those publicans, business owners and representative bodies that have engaged positively with me; it is only through working together constructively that we can bring about change.

Businesses that I speak to want to invest and grow, but they need the space and certainty to do so. I really welcome the recent hospitality investment that my constituency has seen—from Lowe's on Carter Street to Nathan Dawe's expansion of Isabel's and Bespoke Inns' redevelopment of the Hart and taking on of Tutbury Castle. Such businesses need to be supported by Government so that we can meet their ambitions. We must create more well-paid jobs and revive our high streets and town centres.

That means a fair approach to alcohol duty under clause 86, a recognition of the difference between pubs and supermarkets, and targeted support on business rates while deeper changes are delivered. If we get this right, the reward is clear: thriving pubs, stronger high streets, more resilient local economies, and communities that are not just better off but happier and more connected. That is why pubs and hospitality must continue to be listened to, supported and championed in this House and by this Labour Government. I shall continue to do that.

Mike Wood: It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), who made some excellent points. Before I begin, I will disclose that although I do not have any relevant interests to the debate in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I have received hospitality below the threshold from UKHospitality, the British Beer and Pub Association, CAMRA and the British Institute of Innkeeping; there may be others.

People up and down the country may be justified in asking what the Government have against pubs. Many things are causing so many pubs to struggle and to question whether they can survive beyond the very short term—the enormous increases in business rates, the increases in employer national insurance that particularly hit those who employ part-time workers, and the ever-growing burden of regulation, not least in the Employment Rights Act 2025, that affects many pubs and hospitality venues—but I think that this clause in the Bill really sums it up.

The Government did have a choice. The Chancellor could have built on a success of the previous Conservative Government—in fairness to her, she actually did so last

year—by reducing that draught duty rate so that duty on beer and cider sold on draught in pubs was paid at a lower rate, perhaps at the same time as extending the differential with supermarkets and off-sales that might be sold at or below cost price. But she chose not to do that; she chose to increase duty on top of all the extra burdens that are threatening the survival of our community pubs, bars and other hospitality venues. By increasing duty by RPI rather than the lower rate of CPI, the Chancellor is threatening to return us to the bad old days of the previous Labour Government's hated beer duty escalator, under which the duty rate increased year after year.

I think the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) suggested that this measure is somehow in keeping with the policy of successive Governments, but nothing could be further from the truth. In just 19 months, the Government will have increased beer duty by more than it went up in the 12 years running up to the last general election. This is a massive increase in duty in a short period. Indeed, the duty paid on a pint in a pub was actually lower in July 2024 than it had been 12 years earlier because of policy decisions made by Conservative chancellors.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend has been to quite a few pubs in his constituency. Many of my publicans are saying that because of the decisions the Government are making, they have a choice, which is to try to get more customers or to lay off staff. This is affecting pubs who are busy—pubs at their capacity are now really worried about whether they will be able to survive another year. Has he heard that from his local publicans?

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend is right, although that is not really a choice that many pubs are able to make, because it is taken for them. We saw the same thing when the previous Labour Government's beer duty escalator was in force. We know that increases in alcohol duties have a minimal impact on overall alcohol consumption, but they do have an impact on how people drink and what they drink.

Higher alcohol duties lead to a shift from people consuming alcohol in well regulated, licensed premises like a community pub—where they will typically drink medium-strength beer and cider—to people drinking more stronger alcohol at home without the protective framework of a licensed pub. That makes no sense on either a social and health or an economic and community basis. It is the wrong thing to do yet again. It is yet another burden that our overstretched pubs and hospitality venues simply cannot afford. It is the wrong thing to do and that is why, as well as supporting our own new clause and opposing the clause, I will certainly support the new clauses tabled by the Liberal Democrats. There is a better alternative.

7 pm

Of course, we need to sort out genuinely lower business rate bills for hospitality venues, which is what the Chancellor promised she was doing and the Business Secretary apparently thought they were doing, despite the Treasury publishing all the data on the day of the Budget that made it clear that the median rateable value of pubs was going up by a full third, which more than offset the

reduction in the business rates multiplier. The Government certainly need to address that, but they can make a start tonight by dropping the plans to increase alcohol duty and, in particular, to increase that duty on draught beer in our high street and community pubs.

Gareth Snell: It is a pleasure to follow my county colleagues, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier). Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire as a county are rich in the heritage of brewing. Burton is a prime example of that, but in Stoke-on-Trent we too have some wonderful small brewers, such as Titanic, which has sadly shared with me the business rate increases that it faces, with a 450% increase in some of its venues.

That is a challenge that those venues have to face, and I hope the Government will look seriously at finding a realistic workable solution. The value of pubs in our communities is not just about the pints that they sell, but about the people they look after, such as the old gent nursing a pint for a couple of hours and being looked after by the bar staff. We lose that at our peril.

I will restrict my comments to the differential between cider rates and beer rates. One of the things that the Treasury has done for many years, including under the Conservative Government, is to keep an unfair differential between the rate of duty applied to cider and that applied to beer. That came in during the coalition Government and I can only presume that it had something to do with the number of Lib Dem seats in the south-west. The point remains, however, that a small beer producer—a small brewery—in the UK will pay more in duty on the pints it produces than a global cider manufacturer, because of the differential points at which the relief comes in.

Mr Dillon: Under this Government, we also have the situation whereby champagne in France is taxed at 40% less than sparkling wine is taxed in this country. If we are levelling the playing field, does the hon. Gentleman believe that the Government should also level the playing field for English sparkling wine so that it can compete with champagne?

Gareth Snell: There is a danger here of getting into the inevitable jokes about champagne socialism, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. He is right: there needs to be fair play. If we even out the taxation across the sector, that means that we can have targeted support in other areas where we know that there should be an unfair advantage for certain things. For instance, as the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire said, we should encourage and support making greater use of the draught relief for those selling alcohol in a pub.

Currently, 61% of cider producers produce less than five hectolitres of alcohol, which means they get a 100% reduction in the duty they pay. That is why we could increase or level out the rate of alcohol duty on cider and beer producers without impacting the small cider producers in this country. It would only impact the global manufacturers which, frankly, are taking a profit and making, I would argue, a substandard product, or trying to hide a mass-produced product behind a local label, which is often the case.

[Gareth Snell]

Under the Government's proposal, the duty will be £10.39 per litre for cider and £22.58 for beer, and that differential grows every year. Because it is uprated by an inflation percentage, over the past few years the rate between the two in cash terms has just got bigger and bigger. It is a disadvantage to small brewers, who produce good quality beer, that they pay a rate of alcohol duty equivalent to the global cider manufacturers. SIBA estimates that the levelling of that figure could generate £360 million per year. That money could either go towards reducing the rate overall for all levels of duty, or it could further reduce the draught relief so that there is a clear and meaningful differential between those selling alcohol in pubs and those selling it in supermarkets.

There are some brilliant pubs in my constituency, the Greyhound in Hartshill being the one that I frequent the most. It is a community venue, and if it has to pay greater levels of duty on alcohol as a result of this Budget, I am sure it will find a way of doing so, but if there was a way of encouraging more people to go to that pub because the rate of duty on that pint was lower and it was subsidised by the big cider producers selling to the supermarkets, it seems to me that that would be a fair thing to do.

There is also a non-tax measure that the Government could introduce to support small brewers across the country, and it would cost the Government nothing. The market access review is currently sitting on a desk in the Department for Business and Trade, and it would guarantee that small brewers could have access to pubs in their locality to guarantee guest ales. I believe that Scotland already has this mechanism and that it is working well—unless someone can tell me otherwise. If we could replicate that in England and Wales, it would mean that those small independent brewers would have an opportunity to sell more beer in pubs, where a lower rate of duty would be applied to the product. That would help them with their business. It would give publicans an opportunity to increase the range of beers they sell, which would then help to attract more people into those pubs. It would mean that we would have more small independent brewers in this country selling more pints of beer, which supports them as employers and as good companies, such as Titanic in my own city.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I want to speak about the pub and hospitality sector in my constituency in the Scottish Borders, but also more broadly about the impact of these changes on an important industry that is the lifeblood of the Scottish economy. We are debating the hike in alcohol duty, which the Treasury has described merely as “uprating”, but for Scotland this technical change will have a real impact on our iconic industry. It will be a hammer blow to the Scottish whisky industry as well as to the pub and hospitality sector.

The Treasury is hiking these taxes to fill the black hole in its balance sheet, but the Scottish whisky industry is a global brand that not only supports the Scottish economy but is very important to the UK economy, and it is really important that the Treasury and the Government understand the impact that these changes will have on this global brand.

It is important to remember the numbers associated with the Scottish whisky industry. It contributes £7.1 billion to the UK economy. It also supports 41,000 jobs in Scotland, some of them in our most fragile and vulnerable communities in the highlands, in Moray, in the Borders and all over Scotland. The whisky industry has a footprint and an impact. Whether it is the distilleries or the farmers who are growing the crops that go to be distilled, the whisky industry is a key part of the Scottish economy as well as the key part of many local economies, in that it provides local jobs in remote communities and supports local events and, often, local services such as the local school, the village shop and many other key parts of the community.

The Minister and the Chancellor claim that the rise in alcohol duty will boost revenue, but history says something very different. Indeed, the Treasury's own data says something very different, because when duty was hiked by 10.1% in 2023, spirits revenue did not go up; it actually plummeted. Before colleagues seek to intervene, I appreciate that it was a Conservative Chancellor who made that change, but Scottish Conservative MPs argued strongly for it not to happen. We accepted the representations that the Scottish whisky industry, the Scotch Whisky Association and many of our constituents were making against the tax rise.

The evidence has backed up what the industry was saying. When we put up taxes, the revenue generated actually falls. According to the Scotch Whisky Association, that tax hike actually cost the Treasury £150 million as consumers pull back and stop spending as much as they did. By doubling down, the Labour Government will compound the situation. The Chancellor and this Government are trapped in a doom loop where higher taxes lead to lower sales, which lead to lower tax receipts, which lead to—you guessed it—even higher taxes from elsewhere as they scramble around to try to fill the gap. It is not possible to tax a sector into prosperity.

I want to touch briefly on the impact on our high streets and pubs, because it is not just the distilleries that will suffer as a consequence of this tax hike. From the highlands to the Borders, our hospitality is screaming out for “breathing room” because all it is getting from this Government is a tightening of the noose. The Scottish Government are compounding matters in Scotland with their anti-job policies. Taken with the UK Government's policies, that is making things even worse.

Dave Doogan: The hon. Member refers to his belief that the Scottish Government are engaged in anti-jobs policies. Can he therefore explain why unemployment in Scotland is substantially lower than it is in England?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Member for making that point, but by any measure the Scottish economy is not doing well. Scotland is, by any definition, the most highly taxed part of the United Kingdom. While paying all this extra tax, none of my constituents—I am sure his constituents would agree—feel that they are getting any extra benefit from it. Our NHS and our education system are not performing well; there are potholes on all our roads; and our local authorities are underfunded. Taxes are going up in Scotland, but public services are going down. But of course we have an opportunity in a few weeks in Scotland to replace a failing nationalist Government with a pro-UK Scottish Conservative Government.

The hospitality and pub sector in Scotland is having to deal not just with these higher rates of alcohol duty, but with national insurance hikes, the jobs tax and the national living wage hike, as well as all the other red tape being imposed on it. Pubs are finding it more and more difficult to do business, which is why numbers are falling as a direct consequence of decisions that this Government have taken. In fact, in 2025 we saw a record number of licensed premises handing back their keys because they could no longer make their balance sheets work.

As colleagues have mentioned, pubs are more than just where people go to have a drink and more than just the value of a drink; they provide social value to the local community. I represent 90 to 100 different communities in my constituency. Not all of them have a pub, but for those that still do, the pub is a focal point. It is where people go not just to have a drink, but to meet friends and chat to neighbours. It might be the only conversation and contact someone has that day, over a social pint or a can of cola.

I want to mention a couple of the excellent pubs in my constituency: the Black Bull in Duns, the Cobbles in Kelso, the Ship Inn in Melrose, the Plough Hotel in Yetholm and the Office Bar in Hawick. One pub I must mention that has bucked the trend—I said earlier that lots of pubs are closing—is the Blackadder in Greenlaw, which has just reopened and is going from strength to strength. But the pub highlights the huge challenges that the Government are imposing on it. Despite the fact that it has made this effort to open and get people back in the pub, the challenges being imposed on it—largely, I have to say, by the UK Government—are clear, and it is finding it so difficult to continue the service it is providing and keep the business running.

We are fast approaching the point when people in Scotland and across the UK will no longer be able to go down to their local to enjoy a drink, and when the only people who can afford Scotland's national drink—a glass of whisky—will be those living outside Scotland, as opposed to those living in Scotland.

I just wish that the Chancellor, the Minister and the Government would reflect on all the voices highlighting these issues and crying out for help, and that they would recognise the service that these important local businesses are providing to their communities. They should listen to all the publicans who have decided to ban Labour MPs from their premises because they do not agree with the policies that they are proposing. They feel so strongly about this issue that they have decided to make a stand. I encourage the Government to think again. If they cannot think again tonight, they should at least recognise that a cumulative assessment of all these changes would allow them to come back to the Chamber better informed and justify the choices that they are making in this Budget.

7.15 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The line about alcohol duty in clause 86 may look technical, and even innocuous, but outside the Chamber, in places such as my constituency of Wimbledon, it lands with a thud. Before I go further, I should declare an interest: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy and the owner of a speakeasy, CellarDoor,

in Covent Garden. I have owned CellarDoor for nearly two decades—through the financial crisis, Brexit and covid—yet nothing compares to the crisis that hospitality is now facing.

One constituent, a Campaign for Real Ale supporter, wrote to me asking why pubs have been hit yet again through changes to business rates. Another told me that the rateable value of his small unit off Haydons Road in Wimbledon has risen from just over £15,000 to more than £22,000. Another constituent, who runs venues in London and Birmingham, thought the Budget would bring relief. Instead, he is facing sharp increases in operating costs in the years ahead. Admittedly, the Chancellor has belatedly indicated that she will offer some form of business rate relief to pubs, but what about the rest of hospitality—the restaurants, cafés, bars and music venues?

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Gareth, who runs the Cow & Apple in Yeovil, has told me that he feels that the assessments and consultations on how the proposals in the Finance (No. 2) Bill will impact the viability of the rural hospitality sector were not good enough. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is why we need to pass the Liberal Democrats' new clause 9, which calls for a review of the impact on the hospitality sector of these alcohol measures and broader Budget policies within six months?

Mr Kohler: Indeed I do. It is death by a thousand cuts. Those who run hospitality businesses have been hit by cost after cost after cost. The Government must listen.

Alcohol duty brought in about £12.5 billion in 2024-25. Hospitality, by contrast, contributed over £60 billion to the economy in 2023 and supported over 2.5 million jobs—over 7% of the workforce. Yet UK Hospitality estimates that 89,000 jobs—nearly 100,000—were lost in the nine months after the October 2024 Budget. Official figures show that 366 pubs closed in the year to December 2025. That is one pub every single day. The roots of this crisis lie in years of Conservative mismanagement, Brexit labour shortages, a broken business rates system, energy price shocks, commodity price increases and a cost of living crisis. Many in the sector hoped that the change of Government would bring a change of direction, yet things have only got worse with the rise in employer national insurance contributions.

The cumulative effect is undeniable: rising costs for shorter opening hours and fewer staff. Offering us easier or longer opening hours does not help if we do not have customers coming through the door. Investment is deferred, and too often doors close for good. When that happens, high streets lose more than businesses; they lose employment, footfall and the social infrastructure on which communities depend. That is why the Lib Dems are calling for an emergency cut in VAT for hospitality to 15% until April 2027, real reform of business rates and a proper review of the unworkable wine duty system. Such measures would protect jobs, support high streets and, in time, strengthen the public finances rather than weaken them.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), who is no longer in the Chamber, asked where the money will come from. We keep telling Labour: get rid of the red lines and negotiate a customs union

[Mr Kohler]

with the EU, which would raise £25 billion a year for the Exchequer. Businesses in Wimbledon and across the country are not asking for our pity; they are asking for a tax system that reflects the pressures they actually face. If Ministers are serious about protecting jobs, strengthening high streets and growing the economy, they should reverse this tax increase and introduce an emergency VAT reduction for hospitality.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I will focus on Liberal Democrat new clause 9, which would require an assessment of the cumulative impact of the proposals on the hospitality industry.

One must bear in mind that, after a medley of challenges, our hospitality industry fears the future—it is in crisis mode—so it is not prepared to invest or take a chance by improving its offer, and it is hunkering down and hoping for the best. I reflect on the international pandemic, which had a massive impact; Torbay's tourism and hospitality industry has still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. The outrageous second invasion of Ukraine almost four years ago caused a shock in our energy costs. I am afraid that there have also been self-inflicted wounds, such as the national insurance hike and the ensuing employment challenges.

David from Rock Garden in Torquay told me that his utility bill has risen to £3,000 a month, which dwarfs his rental costs. Ofgem is asleep at the wheel; it must back local businesses and drive the changes that we need. Our hospitality industry is horrified by the proposals for business rates. The Government must apply the full 20% rate of relief to ensure that there are protections. I am afraid to say that many people in the hospitality industry scoff at proposals that simply deregulate around the edges, because if they do not have paying customers in their premises, they are set up to fail.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Steve Darling: I will happily give way to my Devon colleague.

Caroline Voaden: As his constituency neighbours mine, my hon. Friend may be aware that three much-loved venues—Wild Artichokes, the Old Warehouse and the Old Bakery—closed in the town of Kingsbridge last week. The owner of one of those venues told us that part of the problem was the cumulation of challenges faced by the hospitality industry—not just the lack of people coming through the door and spending money because of the cost of living crisis, as my hon. Friend just said, but the rises in business rates and employer national insurance contributions, which have made it impossible for businesses to continue. Does he agree that it is a tragedy that such venues are closing every day, and that something must change before the hospitality industry is devastated?

Steve Darling: My hon. Friend is spot on. We need the Government to wake up, smell the coffee and recognise the challenges that our hospitality industry faces.

Some national chains, such as Wetherspoons, use their buying power to drive down the cost of a pint—many customers reflect on prices when they cross the threshold of a venue. The reality for lots of independents—because

it is independents that are really important—is that £6 a pint is the minimum they can achieve with all the costs that are involved. When we compare that with the cost in a supermarket, it is really scary. The Minister rightly highlighted the difference we see today, with more than 70% of the alcohol consumed having been purchased at a supermarket. I feel we need to have a national debate about whether we have got the balance right and how we can ensure that we are driving greater footfall towards our hospitality industry.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I want to reiterate how important that is. In my constituency, it is too little, too late for many—the Lussmanns has closed in Berkhamsted, as has the Elephant and Castle in Wheathampstead—and we need support from the Government to ensure that more do not close. Does my hon. Friend agree that actions such as the Lib Dems' proposal to reduce VAT to 15%, at least until April 2027, would be a step towards protecting hospitality before it is too late for others?

Steve Darling: I do not know those venues, but I suspect some of them may well be on the high street. We, as Liberal Democrats, know that our constituents see our high streets as the beating heart of our communities. By backing our hospitality industry, we are backing our high streets.

Anthony from Otto in Torquay shared with me how independents are powered by families; they put people first. The reality is that an independent is not going to get a regional chippy in to do some work for him. He is going to take on the chippy who he plays football with on a Sunday morning. He has some skin in the game; he might know that chippy's kids, because they go to the local sixth form with his kids. As independents, they have a level of skin in the game. That is why we need to ensure that we set up an economy that supports independents. What I found extremely scary when talking with a number of these people this weekend was that they were saying, "Why are we doing this? We could be managers of a local supermarket and sleep at night." I hope the Minister will listen to these pleas and ensure that the Government do this cumulative impact assessment.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I rise to speak to clause 86 and new clause 26, tabled in the name of the official Opposition, which requires the Government to carry out a review of the impact of the increased level of alcohol duty on our pubs and hospitality sector. All these measures will have a cumulative impact on our hospitality and pub sector, because this comes on the back of the huge amount of tax revenue that will be raised from the last Budget—£26 billion-worth, or £64 billion-worth if we take into account the last two Budgets. Alcohol duty alone will bring in an additional £400 million a year—a raid on our pints, spirits and glasses of wine. Alcohol duty is set to rise by an inflation-busting 3.66% at the start of February, equating to a 2p increase on the price of a pint in a pub.

When I am out in my constituency speaking to the landlords of the Dog and Gun in the Worth valley, the Craven Heifer in Addingham, the Airedale Heifer in Keighley or the Black Hat in Ilkley, they all talk to me about the cumulative impact of not only the alcohol duty increase but rising employer's national insurance,

soaring energy costs, increasing minimum wages, the business rate relief reduction not being at the level that was initially indicated and, of course, the tourism tax that is coming down the line. The tourism tax will impact areas like Haworth in the Worth valley and Ilkley in my constituency, where a tax will be collected and go into a generalised pot to be redistributed by the Mayor of West Yorkshire, but I suspect it will not go back into places like Ilkley or Haworth, which are effectively being used as cash cows for the rest of West Yorkshire.

These are all detrimental impacts over and above the alcohol duty. At a local level, on-street parking charges in Ilkley are set to increase at the end of this month. All these things are making it much more difficult for places like the Flying Duck and the Black Hat in Ilkley, where people like to go and enjoy a drink. Disposable income is getting less in my constituency. Labour-run Bradford council has increased council tax by 14.99% in the last two years. People have less money in their pockets, and then we have a Labour Government hitting our pubs and hospitality sector, and boy do they feel it.

7.30 pm

Why is there still the linkage between increasing alcohol duty and RPI, when the Government specifically acknowledge that the RPI reference has flaws? Why are the Government not referencing it against CPI, which is the official measure of inflation—the Minister did not quite refer to that in her contribution. That is why new clause 26 is so important and must be accepted this evening: it would allow a proper assessment of all the impacts of cost overheads on our pub and hospitality sector that I have mentioned.

Drinkers in Britain already pay around 54p of duty per pint pulled in the pub. The British Beer and Pub Association states that Britain, and England, has the third highest level of tax in Europe when it comes to drinking a pint in a pub, after Finland and Ireland. That is outrageous when we know all the positive impacts that pubs have on those rural communities, and on people who like to go to the pub to enjoy it.

The Government should be working with our hospitality sector, and with pubs across our constituencies, not against them as we have seen. In addition to the questions I have asked about RPI and not using CPI, what assessment have the Government made of the cumulative impact on our pubs and wider hospitality sector to date? Given the number of U-turns that have happened—we have seen another today, with the Government and Prime Minister rolling back on digital ID—will the Economic Secretary to the Treasury enlighten me about this? When fiscal changes have been made outside the budgetary cycle, such as the changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief, how has tax revenue to the Treasury been recalibrated? How much will those measures cost, and how will that impact the Government's spending plans? We suspect—it has not been announced formally, but it has been trailed in the press—that there will be changes to business rates, which would of course be welcome. All Conservative Members want to see business rates scrapped in full. I cannot for the life of me understand why the Labour Government will not follow the Conservative party in that call, but if such a change takes place outside a fiscal event, where on earth will the Government get the money from to meet their spending plans?

On behalf of the many pubs and hospitality venues that I represent across Keighley, Ilkley, Silsden, and the Worth valley, which have been kind enough to come to me with their concerns, I say this to the Government: get a grip. If they do not, I fear for many of the pubs and hospitality venues that will quickly go out of business under this Labour Government.

Dave Doogan: With clause 86, the Treasury in Westminster continues to treat Scotland's vital Scotch whisky sector as a cash cow, with duty rising again in line with inflation in the Budget. As the Scotch Whisky Association warned, the previous 3.65% increase to spirit duty reduced revenue by 7%, costing the Treasury £150 million, so it seems an opportune moment to remind the Minister that her ambition, and that of her colleagues, should be to increase tax receipts, not erode them.

Dewar's, Blair Athol, Edradour and Glencadam—just some of the distilleries in my constituency of Angus and Perthshire Glens—are four of the many distilleries striving to deliver global excellence, all while being gouged year after year by the Treasury in London. Through the hiking of duty, for the third time in two years, in the November Budget, a sector that is already mitigating job losses, stalled investment and business closures will face substantial additional headwinds. If the Labour Government genuinely value industry in Scotland beyond the grasping hand of the Treasury, they should work with us to amend or remove clause 86. That would have been a lot easier if SNP amendment 30 had been selected for debate. Nevertheless I can but appeal to the Minister's better and last-minute judgment on this matter.

A Scottish coalition of drinks, tourism and farming representatives warned in October that duty increases had already contributed to around 1,000 job losses, and claimed that duty can make up around 70% of the cost of a bottle of Scotch. That same coalition emphasised spirits' outsized role in hospitality margins, as they represent a smaller share of sales but a larger slice of profits, meaning that duty uprating can squeeze already extremely fragile margins in venues, especially in Scotland's towns and rural areas where footfall is thinner.

I cannot emphasise enough to the Minister that this tax rise could be the final nail in the coffin for many hospitality businesses that are already on the margins of solvency, especially those in rural settings, such as my constituency and those of many other hon. Members. I do not hold with banning Labour MPs from pubs, because pubs are about being in the company of people from all walks of life. If people wish to select the company that they keep, they can do that in their own house. In a public house, we convene with the whole community and visitors alike—that is the magic of it.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case for the whisky industry. Does he recognise that the cider industry in my part of the world in Somerset is deserving of good treatment because of its support for agriculture? It used to benefit from a duty of 40% that of the wider beer and drinks industry, but that has crept up. The average is now about 75%, and the duty on some classes of cider is now more than the duty on beer. Does he accept that that differential should be restored to support agriculture?

Dave Doogan: I have heard a range of cases from right hon. and hon. Members about that differential, and I would certainly like to see nothing happen that would jeopardise the drinks, hospitality or agricultural sectors in the west country, but I will leave that to be divined by others with a more material interest, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

Pubs are revered institutions, and they are under threat as never before across these islands, so let me put the situation in simple terms. Let us not forget that before the election hospitality was already struggling with the post-covid recovery, the highest taxes since the war, a punitive and unrelenting business rates regime, the disastrous misadventure of Brexit and labour shortages, and 16 years of the UK without any meaningful economic growth. On top of all that, we had the highest energy costs in the developed world.

Since the election, Labour has added to that. At the outset of the debate, I expressed my concern and the Minister was kind enough to take my intervention on the compound effect, which many other Members have mentioned. She should really take cognisance of that, because since the election, Labour has added to the hospitality sector's pain with a massive rise in employer national insurance contributions, even higher energy bills, even greater economic despondency pervading across society, an entrenched cost of living crisis keeping people at home, an increase to the minimum wage with no increase in revenue to support the payment of that wage, and no respite or consideration for the VAT millstone around hospitality's neck. Labour should really listen, because on top of all that, there is now a 25% increase in unemployment, with 352,000 people now unemployed who were not before Labour came to power.

John Lamont: As the hon. Member will know, the Scottish Government announced their Budget today. I am sure he is aware of the comments from UK Hospitality Scotland's executive director, who said that the Scottish Government Budget had

"not sufficiently addressed the challenges that hospitality businesses in Scotland face",

and that the majority

"will still be paying higher business rates bills in April".

How does he reflect on those comments in the light of what he was just saying?

Dave Doogan: I reflect on the fact that, following the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government's Budget today in Scotland, 93% of hospitality, retail and leisure businesses in Scotland will be paying no rates or reduced rates. That is because the SNP is responsive and closer to people in Scotland.

Further to that, not wishing to shoot the hon. Gentleman's fox again, he spoke about the taxation rates for people in work in Scotland. I am sure his constituents will be grateful to know that 55% of taxpayers in Scotland are paying less tax than they would if they were part of the fiscal regime in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The problem with the figure for unemployment, which is a scandal—352,000 people are unemployed who were not unemployed before Labour came into power—is that unemployed people cannot afford to go to the pub

or go out for a meal. It is against that backdrop that the Minister seeks to defend this latest hike in alcohol duty. That is totally unforgivable.

I do not think the Minister believes a word that I am saying, and she certainly will not refer to anything I say in her winding-up speech, which I take as a kind of contrarian compliment. I do not know whether she has a local that she goes to; if she does, she can take my list of 12 life-threatening headwinds for pubs, all caused by the UK Government—mostly by Labour—and see if the landlord and landlady in her pub disagree with my analysis. She should do that before she introduces the 13th headwind—unlucky for pubs—with clause 86.

The SNP will back new clause 9, because, as many Members have said, we really need to review the way in which alcohol is purchased and consumed in the United Kingdom and the fiscal burden that follows that. Off-sales are getting far too easy a run of it, and on-sales will disappear before our eyes. I also support new clause 26.

It is too late today, as we have not been able to stop Labour coming to assault our pubs, but I look forward to standing up for Scotland's hospitality sector again on Report. I hope the Minister will then have had a change of heart, or at the very least be in possession of a revised cost-benefit analysis that stacks up for hospitality.

Dr Luke Evans: I have come here to talk about duty, but not duty in the conventional sense. I feel that I owe a duty to the cafés, restaurants and pubs in my constituency to tell the Government just how poor their impact is and to hold them accountable. That is why I support new clauses 9 and 26.

Let me start with new clause 9, on the review of the cumulative impact. I agree with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that there is a cumulative impact, but I would go further, as I have done, and call it a toxic concoction. It is true that the Conservative Government raised taxes, and I can imagine that in the future another Conservative Government may need to do the same, but the toxic concoction that this Government have set out on, with the Employment Rights Bill, raising the minimum wage and the reduction in support on hospitality exemption all at the same time, is compounding the problem. I am here to use my voice and do my duty to ask the Government to be accountable and able to show their workings, and these two new clauses are an attempt to do that.

We saw the Government come forward in their first Budget and say that they did not need to raise any further taxes, yet the subsequent Budget in 2025, which we are debating now, brought taxes further forward by £26 billion. The Chancellor said that the slate was wiped clean, by her own admission, but it seems that she has hospitality in her sights, and it is not clear why. What does she have against cafés, hotels and restaurants? She seems to be softening, because she has heard from her Back Benchers about the impact that all this is having on pubs.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): To come to the rescue of the Chancellor, it turns out that she simply did not understand the impact, according to the Business Secretary. Perhaps the Minister, in her winding-up speech, will be able to confirm that the Chancellor literally did not know what the impact of her own policies would be on hospitality businesses.

The Minister may be able to tell us whether the Business Secretary was right to identify that failing of understanding by the Chancellor.

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend is very charitable, because the Chancellor has said that she does not know. However, we also know that the documentation released in the Budget says that the Treasury did know. What has gone wrong?

As we have heard today in Committee, the rateable value of 5,100 pubs will double, but the Lib Dem spokesman missed the other point: one in eight pubs will see an increase of more than 100% in their rateable value. The Government have a question to answer. Did they wilfully ignore that and choose to impact hospitality, or were they mistaken and not competent in seeing that there was a problem?

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that new clause 9 would actually be helpful to Government Back Benchers? Given how frequently No. 10 is U-turning, including yet another U-turn on digital ID just today, having an assessment of the cumulative impacts will help them when they come to their next potential U-turn in this area.

7.45 pm

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend has served in government, so he understands why it is important to have a fixed point that all of us in this House can reference, as well as—most importantly—his constituents who own a pub, a café or a hotel and are going to be impacted. That is why I want to see new clause 9 passed, because it will go a long way towards helping us understand the impacts those people are facing. If the Government are going to do something for pubs, as is rumoured, I simply pose the question, “Why pubs, and not cafés, restaurants or hotels?”

Turning to new clause 26, if my memory serves me right, the biggest cheer that the 2024 Budget got from Labour Members was when the 1p reduction in the pint was announced. What do we see this time around in the Budget? A 2p increase—that did not get cheered. Again, maybe Labour Members did not see it, or maybe it was hidden in the detail, which brings us to where we are today. This seems to be the problem: whether we are debating thresholds, as we did last night, or pubs, rateable values and duty today, either the Government do not know what they are doing, or they are wilfully pulling the wool over our constituents’ eyes. Fortunately, though, the Opposition are here to point out the wrong that is happening—to do our duty as an Opposition and hold the Government to account by tabling amendments such as new clause 26. That is why I will be supporting new clauses 9 and 26. Until we see some support for pubs, this is the only way that we in this House can hold the Government accountable and apply transparency to what is actually going on in the Treasury, in No. 10, and in the country.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I would like to place clause 86 in the wider context of the Budget’s impact on the hospitality sector and, in particular, the village pub. I was very grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), for agreeing to meet two landladies from my constituency in December. The Minister heard

from Becky, who runs the Red Lion and the White Hart in Eynsham, and from Donna, who runs the Oxfordshire Yeoman in Freeland.

As other Members have highlighted, village pubs are at the heart of their communities, but Becky and Donna described how hard it is to make the books balance. Donna gave the example of the work she does in her community. She has a number of regulars, and when one of them does not come in on a given day, she will give them a call to check he is all right and suggest he comes in—not because he is a big drinker, but because it is somewhere to be warm and sociable, and she knows that he has mental health challenges. In other ways, these two publicans are contributing to the lives of their communities.

Becky put in front of the Minister some of the cost increases she has faced. A fillet of fish cost her £2.30 in June 2023; when she saw the Minister in December 2025, the latest cost was £4.90. As well as these food prices more than doubling, energy prices have rocketed, but the greatest anxiety for these two publicans came from tax and regulation. Labour costs have increased with employer NICs—Becky gave the example of her employer NICs, which in gross terms have increased by more than four times over three years. Both publicans have had to release staff, with Donna now working more than 80 hours a week, serving as both the pub’s chef and general manager. She places orders on Mondays and Tuesdays when covers are lower, and she is in the kitchen Wednesday through Sunday.

Meanwhile, business rates represent a bombshell. Becky faces an increase in business rates at the Red Lion of nearly 120%, but she is outdone in my constituency by the 223% increase at the Lion in Wendlebury. Finally, Becky highlighted the impact of VAT on the hot food sold in her pub. Before the Budget, Liberal Democrats called for a 5% cut in VAT to offer some relief to the hospitality sector. Take that fillet of fish that has gone up by over 100% over two and a half years. Over the same period, the Treasury’s VAT take on that food has gone up by the same amount, an incredible increase in revenue with no relief for publicans.

The Minister asserted earlier that the Government were backing British pubs, despite the many hits to their bottom line. She also said that the structure of duty increases and reliefs is intended to support pubs by raising the relative price of alcohol consumed at home, compared with that consumed in a pub. Other Members from all parties have made proposals to go further, but many pubs have sought to diversify and increase the share of income and profit from food. Those that have tried are now being hobbled by the impact of VAT, which is another multiplier of costs. Becky and Donna are but two examples of the many publicans across my constituency who are holding on by their fingertips.

Dr Luke Evans: Does the hon. Member share my concern that often the only way that publicans can get around this issue is to either reduce their hours, reduce their staffing or take on more themselves, when they are already working 24/7 to try to deal with the costs? With this kind of change, the impact will be irreconcilable.

Calum Miller: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member. Both the publicans I am talking about are working in excess of 70 hours a week. They have laid

[Calum Miller]

off staff, meaning fewer jobs for those who might be able to engage in entry-level occupations. It is hitting employment as well as other aspects of the economy.

Too many local pubs in my constituency, as in so many others, have shut, and other publicans are considering leaving the sector. When they go, communities lose a key institution that brings people together at the heart of their villages. That is why I strongly support the Liberal Democrats' new clause 9, which would ensure an assessment of the cumulative effect of this Government's careless assault on the hospitality sector.

Lucy Rigby: I am grateful to all Members for their contributions to today's debate. Almost all of them have spoken passionately about their local pubs. I specifically acknowledge the contribution of the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan), just to deny him the pleasure of my not doing so.

We are taking a prudent and responsible decision to uprate alcohol duty in line with RPI. That is fully assumed in the OBR's baseline forecast, so failing to uprate would come at a real cost.

Mike Wood: Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Rigby: I am going to make some progress. Based on HMRC's ready reckoner, freezing alcohol duty would cost the Exchequer around £400 million a year. That money, despite the Opposition's best efforts to pretend otherwise, would have to be found elsewhere. This is one of the measures that assists in ensuring that our economy is strengthened and our future prosperity more secure. Indeed, it does that without taking the axe to public services or to investment. Those policies from the Conservatives had catastrophic consequences for all our constituents.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Rigby: I am going to make a bit more progress.

New clauses 8, 9 and 26 would require the Government to publish reports on the impacts of alcohol duty. The shadow Exchequer Secretary, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), invited me to refer to our tax information and impact note, and I will take him up on that invitation. As is usual practice, our note was published at the Budget. It outlined the anticipated impacts of this measure for alcohol producers and the hospitality sector. Because this uprating maintains the current real-terms value of the duty, the Government do not expect it to have significant macroeconomic impacts, including to the employment rate or hospitality businesses' costs, where a duty on drinks will have comparable relative bearing as now.

Daisy Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Rigby: I will make some progress.

On the impacts on the public finances, HMRC publishes data on alcohol duty receipts quarterly. That data is reviewed alongside other evidence by the OBR when it produces its forecasts of alcohol duty receipts, as it did most recently alongside the November Budget. The Government's view, as is evident from OBR-certified policy costings in recent years, remains that freezing or cutting alcohol duty rates reduces duty receipts.

The hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens raised the importance of producers of Scottish whisky, and I agree with him about that. This Government are supporting key Scottish industries, including whisky, such as through our free trade agreement with India, which will boost exports of whisky and add £190 million a year to the Scottish economy.

John Lamont: Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Rigby: No, I will make some progress.

The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore)—he represents a wonderful place in the world, which is where I was between Christmas and new year—referred to the difference between CPI and RPI. As he knows, we are uprating alcohol duty by RPI, as with many other taxes expressed in cash terms. He will know that RPI is widely used, and moving away from it is fraught with difficulty.

I want to address the important points about business rates and employer national insurance contributions. We have discussed this already and, as Members will know, the Bill does not contain measures on either of those subjects, so I will not accept an amendment relating to them. I reiterate, however, that pubs are at the heart of our communities and we want them to thrive. As I have said, today we have heard some heartfelt references to particular pubs and the role that they have played in each of our lives. I could tell my own stories in that regard, but none of us would get home in time.

As Members know, in the Budget the Chancellor introduced a £4.3 billion support package to give relief to those seeing increases in their business rates bills. As I said earlier, we have made it clear that we are continuing to work with and talk to the sector about that support, and about what further support we can provide and what action we can take.

Dr Luke Evans *rose—*

Lucy Rigby: I want to make this point. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), asked several questions. We will come forward with a support package—any further support that we will make available—when we are able to do so. As for her point about VAT, I know that an answer has been given to the parliamentary question asked by one of her colleagues about exactly that point, but I gently say to her—as, indeed, I have said to other Members during the debate—that if we want to cut taxes, the money has to come from somewhere. That has not been acknowledged at all.

I therefore propose that new clauses 8, 9 and 26 should be rejected and that clause 86 should stand part of the Bill.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 344, Noes 173.

Division No. 406]

[7.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Adam, Shockat
Abbott, Jack	Akehurst, Luke
Abrahams, Debbie	Alaba, Mr Bayo
	Aldridge, Dan
	Alexander, rh Mr Douglas

Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barron, Lee
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex

Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally

Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 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
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 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
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian

Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 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
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo

Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz

Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Witherden, Steve
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stephen Morgan and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver

Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive

Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)

Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 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
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Alicia Kearns and
Lincoln Jopp

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 86 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 9

REVIEW OF CUMULATIVE IMPACT ON THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before the House of Commons a report assessing the cumulative impact on the hospitality sector of—

- (a) the measures contained in section 86 of this Act, and
- (b) changes to taxation and business costs affecting that sector introduced outside this Act since 2020.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(b), changes to taxation and business costs include, but are not limited to—

- (a) changes to employer National Insurance contribution rates or thresholds,
- (b) changes to business rates, including reliefs and revaluations, and
- (c) any other fiscal measures which materially affect operating costs for hospitality businesses.

(3) A report under subsection (1) must include an assessment of the impact of the matters listed in that subsection on—

- (a) levels of employment across the United Kingdom within the hospitality sector,
- (b) the number of hospitality businesses ceasing to trade,
- (c) the number of new hospitality businesses established, and
- (d) the financial sustainability of hospitality businesses.

(4) In this section, ‘the hospitality sector’ means persons or businesses operating in the provision of food, drink, accommodation, or related services.”—(*Daisy Cooper.*)

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to assess and report on the cumulative impact on the hospitality sector of alcohol duty measures in the Act alongside wider fiscal changes, including employer National Insurance contributions and business rates.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 181, Noes 335.

Division No. 407]

[8.10 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Evans, Dr Luke
Amos, Gideon	Farron, Tim
Anderson, Stuart	Flynn, rh Stephen
Andrew, rh Stuart	Foord, Richard
Argar, rh Edward	Forster, Mr Will
Atkins, rh Victoria	Fox, Sir Ashley
Babarinde, Josh	Freeman, George
Bacon, Gareth	French, Mr Louie
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Fuller, Richard
Barclay, rh Steve	Garnier, Mark
Bedford, Mr Peter	George, Andrew
Bennett, Alison	Gethins, Stephen
Berry, Siân	Gibson, Sarah
Blackman, Bob	Gilmour, Rachel
Bool, Sarah	Glen, rh John
Brandreth, Aphra	Glover, Olly
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Goldman, Marie
Burghart, Alex	Gordon, Tom
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Green, Sarah
Cane, Charlotte	Griffith, Andrew
Cartledge, James	Harding, Monica
Chadwick, David	Harris, Rebecca
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hayes, rh Sir John
Chambers, Dr Danny	Hinds, rh Damian
Chope, Sir Christopher	Hoare, Simon
Chowns, Dr Ellie	Hobhouse, Wera
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Cocking, Lewis	Hollinrake, Kevin
Coghlan, Chris	Holmes, Paul
Collins, Victoria	Huddleston, Nigel
Cooper, Daisy	Hudson, Dr Neil
Cooper, John	Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Costa, Alberto	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Dance, Adam	Jarvis, Liz
Darling, Steve	Jenrick, rh Robert
Davies, Ann	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Davies, Gareth	Jones, Clive
Davies, Mims	Jopp, Lincoln
Dean, Bobby	Kearns, Alicia
Denyer, Carla	Kohler, Mr Paul
Dewhurst, Charlie	Kruger, Danny
Dillon, Mr Lee	Lake, Ben
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Lam, Katie
Doogan, Dave	Lamont, John
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Law, Chris
Dyke, Sarah	Leadbitter, Graham
Easton, Alex	Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua

Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 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

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Claire Young and
 Zöe Franklin

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn

Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 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
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben

Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kruger, Danny
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumar, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas

McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 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
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Witherden, Steve
 Wrighting, Rosie

Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Stephen Morgan and
Taiwo Owatemi

Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jarvis, Liz
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John

Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
Medi, Llinos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mike Wood)
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark

Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mike Wood)

Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mike Wood)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
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
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Young, Claire

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 26

STATEMENTS ON INCREASING ALCOHOL DUTY

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed, make a statement to the House of Commons on the effects of the increase to alcohol duty made under section 86 of this Act.

(2) The statement made under subsection (1) must include details of the impact on—

- (a) the hospitality sector,
- (b) pubs,
- (c) UK wine, spirit and beer producers,
- (d) the employment rate, and
- (e) the public finances.”—(*James Wild.*)

This new clause would require the Chancellor to make a statement about the effects of the increase in alcohol duty.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 172, Noes 334.

Division No. 408]

[8.22 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Brandreth, Aphra
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee

Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fox, Sir Ashley
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy*
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Ady)

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shokat
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James

Tellers for the Ayes:
Alicia Kearns and
Lincoln Jopp

NOES

Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barron, Lee
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel

Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 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
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel

Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 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
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh

Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 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
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter

Quigley, Mr Richard
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul

Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia

Witherden, Steve
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Stephen Morgan and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negatived.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill (Clauses 1 to 10, 62 to 69 and 83 to 86 and Schedules 1, 2, 12 and 13), as amended, reported, and ordered to lie on the Table.

Nigeria: Freedom of Religion or Belief

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gen Kitchen.)

8.35 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to lead this debate on Government support for freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria; I hope that we have some good debate. Recent events have thrown a spotlight on Nigeria in general, and on freedom of religion or belief in particular, so I hope that this debate can strengthen that spotlight.

One fact should make the scale of the challenge clear: more Christians are killed each year in Nigeria for being Christians than in all other countries combined. That is one reason why Nigeria is one of 10 focus countries in the first Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office freedom of religion or belief strategy, which I was pleased to launch last year. I declare an interest: I am the UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, or FORB, as I will refer to it from now on. I am committed to that strategy and to seeing Nigeria's FORB improve in the coming years.

Fifteen years ago, I spent some time in Nigeria, and it was clear even then that persecution was a serious problem. I remember sitting in a hotel room in a very nice hotel in Abuja and hearing directly from a man whose wife had been brutally murdered by a mob in northern Nigeria—I am sad to say, burned to death—purely because she was a Christian. Let me reiterate: that was 15 years ago.

The FORB crisis in Nigeria is persistent and entrenched, with violence in the north and the middle belt a way of life for Christians, Hausa Muslims, those of traditional belief systems, humanists and others. Meanwhile, some federal state legal systems have been manipulated by some politicians and other public officials in order to impose so-called blasphemy and apostasy offences, despite section 38 of the Nigerian federal constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion and of conscience.

Nigeria's FORB crisis is partly about violence, but it is also about legal suppression of freedoms at the state level, and it is a multi-faith crisis. While the majority of those affected are Christian, all FORB advocates know that persecution of one group invites persecution of others. Moderate Muslims, atheists, humanists and practitioners of traditional religions are all suffering in Nigeria for what they believe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. The Government have made an excellent choice of him as their envoy, and God has chosen him for that position, which is more important than anything. Is he aware of the findings of the Global Christian Relief red list 2026, which identifies the top five persecutors of Christians worldwide? One of them is Nigeria. The Minister is an honourable man who addresses our issues. Does he agree that the UK Government must use their diplomatic engagement, development assistance and security co-operation to press for improved civilian protection, accountability for perpetrators and the defence of freedom of religion or belief for all Nigerians, whatever their faith may be?

David Smith: I thank the hon. Member. I know that he is concerned about this issue and has spent a lot of his time in this place addressing it. I am aware of that list. I am pleased to be speaking speak at the Open Doors world watch list launch tomorrow—I understand that Nigeria is also high on that list.

What does this have to do with us in this place? First, the Government are committed to a values-based foreign policy. Our consciences will not let us ignore the suffering of anyone denied dignity, agency and freedom. When people ask, “Why do you care about something like this in Nigeria?” our response is, “How could we not?” I am pleased to support the Government, which have moved to address suffering as far and wide as possible.

Secondly, Nigeria’s business is becoming everyone’s business. The old adage is: “When Nigeria sneezes, Africa catches a cold.” Nigeria is booming, with a population of 240 million that will keep growing for years to come. In the UK, we have 270,000 Nigerian-born residents, who make a dynamic contribution to our economy, society and country. A flourishing Nigeria, built on the common good, pluralism and universal freedoms, will be a blessing to the world, to Africa and to the UK.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): I, too, think it is a very good thing that the hon. Gentleman has taken this role. He mentions the impact of this issue around the world. He is absolutely right to say that what is going in Nigeria is the worst example, but it represents a pattern of Islamist persecution of Christians. It is not just a series of individual atrocities; there is a global pattern of Islamist persecution of Christians. It is right that we in this House acknowledge that. Does he agree?

David Smith: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. I would certainly say that there are patterns around the world, and we must consider them honestly and address them. It is true that, as in Nigeria, freedom of religion or belief affects everyone, but we must be honest and straightforward when a particular community is affected more than others, and I will say a little more about that in my speech.

I have mentioned the UK’s Nigerian connections. A flourishing Nigeria, built on the common good is good for us all, but that is sadly some way off. Many of us here will have a rough idea of the situation—I see many colleagues in the Chamber who care passionately about freedom of religion or belief around the world, including in Nigeria. In the last six weeks alone, 13 people have been kidnapped from a church in Kogi state, in what the BBC called

“the second such attack in as many weeks”,

and a bomb was set off in a mosque in Borno state, sadly killing at least five worshippers.

Those are just the latest in a long line of attacks, violence and atrocities. That is why, on Christmas day last year, the American Government launched strikes on the Lakurawa militants in Sokoto state, in the far north-west of Nigeria, who are affiliated with Islamic State. Those strikes raised the profile of the uncertainty, fear and insecurity that many Nigerians live with daily. Between 2011 and 2025, at least 45,000 Christians in Nigeria were killed for faith-related reasons.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent work as the FORB envoy and the extraordinary effort he is putting into the role. In a world in which geopolitics is becoming increasingly transactional—African Governments are increasingly focused on growth rather than on civil and political rights—and intolerance and bigotry are more widespread than ever, does he agree that it is vital that British foreign policy makes space for those without a voice, such as Christians in Nigeria, and that, however hard that is, we should redouble our efforts to do so?

David Smith: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution, and especially for his role in the Bishop of Truro’s report, which led to my position and ultimately played a huge part in putting freedom of religion or belief at the centre of our foreign policy. I am certainly advocating for that in my role, and I know that the Government take it seriously. There is a false dichotomy in whether to advance freedoms or build economic relationships; we should have a holistic relationship with all partner countries around the world.

Moderate Muslims are also targeted by the extremists, who we need to call out. Religion is clearly key, but persecution is not necessarily evenly spread in every situation and in every country, and that is true of Nigeria. In Kaduna state, for example—after controlling for population—Christians were 15.8 times more likely to be abducted than Muslims, so there is a particular issue there. The situation continues to deteriorate. It is therefore reasonable to ask questions of the Nigerian military about their security response. In June last year, 258 people were killed in Yelwata, in Benue state. The nearest military base was just 20 miles away, but it took four hours for anyone to respond.

In the face of all this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the United States again announced in late October on social media that it would designate Nigeria a country of particular concern. As the *Middle Belt Times* in Nigeria put it,

“The message is unmistakable: Nigeria’s government is capable of fighting terrorism when sufficiently motivated. The capacity exists. The resources are available. What has been missing is political will.”

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Given that reliable sources estimate that tens of thousands of Christians have been killed in Nigeria since 2009, largely in the north and middle belt, placing the country at the epicentre of global persecution of the Christian Church, does the hon. Member agree that every diplomatic and political lever available to His Majesty’s Government must now be used to help end this violence and secure freedom of religion or belief for all?

David Smith: As I said in answer to the previous intervention, I do agree that it is very important for us not to have segmented or siloed relationships with other countries; we need to treat our relationships holistically. I look forward to the Minister’s response, because I know the Government are doing a lot—they regularly raise cases of freedom of religion or belief with counterparts in foreign Governments. My view is that we need to have a holistic relationship with other countries, and that includes freedom of religion or belief.

Let me quickly move to the issue of legal suppression of freedoms. Freedom House reports that in Nigeria,

“State and local governments have been known to endorse de facto official religions in their territory, placing limits on other religious activity.”

So-called apostasy and blasphemy laws have spread into Nigeria’s social and legal landscape, often led by regional or local Governments. Twelve northern states have enacted the sharia penal code, which Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports is effectively creating a “state religion”, in violation of Nigeria’s constitution.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing attention to the persecution of people of different faiths and beliefs, and particularly the heinous murders of thousands of people. He knows about the case of Mubarak Bala, who was jailed for a Facebook post that was deemed to be blasphemous. After he left Islam, he was sent to a psychiatric hospital, forced to leave his home and state and arrested. He calls on the UK and western Governments to repeal their own blasphemy laws. He has explained that when he was arrested, he was told, “Even the British have blasphemy laws.” Today, blasphemy and blasphemous libel is a criminal offence under common law in Northern Ireland. It is not used in Northern Ireland; it is a dead letter law. However, other countries that do use their blasphemy laws in extreme ways often point to these dead letter laws in other countries to justify their own behaviour. Does my hon. Friend agree that no country should have blasphemy laws, whether directly or by the back door?

David Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I have been very pleased to meet Mubarak Bala twice now, most recently in person in Warsaw. He is a great credit to himself. He has suffered very unjustly as a result of being a humanist. I am sure we will hear this from the Minister, but the Government seem to be very clear that we should not be supporting blasphemy laws, and we do see people suffering as a result of them.

In the interests of time, I will move on and maybe not take any interventions for a moment.

Why does this matter to us? We are 3,000 miles away from Nigeria, but we are linked by history, culture and language, and we are linked by friendship. Nigeria and the United Kingdom have a very strong relationship. It would be easy to dismiss Nigeria’s problem as something “over there” and think that persecution of religion or belief abroad is not our problem, but that position would be irresponsible, immoral and ultimately untenable.

It is immoral because when we see other humans in need, we want to respond, as humans. How could we turn away from the suffering in Nigeria when we see families ripped apart, innocent people killed and power brokers restricting the agency, liberty and conscience of others? We in the UK have a rich history of experiencing and rejecting religious intolerance that we can share in humility, hopefully, with others. We had civil wars and riots. Those riots became debates, debates became freedoms, and those freedoms led to flourishing. The hallmark of freedom is wanting freedom for others.

That brings me to irresponsibility. It would be irresponsible to assume that Nigeria’s problems are not our own. Nigeria is playing an increasingly influential role globally. It is young, resource-rich and growing.

The UN has projected that Nigeria will become the third most populous country on Earth by 2050, and as I have said, the UK is home to a substantial and growing community of Nigerian-born residents. They are a hard-working, law-abiding, enterprising part of our nation, and we are privileged to have them with us. Working well with Nigeria is in our interest for the sake of all.

Nigeria also represents a genuine democracy in a region where military Governments are common and civil society precarious. As climate change disrupts the Sahel and central Africa further, the promise of a resilient Nigeria with a strong sense of its future as a pluralist democracy cannot be understated.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I am hugely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his excellent speech. He is giving a powerful evocation of the significant crisis that exists within Nigeria in terms of intolerance and faith-related death. Can he indicate—this is a genuine question of inquiry—to what extent there are intersections with other sources of conflict such as terrorism and the resource competition he mentioned, and potentially even climate change? To what extent are those drivers of the kind of religious intolerance that we see playing out in his speech?

David Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw other factors into the equation, whether it is competition over land in the middle belt of Nigeria, the climate change that leads to it, or other forms of identitarian conflict and competition for resources. Those things are true, without question. In my estimation it is also true that there is a specifically religious dimension, and at times a political dimension, to the persecution—I would say it can be both at the same time.

I am concerned that this can lead to a slippery slope. For example, we could compare it with the situation in China, where Tibetan Buddhists have been persecuted for years. That was later followed by a crackdown on Falun Gong and Christians, and religious prisoners ultimately end up joined by journalists, activists, trade unionists and other rabble rousers who the state would prefer not to deal with. We must robustly defend freedom of religion or belief, to avoid that slippery slope.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

David Smith: I will make a little progress, as I want to ensure that the Minister has time to respond.

The Government are doing some great things that I get to see and making a great deal of progress. We will hear from the Minister, but in my estimation the Government are supporting security work in Nigeria, working closely with the Nigerian Government, including on the SPRiNG—Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria—programme, which I hope we will hear more about, and building a sense of communal interfaith relationship and peace building—something I did in the past in a different context. That is really important, and I would love to hear more from the Minister about what that could look like if we grow it more.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Let me just remind the House of Matthew 5:10:

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

[Carla Lockhart]

We must all bear that in our minds tonight. The question I would ask is this: how many more burned churches and murdered worshippers do we have to see before concrete action is taken? The hon. Member is doing an amazing job in this area—well done on that—but we need more concrete action. UK aid should be conditional on demonstrable action to protect religious freedom—surely that is a question for the Minister tonight.

David Smith: Again, I agree that we should have holistic relationships with all our partners; there should not be a hierarchy of importance when it comes to an economic trade deal versus pursuing our values as a country on things like freedoms. I am sure we will hear more from the Minister on that.

I mentioned what is happening on law and politics. In a way, that is almost a more worrying issue, because it creates a context in which it becomes acceptable to persecute. As long as ethno-religious fiefdoms are maintained, contrary to the promises of the Nigerian constitution, widespread reconciliation may be out of reach. The Government are clear in their opposition to the spread of blasphemy and apostasy laws, and I support that. In our complex and committed relationship with Nigeria, Britain has a range of tools at our disposal to support change in the direction of freedom of religion or belief, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the excellent work that the Government are doing, to which I remain committed.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Smith: I will take one last intervention.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It might be helpful to explain that interventions are not allowed from the Opposition Front Bench, so the hon. Member will not take the intervention.

David Smith: Thank you for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I apologise to the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood).

In conclusion, Nigeria is rich with potential and possibility, but in my view violent and legal suppression of FORB is undermining the country's future. A plural Nigeria, rooted in the common good, in which 250 million people have genuine freedom to reason, question and believe is a blessing to Nigeria itself, to Africa and to the world. A flourishing Nigeria is good for Britain and a challenge to the autocrats of west Africa in declaring that freedom is, in the end, worth it.

Conversely, every Christian kidnapped, every mosque bombed and every atheist imprisoned risks the continuation of the cycle of ethno-religious conflict, and a diminishing of all that Nigeria can be. No one wants that and I am pleased that the UK Government are serious about freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria. I am committed to working with the Government in every way possible to support a better way forward. This issue needed attention years ago and I am glad that it now has that attention.

8.55 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing the debate and for his tireless work as special envoy. I thank hon. Members from across the House for their thoughtful contributions. I will try to respond to as many of the points that have been raised as I can in the time available.

I declare an interest as a Christian who has worked with Open Doors and others in the past to draw attention to cases where people are persecuted for their beliefs. I genuinely welcome the chance to keep this important matter in the spotlight. I have engaged with the issue for many years, including when I was shadow Minister for Africa. I was glad to hear my hon. Friend mention Nigerian communities in the UK. I have had the pleasure of meeting Nigerian Christian communities in my constituency of Cardiff South and Penarth, and I know the amazing contribution that they make, alongside Nigerian communities across the UK.

My hon. Friend is right that this issue should interest, concern and deeply shock us all because of the horrific things that we have seen. The brutality of the attacks against religious communities in Nigeria is truly appalling. The cold-blooded massacre of over 200 Christians in Yelwata, Benue state, last October was particularly shocking. We have heard many terrible statistics today, but last year's Open Doors world watch list reported that armed groups murdered 3,100 Christians for their faith in Nigeria in 2025, and abducted a further 3,000. It is shocking to hear that extremists have stormed villages, killed worshippers, kidnapped families and burned homes, and we have heard some truly horrific examples today.

Nigeria's constitution promises freedom of religion or belief for all. Every person in that country deserves the right to practise their faith or belief safely, without fear or persecution. When we defend freedom of religion or belief, we help to build trust between communities, strengthen Nigeria's social fabric and create conditions for lasting peace and prosperity for everyone. That is why Nigeria is one of the 10 countries prioritised for targeted action in the Government's strategy on freedom of religion or belief, launched last July.

We welcome the President's commitment to religious freedoms and his pledge to safeguard freedom of belief for all Nigerians. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland recognised that we are working closely with the Nigerian authorities, along with communities and faith leaders directly, to uphold and protect these freedoms. Indeed, my colleague Baroness Chapman, the Minister for Africa, continues to be engaged closely in this topic, and she is extremely concerned about the violence against many communities, including religious communities, in Nigeria.

My hon. Friend asked about the work that we are doing to raise these issues at the highest levels. Baroness Chapman spoke directly with Nigeria's Foreign Minister Tuggar about freedom of religion or belief in November. Our high commissioner and his team engage with local authorities, communities and faith leaders in affected areas, including with groups such as the Governors' Forum, the National Peace Committee and the National Human Rights Commission.

We know that criminality, intercommunal violence and insecurity make things worse for religious communities. That is why we focus on tackling the root causes of instability to protect people's rights, whether they come from Christian communities or Muslim communities, or whether they are humanists, have different beliefs or, indeed, have no beliefs. We need to create a society where everybody is able to live and to practise in the way that they wish. I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned the case of Mubarak Bala, which I remember raising on many occasions in the past. We highlight violations of freedom of religion or belief on the international stage and push for joint action, including at the UN, the G7, as part of the Article 18 Alliance and in bodies like the Human Rights Council.

My hon. Friend and other hon. Members rightly pointed to the violent extremist groups, such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa, which continue to attack people in shocking ways in the north-east of Nigeria. They target anyone who rejects their ideology. My hon. Friend made the important point that it is not just Christians, but the mainly Muslim population of the north-east who suffer terribly as a result. However, the Christian minority faces extreme persecution through mass kidnappings and murders. Those are utterly unacceptable and have shocked the world.

Intercommunal violence and criminal banditry are linked, and they fuel deaths and tensions. Criminals smuggle weapons into Nigeria, affecting both Muslims and Christians, and they use motorbikes and all sorts of other techniques to evade the authorities. Conflict over land and resources in Nigeria often takes on a religious aspect as tensions rise and violence escalates. Those ideologies can sometimes be used as psychological warfare, with attacks on churches and mosques being seen as acts of revenge.

However, peaceful dialogue can resolve disputes before they escalate. Since our last debate on this issue in 2024, we have rolled out the UK's Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria programme across Kaduna, Katsina, Benue and Plateau states; I was glad to hear that referred to. The programme is doing very important work in reducing violence by strengthening local peace and justice systems and supporting practical, community-led solutions. One early success is that 5,000 internally displaced people have returned and resettled after a peace agreement between the Bassa and Egbura communities in Nasarawa state. If we do not tackle the root causes of insecurity, religious communities will remain at risk of these terrible atrocities.

My hon. Friend mentioned our co-operation with Nigeria more broadly on security issues, which I am very pleased to play a role in alongside my colleague,

the Minister for Africa. Last July, we hosted the third security and defence partnership dialogue with Nigeria.

Mike Wood *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I will be generous and give way to the hon. Gentleman in his new position.

Mike Wood: The tragic case of Deborah Samuel Yakubu is a reminder of the culture of impunity that has been allowed to develop in too many parts of Nigeria. Can the Minister assure the House that the UK Government do everything and take every opportunity to stress the need for improved security in particularly vulnerable parts of Nigeria to ensure that people are safe to exercise their religious beliefs?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely can. I mentioned a range of different levels at which we do that—indeed, the Minister for Africa has raised a number of these issues at the highest level—and we continue to engage. The high commissioner and the team do an excellent job of engaging at all levels to raise these cases. That is why we have this dialogue, the SPRiNG programme and the investment that we are making across a range of areas with the Nigerian authorities, who are close partners in many respects and on many issues not just in Nigeria, but more broadly.

We agreed to strengthen our co-operation and provide practical support to defend against these threats. That includes very practical steps such as sharing operational lessons to counter new tactics being used by terrorists, including the use of drones and improvised explosive devices, which have tragically been used against civilians in too many locations.

The UK is trying to address the wider issues of poverty and humanitarian concerns. We support hundreds of thousands of people through our humanitarian assistance and resilience programme. I assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as the special envoy that we will keep working with the Nigerian authorities and faith leaders to address the shocking violence against people who are simply trying to follow their faith or belief.

I particularly welcome the concerns raised about Christian communities, but this issue affects many. We will work at every level to ensure that this violence is brought to an end, and we will also work globally on these issues. I really praise the special envoy for the work that he does on these important issues.

Question put and agreed to.

9.3 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 13 January 2026

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Universities: Statutory Duty of Care

9.30 am

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a statutory duty of care for universities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate, which follows an e-petition of 128,000 signatures that resulted in a Westminster Hall debate in June 2023. That was two and a half years ago and there has been a general election since then, so I thought it important that a new cohort of MPs be able to look at and debate this matter. After all, the wellbeing and safety of university students is an important issue that attracts thoughtful engagement across party lines. No doubt today's debate will reflect a shared seriousness of purpose.

I was at university in the late 2000s. Although that feels like an increasingly long time ago, I still recall a phone call from one of my peers telling me that a mutual acquaintance, a 20-year-old involved in student politics, had taken his own life. Six years later, two more students at the college did the same, including one who had visited a GP only the day before and been told to take medical leave.

We should be clear at the outset that mental health struggles at university are not new. What has changed, arguably, is our understanding and recognition of them. Throughout the 2010s, there was a concerted effort to raise and tackle the stigma associated with mental health struggles through the work of many well-known names, as well as grassroots campaigners such as ForThe100, who live with the scars from a system that failed them and their families. They should all be applauded for those efforts, which have made such a positive difference.

Although there are ongoing debates about the so-called overdiagnosis of mental health issues and special educational needs, we should not lose sight of the impact. In each year between 2016 and 2023, there was an average of 160 suicides among higher education students in England and Wales, according to the Office for National Statistics. Student Minds states that one in three students reported poor mental wellbeing at the end of the same period.

At its heart, this debate asks a question that is relatively simple but that has complex implications: are the health, wellbeing and safety responsibilities that universities owe to their students sufficiently clear, consistent and enforceable, or does the current legal framework leave too much uncertainty for students and institutions alike?

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. A few years ago, I and colleagues on the all-party parliamentary university group looked at these issues. What we found was a very

inconsistent set of relationships between universities and local health services. Has my hon. Friend found that, too?

James Naish: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. Undoubtedly, "consistency" is a key word. It is about how we ensure that these issues are dealt with, through universities or associated support services, in a proper and consistent way, no matter where someone is at university. I am not surprised that my hon. Friend's all-party parliamentary group came to that conclusion.

It is clear that more and more students are seeking to be open with universities about their mental health challenges and are seeking support. Over the past decade, the proportion of students disclosing mental health conditions to their university has risen sharply, from under 1% in 2010 to nearly 6% in 2022-23, and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the figure is rising yet again. It is also recognised and accepted by universities that poor mental health is associated with higher drop-out rates, poorer academic outcomes and weaker graduate prospects.

I welcome the work that this Government and the previous Government have done with the university sector to respond, including through the work of the higher education mental health implementation taskforce. However, although the scale of demand for mental health support from universities has risen sixfold, the law has yet to catch up with the very different set of circumstances and our increased understanding. At present, no statutory duty requires universities to take reasonable care to protect adult students from foreseeable harm. Instead, obligations arise in a fragmented way, through health and safety law, equality legislation, human rights law, contract law and voluntary guidance issued by sector bodies.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am concerned about medical students. If they have problems at university, there is a duty of care for them; if they are outwith the university, at a general practice or in another clinical setting under the aegis of the NHS, there appears to be no statutory duty of care. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must sort that out, particularly in respect of the sexual harassment of students?

James Naish: I will go on to mention the British Medical Association and its latest survey and work on the issue, but my hon. Friend is right to make that point. The patchwork of duties does not amount to a clear or proactive framework for student protection. That needs to be addressed.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend find it surprising, as I do, that whereas there are duties of care on workplaces, prisons, hospitals and colleges, and owed by manufacturers to consumers, no duty of care is owed by universities to students?

James Naish: Yes. That comes as a surprise, without doubt, particularly to parents who find themselves in very difficult circumstances when their children are not well, or in some of the more extreme circumstances that we are thinking about today. I agree that the House needs to look at that. Most universities have wellbeing,

[James Naish]

counselling and mental health support services, which is fantastic, but we have to recognise that provision varies significantly in availability and quality.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): My constituent Hilary's daughter Phoebe took her own life at the University of Newcastle, aged just 20. Does the hon. Member agree that the level of pastoral care that universities do and do not provide is an important factor, not just for students but for their parents, in the choice where to go to university? Universities should be transparent and honest about the level of support that they do and do not provide.

James Naish: I absolutely agree. The reality, as I say, is that things have improved significantly. I am here today not to knock universities, but to ask the question whether, underpinning the provision that the hon. Member describes, there should be a level of legal obligation. Interestingly, a 2023 survey of 4,000 students by the suicide prevention charity CALM—the Campaign against Living Miserably—found that just 12% believed that their university handled mental health well. In response to the hon. Member's point, I guess the question is “Yes, provision is important when you are selecting a university, but when you face problems, is that provision sufficient?”

The truth is that the lack of legal certainty results in some dangerous gaps. That is recognised by the higher education mental health implementation taskforce's terms of reference, which were published only in December 2025 and which are clear that

“there is wide recognition among mental health practitioners, charities, those with lived experience and the sector that more could and should be done”.

I do not believe that I am flagging anything that is not already known, yet the sector and the Government have repeatedly said that a statutory duty of care is not necessary.

I beg to differ—that is why I am here—and so do my constituents Bob and Maggie Abraham, who are here today, who lost their daughter Natasha to suicide at the University of Bristol in 2018. Both the county court, in May 2022, and the High Court, in February 2024, have ruled that the university caused or contributed to her death. In the *Abraham v. University of Bristol* case, the court upheld a breach of the Equality Act 2010 for failure to make reasonable adjustments, but it declined to find a general duty of care in negligence. Crucially, however, the judge emphasised that the question of duty was

“one of potentially wide application and significance”,

and therefore not one that the court should resolve incrementally through individual cases.

In other words, the courts have signalled that this is a matter for Parliament and Parliament alone to assess. It is not for grieving families to seek litigation after harm has already occurred, but that is what is happening in the absence of legislation: the law develops only after harm has occurred, through costly and traumatic litigation brought by those who are least able to bear the burden. That matters all the more because, as I say, the context of higher education has changed significantly. The proportion of students disclosing mental health conditions

has increased sharply, and a significant number of students who died by suicide were already known to university support services. That, in itself, should indicate that more must be done.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Some 72% of students report that their mental health has suffered as a result of the cost of living crisis. One in five have considered dropping out because they simply cannot afford it. Given the ever-rising financial pressures on students, does my hon. Friend agree that it is time to explore all avenues to protect students' wellbeing?

James Naish: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The cost of living has only exacerbated a problem that we knew existed, so it is right for this House to think very deeply about the question.

On a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) mentioned, it is worth noting that gaps are being recognised by more and more organisations. Last November, following a UK-wide survey of medical students, the British Medical Association issued a press release calling for stronger protections against neglect and specifically referring to sexism and sexual violence towards medical students. It urged the Government

“to bring forward legislation that introduces a statutory duty of care on higher education institutions for their students.”

We should be clear that a statutory duty of care would not require universities to act in loco parentis, nor would it require them to provide unlimited services or assume clinical responsibilities. Rather, it would establish a clear baseline that universities must act reasonably, with appropriate care and skill, when harm is foreseeable and vulnerability is evident, much as already happens in other regulated settings.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I have come to this place from the university sector, so I understand the points that my hon. Friend is making. I pay tribute to staff across the sector who are supporting students right now. My hon. Friend will know that the sector is under huge financial pressure, so does he agree that a statutory duty should come with statutory funding?

James Naish: Yes. Undoubtedly one of the universities' biggest concerns is about how the duty would be implemented and what the implications would be. I am not shying away from the reality that there would be costs for universities, but the question is whether we should put the duty in place. My hon. Friend's point is about how any such legislation should be implemented, as opposed to whether it is needed in the first place.

It is important to be clear that a statutory duty of care is not about exposing institutions to unreasonable liability. In fact, clearer statutory duties may benefit universities by reducing uncertainty, helping to focus limited resources on the services and support that will make the biggest and most important legal difference, and by providing a shared sector-wide benchmark against which wellbeing and safety interventions can be properly assessed and, when necessary, judged in a court of law.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As a Bristol MP, I very much appreciate the fact that my hon. Friend has taken up the case on behalf of Natasha's parents. I have had conversations with the University of Bristol about Natasha's case, and also with the University

of the West of England. One issue that comes up is where parents fit in, because students have a right to tell the university that they do not want their parents involved. They are treated as adults in that respect, which can put universities in quite a difficult position if they feel that the parents ought to know what is going on. What thought has my hon. Friend given to that aspect?

James Naish: My hon. Friend is right. What I am alluding to is the level of greyness that means that we see people falling through the gaps. Our responsibility in the House is to understand whether those gaps should continue to exist, for valid reasons, or whether a change in the law is required to ensure clarity for universities, parents and students.

I hope that in his response the Minister will address several questions. First, do the Government agree that the current legal position leaves duties unclear until after harm has potentially occurred? Secondly, do the Government accept that reliance on evolving common law places an unreasonable burden on impacted individuals to clarify law through litigation? Thirdly, what assessment has been made of the case for statutory clarity, particularly given the calls from organisations such as the British Medical Association for stronger protections for students?

Finally, if the Government do not believe that a statutory duty is the right approach, how do they propose to deliver the clarity, consistency and accountability that students and universities both currently lack, given the mental health taskforce's stated aim in December 2025 to

“fill gaps in areas where more consistency is needed”?

Surely there is no better way to ensure the consistent implementation of proactive measures than by ensuring a solid legal basis for that obligation.

This debate goes to the heart of how we balance autonomy with responsibility and independence with protection in one of the most important sectors of our national life. Provision for students has improved, but in reality the consistency of support and legal understanding remain poor, despite words to the contrary. It is down to this House, and this House alone, to determine what more could and should be done. I look forward to colleagues' contributions and to the Minister's response.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Llinos Medi.

9.46 am

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Gadeirydd. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this important debate on the potential merits of a statutory duty of care for universities.

My constituents, Glynwyn and Iona Foulkes, have been directly affected by this issue, as they tragically lost their daughter to suicide in 2020. Marek Foulkes was a conscientious and high-achieving second-year pharmacy student at Cardiff University. On 8 July 2020, she committed suicide after receiving incorrect exam results. This error led Marek to believe that she could not progress into her third year of studies. By the time the university had sent her the correct exam results, Marek had taken her own life.

Marek had had a clear career path since her time at Ysgol David Hughes secondary school. All she ever wanted to be was a pharmacist. She worked at local pharmacies during school and university holidays. She became a peer guide for other students, and she participated in voluntary work at a hospital in the Philippines during her time at university. Sadly, all her dreams and aspirations ended on receiving those incorrect exam results.

Many people assume that universities already have a clear legal responsibility to look after students' wellbeing, particularly where risks are known or foreseeable. However, the extent of any such responsibility remains unclear, and guidance and best practice across the sector are inconsistent. Sadly, this inconsistency results in a postcode lottery in the quality and accessibility of mental health care and other services.

As public services and universities struggle, the line of responsibility becomes blurred and our young people fall through the gaps. Too many young lives have been lost to suicide, and I believe that something concrete now needs to be done to safeguard them.

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): As a pharmacist, I remember when this news came out. My entire sector shares the grief of the family for the loss of a potentially amazing pharmacist. Does the hon. Member agree that pharmacy is a little lesser because of it?

Llinos Medi: I totally agree. The importance of today's debate is that Marek's name is recorded here and is always in our minutes and in our memories.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I think we all fully appreciate the work that universities do to try to look after the wellbeing of their students. However, does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of investment in public services—by which I mean the health service as well as others—can perhaps lead to tragic consequences, such as Marek's, for students who have mental health issues or who have been sexually abused? Our public services need more investment so that we can scoop up these young people and look after them a lot better.

Llinos Medi: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Better resources and funding for our public services would go a long way to help students who are feeling vulnerable, scared and unable to cope. As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned, we recognise that students' independence and autonomy as adults is important, but it is also our role here to make sure that we put safeguards in place to balance their autonomy with the need to safeguard them at vulnerable times.

Warinder Juss: I am really sorry to hear the case of the hon. Lady's constituent. When I first raised this issue in the House last May, I mentioned that over the previous 10 years one student had taken their own life every four days in England and Wales. When Natasha took her life in April 2018, she was at least the 10th student to have committed suicide at that university since October 2016. Does the hon. Lady agree that as parliamentarians we cannot just sit aside and do nothing on this matter?

Llinos Medi: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and I totally agree. That is why I appreciate this debate, where we can all share our experiences and make sure that, in our terms here, we make the change that we want to see.

[Llinos Medi]

As has been mentioned, universities try to roll out strategies and action plans, but that has resulted in a patchwork of different support services across the university sector that simply is not working for our young people. It has also led to differing approaches to responsibility and accountability for students' welfare and wellbeing. The lack of clarity has real consequences and, as we have heard in Marek's case, it can have an impact on the whole community, including the pharmacy community.

When things go wrong, students and families often discover far too late that there was no obligation to act, even where warning signs were present. I therefore want serious consideration to be given to the concerns of students and their families. I agree with Marek's parents that the current legal framework is insufficient and that reform is urgently needed to clarify institutional responsibilities.

9.52 am

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this important debate on the merits of a statutory duty of care in universities.

The pain of losing a loved one to suicide is unquantifiable, and it stretches out further than we can imagine. I could share any number of heartbreaking statistics: for example, according to a 2022 Student Minds survey, 57% of students reported mental health issues, and over the past decade in the UK a student has taken their life every four days.

Although statistics matter, sometimes they can distance us from the reality of what is happening, which is why today I would rather talk about one of my constituents. His name was Oskar. He was a student at Sheffield Hallam University, and he was living with the effects of a brain injury. When the university gave him a warning related to his course, he took it to heart and feared he was being kicked out. Oskar then attempted to take his own life. Despite having given explicit consent for the university to contact his parents in the event of medical concerns, his family were not informed of this attempt. The university later argued that the consent applied only to physical injuries, not to an attempt to take his own life.

After that first attempt, Oskar should have been supported into treatment. At the very least, his parents should have been told that their son was in crisis. But neither happened. When I spoke to Oskar's parents Maxine and Gary, they were clear that Oskar would not have wanted to upset them or to burden them. He would have needed someone else to make that call, and he gave his consent for that very thing to happen. Oskar later took his own life at his student accommodation.

At the inquest, the university was defensive and obstructive. I am sorry to say that I have seen that again and again in different organisations, including in healthcare. It was clear that the university's focus was on getting the case closed. Maxine described it as the most horrific experience of her life. Although there is guidance on how universities should respond to serious incidents, the institution argued that it was not required to follow it. That is precisely the problem: guidance can be ignored,

but a statutory duty cannot. Parents like Maxine and Gary do not want to replace the work that has already gone into improving mental health support for young people. They are asking not for universities to become parents, but for a clear legal framework where there is currently a gap.

One hundred and seven suspected student deaths by suicide were reported in 2023-24. Oskar's case, and the response, is not an isolated failure. The Government's national review of higher education student suicide deaths for 2023-24 shows that the same weaknesses are being repeated across the sector.

More widely, reports were submitted for only 62% of serious incidents, and families were not involved in three quarters of investigations. When action plans existed, many lacked named owners and deadlines, and senior sign-off was unclear in 71% of reports. This is very concerning, because processes matter. It really matters that investigations are done properly and that action is taken on them.

University students fall into a legal grey area. They are no longer protected by the safeguarding frameworks that apply in schools, yet they do not benefit from the clear duties of care that exist in most workplaces. Too many young people sit in that gap at a point in their life when they are particularly vulnerable, and too often the consequences are devastating.

University is often a pivotal time in a person's life. Students can gain lifelong friends, meet their partners and discover their passions—and their alcohol tolerance. It is often seen as a carefree period, full of independence and possibility, but for many it will be the first time that they are living by themselves. They are often in a new city, without networks of support and the people who know them best and would notice if something is going wrong. It can be really lonely.

When the warning signs appear, it is not always clear who is responsible for acting. To answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), one simple, practical safeguard would be for every student to nominate a trusted point of contact when they enrol, to be used in the event of a serious concern. That person might be a parent, but does not have to be. University students are adults and have the right to exclude their parents. They have the right to make their own decisions about how they live their lives. But such a safeguard would give them an opportunity to make a good decision, and would make sure that universities have a path to finding support for students in the event of mental health problems. Universities will contact families after the worst has happened, but why do they not reach out when there is still a chance to intervene, even when they have full consent to do so, as they did in Oskar's case?

Although some universities have taken big strides towards increasing access to mental health support, others are lagging behind, and this is creating big inconsistencies across higher education bodies. At the moment, universities operate under a patchwork of guidance and general principles, which has left students, families and staff unsure where responsibility begins and ends. A clearly defined statutory duty would create consistency across the sector and provide assurance that basic, reasonable safeguards are in place for every student, regardless of where they study.

The pain of a loss by suicide never leaves us, and it causes a tidal wave of grief that ripples out. It is a sad truth that so many people will never fully realise how many people their lives have touched. It only becomes obvious when it is too late.

Suicide is a multifaceted issue, and of course the responsibility for students is not just on universities. Combating death by suicide requires a multifaceted and multi-agency approach, but it would be no bad thing if we all felt a little more responsible for one another. Establishing a statutory duty of care is not about blame. It is about responsibility, consistency and doing what is reasonable to protect young people before they choose a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

9.59 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for setting the scene incredibly well. I want to give a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate. Education is devolved; the Minister is not responsible for it, but the issues are the same for us in Northern Ireland. There is also the fact that 30% of Northern Irish students go to university here on the mainland and only 4% from the mainland study at our universities. The issue for parents in Northern Ireland, with 30% of their students on the UK mainland, is therefore pertinent to this debate.

I want to speak holistically about the needs of students across the United Kingdom, despite our differing education systems and educational devolution, because the issue that the hon. Member has brought to our attention today applies everywhere, irrespective of where someone lives in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe that a statutory duty of care would clearly define legal obligations for universities, students and teaching staff so that they can follow up—a regulation, or a way of responding to every case brought to their attention. I want to address that, and I will also focus on what students and parents can expect, reducing ambiguity and uncertainty.

There is no doubt that the mental health and resilience of our young people is not where it once was. I am not saying that we were stronger back in the '60s, or maybe even further back, but as an elected representative I have never seen anything quite like how it is today. Certainly, in my years as an elected representative I have seen it getting worse, more acute and more serious. That is probably where we are.

The landmark youth wellbeing prevalence survey of 2020 found that 12.6% of children and young people in Northern Ireland were likely to meet

“established criteria for a common mood or anxiety disorder.”

I know that we are talking about universities, but I have parents and constituents coming to me whose 10-year-old children have anxiety and mood issues. That should be a time of fun, with no worries or burdens hanging over their head.

The figure was noted as being approximately 25% higher than rates in other UK nations, so we in Northern Ireland seem to have a bigger anxiety issue. A 2023 survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that some 39% of young people aged 18 to 24 in Northern Ireland—nearly four in 10—reported that

“anxiety had affected their day-to-day life to a great or moderate extent.”

The 2023 Young Life and Times survey reported that “45.2% of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland had probably mental ill-health.”

It is clear that certainty and support are integral parts of education and must be a foundational principle.

My thoughts for the Minister are that even though education is a devolved matter, when it comes to discussing these issues it does not matter where someone lives, be it Edinburgh, Penryn, Bournemouth or Coleraine; the issue is the same. So can the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can work on this collectively across the United Kingdom?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that clarity is required and that, in any statutory duty of care, account must be taken of the potential seriousness of the problem for those affected? Does he agree that we need to do it in a way that does not impose an extreme burden on universities to implement any statutory duty of care, so that it becomes a win-win for both students and their concerned parents?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right. The best way to approach this may be in a pastoral way, reaching out and noticing things—not that I am better than anybody else, but I do tend to see the person and perhaps see what the issues are a bit more deeply.

In Northern Ireland, results day for the transfer test—the cognitive abilities test, as it is known—is coming. Increasingly, parents who are considering which secondary school to choose for their children are not simply looking at academic grades, after-school clubs or links to vocational education. Parents are prioritising pastoral care for children as young as 11, because they are aware of the mental health pressure on their child from a young age. How much more pressure is there when they fly the nest and head to university? It can be a very lonely place. Sometimes, in life, the person who laughs the loudest and looks like the life and soul of the party is not necessarily without anxiety or mood issues. They could be the person who hangs their fiddle at the door, as my mother would have said: they seem like a person with no worries when they are outside, but when they close that door and go into their home, things can overtake them.

University is certainly the stage at which we advocate for independent thought and study, but independence is not the same as isolation. I believe that a duty of care would help to address drop-out rates. Precise figures for the number of Northern Ireland students who leave university due to mental health issues are not publicly available, because universities generally track overall drop-out rates in official stats but not the specific, self-reported reason for leaving. But one survey found that 29% students have considered leaving their course, with mental health cited as the most common reason. The hon. Member for Rushcliffe, who set the scene so well, cited an example of that.

None of us is looking for universities to take on parenting roles; it is not about that. It is about pastoral care, and that is where I would like to see the focus. Support is a different matter, and I hope that this proposal will provide a structure for greater student support to be a standard. I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate, and all those who are participating.

10.6 am

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this important debate. Currently, there is no general duty on universities to take reasonable steps to prevent foreseeable harm to adult students. With much of the University of Wolverhampton in my constituency of Wolverhampton West, I have been working closely with the university's director of student life and designated safeguarding lead to address this issue.

Campaigners are not asking for strict liability or for universities to take the form of a parent. They are asking for something fair and simple: where a university becomes aware of a foreseeable risk of serious harm to one of their students, it should take reasonable steps to reduce and prevent that risk. That duty of care is applied in workplaces and colleges, and higher education should be no exception.

After I raised this matter in the House last May, I got a response from the Minister for Skills, Baroness Smith of Malvern, who said that a duty of care may arise in certain circumstances, and that such circumstances would be a matter for the courts to decide, based on the facts and context of the case being considered, and would be dependent on the application by the court of accepted common-law principles. I became an MP to be a legislator. As MPs, we cannot absolve ourselves from our duty as legislators by saying that it is for the courts to clarify uncertainties in the law. It is for us not only to clarify the law, but to make it stronger and sensible.

I was a personal injury and clinical negligence solicitor for more than 30 years before I became an MP, and I find it shocking that the common law does not impose a duty of care on universities to exercise reasonable care and skill for the wellbeing, health and safety of their students when they are teaching them or providing education-related services. That also applies to taking reasonable steps to prevent injury, including psychiatric injury, when such a statutory duty exists in prisons, hospitals, primary and secondary schools, and colleges or further education. Duty of care in negligence also exists in other situations: doctor to patient, solicitor to client, manufacturer to consumer, and one road user to another. There are well-established principles of negligence that state that, where a duty of care exists and that duty is breached, resulting in injury and/or financial loss that was reasonably foreseeable, negligence has occurred.

I will bring the tragic case of Abrahart up again. In Natasha's case, there was reasonable foreseeability of Natasha's health suffering and her having a psychiatric disorder, but it was held that the university was not negligent because the university did not owe Natasha a relevant duty of care. In October 2017, university staff became aware that Natasha was struggling and was experiencing anxiety and panic attacks in response to oral assessments. In February 2018, a university employee received an email from Natasha, saying:

"I've been having suicidal thoughts and to a certain degree attempted it."

At that time, Natasha had been diagnosed with chronic social anxiety disorder, but the university continued to mark her down on her assessments. The court confirmed that there were other ways of eliciting information from the student rather than having oral assessments.

It concluded that, had there been a duty of care in existence, there would have been a breach of that duty, and the university would consequently have been negligent for its actions.

Natasha's claim succeeded only under the Equality Act 2010 on the grounds of disability discrimination, because the university failed to make reasonable adjustments based on her disability. However, there are other reasons—to do with legal costs and time limits—why, in order to achieve justice, it should be possible to pursue a claim in negligence where a university has been negligent.

Kerry McCarthy: It is not adequate for us to have to rely on a determination that someone is suffering from a disability because of mental health issues. In some cases, there will be a history, engagement and a diagnosis of a disorder, but in many others, it could be that the student suddenly feels themselves to be in that situation. There is not always a long pathway to suicide; it could be triggered by a particular event. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that relying on the Equality Act is not adequate in the cases of these students?

Warinder Juss: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and I agree. There will be cases where a student is vulnerable and action needs to be taken, but where that student may not have been diagnosed with a disability. It does not feel fair that in those circumstances the university should not take any steps to deal with the student's vulnerability.

It cannot be right that there is currently no duty on universities to take reasonable steps to protect the welfare of their students and prevent them from suffering harm when it is reasonably foreseeable that a failure to act will result in harm. Establishing such a statutory duty of care would ensure that the law in this country was brought in line with the position in other common-law countries, like the United States and Australia. More importantly, it will give clarity to judges to ensure that justice is achieved and there is access to justice. Universities will also be given clarity about their responsibilities, so that they can take appropriate action to prevent the loss of young lives in their institutions.

A statutory duty of care for universities would define expectations, embed accountability and promote prevention. It would not burden universities unnecessarily, but would align them with the responsibility already expected in other sectors. This is about fairness, clarity and saving lives, and Parliament must act to close this duty gap. Students and their families deserve better, universities need certainty and the courts need clarity. As parliamentarians, let us make that happen.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Back Benchers' speeches must end by 10.30 am so that we can move on to the wind-ups.

10.14 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on setting out the case for a statutory duty of care so well.

Students face an array of intersecting pressures throughout their student journey. One is the cost of living. York is one of the most expensive places to be a student, not least because of the lack of supply and the cost of accommodation. That bears down on students, who have to take on more responsibilities, often working full time alongside their studies. Having to dedicate more of their time to surviving compromises their studies, yet universities seem quite impervious to understanding those cost pressures by putting mitigation in place, whether by providing accommodation or by supporting students who do not succeed because they have to spend more time on their work.

Transport pressures also bear down on students, as does the array of challenges that young people face today, including social media, violence and sexual violence, and we have talked about the interplay of neurodivergence and mental health. It is really important that there be a statutory duty of care on universities to provide holistic support around a student.

We must also recognise the challenges facing international students, who have not yet been mentioned in this debate. They are from another jurisdiction with different mental health models, but they also face challenges with their immigration status, which I have come across in York. We need to look at the system. An Iranian student today who would not be able to return to Iran because of the situation there must be able to change their status here. There are many intersections for international students, which we must take on board.

In 2015, York had a real surge in the number of students who took their lives. I congratulate the universities and the wider community on looking at how they could put mitigation in place, but 1,108 students have since taken their lives across the country. Therefore, this situation does permeate the sector.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As near neighbours with universities in our constituencies, my hon. Friend and I see a real patchwork of support at universities across the country. Does she agree that a statutory duty would bring universities on a level playing field with hospitals, schools and employers? I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on students, and this is something that we have long called for. Does she not think it is time that we brought forward the statutory duty to support all those students?

Rachael Maskell: I agree. We must legislate in this place; that is why we are here. I particularly want to thank the student unions, because they are the people who are making the case, day by day, to the employers and the universities about the need to provide that statutory duty and the necessary services.

I want to address a different issue that has not been raised in the debate, around mental health services. We know that they are in crisis and, as a result, they are not responding to needs. Often, somebody will have a relationship with their mental health service at home but not when they move to a new area. We need a better transition for people who are neurodivergent, but also for those who experience mental health challenges, to ensure that they are properly engaged with those mental health services. The problem we have is that it is always somebody else's problem, so we need to ensure that those mental health services are provided through a

different model. Particularly within the student setting, I encourage a primary rather than secondary care model, because often the thresholds are in the wrong place for proper engagement. In the primary care setting, there can be a partnership formed between the university, the GPs and professionals to ensure that those services are timely.

My final point is about students who do not succeed in their studies and the welfare services that are wrapped around those students. There must always be a second chance for a student. Perhaps they do not get the scores they need; perhaps their relationships with some of their lecturers and professors are not, shall I say, cordial. As a result, conflict can often arise. We always need a second chance for a student so that there is another avenue to pursue and another opportunity ahead of them. That is what a statutory duty of care will confirm for students.

10.19 am

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see a constituency neighbour in the Chair, Sir Christopher. My constituency has three universities: Bournemouth University, Arts University Bournemouth and the Health Sciences University. They are committed to achieving zero suicides, and have a joint strategy intended to ensure that no person loses their life. I would like to put on the official parliamentary record the names of Paul Millgate, Callum Jewell and Alec Channing. Their lives were lost, as was the love that they gave to their families.

Universities provide significant support for student wellbeing, but it is worth reflecting on what needs to go beyond that. My constituents are benefiting from studying at Bournemouth University and the duty of care that it provides. Bournemouth University is going as far as it possibly can to provide this care, but as we have heard in this debate, introducing a statutory duty of care can achieve two important things: first, a level playing field between the higher education sector and other sectors, and secondly consistency in the standards of care that students and staff can expect across the whole country. It is great that we have fantastic constituency examples of universities that care deeply for their students and staff, and that exercise that care deeply, but we need to make sure that every staff member and student benefits from that type of care.

That is particularly the case because education opens doors for so many young people. I am a fervent fan of apprenticeships and am pleased that the Government are moving towards further investment in apprenticeships, but university will still be a place of great educational importance for our young people. I am also pleased that many of them do not regret their decision to choose a degree. Indeed, last year's student experience survey showed that just 11% of undergraduates regretted their decision to take a degree.

We must ensure that every undergraduate's experience is the best it can be. In introducing a statutory duty of care, we need to think carefully about what this would be. There must be clarity on what duty of care means in a higher education context, and it has to intercept with and make sense alongside existing safeguarding responsibilities, health and safety law and anticipatory duties under equality legislation. I am confident that it

[Tom Hayes]

can, for it must. We also need to think about who would monitor and regulate compliance. Would it fall under Ofsted, the Office for Students, the Department for Education or a new regulatory body? Universities need clear expectations and pathways for managing risk.

We also need to recognise the critical importance of funding, which has been touched on in this debate. In April, I spoke about the shortfall that Bournemouth University was facing of around £15 million to £20 million, which has now more or less closed. In the view of the Office for Students, 24 higher education institutions are at risk of closure. That is a desperate situation for many institutions and our higher education setting. If we are to put this duty on universities, as I think we should, we should also think carefully about what the funding will be.

I will give a short example of what Bournemouth University does. There is a university retreat that provides self-defined crisis support for students, Monday to Saturday from 2 pm to 9 pm on the Talbot campus. It has no thresholds to access, so student mental health support is available in the here and now. For students whose needs may be more complex—or not complex enough to allow them to access healthcare support at hospitals or GPs—this service from the university provides face-to-face support, particularly in crisis moments. It provides those who are stuck on long waiting lists with immediate access to the support that they need. Critically, that is funded by Dorset HealthCare and is delivered in collaboration with it. Any duty that we provide should provide additional funding through our NHS pathways, alongside higher education institutions, so that we can get the very best for our students.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this debate and look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in response. In particular, I am looking for the answer to the exam question: is it the Government's intention to bring forward a statutory duty of care? What would that mean, and how would it be resourced?

10.24 am

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this important debate.

As the Member for the City of Durham, I am immensely proud to represent a world-class university. For many students, coming to a city like Durham is not only a period of excitement, discovery and personal growth, but one of vulnerability. They are away from home for the first time, facing academic pressures far beyond A-levels and dealing with situations that they may not have had to deal with before, from problematic landlords to issues with utility suppliers, difficulties getting medication under shared care agreements and loneliness. They face situations that can pile on the pressure and exacerbate existing anxieties. For some, that vulnerability is even greater. Just yesterday, the Unite Foundation reported that well over a quarter of care-experienced and estranged students face financial concerns that directly damage their mental health. That number is over and above that of their peers who do have a family support network in place.

We are witnessing a crisis of scale. Higher Education Statistics Agency data shows that the number of students disclosing a mental health condition has increased by 480% since 2011. Office for Students statistics show that 25% of undergraduates in their final year have experienced sexual harassment, and we know that that is a tragically under-reported figure.

Some argue that because students are adults, a legal duty would make universities risk-averse, but I disagree. There is no need for a duty of care to be in loco parentis, where every move is monitored. It would be a duty to provide a professional standard of care, at the same level that we would expect from an employer or healthcare provider. If a student stops attending lectures for weeks on end, or their work shows signs of severe distress, a clearly defined process outlining how the university can and should support the student would potentially help with pressure points before they turn into emergencies.

Currently, student safety is a postcode lottery, and support varies widely between institutions. A statutory duty would replace this patchwork with a single national baseline and would help to give consistency, providing a floor below which no institution can fall. It would provide clarity on data to empower pastoral teams to involve emergency contacts without fearing that they are breaching GDPR, and integration to ensure better data sharing between the NHS and universities.

Alongside that, we must be mindful of the concerns raised by the University and College Union. Although a duty of care would be a huge step in the right direction, we need to be aware of the context in which this new responsibility would be introduced. A statutory duty of care would help to close gaps in accountability and would lead to earlier intervention, but there is already a funding crisis in higher education.

Imposing a duty of care on universities will not work if already overstretched staff and underfunded pastoral teams are expected to pick up the pieces. In fact, there is a risk that introducing a duty of care and thinking that that is job done could lead to more problems for students. If a duty of care is to be introduced, it must also come with the resources and funding to ensure that universities can deliver the training that their teams will need and that they can dedicate their own resources to already creaking mental health support teams. Of course, they need to ensure that their own staff are working in a safe environment.

A student's safety should not rely on the terms and conditions of their specific university, but we cannot rely on passing legislation without the proper funding to allow universities to deliver the best support for their students. We owe it to every family to ensure that when a young person leaves home for higher education, the sector and the Government work hand in hand to ensure that they are protected by a properly funded, well-regulated and easy-to-understand statutory standard of care.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Phil Brickell, who has one minute.

10.29 am

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I will focus on recent goings-on at my local institution, the University

of Greater Manchester, where over the past year there have been credible, detailed and publicly available allegations of fraud, bribery and corruption involving senior executives and the university's Centre for Islamic Finance. Greater Manchester police's major incident team has investigated.

The first detailed reports emerged in February 2025, but it was only in December that the Office for Students finally confirmed that it was opening an investigation into governance at the university. Students, staff and taxpayers are all entitled to ask why it took 10 months. Why did it take a police investigation to trigger regulatory action, and why did that happen six months later? How many students were left exposed while the Office for Students hesitated?

The delay is indefensible. The OfS's condition E governance requirements exist to protect students and ensure public confidence in the sector, yet these allegations raise questions about whether governing bodies were aware of, or fully understood, commercial arrangements that appear to benefit insiders at the expense of the institution.

When millions of pounds are potentially being paid out in opaque deals, we must ask: were students served, or were they being treated as a revenue stream to be monetised without proper oversight? People across Bolton are watching events at the university unfold, wondering out loud what the regulator is doing and when it will act. They are crying out for certainty, which is why in my letters to the OfS chief executive and the Education Secretary I have called for urgent, transparent action—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

10.30 am

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this important debate.

I acknowledge the families who have suffered the devastating loss of their loved one at such a young age. In particular, I recognise Natasha Abraham's parents for their campaigning to prevent other families from enduring what they experienced. I am grateful for the time that they spent with me to share Natasha's story and their concerns about how universities support students in crisis. It is because of families like theirs that we are having this debate today, and we owe it to them to get it right.

Although much of this debate has rightly focused on mental health support, universities have a broader duty of care to their students. It encompasses physical safety, appropriate academic adjustments, protection from harassment and ensuring that institutional practices do not place unreasonable pressure on vulnerable students. The Liberal Democrats believe that universities should be held accountable for the support that they provide to their students as part of those duties.

We have heard a lot of numbers and statistics about students' mental health challenges. In the interests of time, I will not dig into those further. From the many meetings that I have had with universities and student organisations, it is clear that many care deeply about those studying with them and want to provide the best

support to all who need it, but we also know that demand is rising and not all institutions are meeting what we might expect.

The question is how we ensure that support services are available, timely and fit for purpose, and that students know how to access them. Also, how do we ensure that institutional practices, from assessment methods to accommodation standards, properly support student wellbeing? Support can come in a number of forms, catering to different student populations and localities, among other things, but I hope we would all agree that there should be a consistent approach across all universities to ensure that support is available when and where it is needed.

That is where the university mental health charter, devised by the charity Student Minds, could have an important role to play. Signing up to the charter is currently voluntary for universities, and just over 100 of the 165 have signed up. All universities are being asked to sign up by the end of this year. That should be encouraged, to ensure a base level of support for all students from the start of their higher education experience.

To address universities' duty-of-care responsibilities, a voluntary aspiration must evolve into a rigorous accountability mechanism. That means not just mental health services, but ensuring that institutional policies and practices properly support student wellbeing. Universities must not only sign up to the charter, but demonstrate that they are adhering to a full strategy, with clear standards, regular independent assessment and consequences for non-compliance; providing details and evidence of direct signposting of services to students; dedicated individuals responsible for ensuring that well-structured welfare checks are carried out; and timely delivery of services when needed.

I was going to give a couple of examples from the University of the West of England, as I have been really impressed by its leadership on the issue. It does not have a one-size-fits-all solution, which is food for thought for other institutions and the Minister. However, in the interests of time I will just encourage the Minister to look into that. Importantly, the university's approach is not just about counselling; it is about co-ordinating work across the institution to ensure that students with mental health conditions receive appropriate academic adjustments where necessary, that assessment practices are flexible when needed, and that support wraps around the whole student experience.

As others have said today, it is important to recognise that universities cannot solve this problem alone. We need much stronger partnerships between universities and NHS mental health services. Students should not fall into gaps between university counselling and clinical NHS provision when they most need support. When students move away to university, they often lose the continuity in NHS services that may have supported them at home. The student mental health agreement, which facilitates the sharing of information, with consent, between universities and NHS services, must be implemented consistently across all institutions.

Finally, the area that is perhaps hardest to address is the cultural change required among students, families and staff across universities. It is vital that students who are suffering feel comfortable and safe to disclose any

[Ian Sollom]

issues they may have in order to seek and access the support and services they need. We can only do so by continuing to talk.

We owe it to the families of those young people who are no longer with us to ensure that we adopt a system-wide approach to providing the best access to support and services at universities, as well as bringing about much-needed cultural change to prevent further tragedies in the future.

10.37 am

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I am pleased to respond to this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on leading it; I also pay tribute to the families who have brought their tragic stories to hon. Members, which have informed the debate. That is how serious problems, such as the lack of consistent safeguarding for students, are brought to public awareness, and it is how change happens.

The themes that have come up today show a clear pattern and demonstrate the challenge across the whole United Kingdom. The main theme was the lack of consistency in safeguarding and care. The hon. Member for Rushcliffe was eloquent in making his case that deciding the law through litigation, not legislation, causes uncertainty and distress for families. Equally, some of the difficulties that exist—such as the need to recognise that students are adults with their own autonomy and responsibility, while parents obviously want to help their children in young adulthood—were also set out well.

University should be a rich and rewarding experience for every student. University is when so many young people have a chance to grow, learn more about their passions inside and outside the lecture hall, and decide what they want to do in future. It is when many young people begin to discover who they want to become.

Sadik Al-Hassan: Here with us in the Public Gallery is John, a constituent of mine from Nailsea. John's beloved son Max devastatingly lost his life to suicide in 2017, at just 23. Max's mental health difficulties emerged while he was studying for an economics degree at the University of Edinburgh. Tragically, Max is not alone. Does the hon. Member agree that there is a crisis of care in universities, and that we need a funded statutory duty of care to protect other students like Max?

Nick Timothy: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that very sad story. I reiterate that I know the bravery that it takes for families to share these stories, and the importance of hon. Members repeating them so that we can fully understand this problem. Although my party's position is not yet fully established on whether we need a statutory duty, we certainly need to do a lot better than we are right now.

As well as being an exciting time, university can be when young people are at their most vulnerable. Universities have several legal duties, including health and safety legislation to ensure that they minimise accidents and injuries on campus. There is the basic maintenance needed to ensure that buildings and public spaces are safe, and in recent years we have seen universities take

more seriously the task of offering mental health services to students and making sure that there is help available.

The proportion of students with a mental health condition has increased from less than 1% in 2010 to 5.8% in 2022, and the Office for Students has recorded an average of 160 suicides a year among students between 2016 and 2023, which is an extraordinary statistic. Like other colleagues here today, I have been contacted by constituents whose families have been affected by this awful trauma. One told me about a relative who committed suicide as an undergraduate. Legal proceedings against the university found that it had failed to make the changes needed to support the student in question. As we have heard today, my constituent is not alone, and so many others have not had the help that they needed during a critical time in their life.

These are often complex cases, but universities are obliged to find ways of addressing common problems experienced by students struggling with their mental health. Some students need help to cope with the stress of workloads and exam pressure, moving away from home for the first time, losing touch with friendship circles and family, as well as financial pressures, as we have heard during this debate. In those moments of crisis, universities can and must help.

It is also very much the job of universities to make their campus as safe as possible from criminal behaviour. The Office for Students found that 14% of surveyed students reported being a victim of sexual violence, and one in four students reported being a victim of sexual harassment. While this obviously reflects wider social problems, universities must still put in place sufficient preventive security measures and offer support for victims of these very serious crimes.

Warinder Juss: Many hon. Members have mentioned the need for universities to have extra funding to meet this statutory duty of care. Does the hon. Member agree that it is not always an issue of funding, but can be one of mindset? In Natasha Abrahart's case, the matter could have been dealt with without the need for extra funding, just by finding another way to elicit that information from Natasha rather than exposing her to oral assessments when the university was aware that she was suffering from chronic social anxiety disorder.

Nick Timothy: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. In these debates, the first response is so often to say that it is a question of money. However, the reality is often that we need proper structures, policies and accountability in place so that institutions perform as they should. As the debate has shown, we also have a much wider culture to address. Some of the culture change we need reflects a wider cultural change in society, but some of it is very specific to universities and the work they do to make sure that they meet their duty of care. I therefore agree with the hon. Member.

Universities have a responsibility to protect their students from discrimination, intimidation and extremism, but that is not what has happened over the last several years. The last Conservative Government passed the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which was introduced to ensure that universities are safe for the free exchange of ideas and intellectually honest debate. That legislation is still not properly or fully

enacted. Students wanting to challenge ideas such as radical gender ideology still risk being threatened and punished for their opinions.

At the same time, universities have tolerated protests and encampments that have left Jewish students feeling unwelcome and unsafe. Antisemitic chants such as “From the river to the sea” and “Death to the IDF” have been met with silence from too many universities. The protests that I am talking about have cost £2.6 million in security and clean-up costs across the country since the 7 October attacks. Despite the brazen mass display of antisemitism at those events, only 49 students at 17 universities have been investigated, and even fewer have been punished.

Just last week, the United Arab Emirates placed restrictions on its citizens to limit the number who come to study at British universities, due to concerns that they might be radicalised by the Muslim Brotherhood on our campuses. Islamists are finding more ways to infiltrate British universities and institutions to spread their ideological poison undeterred. Just as we must in all our public institutions, we need to take on and destroy that evil in our universities.

There is no single clear statute in law that sets out a positive duty of care for universities, but parents have a reasonable expectation that universities will protect and support the young people they are entrusted with educating. That is why my party welcomes this debate. I personally welcome the contributions from everybody who has attended, and I thank Members across the House for engaging so constructively as we work to make universities safe for everyone.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I recognise the profound pain felt by families who have lost loved ones in higher education. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this debate, and I pay tribute to his constituents Bob and Maggie Abraham, whose tireless work for better student support has inspired so many. I want to acknowledge all the families who have campaigned with courage and determination, including those from the LEARN Network—Lived Experience for Action Right Now—who continue to work alongside us to drive change.

Our duty now is clear: we must turn grief into learning and action. The Government share the determination to do just that. We want safer campuses and better support for every student. Our approach is to act on the evidence and work with the sector to embed best practice and strengthen institutional accountability. Members should be in no doubt that this Government believe that change in that regard is needed.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi), who highlighted Mared’s story: the tragic loss of the life of someone who had a bright future as a pharmacist ahead of them. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) highlighted Oskar’s story. I recognise that improvement in higher education is needed. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted the UK-wide nature of these concerns and the growing prevalence of mental health conditions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) raised important issues about general duties, to which I will turn later. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) highlighted the link to the cost of living pressures that many students face, and the issues for international students.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) spoke about the tragic stories of Paul, Callum and Alec, and highlighted the really good practice taking place at Bournemouth University, which is part of the answer to what needs to change. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) highlighted the brilliant work of the Unite Foundation, which I know well, and spoke about cohorts such as care-experienced students and estranged students. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) rightly highlighted governance concerns and the centrality of accountability.

The Government remain committed to improving students’ health and wellbeing. Since the previous debate on this matter, we have published the findings from the national review of higher education student suicides. That landmark review examined serious incident and prevention of future deaths reports, identified patterns and risk factors, and looked at institutional responses in depth. The sector’s response was notable. Many universities engaged openly and honestly, showing a clear commitment to share lessons and learn together.

To ensure that the review’s recommendations are turned into action, we have extended the higher education mental health implementation taskforce, which brings together students, families and the sector to work with and challenge institutions to improve student mental health and wellbeing services.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Last week was the seven-year anniversary of the death of one of my constituents’ sons, Kieran Patel. Unfortunately, the House has not given me time to do justice to his story. His mother Manjo was in touch with me last week and shared the horrific experience of the loss of her much-loved and talented son, who was a medical student at Southampton University. We have heard many horrific stories of potential that has been cut short today.

Manjo and other family members left behind would like to know that the action that the Minister is outlining will take place with urgency. The Minister has pointed to a number of previous reviews, debates and discussions. Can he confirm that the Government are seriously looking at a statutory duty and all possible levers to ensure that no parent has to experience a tragic loss like Manjo’s again?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that. I welcome his intervention, given that he has not had a chance to mention Kieran’s story and Manjo’s experience as his mum in a speech.

We want to move fast, which is why we published updated terms of reference for the taskforce just last month. They set out the priorities for the taskforce for the next phase of work, which includes exploring the most effective mechanisms for holding the sector to account. We have also recently appointed Professor Sir Steve West as the new higher education student

[*Josh MacAlister*]

support champion, to maintain momentum on these matters. Sir Steve will steer the taskforce through the next phase of work.

Although universities play an important role in creating supportive environments, they are not, and should not become, substitute mental health services. Mental health care rightly sits with the NHS. The Government recognise that and the pressures on services, which is why we are recruiting 8,500 additional NHS mental health staff by the end of this Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East highlighted, many universities are already delivering to bridge the gap, providing counselling, wellbeing services and crisis support, while working closely with local health partners to ensure that students get the right care. The taskforce will shortly publish a report showcasing five successful higher education and NHS partnerships. Those examples will demonstrate how greater collaboration can transform support for students while helping to drive efficiencies across health services. I urge universities that are not already part of such partnerships to study those models and explore how they can forge an approach that works for their local context. To stress it again: the taskforce is looking at how to better hold institutions to account and will make recommendations accordingly.

Phil Brickell: Can the Minister confirm that the taskforce will look at the effectiveness of the OfS as the regulator for the sector in driving better student outcomes and preventing student harm?

Josh MacAlister: The taskforce's job is to look at the whole system that sits around universities, and the OfS is a crucial part of that, so it will be in scope of that work.

Let me turn to the question of a statutory duty of care. As has been highlighted in this debate, higher education providers have a general duty of care to deliver educational and pastoral services to the standard of an ordinary competent institution. In carrying out those duties, they are expected to act reasonably. In addition to general and common-law duties, universities also have explicit statutory obligations. For instance, under the Equality Act, they must make reasonable adjustments for disabled students, which includes those with qualifying mental health conditions. Providers should plan ahead to remove barriers and act promptly when there are signs of mental health deterioration.

Equality and Human Rights Commission guidance makes clear what good practice looks like. Student-facing staff should be trained to recognise signs of mental health crisis or deterioration and should know what steps to take, including helping the student to access support. Where a severe or urgent condition is apparent, reasonable adjustments should be made without waiting for a formal diagnosis or medical evidence. If a student has no diagnosis but staff are concerned, for example because of disengagement, missed deadlines or marked changes in behaviour, staff should consider whether the Equality Act criteria may be met and whether adjustments are appropriate.

We also need to be clear about what introducing a statutory duty would mean in practice. It is not just a question of drafting; it would require defining a minimum

legal standard for universities, which risks becoming a ceiling rather than a floor. I draw Members' attention to some of the evidence provided in the 2023 Petitions Committee hearing on a statutory duty of care, at which a number of stakeholders expressed a range of concerns and scepticism about the unintended effects of a statutory duty of care. A ceiling rather than a floor could drive providers towards defensive compliance and litigation, instead of focusing on what really matters: spotting problems early, making timely adjustments and learning from serious incidents. When we talk about the risk of unintended consequences, this is what we mean: confusion about boundaries, reduced ambition and the risk of resources being diverted from proactive support.

Almost all students are adults. Introducing a special statutory duty for them could be disproportionate, when the evidence shows that students in higher education have a lower suicide rate than others of the same age in the general population. That is not to minimise the problem at universities, which I recognise, but to highlight the need for a proportionate response that strikes the right balance.

We will continue to monitor the evidence, listen deeply to bereaved families and hold providers to account. Right now, the fastest and most effective route to support safer campuses is for universities to embed the recommendations from the national review and best practice identified through the taskforce's outputs, to strengthen their partnerships with local health services and to ensure full compliance with duties that already exist. Together, I believe we can ensure that higher education remains a place of opportunity, enrichment and safety for every student. I know that those views are wholly shared by my noble Friend Baroness Smith, the Minister for Skills.

10.56 am

James Naish: I thank the Minister for his response. I pay tribute to those in the Public Gallery, and I thank everybody for coming; the debate will not have been easy listening for some, so we appreciate their presence. Secondly, some hon. Members were not able to contribute, including my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), chair of the all-party parliamentary group on universities. I thank everybody for joining, even if they were not able to make their points.

We heard from hon. Members from across the country—from England, Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland—and from the great university cities of Durham, York, Edinburgh, Leeds, Birmingham and Bournemouth, among others. I thank them all. There were some emotional speeches, but the overall sentiment was clear: universities have made good progress on the practical elements—although they need to be funded properly to provide the necessary services—but there is still a place for legislation.

The word "consistency" was used numerous times. I push the Minister to think carefully about how we can ensure a level of consistency across hundreds of different organisations across the country without taking a statutory approach. We heard about incorrect exam results and failures to act on appropriate consent, and a range of other examples. A statutory level would ensure certainty across the whole of the United Kingdom. There is a gap between public expectation and reality. When things fall apart, it leads to confusion, anger and a loss of trust in

some of our greatest institutions, which are among our great national assets. We should not take it for granted that we can allow that to be self-managed.

I push the Minister and the Department to monitor the effectiveness of the mental health taskforce. The taskforce acknowledges that there are gaps and that more needs to be done. It may be that the gaps cannot be closed without taking the step that we have talked about today. I hope that there will not be groupthink in the Department, but that this matter will be constantly asked about and discussed. As I said, surely there is no better way to ensure the consistent implementation of protective measures than a solid, legal basis for that obligation. I believe that that stands as the cross-party sentiment of MPs here today. I hope that the Government will go back and look once more at this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a statutory duty of care for universities.

Academic Technology Approval Scheme

11 am

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Academic Technology Approval Scheme.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher; I wish you a happy new year, although we are probably in the dregs of when we can say that. I welcome the Minister for what I hope will be a constructive half-hour debate. I will start by briefly setting out what ATAS is, because if I have learned one thing in the last few months, it is that it has quite low salience—including, I regret to say, in the Foreign Office. If this debate achieves nothing else, I hope it resolves that.

ATAS, known properly as the academic technology approval scheme, is a system by which additional checks are carried out on international students and researchers of certain nationalities, or those working in security-related fields. It is clearly an incredibly important process, and one that exists in some form in most other countries where advanced research is taking place. ATAS checks are most commonly needed when individuals will be studying, researching or working in subject topics that could be used to develop advanced conventional military technology or weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems.

There is an obvious reason why it is important to get ATAS right. The type of research that, in the wrong hands, could be used to develop weapons of mass destruction is also the type of research that is critical for making many non-military advancements. For example, biophysics research in molecular medicine involves groundbreaking discoveries in the diagnosis and treatment of diseases that can change the lives of millions of people. Creating novel chemical materials could revolutionise food packaging and how it is recycled.

We all know that we need better energy systems and sources. Buses now commonly run on hydrogen, a move that in Scotland, I am proud to say, was supported by experts in the school of chemistry at the University of St Andrews in my constituency. And then there is artificial intelligence. We know that it is having a huge impact on how we live our lives, and I want to ensure that the best and brightest are here in the UK working on it, ensuring that the development of AI includes the necessary guardrails to prevent its abuse. Those are just a few examples of research subjects that could require ATAS approval for an international student or academic.

My point is that if we want the UK to be a world leader in research and development, which is key to the Government's modern industrial strategy, then we need to attract the brightest and the best. We cannot do that if the security checks needed to process their visas are not working.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for always bringing forward incredibly important subjects, both to Westminster Hall and on the Floor of the House. Universities back home, such as Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, have many ATAS students and researchers who study in sensitive areas such as science, engineering and technology. Many of the funded research positions have been delayed or

[*Jim Shannon*]

even unfilled due to ATAS processing times having a significant impact on the system. Does the hon. Lady agree that more must be done for clearance to be secured in a timely manner so that advantage can be taken of vital research postings?

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Member always manages to touch in advance on the key topics that we will raise in the debate, and timescales in relation to ATAS is certainly one of the things that I will touch on.

I turn to the time it takes for ATAS checks to be carried out. I am grateful that the Minister wrote to me last week confirming a standard timeframe of 30 working days—six weeks—to process applications. That seems quite reasonable for something technical that we clearly want to get right. The problem is that that response timescale is not exactly everyone's experience. I have had casework for academics and students coming to the University of St Andrews with delays of up to six months, an experience that is shared by the Russell Group of universities, which reached out to me in advance of this debate.

Processing delays are not anything new, but there are a few elements that I want to pull out. Most postgraduate programmes of study and research programmes have defined start and end dates, which is particularly true when grant funding is being utilised. Missing those start dates due to ATAS delays means that research students miss the start of their course, and that research projects might need to delay their start dates or begin without key personnel. The University of St Andrews will not make a formal offer without ATAS being completed, and the student cannot apply for their visa without receiving a formal offer from the university.¹ These are the different roadblocks on the way to getting approval.

Sir Christopher, can you imagine securing the funding for groundbreaking research and attracting the best global talent, only to find, days before the project is due to start, that you still do not know whether you can go ahead? You find yourself having to go back to the finance provider to ask for leniency and change contract dates and funding arrangements—all while worrying that the funding might ultimately be withdrawn. That could jeopardise your chances of receiving future support, or mean that the individual in question gives up on the process and secures employment elsewhere.

Although I am relieved to know from my conversations with the University of St Andrews that it has managed to deal with the stress of these concerns—but not the losses themselves—I have been told by the Russell Group about other universities that have experienced researchers and students withdrawing applications and going to other research-intensive nations instead, and about large research and development businesses withdrawing from university-led projects because they could not wait any longer for applications to be approved.

I therefore ask the Minister whether the 30-day standard period is a reasonable reflection of capacity. Would a 40 or even 50-day target perhaps be better? Then universities and applicants could plan accordingly. Could that be put into a formal, service-level agreement, so that universities, applicants and funding providers could manage expectations? There are naturally peaks to the number of applications for review over the summer,

given that the academic cycle, even for non-taught research, tends to start in the autumn. Could the Government be taking steps to prepare for that? Could extra resources be put in place? I understand that the highly technical nature of the checks being carried out means that there is a need for scientific experts, who are already in high demand in Whitehall. Does the Minister feel that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has sufficient scientific capacity to meet demand? Is that something that engagement with the university sector and the specialists we have here could resolve?

I have mentioned casework, because for MPs that is a huge part of our job. Visa problems, Department for Work and Pensions issues and HM Revenue and Customs delays are the bread and butter of our inbox and the work that our constituency staff do. It is a question of trying to find out the problem and what can be done to unstick whatever is stuck. But frustratingly, we cannot do that with ATAS. There is just one email address, for use by universities, MPs, students or anyone else who needs to get in touch. I am not sure that I have ever received a response from it. I am not surprised—it must be absolutely inundated.

Surely there must be a better system. I would rather we did not have delays with visas or pensions, which my team have to chase up on constituents' behalf, but this is at least something that we can do and that can give some answers as to why things are moving slowly and when an answer can be expected. Will the Minister look into an MP hotline for ATAS or a dedicated email address for use by registered universities? We can of course get in touch with the Home Office, as ATAS delays stop visas being processed, but this does not help at all, with UK Visas and Immigration officials left as in the dark as everyone else over the status of an ATAS check. Like us, all they can do is wait.

The opacity of the system was thrown into sharp relief for me towards the end of last year by one particular piece of casework. My constituent, an academic at the University of St Andrews, was applying for his visa to be renewed. This was all completely routine, but tragically, after his having submitted all the information and with the ATAS checks under way, his father unexpectedly took ill and passed away. He naturally wanted to travel home to Syria to see his family, pay his respects and, as the eldest son, arrange and play a part in his father's funeral. He immediately contacted UKVI and asked for permission to travel.

The next developments, I understand, are outwith the remit of the Minister and are not why we are here today, but they are worth noting. There does not seem to be a Home Office exemption to allow time-limited bereavement travel, even where evidence of death has been provided; and the UKVI escalation process, while effective, is still slow in consideration of the cultural norms for burial soon after death in many countries.

All of that means that my constituent had missed his father's funeral before any answers were received. He still wanted to return home to be with his family and pay his respects as soon as possible, and this is where we return to ATAS, because he was told that if he left the country, he would need to start his visa and ATAS applications all over again. That would require him to incur significant cost and uncertainty and risk serious disruption to his ongoing academic responsibilities. The only option, we were told by the Home Office, was to

1.[*Official Report*, 21 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 4WC.](Correction)

try to get his visa renewal through as quickly as possible. That left one big stumbling block: the inability to directly contact, chase or otherwise check in with ATAS over his security checks. This was without knowing how long the current waiting period was, and without ATAS having any guidance or grounds for expedition in compassionate circumstances.

My team are a pretty resourceful bunch, and they tried everything they could think of. They obviously emailed the public email address, and we wrote to the FCDO. We rang the FCDO helpline, and I was told on that phone call that the FCDO did not know what ATAS was and whether it was part of its remit. That is a bit worrying. When it was explained, we were told that surely this was the responsibility of the Home Office. It went on.

There is a positive ending in this case. Although my constituent missed the funeral and the initial mourning period, his checks did go through and his visa was renewed. He was able to see his mother and sister and pay his respects to his father. I am not convinced that anything done by my office—or indeed by me, because I did try to speak to a couple of FCDO Ministers in the House—did anything in that regard.

I know that the Minister will point out that in the end my constituent's ATAS checks were done within the six-week processing window. It is true that this is not one of the cases of terrible delay that I referred to earlier, but it clearly demonstrates the need for escalation routes for MPs or sponsoring universities, transparent processing timeframes, and a compassionate travel route or other allowances for bereaved applicants—or at least knowledge of what the process can and should be and whether indeed it is possible at all. Above all, there should be some form of knowledge or oversight within the FCDO, given that nobody seemed to know that ATAS existed or was an FCDO responsibility.

Something called the academic technology approval scheme might sound incredibly dry, but I hope that this debate demonstrates that it is incredibly important. It is important for our industrial strategy, medical breakthroughs, securing our energy future, and supporting our universities and our security as a nation. It is also about people. These issues are not minor. Roughly a quarter of the University of St Andrews's skilled worker visa applications last year involved ATAS checks, and a tenth of the ATAS students had their start days impacted. As proud as I am of the university, I know it is not the only top-level research centre in the UK. If we add up those figures, we are looking at thousands of delays and research projects impacted, as well as time and money lost. I hope that the Minister will set out how we can address these issues and bring ATAS and its processes into the light.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), the Minister of State who oversees this area within the Foreign Office, is unable to attend the debate, so I am grateful for the opportunity to respond on his behalf.

It is fundamentally important that there is feedback to the Government and Government Departments on where things could be improved and on where Departments could be better joined up. Sometimes, perhaps unintentionally, things can fall through the cracks. Sometimes there may be system dysfunction, but sometimes it may be the fault of an individual—it could be a training issue or someone who is new to the role. I am not saying that I know all the details, but it is important that we continue to maintain the best possible service for all our constituents and for the whole country. I also appreciate the contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is always an important voice in our debates. A number of matters have been raised to which I will seek to respond.

It is important to reflect on the point that the hon. Member for North East Fife made about our need to attract the brightest and best to our country to support our economy and be part of international research teams. As part of Britain being a global and outward-facing nation, that we are looking to those teams to bring the best knowledge and insights from across the world. Having global talent and working together is part of the United Kingdom's success as a science and technology superpower. In a similar way, UK talent goes abroad. Sometimes research teams operate and work in this country and then in other countries. That is part of our work and how we grow our economy, but we must also look at where we might work together on sensitive matters that underpin our security.

Recognising the importance of ensuring that we continue to attract talent was also part of our work last year on how we not only secure our borders and control immigration, but widen routes for attracting and supporting talent, particularly where our economy needs to grow in new ways, supporting our future competitiveness in areas of the economy. As the hon. Member acknowledged, it is important to get the balance right between attracting talent and ensuring that we have the right checks in place. Many new technologies have both civilian and military uses, and we are in a more complex world. As proliferation risks grow, research intended to do good can, in the wrong hands, lead to the transfer of sensitive skills, knowledge, networks, relationships and technological capability. That is what ATAS is designed to prevent. Once sensitive knowledge is shared, it cannot be recovered.

I therefore welcome today's debate on the academic technology approval scheme. It is important to recognise that ATAS is a national security vetting process, not a routine administrative check. It exists to protect the United Kingdom from the unlawful transfer of sensitive knowledge and technologies that could also contribute to the development of weapons of mass destruction or advanced military capabilities. It is important that we remain open to global research talent while rigorously protecting our national security, and that we ensure that security and openness strengthen each other when done well.

The demand for ATAS is a sign of the importance of growing areas of research in our universities. Demand has increased sharply in recent years as the scheme has expanded to reflect the growing and evolving threat landscape. Applications have risen from about 17,000 in 2017 to approximately 35,000 last year. Despite that growth, the vast majority of applications—about 98%—are processed within the 30 working-day service standard, and many are resolved more quickly. Some applications

[Seema Malhotra]

may be more straightforward and present no security concerns, but where cases are more complex or potentially high-risk, there may be a requirement for additional security checks, not all of which are within the FCDO's or the Home Office's control. That can take more time—sometimes more time than we might like. I recognise that decisions taking longer than the standard timeframe can have a personal impact, particularly if there are compassionate circumstances that have an impact on applicants and create uncertainty for universities.

Work is under way to look at faster triaging, providing surge support for more complex cases, and IT improvements, and there is ongoing engagement with universities. That is important, because we recognise the challenge. As with other visa circumstances with universities, which might do their own checks for international students, it is important that we recognise that universities and students have start times, and it is important that we do not push into a backlog or create issues just before university term time begins. We continue to do work to smooth that by supporting universities in how they do their checks and looking at how ATAS certificates might need to be issued in advance of visas being issued by the Home Office. The Home Office continues to work with the Department for Education and universities to improve that.

Wendy Chamberlain: The Minister has just mentioned the Home Office. I suppose part of our frustration as a team was that ATAS responsibility sits within the FCDO rather than the Home Office, and that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding. I am very pleased to hear that work is ongoing. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the House is properly updated in relation to that work? Will it take on board some of the suggestions I have made? The key frustration for me and my team is that we are used to being able to get some answers, but with ATAS that feels very, very difficult to do.

Seema Malhotra: I do understand the importance of that. There are other issues that in my previous role last year in the Home Office, I experienced when working alongside other Departments, including the DFE and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

The hon. Member has also highlighted the relationship between Foreign Office-led processes, some of which may lead to and require checks being made outside the Foreign Office. I take her point and will relay it to my hon. Friend the Minister of State, who oversees this area. I am happy to work with him on it, because I am interested in how Foreign Office-led services and delivery can be the best they can be, and whether there are further lessons to be learned.

We will consider how we can keep the hon. Member for North East Fife and the House updated on where the improvements that we are already working on can lead to change, not least in responsiveness to Members of Parliament, which I take very seriously, as does my hon. Friend the Minister of State. I appreciate the feedback; I continue to believe that it is important that Government continue to learn. We are like any other organisation, in that the continuous improvement of our operations should be a matter of concern to all of us. In this case, it certainly is.

I emphasise that ATAS sits within a much broader Government commitment to supporting research, innovation and international collaboration. Our approach is to combine openness with responsibility and to continue to work closely with universities to improve guidance, streamline communication and ensure that applicants understand ATAS requirements early.

It is not always the case, but sometimes applications are put in very close to the mark. There can also be an assumption that, where there is a 30-day working standard, it will all happen within 30 days. I do not know the details of the hon. Member's case, although I know that she is very assiduous in raising cases for her constituents, but it is important that we make sure there is that communication and that there are clearer routes for institutions to raise concerns, improve transparency on processes and strengthen engagement with the sector.

At the same time, the Government continue to invest heavily in research and development. In a sense, we are a victim of our own priorities. The increase in demand for ATAS is a reflection of the Government's own priorities and our recognition that it is important to attract talent in the shorter and the longer term. Work is going on through association with Horizon Europe, long-term funding in AI, clean energy and the life sciences, with deepening science and defence partnerships across regions including the Indo-Pacific, over which I oversee some of our work. ATAS supports that ambition by ensuring that the UK's research environment remains secure and welcoming to global talent, in good faith. We want to support that work in the UK and internationally.

Before I conclude, I want to make some remarks about the constituency case that the hon. Member highlighted. I very much appreciate that communication with the FCDO has been part of, and a driver for, today's debate. It is regrettable that the hon. Lady experienced that difficulty and did not receive clear information about her inquiry at an earlier stage, particularly given the sad circumstances. I am grateful to her for the support that she gave her constituent and for telling us that he got a positive certificate and, importantly, was able to spend time with his family in those very sad circumstances.

The hon. Lady said that when we knew about the situation and it got to the team, the application was expedited and the process was completed within, I think, 14 days. That is important to us. I have seen such work previously in the Home Office, so I know that it will have been important to those teams too. That was well inside the published service standard, and it shows what can happen when we mobilise teams in compassionate circumstances. Where there are lessons to learn, it is important that we do so. I appreciate that there was a delay in the correspondence that the hon. Lady received over the Christmas period, but we continue to try to improve our service standards in relation to correspondence. That is a priority matter for the Department as a whole.

Wendy Chamberlain: I put my thanks on the record—it is great to hear that the case was expedited as a result of our actions—but what I have tried to illustrate today is that we had no real knowledge of that or of how to achieve it, so I am grateful to the Minister for that update.

Seema Malhotra: Sometimes our processes mean that we or the Home Office may contact the constituent earlier than we respond to the Member of Parliament. Sometimes it is joined up, but sometimes there is a slight delay. It is very important that we ensure that the constituent is updated so that they can make arrangements, but I appreciate that there was a slight delay in the correspondence sent to the hon. Lady to make sure that she was fully informed.

This has been an important debate. I recognise that feedback is important as we continue to join up. The data shows that ATAS, which is a vital part of our security protections, operates strongly. Cases may take longer where there is significant demand, but the security of the United Kingdom requires careful and proportionate judgment. Where we can continue to improve our operations, we will certainly endeavour to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Airport Drop-off Charges

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of regulating airport drop-off charges.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I want to make the case for ending airport drop-off charges altogether, or at the very least introducing a free grace period, and for clear, consistent signage at all airports so that passengers know exactly what they are being charged and how to pay. I have received significant casework on this issue, and I know that colleagues across Greater Manchester and across the country will share my concerns. The current system is unfair, confusing and punitive. It does not work for passengers, and it is time for a change.

Manchester airport is our international gateway. It is the third busiest airport in the United Kingdom, and a vital engine for the north-west's economy. It should be a source of pride, not stress, yet the regime for dropping off and picking up passengers has become overly complex and, for far too many people, deeply unfair.

Let me start with the current rules. Outside each terminal, the tariff is £5 for up to five minutes, £6.40 for up to 10 minutes and £25 for up to 30 minutes, with a maximum stay of 30 minutes. Since last spring, the airport has operated a barrierless automatic number plate recognition system. If people forget, or if the process is unclear in the rush and stress of a drop-off, they are liable for a parking charge notice of £100, which is reduced to £60 if paid within 14 days.

I do not dispute the fact that airports face operational pressures. Forecourts are constrained spaces and congestion causes delays and emissions. The aim of a barrierless system is to keep traffic moving, but we have to be honest about the human reality. A parent unloading luggage at 5 am or a carer helping an elderly relative to the terminal door is not thinking about an online payment later that day. They should not receive a penalty notice in the post just because there is no clear or simple way to pay at the time.

There is a wider issue with value for money. The RAC has shown that UK drop-off fees have increased across many airports. On a cost-per-minute basis, Manchester is among the worst, charging £1 per minute for the first five minutes. That is hard to justify and is out of step with passengers' experiences elsewhere. A member of my staff shared his experience from a recent holiday he took via Kraków airport, for example: the drop-off and pick-up area offered eight free minutes, then a small fee of 5 złoty—about £1—per four minutes thereafter, with simple rules, clear signs and visible ways to pay.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing today's important debate on drop-off charges. My long-suffering and complaining Slough constituents have been on the case about extortionate drop-off charges—not to mention excessive parking charges—at our nearest airport, Heathrow, as well as at Gatwick. I have consistently raised with Heathrow the issue that there is a disproportionate expense for merely spending a few moments on its premises. Does my hon.

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

Friend agree that, without a direct western rail link to Heathrow or sufficient alternative public transport from Slough, passengers are being forced into a corner and into paying excessive charges? Does she agree that that must stop?

Yasmin Qureshi: I absolutely agree.

I want to discuss the realities in Bolton. There is a direct rail link from Bolton to Manchester airport; a typical journey time is about 36 to 45 minutes and, at off-peak times, a single ticket can be found for anywhere between £4 and £9. There is also a direct coach from Bolton interchange, which takes about 65 minutes; generally, prices range from £6 to £12. For many travellers, these options work, and we should promote and protect them, but they do not work for everyone. For a family of four with two large suitcases and a pushchair, or for people catching a very early flight or arriving back late at night, public transport is not always practical.

For those who drive, the maze of choices remains problematic. The airport provides a free drop-off at JetParks with a shuttle to terminals. That works for some people, but it is further away, involves a transfer and is simply not suitable for those with mobility needs or heavy luggage.

We should also reflect on governance and accountability. Manchester airport is part of the Manchester Airports Group, which has a unique ownership structure combining public and private shareholders. Manchester city council owns 35.5%, IFM Investors owns 35.5% and the nine other Greater Manchester councils, including Bolton, together own 29%. That public stake brings with it the responsibility to treat passengers fairly.

What should the Government do? Many of my constituents would say that the answer is simple: scrap drop-off charges altogether, or at least introduce a short free period for pick-ups and drop-offs. I recognise that all airports differ in size and layout, and one solution may not fit all, but there is a clear and proportionate role for Government in setting expectations around fairness, transparency and consumer protection.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech; I am grateful that she has secured this debate. Airports are imposing drop-off charges primarily to increase profits, despite their stated claims of environmental benefits. On the point about transparency, when I inquired of Heathrow how many cars are using its drop-off point each year, it declined to answer. It said that the data was classified as “commercially sensitive”. If it truly believes that raising drop-off charges has a positive impact on customers’ transport decisions and provides environmental benefits, why is it reluctant to share that data?

Yasmin Qureshi: I totally agree. Later in my speech, I will be asking for more detail about what happens with drop-off charges, as well as other information that we need from airports, such as how many people have had fixed penalty notices.

Secondly, there should be national guidance on simple and consistent signage at all airports for parking charges and fees. Thirdly, the barrierless system for dropping off and parking should come with clear payment prompts

at the point of exit and, where possible, a reasonable reminder rather than an immediate penalty for first-time non-payment.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this very important debate. I must say that I love Manchester airport, but not these charges. A constituent of mine, who is an Uber driver, makes countless trips to Manchester airport every week. He was recently fined twice for not paying drop-off charges. He tried to pay, but the website kept crashing. The airport failed to send him a reminder before the penalty and fined him straightaway, although it was its fault and he was not responsible. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is deeply unfair for hard-working people to pay the price of faulty tech that the private companies fail to fix?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my fellow Greater Manchester Member of Parliament for raising that issue. I will come on to the similar experiences that my constituents have had.

I was talking about barrierless systems for drop-offs. I believe that airports should publish data on the number of drop-off penalties that are issued, how many are cancelled on appeal and the reasons why. The Government’s position is that although airport parking charges are “a matter for the airport operator as a commercial business”,

the Department for Transport

“expects car parking at airports to be managed appropriately and...consumers to be treated fairly”.

Too many passengers feel that that expectation is not being met.

I want to speak directly about the human element, because that is where my office’s casework has been the most compelling. The stories that we have been told follow a very clear pattern: people acting in good faith, anxious to get loved ones to the airport on time and unaware that payment cannot be made on site, and then being shocked to receive a penalty notice days later when they believe that they have done everything right. The stress and frustrations are real, but they are avoidable.

One constituent contacted me after dropping his wife at Manchester airport and leaving after noticing that there were no barriers or pay stations. He then received a £100 fine in the post for not having paid. He was stationary in the drop-off area for just one minute and 10 seconds. If there had been a pay station, he would have paid. Instead, he went home and then received what he felt was an entirely disproportionate fine for being there for less than two minutes.

Another constituent contacted me after he tried to pay online in good faith but was unable to do so because of problems with the website. He did not see the signage and was made aware only after the fact that he needed to pay. Despite trying to pay the £6.40 charge, he was unable to do so and received a £100 fine instead. That does not feel fair or reasonable.

These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a system that relies too heavily on people remembering to make an online payment after their journey, rather than being clearly prompted to pay at the time. A short free window in which to park, clear exit prompts and a one-time reminder invoice would entirely prevent many of these cases.

Airports are the front door to our country. That front door should be welcoming, efficient and fair. It should not depend on whether a tired or stressed driver remembers to make an online payment later that day. It should reflect the reality of places such as Bolton, where rail can be a good option but is not always practical.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I should declare an interest, because Manchester airport is my local airport and is used by many of my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme. In fact, I was there on Sunday: my poor wife had to wait because the flight from Northern Ireland was delayed. The first thing she said to me was not “Hi, love,” but “Don’t forget to pay.” That speaks to the impact that these charges have on marital harmony.

To be serious, this unfairness speaks to a lack of consistency across the United Kingdom. More importantly, it makes the case for a direct line between Stoke-on-Trent station and Manchester airport, which would benefit my constituents. I hope that my hon. Friend will support my calls.

Yasmin Qureshi: I am so sad that my hon. Friend’s wife was not able to say “I love you” at the point of greeting him. I hope she has made up for it.

Adam Jogee: On a point of order, Ms Vaz. In the interests of getting home safely, I should say that my wife quite often says “I love you,” and I am very grateful to her for doing so.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Point taken.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful clarification. His serious point is one that I think a lot of people here would agree with, and I am sure the Minister has heard his appeal for a train line from his area to Manchester.

The cost of a taxi plus a forecourt fee can push travel beyond what many families can afford. With modest regulation, better design and a willingness to learn from our European neighbours, we can manage traffic without turning airport forecourts into what feels like a penalty for helping someone we care about.

2.44 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate, the importance of which is reflected by the number of Members who have turned out—some of them from further afield than Greater Manchester. There is clearly a pattern of airport operators looking to maximise every aspect of income from the land that they own.

In Greater Manchester, we are very proud of Manchester airport. It was built and grown by the local authorities, and they remain an important shareholder of the airport, as well as the wider group, which includes East Midlands and Stansted airports. The benefit of that, particularly during those 14 long years of austerity, was that the airports were providing a dividend payment to the local councils to fund local public services.

With that in mind, Manchester airport has a bigger responsibility than just paying dividends. It has an important economic role to play in our city region and the whole of the north of England. As has been said, it is a gateway to Britain for those coming in. Their experience on arrival and when being collected by loved ones will really shape that experience. We are very proud of it and it is vital to our economy. It is a significant employer that drives economic growth, and it is a thriving hub supported, by and large, by the public.

The charging policy was introduced in 2018 and was controversial at the time. I may have a slightly different view of charging policies, perhaps because from a local government finance point of view all streams of income are welcome, but I think the principle of payment has been settled for most people. However, I strongly believe that any payment system must be fair for those who pay it. In far too many people’s experience, the system at Manchester airport is not one of fairness.

Many years ago, there was a campaign in Oldham against the weekly payment stores where people go in to buy a washing machine or TV and then pay a set weekly amount. At the time, the campaign was against BrightHouse. BrightHouse’s business model relied on people not being able to afford the weekly payment. If they could not make the payment of, say, £20 a week for a washing machine, they could not make a £19 contribution if that was all they had; BrightHouse wanted either full payment or no payment. It would reject the £19 and then charge a penalty on top. For every normal person, that is not a fair way of doing business, but for BrightHouse, the business model relied on it. That is how it made its money.

We need to be careful, when looking at any system, to make sure that it is not built on inherent unfairness as a way to generate money. This is not about whether £5 is a fair charge to pay; it is about what happens if someone does not pay, and whether the penalty is proportionate.

Afzal Khan: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about fairness. I am concerned about these charges, because someone I know took one minute extra while trying to get out of the airport, and he was lumbered with a £60 fine. That is not fair.

Jim McMahon: That is the point. For the sake of a £5 fee, the penalty could be a full day’s wage for a low-paid worker. Is it a fair penalty to take away a day’s pay from somebody for going over by a minute? Most people would say that that is not a fair response.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Doncaster Sheffield airport in my constituency is about to open. I want there to be access for everybody, and I want everyone to feel that they can use it. For some people, it is not optional but essential to get really close to the terminal because of their disabilities. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in principle, whatever regime we have in future must take into account those people who need to be close and give them a grace period without having to pay, so that they can get on their plane and go on their dream holiday or work trip?

Jim McMahon: I think so. It is not just about being fair; it is about being reasonable. We have all dropped loved ones off at the airport. We know how stressful it

[*Jim McMahon*]

can be, and we know that the family member giving the lift normally tries to fit it around other things as well. Sometimes they will be dropping people off in the early hours of the morning. They rush to the airport, drop their loved ones off, say their goodbyes, make sure they get on the flight nice and safely, a bit upset perhaps that they are leaving, go home, maybe go to bed, and wake up in the morning—and before they know it, the day has taken over. It can be very easy to miss the deadline to pay. If it were extended from 24 hours to, say, 48 hours, most people would eventually say, “Hang on: I should have made that payment.”

It cannot be that every organisation relies on an app. In my town, the hospital and the leisure centre now have apps to pay, and so do some supermarkets. There are so many apps, and keeping track of them can be very difficult, so some people will have to search out how to make the payment. That is where the idea of reasonableness really comes in.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A lot has been made of transport links to airports. At Edinburgh airport, we have excellent links—it is the end of the tramline and there are special buses—but if people are being picked up or dropped off, they have to pay £6 for the first 10 minutes and £1 for every minute after that. That is difficult for people on a fixed income. The holiday may be the big thing of the year, but if the flight is late they face bigger charges, so the principle of fairness does not seem to apply. Taxis also have to pay the charge, so there is an extra cost there too. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me?

Jim McMahon: Many people ask their loved one to send them a message when they land or when they pass through the terminal ahead of collecting their baggage, but in Manchester airport there have occasionally been delays in getting the luggage off the plane and sent through to the terminal, or the conveyor belt has not worked in sending the luggage through, so faults with the airport or airline delays can lead to a penalty.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress, because I am mindful of the time.

On reasonableness, of course an app can be used if it is a convenient way to pay, but why not have a simple contactless payment system at the lay-by where the luggage is taken out, so that people can tap in there and then? Then they would not have to wait 24 or 48 hours to pay online. With a lot of these things, if the lived experience of those using the system had been thought about when it was brought in, it would have been designed very differently.

In November, we met the managing director of Manchester airport, Chris Woodroffe. We raised those points and put forward a number of requests. The first was for payment on site, so that people can pay not just on an app, but when they are at the airport.

Secondly, we asked for an end to the system that allows charges to be racked up. For example, there may be separate lay-bys for arrivals and departures, so it is

very easy for someone not familiar with the airport to pass through the arrivals terminal drop-off point, realise that is the wrong place to be, drive around the block and eventually get to the correct location. If they do that, the system charges them twice because they have passed through one before they get to the other. That could be easily resolved using technology.

These organisations do not have the legal powers that local authorities have, but rely on contract law in enforcement. Many airports have confusing road networks that rely on roundabouts, with one-way systems through the terminals to drop off. In contract law, for a contract to be fair, those entering into it must have the right to decline it. How can they have the right to decline if they are charged at the moment they enter the place where the signs advising them about the contract are, with no way to reverse or pull out? Those dropping off should have the ability to say, “Now that I am aware of the charges, I don’t agree and will find a different way of dropping off.” Some airports have a bus that enables drop-offs further afield. Some people may not have been aware of that before they arrived, but may choose to use that.

Although I am personally sympathetic to the idea that charges can be realistic, Manchester should not follow Gatwick airport and go from £5 to £10, or even close to it. Most people would find an airport’s charging £10 to drop off completely unreasonable and unfair.

John Milne: Gatwick is precisely the airport that I was going to raise. It jumped to £10 in very short order, over a couple of years. That is an enormous amount of money for something that takes a couple of minutes. The objective is allegedly to cover the increase of business rates and to fund airport expansion. Does the hon. Member agree that the public should not have to bear the cost of an airport’s expansion? It benefits private companies financially, but puts pressure on public services, trains and transport and means that people are parking all around the airport. Does he agree that that is unfair?

Jim McMahon: Logic says that business rates are derived from the commercial value of the asset. The opposite is true of Gatwick—if it commercialises a lay-by, the business rate liability probably goes up—so I am not sure that that quite solves their problem.

This debate has been important, and I express my appreciation of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden for securing it. We are very proud of Manchester airport and the airport group that it operates, but we are determined to see a revision to the ability to pay, how to pay and the grace period—from 24 hours to 48 hours—and I hope that we see progress.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. If Members keep their interventions shorter, we can have a very loose six-minute time limit and get everyone in.

2.55 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this important debate.

In many countries, a quick kiss and fly really is quick and really is free. At Amsterdam Schiphol, the kiss and ride drop-off is free. At Paris-Charles de Gaulle the first 10 minutes are free, and at Madrid-Barajas the express departures car park gives drivers 10 minutes free. Meanwhile, here in the UK we are normalising the idea that dropping off and saying a hurried goodbye at the airport comes with a bill. Bear with me here: kiss and fly? More like kiss and buy.

At Gatwick airport, which serves so many of my constituents in Reigate, Redhill, Banstead and our villages, the drop-off fee was hiked to £10 for 10 minutes—a 43% jump from £7. That hits everyone: the parent, the friend taking someone to an early flight and taxi drivers trying to earn their living. It is true that Gatwick offers free drop-off in the long-stay car park with a complementary shuttle, and that blue badge holders are exempt, but we all know that that option adds time and complication, and is not always practical at unsocial hours.

We should be clear about responsibility. Most airports in the UK are private businesses, and drop-off charging is a matter for the owners to decide and manage. That is certainly true at Gatwick, where the increased drop-off charge has been explained on the grounds of growing financial pressure on the operation. However, the extra costs place a burden on my constituents using the airport, and I urge Gatwick always to keep them in mind when analysing the numbers and ensure fairness, the importance of which the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) eloquently highlighted. It is easy to assume that people can use the train or bus as an alternative, but that is often not the case for the elderly, the disabled or those who simply cannot transport all their luggage by hand.

Gatwick has said that the drop-off charge increase has not been taken lightly and follows a number of cost increases, including a more than doubling of its business rates by this Government, from £40 million to more than £80 million per annum. It is relevant to note that Heathrow has also increased its drop-off charge this month, although far more modestly, from £6 to £7. Unfortunately, that is what happens when the Government pile ever more taxes on our businesses: those costs inevitably find their way back to the consumer in some shape or form. If Ministers would like to see the trend of extra charges and surging prices reduce, I say gently that they might consider not continually taxing businesses. Rethinking the damaging business rates hike would be a good start and would give British businesses, including our airports, room to breathe.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, Ms Vaz, it is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for leading today's debate on this matter. It is an important issue, as others have said and will say after me.

Back home, this has been a topic of conversation with my constituents. Air travel has become much more usable and cheaper than it has been in the past, but that means that many people travel through Belfast City airport, Belfast International airport and City of Derry airport—they are all used. I have heard numerous complaints from constituents about changes to pick-ups

and drop-offs at airports in Northern Ireland, so it is important for me to be here and to get our perspective across.

I share other Members' concerns about drop-off charges. They seem a little drastic and unfair, and many people have complaints about them. The traffic wardens in Newtownards are very zealous—even evangelical—and they get their money. We get complaints about parking tickets on private land, and by and large we have been able to fight them, but people cannot fight the CCTV at Belfast City airport or Belfast International airport.

I fly out of Belfast City airport on Mondays to come here, and I go back on Thursdays. It is a great airport and has had some recent updates; it covers mostly regional flights, but some are international. According to my constituents, the drop-off area has a minimum price of £4 for up to 10 minutes. It used to be that there was no charge at all. Is it a revenue earner for the airport? I suspect it is, but the staff may tell me differently. If people stay longer, the charges increase as follows: it is £6 for 10 to 20 minutes, £20 for 21 to 30 minutes, and £25 for 30 to 60 minutes. If people's planes are delayed, they had better not forget their cards, because they will be digging deep that night.

Similarly, at Belfast International airport, it costs up to £3 for 10 minutes. If someone's car stalls on the way round, they are in trouble, because the price will increase. Airports have CCTV everywhere, and people cannot get away with dropping somebody off, because the airport has them on CCTV. They can expect a £60 fine. If someone thinks they can do it the sharp way—perhaps the car is still moving as they jump out—it does not matter, because they will be fined.

One thing that annoys me greatly at the airport is flight delays and cancellations. What happens to the person who thinks, "I'm just going to pick them up," and then looks at the screen and says, "Oh, it's 15 minutes late"? Guess what? They owe more money.

Adam Jogee: Further to the hon. Gentleman's description of the situation at Belfast City airport, I found out on Sunday, when my mother-in-law dropped me off from the long-stay car park, that it is free for the first 10 minutes. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) made about accessibility is important, because the long-stay car park is further away and there is no canopy. We all know about the liquid sunshine for which Ulster is well known. *[Interruption.]* Liquid sunshine, not rain. If someone is not as able-bodied as others, or if they have children, bags and all the rest, it is more difficult for them to get into the terminal. The accessibility point extends not just to the east midlands, but right across the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for sharing his experiences of Belfast City. It is a good airport, by the way. I am just saying, "Follow the rules, and make sure the timings are right." The planes are sometimes cancelled, and more often than not they are delayed, which seems to be a fact of life now. Some may say that the clue is in the name: "drop-off". The plan is not to be there for long, but we all know that it takes a little time for people to get their cases, say goodbye to loved ones or pay taxis. It has been argued that the first 10 minutes should be free, which is fair. If drop-offs and pick-ups

[Jim Shannon]

are made financially inaccessible for people, they will double-park and potentially cause congestion, which poses a safety risk.

One thing that strikes me is that Belfast international airport has a 15-minute free drop-off in the long-stay car park. It is only a short walk to the terminal, but it does not suit everybody. There is £3 to £5 fee for less than 10 minutes. There is certainly a case for the fees to be regulated, and I look forward to the Minister's response. Sometimes we can use compassion and understand that it is not always easy for someone to drop people off and get on their way. To give an example, one of my constituents moved to Scotland for university when she was 18. She has been living there for nine years now and is working as a nurse. It is always lovely when she comes home, but saying goodbye is the hardest. She tells me that she wants to say goodbye—she wants to give people a hug and a kiss, and to say cheerio—but guess what? The clock is ticking, and that long goodbye could be a very costly one.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend mentions compassion and understanding—and the lack of it. He reminds me that many years ago, when I was on the Transport Committee, we met a certain chief executive of Ryanair who is not noted for his compassion and understanding. He made it absolutely clear to us MPs that he did not care—I will not use the expletive—if passengers had to crawl over broken glass to get to the airport. Compassion and understanding need to be shown by the airport operators, because they certainly will not be shown by Ryanair.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely.

The moral of the story involving the young lady, who happens to come from Newtownards, is: “Don’t get too emotional at the airport, because the clock is ticking.” People might find that £3 or £5 has become £10 or £20. If they reach for a hanky and cannot find one, they are in deep trouble.

Airport drop-off fees are increasingly becoming a burden on ordinary passengers, taxi drivers and local residents, and that is not to mention the extortionate air fees. When flying from Belfast to the mainland, we pay the highest flight charges in the whole of the United Kingdom. We might be on the periphery of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we are an integral part of it, and we should be shown fairness when it comes to prices.

We recognise that airports need to manage congestion and maintain facilities—I understand that—but the charges must be fair and transparent. There are calls to look at them again, and I look to the Minister for a positive response that will encourage not only us regular travellers but, more importantly, constituents of mine who are regular travellers, who tell me about the airport charges all the time. It is time to address them.

3.6 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this important debate.

I have heard much about this issue from many of my constituents in Mansfield, and they all make the same point again and again: people feel as if they are being unfairly charged for simply dropping someone off at the airport. They are not asking for special treatment or favour; they are simply trying to drop off a partner, parent or child. That often takes no more than a few minutes, yet this basic act now comes with a significant charge at many airports, particularly for those on lower incomes. Let us be clear: this is not about parking, and it is not a premium service. It is a fee for stopping a car long enough for someone to get out, unload their suitcase and say goodbye.

Two of my constituents who wrote to me on this topic, Emma and Keith, commented on what this looks like at East Midlands airport, which is close to Mansfield—many of my constituents fly from there. At East Midlands airport, drivers are charged £5 for up to 15 minutes in a drop-off zone, with a number of extra charges for additional minutes. As Emma and Keith made clear, the problem is not just the price, but the whole system under which they are charged. At East Midlands airport, there are no barriers or ticket machines. There is no way to pay by cash or card, and one might not realise that one has incurred a charge. Drivers are recorded by automatic cameras and required to pay later, either online or by phone. Crucially for many of my constituents, the payment has to be made by midnight the following day. If drivers miss that deadline, they will be hit with a parking charge of £100.

Many of my constituents have pointed out that the system penalises people who do not have a smartphone or access to the internet—particularly older people, as we have seen with automatic number plate recognition systems and cashless systems in some car parks in my Mansfield constituency. Some people do not use apps, and others might not feel confident about paying online. Some people might not even realise that they have to pay, or that they have been charged, until a penalty notice arrives through the post.

This is not modernisation—at least, it is not a modernity of which I would approve—but exclusion. Working people feel it the most, including parents dropping off their children and families trying to save money by giving lifts, as well as disabled passengers and older travellers who need to be dropped off close to the terminal entrance. For many of those people, being dropped off is not a convenience but a necessity. We should be honest about the market: airports are effectively local monopolies. Someone living in Mansfield cannot shop around for somewhere else to drop off at East Midlands airport. There is no cheaper accessible drop-off option. They either pay the charge or do not use it.

That is why this debate is important, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden for securing it. We need to consider regulation, because if airport management is not prepared to act, we should be prepared to do so. My message to airport management is very simple: stop the excessive charges, end the punitive enforcement and ensure that systems for payment work for everyone, not just for those with smartphones and digital confidence. I say to them: act now, or MPs like me will look to compel them to do so.

3.11 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate. We have had unanimity across the House, with a real feeling of injustice at the rising charges that we see at almost every airport that has been mentioned today. It should be of concern to all of us, and indeed to our constituents. Many of us receive letters and correspondence about this issue; I certainly do, given my constituency's proximity to both Heathrow and Gatwick.

I will focus on three themes, two of which are directly related to the drop-off charges issue and one of which is a slight shoehorning of another issue that I feel passionately about, which corresponds to the topic of today's debate. The first issue is about the rising cost of the charges, particularly for people who have no realistic alternative to get to an airport. The second is about the transparency and fairness of the payment processes themselves. The third is about the wider enforcement and security consequences of poorly designed payment systems involving ANPR, and about the insecurities in our ANPR system.

I am the Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath. Camberley, our main market town, is 19 miles from Heathrow airport and about 45 miles from Gatwick, but we have incredibly poor public transport systems to take us to those airports, so people rely on driving and therefore incur the £10 charge, for example at Gatwick, which my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) mentioned. These are not lifestyle choices; they are structural necessities, driven by poor public transport infrastructure as we come out of central London and head towards the shires in the likes of Surrey.

I absolutely welcome the recent introduction of a fantastic new express bus service from some of the villages in my constituency to Heathrow, but it connects only three of the communities in my constituency to the airport, so lots of people are left beyond that system. For those people, driving is the only realistic option. Of course, the lack of choice disproportionately affects the disabled, people with young children, older people and those travelling to or from regional airports, where public transport systems are even more limited than in my area. That all reflects the wider national picture. The Business Travel Association has been clear that public transport is frequently not a viable substitute for accessing airports, and that pricing people out of kerbside drop-off does not make it suddenly accessible.

That leads me to my second point, which is about the fairness and justice of the payment systems themselves. The hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) made a series of excellent points, and I have been a victim of exactly the situations to which he referred. I have driven around the loop at Heathrow airport and incurred the charge that he mentioned, purely by accidentally turning the wrong way. I appealed to get my money back, but I did not get it. Then I had to go and park in a multi-storey car park, so I felt doubly aggrieved, and nobody ever got back to me when I called the number.

The problem is that the system seems to be baking in penalties as a form of revenue-raising. I do not know whether that is entirely fair, but that is how people feel and that is the perception. Why do people feel like that?

Because the companies involved are not making it straightforward by issuing clear signage and they are not making it easy to make payments. The hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden talked about some of the scenarios in which people go to airports, such as late at night or early in the morning, and they often do multiple other things during the course of the day, so it is easy to forget the act of payment.

That leads me to my third point, on ANPR. Because of the increasingly punitive nature of some of the costs, we are seeing a huge rise in the use of ghost plates and in number plate cloning. Constituents of mine have received fines from both Gatwick and Heathrow airports because their number plates had been cloned, perhaps by taxicab companies that are apparently seeking to avoid the repeated application of charges at airports. If the system is driving increased criminality to avoid fines, we have a problem that needs to be explained, because the costs and inconvenience are falling back on constituents. That issue is perhaps not something people will have considered—I think it is the first time it has been raised today—but it is really important.

Although the previous Aviation Minister, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), said that there was no intention to review the process, I urge the Government to look at it again. There need to be proper, fair payment systems and a cap on how much airports are allowed to charge, because I do not want to have any more constituents writing to me about it.

3.16 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate, which holds such importance for my constituents.

My constituency is proud to be the home of East Midlands airport—part of the Manchester Airport Group—from where about 4 million people fly each year. Before I focus on the drop-off charges at the airport, it is important to understand them in the context of a wider local problem. The closest train station to East Midlands airport is East Midlands Parkway, which is a 10-minute drive away. The only bus service from East Midlands Parkway is dial-a-ride only—that is, it is an on-demand service, not even a regular bus service.

For those who might not have experienced an on-demand service, a passenger basically rocks up at the train station and rings a number, and there might be a bus available. That is how it operates. It is very good, but the reality is that when someone is going through the stressful scenario of going on holiday with a couple of kids in tow, they are going to get a taxi. The taxi will have to use the rapid drop-off option, so despite travelling via public transport, the passenger will still have to pay the drop-off charge to get to the airport.

Some 91% of travellers to East Midlands airport travel by car, leaving just 9% travelling by public transport—a proportion so much lower than for every other passenger airport in the country. The drop-off charges seem so unfair because our choices to get to airports are pretty limited. People are also parking in villages near the airport, including in Leicestershire. I was chatting to my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) yesterday, and he said it was a

[Amanda Hack]

problem in his constituency too. Essentially, to avoid parking at the airport for any length of time, people will get a taxi from a village outside the airport and make their way there, thereby avoiding the weekly charges. Given that there are hardly any alternatives to travelling by car to the airport, we need to look at the infrastructure around our airports, as people feel they have no choice but to drive or get a family member to drop them off.

Raising drop-off prices, as we have seen many airports doing, does not mean that my constituents or others who travel to East Midlands airport are suddenly able to magic up a bus or train to get them there. People want the convenience of being dropped off close to the departure gate, and airports know that. Let's face it: it is a cash cow. It is an easy way to make money. As has been stated, East Midlands airport has recently been made barrierless, which means that someone can only pay online or by using an automated phoneline by midnight the following day. When dropping someone off early in the morning or late at night, it can be really easy to forget. I am sure we all have examples of that.

As the airport is in my constituency, I get a lot of casework on this matter that I then field to other MPs, because it generally does not come from my constituents. I was contacted by someone who returned home just after midnight, having dropped off a loved one at East Midlands airport, and they had just 24 hours to pay. Thankfully, they remembered, but they felt it was so unfair that they had such a short time to pay. It is possible to set up an account to take automatic payment, but that simply will not be accessible to all, and setting up an auto-payment for a single or twice-yearly event is not worth while.

What other service operates a system in which it is impossible to pay at the point of sale? It feels like the system is set up in the hope that people will forget, with fines of £100 if it slips their mind—although, of course, there are no reminders. The fine is reduced only if it is paid within 14 days. Coincidentally, 14 days is the length of many family holidays, which is ironic.

I have raised the issue directly with the airport and requested that a pay terminal or a simple QR code be put in the terminal building. That request was refused, based on fraud issues. Yet such options are common practice. Just yesterday I used the QR code at my local train station—which happens to be operated by the very same parking company. If the company can do that at Leicester train station, it could do it at East Midlands airport with no trouble. That is where regulation could bring merit, with clearer payment methods, reminders and limits on parking charges—not radical ideas, just basic consumer protections.

I wrote to APCOA parking to request data on the number of parking charge notices issued prior to and after the introduction of the new system at East Midlands airport. I was refused that data, which is not a good sign. Companies that are privately fining individuals should be subject to data-access rights relating to the schemes they operate. Ultimately, the current system of airport drop-off charges is unfair. When we factor in inadequate transport infrastructure, the case for regulation becomes even stronger.

3.21 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this important debate for airport communities.

Residents in my constituency know very well the impacts of airports, with Heathrow on our doorstep. The recent decision to increase the drop-off charge at Heathrow from £6 to £7 has been met with increasing frustration. Another issue mentioned in respect of the impact of airports on nearby villages is displacement. All too often, significant numbers of vehicles park in and around the Heathrow drop-off zone. If my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) were here, he would vividly describe the impact on Heathrow villages of the antisocial parking of people who are avoiding drop-off charges.

In my constituency, given the nearby bus routes and the Elizabeth line connection at West Drayton, people are clearly getting around drop-off charges by parking in and around airport communities, causing a huge amount of frustration and nuisance. That has led to local authorities, such as Hillingdon and many others, introducing controlled parking zones, which charge residents significant amounts to park in their own streets to avoid the impacts. Even then, CPZs are only as good as the enforcement. We have a massive issue with parking enforcement, particularly out of hours, at evenings and weekends. People park in streets and neighbourhoods, often blocking residents' drives, and there is no enforcement activity. There is also a significant increase in unregulated car parks popping up on private land, where people sell parking at competitive and preferential rates, leading to significant impacts on local communities.

I agree that airport charges could support alternatives that discourage people from driving to the airport, along with the related impacts, but all too often we do not see the investment following the charges. In Heathrow's case, the transport funds that the airport hold are unspent, and a large amount of investment has not been put back into improving local bus routes. Bus connections from my community to Heathrow are incredibly poor, both for airport visitors and for staff, who have to take indirect routes to get there by bus, on infrequent services and undercapacity routes. The smaller, infrequent buses make it difficult for people with luggage to travel.

With the introduction of the Elizabeth line, we have seen a really positive improvement in transport connections, but it is ultimately the taxpayer who has led investment on that route. There is concern and frustration that as Heathrow potentially expands—a lot more will be said on that should proposals come forward—it will again be the taxpayer who continues to fund public transport options, rather than Heathrow airport making an adequate contribution.

As has been said, self-employed people who work for Uber, and other app-based drivers to the airport, have reported feeling increasingly squeezed by the increasing charges. They are struggling to make ends meet given the cost of living crisis and the increasing charges that they and their customers have to bear. They feel under-engaged and under-consulted by the airports; as important stakeholders, they clearly should be engaged and consulted.

I hope that the Minister, in considering the many issues raised today, will also consider the role that could be played by better guidance and regulation on charges. In particular, will he look at the options for making it clear that the funds raised through such mechanisms must be spent on alternatives to driving to the airport? There has to be transparency about the funds raised and how they are spent because, as many Members have said, it is very hard to get that information out of the airports. There should be a duty and responsibility on airport authorities to collaborate on issues like transport displacement with the local authorities in which they are based.

Lastly, there should be real clarity in the design and communication of any measures. Like others, I recently drove to the airport to pick up a friend who had missed the last train and drop him off at a different tube line. It was incredibly difficult to work out exactly what is and is not within the drop-off charge zone, and where the ANPR cameras are and where they are not. The signage and communication are incredibly poor, both before and after the journey to the airport. I hope the Minister will consider those points and ensure that if drop-off charges are to continue, they work for local residents and the surrounding communities.

3.27 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this important debate.

What should be a simple act of kindness—giving someone a lift to an airport, as we have all done—is increasingly being met with extortionate airport charges. This is neither fair nor reasonable, and it is why we believe the Government must now look seriously at regulating the fees. For constituents like mine in West Dorset, who live in a hugely rural area with limited public transport, where many villages do not even have a reliable local bus service, let alone a direct rail link to a major airport, it is increasingly painful. For my constituents to get to Exeter, Bristol or Bournemouth airports, let alone Heathrow or Gatwick, means driving, booking a costly taxi or, more often than not, asking a family member or neighbour to help.

If we want to drop someone off, we have to use the airport system and pay its charges. At Bristol, that now means £8.50 for 10 minutes, or £30 for an hour. Bournemouth airport promotes what it calls a passenger pick-up offer of up to 90 minutes to meet and greet friends, for the small fee of £6. For many people, that £6 will be spent on merely five minutes' activity. For families who are already paying inflated air fares, baggage fees and taxes, it is just another hidden cost added to the journey.

The charges have risen rapidly across the country, far beyond inflation. Gatwick now charges £10 for just 10 minutes—double what it charged in 2021. What began in 2007 as a £1 security-driven charge at Birmingham airport has become a nationwide revenue stream. Airports often justify the increases by citing environmental goals or the need to encourage public transport use, but unless the charges are accompanied by serious, accessible and affordable public transport investment, they do not change behaviour; they simply extract more money from those who have no alternative.

The charges hit some groups particularly hard, including disabled passengers, people with reduced mobility, parents travelling with young children, and those from rural areas who are least able to use public transport and most dependent on car access. Although airports have duties under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments, statutory provisions for blue badge holders do not apply in private car parks, and many people fall through the cracks.

The Competition and Markets Authority and the Civil Aviation Authority previously concluded that there was insufficient evidence of harm in surface access charging. That assessment is now out of date. Since 2016, charges have risen sharply. Free drop-off zones have all but been removed, and on-site payment options have been closed in favour of online or phone systems that are confusing for most.

As people try to avoid the charges, police have reported increased dangerous behaviour, with cars stopping on motorway hard shoulders to pick up passengers. That is unsafe for drivers, passengers and emergency services and is a direct result of an unfair pricing system. It is also worth remembering, as has been highlighted, that these charges are not normal across Europe. Passengers at Paris-Charles de Gaulle, Amsterdam Schiphol, Frankfurt and Madrid do not pay to drop off loved ones. If it can be done there, it can be done here.

Airports argue that they face financial pressures, particularly from business rates, which were recalculated after the pandemic. We Liberal Democrats sympathise, and passing the bill directly to passengers through drop-off fees may be the easiest lever to pull, but it is not the fairest or most effective one. The Department for Transport has previously said that it has no plans to monitor or limit parking fees at airports, and I believe that position is no longer acceptable.

The Liberal Democrats have been clear that we want to reduce the environmental impact of flying, but it has to be done in a way that is fair and effective. We support investment in zero-carbon flights, reforming aviation taxation so that frequent flyers pay more, taxing private jets, improving rail alternatives and banning short domestic flights where fast rail options exist. What we do not support is offloading the cost of climate policies on to families, friends, disabled people and rural transport.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I rarely intervene on another spokesperson's speech, but this raises a question: if the Liberal Democrats want these expensive policies and say that consumers should not pay, who should pay?

Edward Morello: I thank the hon. Member for the opportunity to clarify my point. It is not about whether the consumer pays; it is about whether the airports are using the revenue they claim they are generating to support climate policies for that purpose, or whether it is simply another revenue stream for them. Airports and providers must use the money correctly, rather than just levying another tax on passengers.

Regulation could take several forms. There could be a cap on drop-off charges linked to inflation. There could be a requirement for a free short-stay grace period. There could be mandatory exemptions for disabled passengers and carers. There could be greater transparency on how revenues are used and whether they genuinely fund sustainable transport.

[Edward Morello]

What we cannot do is to continue to allow airports to exploit their control over access to extract ever higher fees from consumers who have no meaningful choice. It is time we recognised that airport drop-off charges have become unfair, unregulated and disconnected from their original purpose. I hope the Government will act.

3.33 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I join all other contributors today in congratulating the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate. We often say, "This is an important debate," and most of the time in this Chamber we do not mean it, but on this occasion I think we do.

Through some very articulate speeches, building one upon the other, the debate has exposed two significant problems with the current state of affairs in drop-off charges at our airports: first, whether we should be charging in the first place; and secondly, if we accept the proposition of the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) that it is okay to charge for drop-offs, whether the process of charging is itself fair. Frankly, I was taken by surprise on this point, which was raised repeatedly. At multiple airports, the charging mechanism is itself unfair, as it does not give the opportunity of point-of-service charging—a barrier at which the customer pays—but instead requires customers to pay after the event by what are, at times, very complex mechanisms.

I was a barrister a very long time ago. There is a health warning on my legal advice, but this matter was first settled in 1877 by Mellish LJ—I do not have this at the back of my memory; I looked it up—in *Parker v. South Eastern Railway Company*. When parking somewhere, the terms and conditions are typically on a board. A provider seeking to rely on those contractual terms has to take reasonably sufficient steps to draw them to the consumer's attention for the contract to be established, and it must be at or before the point at which the contract becomes established.

The reason why that triggered my memory is because, in my day, I learned about a very famous judge—Lord Denning, the Master of the Rolls—who developed the argument in *Spurling v. Bradshaw* in 1956. He said that the principle covers typical, expected terms and conditions, but if there are particularly onerous conditions as part of the standard terms, the level of notice has to increase to a commensurate degree.

I am interested to hear the Minister's considered thoughts on this issue. I wonder whether a requirement not to pay now, but to pay later and by a circuitous route, would constitute an onerous term when dealing with a consumer, as these contracts almost always are. If that is the case, has a contract been established at all with any of the people dropping off at these airports? I cannot give legal advice, and I am very out of date anyway, but consumer rights groups should explore this issue with a test case—a group action would run to many millions of pounds if it were proved successful. That is the point about whether charging is fair.

Jim McMahon: Throughout the whole conversation, the thing that keeps coming to mind is: why would the airports not want to provide a payment option to pay there and then at drop-off, if not for the fact that they would raise less revenue because they would not be able to charge a penalty if people miss the 24-hour window?

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is exactly the kind of evidence that a judge would assess to establish whether sufficient notice had been given and how onerous a term is.

The second part is about whether the travelling public accept that this is a reasonable charge and has become the norm, as the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton asserts. An awful lot of people do not feel that it is fair in principle to charge for this service, because no real service is being supplied. People are occupying a bit of tarmac for one or two minutes. It used to be free, so the feeling of value is limited at best.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) talked about a hidden charge, and he was absolutely right. As passengers, we are incredibly price-conscious when it comes to buying our flights. We will wear only one pair of socks for the entire holiday in order not to pay for baggage. We then get lumped with paying a tenner for being dropped off, and it is a hidden cost—it is not in the headline price of the flight.

I totally understand the reaction of many that this is unfair, and that the market is not working. The communal reaction is that we must regulate. Perhaps we should, but before we do so we need to understand why airports are raising these charges. I am sorry to say that in many cases it is because this Labour Government are forcing them to do exactly that.

If Government policy increases costs for airports, the airports, as rational commercial organisations, will seek to recover those costs from their consumers, because there is no one else—ultimately, the consumer always pays. This Government have increased employer national insurance contributions, levying more than £900 in additional tax for every single employee on the books. They have raised business rates enormously and have increased environmental targets, which also have significant cash consequences. All of it comes for the consumer.

I will not deal with national insurance contributions because we all know how impactful that change has been, not just to pubs but right across the private sector.

Danny Beales: I am just a bit confused. The hon. Member suggests that drop-off charges are the responsibility of this Government. At Heathrow, the charge is £7, but it was £6 during the 14 years of the last Government, so proportionally—following his argument—90%, or whatever the maths says it is, of the cost came from the last Government and only 10% from this Government. I do not exactly follow the logic of his argument.

Jerome Mayhew: The logic is not exact, but if you increase costs, you cannot be surprised if prices go up. Essentially, that is the point I am making.

On business rates, Gatwick has had the worst increase. According to the *Financial Times*, its business rates have increased from £40 million a year to £90 million a year, so the Government have increased Gatwick's costs by £50 million every single year. Where do they think

that money will come from? It will come from the consumer via drop-off charges, other additional charges or increases in the landing rates applied to airlines—such increases would go on to the consumer through increased air fares. It is therefore financially illiterate for the Government to very substantially raise the cost of doing business—particularly for airports, with their increased business rates—and then complain when these companies raise their charges.

There are additional costs on airports, which I will briefly talk about, because of environmental and net zero targets and requirements. Many airports have directly cited those costs to explain why they are raising charges. Many of them, including Bristol, Heathrow and Gatwick, have said that they are trying to raise drop-off charges to force passengers to use alternative modes of mass transport. That would be fine and well if additional public transport were available for those people being disincentivised from using their car.

However, I do not agree that we should penalise passengers by using the stick of increased charges to force them to use a less convenient mode of transport to get to the airport. Instead, we should lure passengers to airports by providing a method of public transport that is even more convenient than using the car. That is where the Government have gone wrong, because they have incentivised airports to use the stick of payments or costs to beat their own customers without providing an attractive alternative to car use.

I fear that I am running short of time—I see that I have one minute left—so I will not do the peroration where I say, “Aren’t the Conservatives wonderful? We are re-evaluating our environmental policies to get rid of the target of net zero by 2050, which is driving the transition at such a pace that it is increasing costs unrealistically, and we should be focusing on the consumer rather than on interest groups.” However, I hope that in the time available to him the Minister will show that he takes seriously what is genuinely an important issue that affects many millions of people around the country. It is an unfairness in plain sight. This is his opportunity to assure all our constituents that they have been listened to and that the Government are taking this issue seriously.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this important debate. As she so clearly and eloquently expressed, this issue affects many of her constituents, and indeed many airport users across the country, as other hon. Members have outlined. I commend her commitment to advocating for those impacted by what can sometimes be unfair and disproportionate airport drop-off charges, and I will engage closely with the points that she and hon. Members of all parties have raised.

Turning to the specifics of her speech, my hon. Friend clearly set out how airports are nodes of economic productivity. They are essential to UK growth, but they are underpinned by the lived experiences of people in the communities we serve as Members of Parliament. She spoke powerfully about the impact on people with disabilities, young families and those who need to be

dropped off in the middle of the night, including on their ability to use airports, if parking charges are not set in a way that is fair and proportionate. I thank her for doing so.

My hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and others subsequently spoke about the underpinning principle of fairness being required within the system. Whether through apps or websites, the rules must be clear and transparent, which the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), also spoke about. The rules must also be easy to navigate, regardless of when someone drops off a passenger or when they come to pay the charge.

I turn to the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon). His point about the fairness of penalty charges for non-payment was well made. It is incredibly important that there be transparency about that aspect of the charging system, and airports must express it clearly to their consumers. That point was buttressed by the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Rusholme, who used the specific example of a failure to pay a fee for staying an extra minute ending up in a £60 fine. That goes to the heart of the fact that there are people who serve the economies connected to our airports—particularly taxi drivers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) mentioned. It is really important that we make sure that those people are at the heart of designs for parking systems at our airports.

Important points were also raised about airport signage being clear, and I will take those away. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) made valuable points about rural connectivity and access to airports. My hon. Friend noted that a dial-a-ride service can work very well in certain instances, but consumers cannot always trust a bus to show up when they need it to so that they can get to the airport on time, often at night. I understand the concern. We need to make sure that surface access across our airports, whether for people who live in rural or urban communities, is improved. That is a key priority for me as Aviation Minister.

Lee Pitcher: Does the Minister agree that there is an opportunity for franchising in certain areas? I am working with South Yorkshire mayoral combined authority at the moment, to put in place a Doncaster East super loop that includes the airport and improves services, so that our residents can get to the airport safely and quickly.

Keir Mather: Absolutely. My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is a virtuous circle of economic prosperity to be created through multimodal access to airports. Rail provides an incredibly important piece of that puzzle and it is hoped that increased powers in the Railways Bill, including more control of the provision of passenger services, will allow us to cluster economic focus to the areas that need it most.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) raised issues to do with East Midlands airport. Although the airport uses a proportion of its car parking revenue to fund public transport, cycling and walking access

[*Keir Mather*]

options, including its local electric bus service, that does not negate his important point about fairness. He mentioned the penalty fee being incurred by midnight of the next day if someone fails to pay their fee on time. His point about transparency and consumers being able to know when that fee is approaching is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend also raised an incredibly important point about accessibility. For older residents or people who do not have the same digital literacy as others, navigating smartphone apps and websites to pay that charge can be very onerous indeed. I will certainly be taking that point away.

Jim McMahon: Part of the issue is that there is a starting principle that does not accept that taking a car to an airport is legitimate on the grounds that people should cycle or take the train, the tram or the bus. If that alternative is available, fine, but for most people the ability to see off loved ones safely and say goodbye is a very important part of the experience.

Keir Mather: That point is incredibly well made. Too often, when we discuss aviation policy in this place, we fail to recognise that the people who use our airports may well be making emotional journeys with their loved ones and dropping people off to travel around the world and explore new opportunities. They deserve to know that they can do so in a context where the airport is providing them with a good quality service.

I also want to reflect briefly on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden about our airports being a gateway to the United Kingdom. That is an incredibly important and useful lens through which we can view some of these policy considerations.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello), pointed out that travel to Bristol airport is a real challenge from his Dorset constituency. I visited Bristol airport a couple of weeks ago, and I got to see the fantastic local bus service that they are pioneering there. He raised a very good point, building on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton: if someone has to go a longer distance they will be taking a car and will therefore need to access that drop-off zone. We need to think realistically about the impact on the constituents he represents.

The Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham, raised the principle of fairness that lies behind the mechanism for payments of charges and how, in an opaque system where the rules are not clear, that can cause difficulty for people paying. Where is the fairness in that system? The point is well made. I will leave to him the legalistic determinations about how it relates to certain principles of contract law, but I am happy to explore the issue further with him.

My hon. Friends the Members for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for West Dorset made important points about accessibility. The CAA enforces the rules on accessibility at airport car parks, including through the Equality Act 2010. Passengers with a disability or reduced mobility are legally entitled to special assistance

free of charge when they fly from UK airports. Many airports, including Manchester, offer exemptions from fees for blue badge holders. That is not to say that there is not still enormous work to do to make the system fairer and more transparent. I am always happy for hon. Members across the House to write to me with specific instances of where they feel the framework is not serving the needs of passengers with disabilities. I will happily look into that for them.

Finally, the hon. Members for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), for West Dorset and for Broadland and Fakenham raised taxation. In the autumn Budget, His Majesty's Treasury announced a redesigned transitional relief scheme worth £1.3 billion in support to airports over 2026-27 and 2028-29. That caps airport bill increases at just over double by 2028-29, compared with the larger increases that there would have been without support. The Labour party's view is that airports do not exist completely separately from the public services on which their workers depend. People need to travel to airports on the strategic road network, and workers at airports need to be able to access the NHS. It is incredibly important that airports should play their part in contributing to the public finances, but we want to ensure that is done proportionately. I am always happy to have conversations about that with hon. Members.

Jim McMahon: Gatwick was given as an example, but it is worth bearing in mind that it paid out £600 million in shareholder dividends.

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution.

In the time remaining, I want to turn to the actual operating model of these parking charges. Most UK airports are privately operated and have the commercial freedom to set their own fees for the services they provide, but the Government expect fees to be set in a way that is both fair and proportionate. Well-designed parking facilities help to manage traffic flows and improve accessibility and local air quality. At the same time, airports must encourage passengers to use public transport options where possible.

Although all that is being considered, I am sure that some hon. Members in the Chamber will be disappointed to hear that the Government do not believe that it is their role to dictate parking prices from Whitehall. Airports must retain the ability to manage their own infrastructure; the Government's role is to ensure that competition and consumer laws are protected. Ultimately, each airport operator must justify the charges they levy and show that they are fair, transparent and carried out with proper accountability.

We support the continued success of our world-leading aviation sector, but we must do so in a way that delivers a green, more sustainable future. Airports should use their surface access strategies to set clear targets for sustainable travel and offer positive and practical incentives so that people do not drive to airports, but instead to use public transportation. When airports develop those strategies, they must clearly set out their approaches to parking and drop-off charges, and they must use their airport transport forums to plan future transport options in consultation with local people. My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip made that point powerfully.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden said, many airports, including Manchester, offer a range of parking options, including free drop-off zones for passengers and public transport, but it is important that everyone who needs to can access our airports. Some parking options and public transport alternatives may not always work for passengers with accessibility needs. Although airports such as Manchester offer exemptions for blue badge holders, I want to push that further.

More than anything, today's debate has highlighted the importance of fairness and transparency. It is essential that passengers can easily find information about parking and drop-off options so that they can plan their journeys and make the right, informed choice. We expect airport parking and drop-off charges to be clear and accessible, both online and at the airport itself. Airports must also make it easy for their customers to pay the relevant fee in a timely manner before proceeding to issue penalty charges for failure to do so. I was disappointed to hear Members across the House give examples of where that has not been the case for their constituents. I undertake to remind airports, including Manchester airport, of their obligations.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) made the very good point that the notice of the charge was situated beyond the point at which someone could reverse out. Will the Minister undertake to remind Manchester airport that any notice of a charge has to be at a place where people can decide not to accept the charge?

Keir Mather: It should be incumbent on all airports, including Manchester airport, to provide transparency, clarity and ease of access to information about parking charges, so I will happily raise that when I next meet Manchester airport representatives. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden needs no support in being a champion for her constituents in this space.

Importantly, airport users are protected by consumer law. Most airports have contracts with private parking operators, which must belong to a trade association and

follow the sector's new code of practice and appeals procedure. If drivers feel that signage is inadequate or that they have been treated unfairly, they can appeal through those services.

More widely, we recognise concerns about poor practices among some private parking operators. That is why the Government have consulted on proposals to raise standards, in preparation for a new code of practice and compliance framework. Responses are now being analysed, and we will publish our response in due course. I am cognisant of the pressure that this creates on local communities, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath mentioned. He also mentioned ghost plates, which we are taking real action to tackle through the road safety strategy.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden on securing the debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed. The debate has shone a light on drop-off and parking charges at airports, and reinforced the Government's expectation that airports manage the arrangements with fairness and respect. We will continue to work to ensure that they do so, and I encourage Members across the House to join us in those efforts.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Yasmin Qureshi, you have two minutes to wind up.

3.56 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who took part in the debate, and I thank the Minister for his response. He will be reassured to know that I was not expecting the Government to dictate car parking charges at airports. What I wanted was an assurance, which I think he has given, that he will work with the airports and explain to them the challenges we face. I want them to come forward with a better way of dealing with people who come to the airport, and with the drop-off charges, the signage, the payments and all the issues that we have discussed. I thank all my colleagues again for attending and taking part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of regulating airport drop-off charges.

Arctic and High North

4 pm

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I will call Graeme Downie to move the motion and will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. As is the convention for a 30-minute debate, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the Arctic and High North on UK security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I am delighted to introduce this debate and emphasise the importance, as we have seen in the past week, of the Arctic and the High North to UK security.

The UK's geographic position, distance from fighting in Ukraine, and Russian airborne or drone incursions in Estonia or Poland can lead to people feeling that the threat from Vladimir Putin is someone else's problem. However, we sit at the gateway to one of the most vital pieces of real estate on the planet: the High North and the Arctic. That gives us outsized importance, but also puts us at potential threat. The Harvard Arctic Initiative's new report on power shifts and security in the region highlights how the rules-based order is being challenged in the Arctic, just as it is elsewhere around the world. Melting ice is opening new shipping routes and unlocking potentially vast reserves of oil, gas and minerals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate. He is right to bring up the issue of melting ice: whether it be climate change or simply that the ice is melting, it is a key issue that cannot be ignored. The melting ice makes us more accessible, but we have forewarning, and to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Does he agree that it is past time that we, as NATO members, took the Chinese and Russian threat in this area much more seriously, and that we must immediately enhance cold water capabilities and ensure that our strength and ability is equal to any threat that may emerge from any country?

Graeme Downie: I totally agree. I will cover those points about the challenges that we face in the Arctic from both those powers.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech; I thank him for securing today's debate. A recent article in *The Guardian* highlighted how UK-based companies continue, shamefully, to be part of the supply chain for Europe's imports of liquefied natural gas from Russia. While I am pleased that the UK has committed this year to transitioning towards a ban on the provision of maritime services for vessels carrying Russian LNG, does he agree that the UK should work with its European allies to phase out dependency on Russian LNG entirely and to identify where we continue to have high dependency on an adversarial and unreliable Arctic in the High North?

Graeme Downie: I absolutely agree that we must do more on all those points. Russia seeks to dominate the Arctic routes militarily and economically, while China positions itself as a near-Arctic state investing in infrastructure and shipping lanes to secure influence over future trade corridors. We must understand our geography and prepare ourselves to reflect our position as a frontline country in a new, unstable and increasingly violent world.

We must help the British public to understand that what Vladimir Putin chooses to do anywhere will harm their lives on a daily basis. When he illegally and brutally invaded Ukraine in 2022, it was our most vulnerable constituents who paid the price through increased energy bills. Any action he takes in future will hurt the same people the most, and it is the first duty of Government to protect them.

The subsea cables and energy assets in the North sea are not abstract; they are national lifelines underpinning energy supply, jobs and our digital economy. Disruption to those systems would have immediate consequences for households and businesses across the UK. I have asked written questions of both the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero about steps to defend physical energy and infrastructure assets. As a senior member of the energy industry put it to me, "If a Russian submarine appears next to one of our installations, who do I call?"

We know that Russia understands the importance of the High North and Arctic because we are seeing a new and unprecedented military build-up. There have been reports of new air bases in Murmansk, increased deployment of air defence systems and a new fleet of ice-capable vessels for Arctic power projection. Vladimir Putin is not retreating; he is acting deliberately to rebuild what he sees as a large Russian empire.

During a recent visit to Estonia, I heard that Russian land and maritime forces, cyber-capabilities and other hybrid tactics threaten the Baltic nations. Estonians were also clear that peace in Ukraine, while of course welcome and something that we should all be working towards, would not end the threat to Europe. Putin will not exist as a quiet European neighbour. As he sees it, he must maintain Russia's prestige by joining the global competition alongside the US and China. He will not allow Russia to be seen as a secondary power. He will redeploy and reinforce in what he sees as his sphere of influence.

As the upgrades that I mentioned made clear, one of Putin's priorities will be in the UK's own backyard of the High North. The peace that we all want to see in Ukraine would not reduce the threat to the UK; it could increase it, and we must be prepared for that. That brings me to the action in the north Atlantic last week to seize the Russian-flagged tanker, *Marinera*. I fully support that, and hope that we see additional action in the future over the Russian shadow fleet. That demonstrated the effective co-operation between the US and the UK and the increased capability that we can bring to bear. However, it also comes with warnings. First, the UK must show that it can defend its interests in the area alone as well as with our allies.

Mr Calvin Bailey: My hon. Friend continues to make an excellent speech. The Trump Administration have shifted both words and power to highlight the challenge

in the Arctic and the High North from Russia and China. However, the United States drew down its peripatetic air force deployments across the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap over recent years.

Europe and the UK have not covered the GIUK gap with fixed deployments, despite its proximity to our borders. As my hon. Friend made clear, that is something that we must do independently to protect Europe from Russia and maintain our open sea lines of communications. Given the UK's nuclear submarine enterprise and our leadership role in the joint expeditionary force, does he agree that the UK and Europe must take the lead in protecting and securing the Greenland and Iceland gap?

Graeme Downie: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. Those are two points I will come on to, as to why the UK must act independently but also with our European allies in the High North and the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap in particular.

We must always remember that Putin will respond to actions, not words, and we cannot afford to sleepwalk unprepared into a geopolitical High North and Arctic. Secondly, as with any bully, Putin will feel the need to retaliate after the actions last week, but it might not be against the big kid of the USA; he could act against the UK. That is not something that should make us scared, but it should highlight that we must be ready for a response from Russia in one domain or another and make sure that we are able to respond and defend ourselves effectively.

I commend Ministers for initiatives to strengthen our armed forces, including raising the service pay, bringing housing back under public control and strengthening industrial partnerships across the UK. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) mentioned, we have also increased investment in the joint expeditionary force working with High North allies. In both visits to Estonia and the US, that was mentioned as something that the UK should continue to do to implement effective security measures as actions, not merely words.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The hon. Gentleman talks about our High North allies. I have just been next door with Naaja Nathanielsen, Greenland's Minister responsible for energy and mineral resources. Given that Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, and Denmark is a founding member of NATO, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the security of Greenland is a matter for all of NATO and not a matter for unilateral action from the United States?

Graeme Downie: I could not agree more. The UK's position should be very clear: Greenland's future is to be determined by people in Greenland and absolutely no one else.

Initiatives in the UK must be matched with urgency and sustained funding. We must see a clear path to the 3.5%, plus the 1.5%, of defence spending agreed at the NATO summit in The Hague. We need a defence investment plan as quickly as possible, and one that commits the UK to force development that will truly give Vladimir Putin a moment of pause. Failure to do both those things will leave the UK and our people at risk.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman could encourage the Prime Minister, or indeed the Minister, to move forward more quickly in committing to increasing expenditure on our defence forces.

Graeme Downie: I believe that that is what I did—or I certainly hope that is what I did. I would certainly like to see things move much faster, and in a way that is much clearer about the UK's defence posture and intentions.

However, to justify that action, the British people need to understand the threat that we face, and that must start from the very top of Government and carry on continually. More effective defence spending is, in some ways, the ultimate in preventive spending. The cost of not being prepared will lead to increased instability and hybrid attacks on the UK, or encourage future Russian aggression in Europe, all of which will increase the day-to-day costs of Government and the bills of ordinary people. It could also lead to an armed conflict with Russia that would be truly devastating for our country and the world. Acting with strength now is the only way to prevent those awful consequences.

With the increased threat to the High North, the Arctic and the North sea, I also ask the Government to consider the increased use of assets on the east coast of the country, such as Rosyth or Defence Munitions Crombie in my constituency. That would improve response times and resupply capability and deterrence posture, and such a move would demonstrate that the UK is serious about defending its northern approaches and critical infrastructure.

We should value our relations with the US, but Europe must also show that it is able to respond alone, or with only limited US support. In a piece last week, titled "Greenland is Europe's strategic blind spot—and its responsibility", Justina Budginaite-Froehly of the Atlantic Council said that Europe must have a

"presence capable of monitoring the GIUK gap"—

my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead referred to that earlier—

"and denying Russia and China the ability to encroach further on the Arctic region."

Action is already being taken by both Norway and Denmark, while across Europe Poland is laying mines and digging trenches in preparation for a Russian invasion; Germany has recently confirmed £50 billion of spending on new conventional military equipment; and we have had instances of Russian aircraft encroaching on NATO airspace in Estonia, with Estonia triggering article 4 consultation from NATO as a result.

The UK must match the urgency of our European allies. I come back to the point I made at the very beginning: we are not a country distant from conflict. Just like Estonia or Poland, the UK is a frontline nation—that frontline is in the High North and the Arctic.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate, and I commend him on his speech. He has listed a large number of instances across Europe of hybrid warfare and, in many cases, physical attacks by Russia. In the UK, we have also seen Russian-sponsored attacks on

[Edward Morello]

Ukrainian drone suppliers. On his broader point, the British public need to be aware that that war is already on our borders.

Graeme Downie: Once again, I could not agree more. Going back to the poisonings in Salisbury, the UK public need to be very aware that Vladimir Putin is now a threat to our shores—he has been in the past, and he will be in the future. It will be the most vulnerable people in the UK who will pay the price of that aggression, which is why we must ensure that we respond with force and clear action, not merely words.

Vladimir Putin's regime is undoubtedly a criminal enterprise masquerading as a Government, and its aggression must be met with strength. Putin's ambition is clear: to dominate and rebuild Russian influence across his perceived empire, and he reacts to action, not mere talk. Delay is not defence. We cannot wait for threats to emerge before we act. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what the UK Government are doing to meet those threats today.

4.13 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): It is a delight to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this debate and for all his work as chair of the Labour back-bench defence committee. In an article published last week, he stressed the critical importance, in these volatile times, of strengthening the UK's armed forces, preparing for the possibility of war and showing that although we do not want conflict, we are ready to fight to defend our freedoms and indeed our prosperity. He is absolutely correct and is speaking about an area with which he is all too familiar.

Geography really matters. Some members of the SNP may not be interested in defence, but, given Scotland's geographical position, our adversaries are interested in Scotland because of what it offers to the UK, Europe and NATO defence.

Mr Angus MacDonald: Given that one of the UK's core NATO responsibilities is securing freedom of operation in the GIUK gap, can the Minister reflect on what an SNP-led independent Scotland would mean for that task? At a time when hostile states exploit political fragmentation, does he agree that a party that opposes the nuclear deterrent, has turned away defence-related industrial investment in the Clyde and has even restricted medical aid to Ukrainian soldiers by classifying it as military support would weaken rather than strengthen our collective resilience in the High North?

Al Carns: The reality is that this is not about politics. This is about sincerity around our national security decisions. An independent Scotland would weaken not just the security of the UK—of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland—but the whole European security architecture and NATO as a whole. At this point in time, a worse decision could not possibly even be fathomed.

Some comments were made earlier about whether we have a frontline with Russia. The reality is that we do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and

Dollar mentioned, it sits in the north Atlantic. When it comes to being scared of Russia, last time I checked the military dictionary, that word definitely did not exist. If someone from industry sees a Russian frigate or submarine near the CNI, I can guarantee that there will be a Royal Navy, NATO or European submarine or frigate very close by.

Although much of the current attention is focused on Ukraine, being ready to fight means being alert to every danger. We must continue working ever more closely with our allies to address emerging threats wherever they may arise. Today's debate is a welcome opportunity to discuss a part of the world that is becoming increasingly contested by the major powers.

Having been largely inaccessible to navies in the past, the High North and Arctic are changing at an unprecedented and accelerating rate. Global warming is transforming the Arctic from frozen expanses to a 21st-century geopolitical hotspot. As melting ice opens up new sea routes, the established security balance across the top of the world will be fundamentally reshaped forever. Routes between the Atlantic and Pacific will become increasingly navigable for more of the year, bringing the continents of Asia, Europe and North America closer than ever before.

Competition to exploit the region's valuable natural resources is growing, too. China is extending its activity in the Arctic, having recently sent more icebreakers and research vessels to probe its expanses and declaring itself a near-Arctic state. We are under no illusion about how the changing Arctic environment poses new challenges, both commercially and militarily.

Russia remains the most acute danger to the security of the northern near Atlantic, and its operations within a more navigable Arctic are an increasing part of that threat. It is sobering to realise that Vladimir Putin controls more than half of the entire Arctic's coastline. The increased militarisation of Russia's Arctic territory, including investment in bases and air and coastal defence capabilities, is of increasing concern. For example, Russia has established a new northern joint strategic command, reopening cold war-era bases above the Arctic circle, including a fully operational base on Franz Josef island and another on Kotelnny island.

In the north Atlantic, Russian submarine activity is nearing the highest levels since the cold war. Changes in the region directly impact us and our security here in the UK, as one of the Arctic's nearest neighbours—whether it is from increasing threats or damage to subsea electricity or telecommunication cables in the Baltic sea or from the increase in Russian activity in the key Greenland-Iceland-UK gap involving surface and sub-surface vessels and aircraft.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): As climate change opens new routes and access to resources, and as we are one of the Arctic's closest neighbours, how are the Government working with allies to strengthen our collective security in the region in the face of climate change to ensure that the UK is able to protect our long-term interests alongside other partners from non-Arctic states?

Al Carns: As my hon. Friend will know, we have various multilateral treaties, including working with the JEF and NATO to ensure that any implications from

global warming are carefully considered and that security recommendations are put in place to deal with them should they arise.

NATO has made it clear that defence of the High North is a key strategic imperative. The addition of Sweden and Finland to the alliance has significantly strengthened NATO's hand in the region. Indeed, Nordic countries have spent decades managing Moscow's interests in the High North, and they bring valuable experience to help counter the threat that Putin's forces present today. As part of the UK-led joint expeditionary force, we are working alongside them to enhance collective security across Northern Europe.

We have assets across all three main services and interoperability with our allies that can project force deep into the High North. For example, a recent agreement between Britain and Norway will see our commando forces, led by the Royal Marines, operating in Norway all year round to defend NATO's northern flank. They will take part in Exercise Cold Response, the largest military exercise in Norway this year, with a 40% increase in Royal Marine activity. I know the exercise well: in 2022, I took part in it as the chief of staff of the UK strike force, operating a multinational fleet, dozens of ships, aircraft and thousands of forces across the Arctic. I spent time during my 24 years—many of it unhappy, in a snowhole—in the Arctic as part of the Royal Marines, as a mountain leader.

We train hard for those operations in the Arctic. We have some of the best troops in the world, and we work exceptionally hard with Norway and Sweden and with Finnish forces. What is more, we have established the littoral maritime response force, with dedicated personnel, ships and helicopters operating in the High North. We have bought new generation anti-submarine frigates, have just completed a huge deal with the Norwegians to ensure interoperability across the Type 26 fleet, and have launched the groundbreaking Atlantic Bastion programme to protect the UK from Russian undersea threats. It is all part of widespread and regular operations involving our armed forces to maintain operational readiness across northern Europe.

The MOD keeps Russia's military posture in the region under continuous review and conducts wider strategic monitoring with our allies. Of course, we recognise that Russia is an Arctic state with a legitimate presence, but we have to be clear that we will protect, and if necessary assert, our rights to safeguard security and international law. That includes honouring the integrity—

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I too was at the meeting of the APPG for Greenland, in a room nearby where we heard from Greenland's Minister for business, mineral resources, energy, justice and gender equality. In addition to my hon. Friend's important points about the military strength and prowess of this country and others, and about our alliances, does he agree that we need to send a very strong message about international law and the international rules-based system? That would give reassurance to the High North and Arctic countries, particularly Greenland, at this moment.

Al Carns: I completely agree. I think our Prime Minister has done exactly that, but the only people to decide the future of Greenland are those in Greenland,

and NATO as a whole provides a collective security agreement for Greenland and other countries in the High North.

We cannot be naive about the challenges that we face. For example, the threat of damage to subsea electricity and telecommunications cables is an ongoing concern and underlines the importance of really close collaboration and interoperability with our European partners. Very simply, there can be no global security without security across the Arctic and northern Europe.

Let me move on to the points about Greenland. The past few weeks have seen an increasing focus on Greenland in the context of Arctic security, but the UK has been absolutely and utterly clear: the future of Greenland is a matter for the Greenlanders and the Danes, and no one else. Greenland, Denmark and the United States have worked closely since the second world war to ensure that this key territory is protected from various aggressors. That will always continue. Security in the Arctic must therefore be achieved collectively with NATO allies, including the United States, by upholding the principles of the UN charter—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.49 pm

On resuming—

Al Carns: Security in the Arctic must be achieved collectively, with NATO allies including the United States, by upholding the principles of the UN charter on sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders. These are universal principles and we will always defend them.

It is worth noting that we completed Exercise Tarassis, one of the biggest exercises in the High North, late last year. The next set of exercises in the High North is known as Lion Protector. We have a JEF chiefs of defence meeting coming up at the end of this week. Cold Response will take place, and is already under way, with a 40% increase in the Royal Marines deployed in the High North. They will be there all year round.

The RAF continues to patrol in the High North with various types of aircraft. Some bilateral outstanding agreements, such as the Lunna House agreement, have established interoperability like never before across our naval forces, particularly with Norway.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Prior to our brief interruption, the Minister described a part of the world that is undergoing considerable change and turbulence, not least from climate change. Will he reflect on how UK procurement and military doctrine might have to go to a similar scale and rapidity of change in order to respond to, and reflect, the challenges of an increasingly liquified Arctic that is no longer in a frozen state?

Al Carns: For a long time during the cold war, a large proportion of our time was predisposed to looking to the high north-east and north-west in the Atlantic and the High North. It is a case of relearning some of our old lessons, and ensuring that our capability and technological mix is adapted into our doctrine, training

[*Al Carns*]

tactics and procedures. For example, some of the work now going on in Exercise Cold Response is not necessarily about training; it is about actual mission set planning to prepare for the worst-case scenario, and that is how we are seeing it evolve through time. That will continue through the Lunna House agreement and various agreements we have with Sweden and Finland as part of the NATO alliance, so it will continue to get stronger. Importantly, we will never forget the JEF either, which is a super-important geopolitical alliance.

Politically and environmentally, the Arctic is in absolute flux. Rising temperatures are remoulding landscapes and turning centuries of certainty on their head. As the region grows increasingly contested, it is more important than ever for Britain to collaborate with like-minded states to uphold international law and strengthen our collective security. That is precisely what we are doing. We are working intensely with our partners to monitor threats, bolster our forces and stand up for our interests. As we boost defence spending to 5% of GDP over the next decade, protecting the stability and security of the High North and Arctic will be integral to our plans. That is how we will keep Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

Question put and agreed to.

4.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

Northern Ireland Political Institutions: Reform

4.55 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of reforming Northern Ireland's political institutions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Vaz. I was talking briefly to colleagues on the way over here and I said, "This time a year ago, almost, we had the exact same debate." That was a 30-minute debate on the reform of the institutions of Northern Ireland, and I was absolutely petrified of causing any controversy, so I did not take any interventions. This will be a 60-minute debate and I would much rather we have a conversation—rows, warts, fights and all, in good faith and in good spirit—and try to come together. I am really pleased to see colleagues in the Chamber from across the House; that really means something to me.

My motivation for this debate is not based on party politics. I feel that the people of Northern Ireland are looking at us, and they are calling for something better. I am not questioning the bona fides of any representative. I think that every single one of us is here to represent our constituents across Northern Ireland in good faith, and every single one of us does that as best we can. However, where I feel we run into difficulties is that we have a system of government that enables or permits—whatever we want to call it—collapse, and that becomes a difficulty. I do not need to rehearse the reasons why. My colleagues from Northern Ireland understand fully how we arrived at this situation and the system that it is based on.

Governing under the constant threat of collapse discourages long-term decision making; it entrenches short-term decision making and paralyses reform. Probably one of the best examples that we can give of that is that we are currently attempting to set a three-year budget for Northern Ireland, for the first time in at least 10 years, and it is extremely difficult to do so. Unfortunately, with the historical muscle memory of what has happened with our governance before, there is a real risk—and a concern and a worry among the public—that we simply cannot have difficult and challenging conversations that really challenge party positions in such a way that there is no fear of collapse.

I do not need to tell colleagues around the table today the price of collapse and constant interruption of government. Such a situation would not be acceptable anywhere else in the UK. Northern Ireland is part of the UK, and we should be treated as such. It would not be acceptable in a mayoralty anywhere in the north of England. Likewise, in the Republic of Ireland, this situation simply would not be tolerated, either after an election or during the course of a Government, where, to be fair, there is a real comparator, in that they have to form coalition Governments.

We are not exceptional and we are not unique in being asked to govern with people who have completely different views from ours. Many, many Governments around the world do that. I think that nearly 30 years after the Good Friday agreement being signed, the public at large—we all serve at their pleasure—are simply saying

that enough is enough. The evidence is now overwhelming. I used to say to people 10 or 15 years ago that reform was a niche Alliance party talking point. I do not think we really reserve that luxury any more. I am not picking on any colleagues, but there are colleagues here from the SDLP and from other political parties who really have gone some way to advancing those arguments about reform of our institutions, and have expounded on those points very well.

We are not the only ones making this point. People within Unionism are saying the same thing. When it comes to people living in Northern Ireland, right across nationalism, Unionism and people like me who are neither of those things, there is now a real groundswell of opinion. We have seen constant evidence in polling from various surveys that shows people in Northern Ireland simply do not want to have this system any more.

I do not feel that I am better than anybody else because I do not designate as Unionist or nationalist—part of me is Unionist and part of me is nationalist, but all of me is united community. I feel strongly about that point. We need to bear in mind going forward that the desire for reform is not the preserve of any one political tradition or viewpoint in Northern Ireland, or the solution offered by them. It is felt right across the political spectrum.

The Assembly has now spoken. Just before Christmas, for the first time, it formally backed Alliance's call for institutional reform. It is not symbolic; it is a historic milestone, and Members across the Legislative Assembly acknowledge that the ability of any single party to veto decision making is untenable. Misuse of mechanisms such as the petition of concern has damaged trust and stability, and reform is now necessary, not optional.

I remember the previous collapses. In December 2019, whenever we were convening all-party talks on how to restore the institutions, there was a viewpoint that it was not the right time to have a discussion about how to reform them. I did not agree with that at the time, but with hindsight I understand why those points were made and why some held those views.

I understand that it is simply not good enough for me to say, "I want these changes done tomorrow in this prescriptive way, and that is the end of it." That is not how we will move forward in any meaningful way, if no one gets what they want. That was what the entire Good Friday agreement was about.

To colleagues who might take the position that this pulls at the fabric of the Good Friday agreement to the point where it breaks, I would dispute that completely and utterly. It was not good enough to simply have the agreement signed to enable peace. That was very much hard-won and hard-fought and something that we need to jealously guard, but it is not enough any more to say to people that we can forgo the difficult job of governance.

I want this to be a positive and productive conversation. I am willing to hear different viewpoints and to accept that others will disagree about how we do this, but where there is consensus, we owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to say that enough is enough. We need to honour them and their wishes. The reforms remain modest but are essential: removing the ability of any one party to block the formation of an Executive, replacing parallel consent with arrangements that encourage

genuine cross-community participation, and restoring the petition of concern to its original purpose of protecting rights, not blocking progress. We have seen, even in recent weeks, how veto mechanisms continue to be abused. That is not safeguarding democracy; it is corroding it. These reforms would not dismantle power sharing. They would make it workable. They are the bare minimum.

To Unionist colleagues in particular, I want to make a plea, or at least make my own views known and quite plain. I completely understand why some people in the community, given the different political make-up across Northern Ireland, now see discussions about reform as being couched in some sort of ulterior motive of majoritarianism and exclusion. It would trouble me greatly, to my core, to the extent that I would not participate, if any Government or Administration simply excluded Unionists because they did not feel that there were enough of them to—in a crass way—make up the numbers.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The hon. Member very piously tells us what would offend her, but of course it did not offend her in December 2024 to be a cheerleader for the Secretary of State railroading through a protocol that treats Northern Ireland as a colony of the EU, and to continue support without cross-community consent on a basis of majoritarianism. There is quite a gaping void between what she is saying today and what her party did in December 2024.

Sorcha Eastwood: I thank the hon. and learned Member for making his point. I see where he is coming from. I believe that Brexit was a fundamental act of self-harm. I think it caused damage to relations, and certainly I think that most people in Northern Ireland—Unionist, nationalist or other—regret Brexit. I completely understand where Unionist colleagues are coming from, because there is a difference, and it is incumbent on all of us to work to ameliorate and patch up issues that pertain to this day in terms of the operation of the protocol, but I do not want to get sidelined on that.

In conclusion, I want people to understand that this is a genuine and heartfelt appeal for constructive work. We are now calling on the UK and Irish Governments to no longer sit back and wait for that crisis and collapse. That is not the time to have these conversations at all. We are calling on the Secretary of State to immediately convene a process of institutional reform, to engage the co-guarantors of the agreement in both Governments, and to move beyond the delay and prevarication that are simply not honouring the wishes of Northern Ireland.

People who are Unionist, nationalist and other voted for a Government, and we simply cannot sit here and say that we do not see fit to provide one for them. This is not controversial. This is not new. It is not part of other polities—it is not part of anywhere else in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. I simply ask that we try to move forward today in good faith and in accordance with the wishes of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, who simply want to have a Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. Please stay standing while I see who is bobbing. I hope to take the wind-ups at 5.33 pm.

5.5 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I confess that I have not been in Westminster Hall for a while; I was watching the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to see exactly when I should stand up. I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for securing the debate, which is an important part of the conversation as the case for modest Assembly reform builds.

The Social Democratic and Labour party has been working quite intensively to find common ground and take this conversation beyond campaigning and graphics and into the realm of the possible. I welcome the indications from the Prime Minister last week, when I asked him at Prime Minister's questions, that the UK Government are freshly open to engagement. There had been a fairly hands-off approach.

I restate the SDLP's frustration that the Executive parties have made not a single step towards reform. In spite of election campaigning, there is nothing in the programme for government. I welcome the Assembly's acceptance of an SDLP proposal to take some of this issue on through the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, but if anybody wants to see an example of an issue being slow-walked, it is that committee's discussion and inquiry over the past year.

As with the agreement that created the institutions, we accept that parties are approaching this issue from different places and at different paces. As with that agreement, it is also clear that we will not come to a conclusion without some sort of facilitation. I will not spend much time on the need for reform: the periodic collapses, the quagmire and stalemate on public policy, the daily draining away of public confidence, this week's failure to agree a multi-year budget and the feedback from Baroness Hallett in the covid inquiry last week all ably make the case, as did the hon. Member for Lagan Valley.

The flaws are by culture and by design. There is much recrimination about some of what is in the agreement, but hon. Members need to be reminded that we were trying to end a hot war and resolve a centuries-old conflict, which the agreement very largely did, in spite of what my colleague Mark Durkan memorably called the "ugly scaffolding".

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that much of the work that was achieved in the Belfast agreement was undermined in St Andrews in 2007, when there was a change to how the First and Deputy First Ministers were elected? Rather than being a co-post, it became a divided office.

Claire Hanna: The hon. Member is absolutely right. Those subsequent changes, particularly at St Andrews, have distorted the institutions away from a place of consensus and towards veto, brinkmanship and power struggle. There is a lot in the agreement that the SDLP would like to revisit—not least strand 2, which has shockingly underperformed—but the immediacy and urgency of this issue means that we have to focus on where common ground can be found.

I agree with a lot of what the Alliance party has suggested but, bluntly, I do not think it is achievable. I do not think that it is possible to get there from where

we are now, although we were very open to a lot of those conversations, not least on mandatory coalition and designation. As a party that is anti-sectarian, centre-left and for a new Ireland, we have never fitted neatly into any binary, but it is important to recognise both where we are as a society and where we want to get to.

Sorcha Eastwood: There is a real point there: people who may be in what we would term a Unionist or nationalist party may not really regard themselves as those things. That is a really positive and legitimate challenge. As the hon. Lady herself says, even her party does not fit neatly into boxes, and I certainly know Unionists, in Unionist parties, who would also feel the same. Does she think that the current set-up gives no latitude to reflect the views of people who may be Unionists or nationalists?

Claire Hanna: Clearly, we are a more pluralist society. I am unashamedly a new Irelander, and that is an important part of my identity. That is a factor in our politics, as is the legitimate position of Unionists, so we cannot wish it away. We cannot say, "I don't see colour or designation," but for so many of us it is clearly not the primary identifier. Many of the reforms can take effect even without going into what, as I said, my colleague called the "ugly scaffolding".

The proposals we are making are keyhole surgery. They are not a lobotomy or amputation; they do not fundamentally undermine the principles of power sharing. I remind hon. Members that of course the agreement is not an ornament to sit on the mantelpiece; it is not a relic. It is a toolkit, and it envisaged change. It has been changed on the Floor of the Assembly, and it allows for that.

We want to put down some modest proposals, some of which I have advanced through the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and its excellent 2023 report on the existence of an Assembly. We propose the election of a Speaker by a two-thirds majority. Two thirds exists elsewhere in the agreement, for example in the threshold for calling an election, and I do not think anybody could say that the election of a Speaker oppresses or suppresses any community. Mike Nesbitt of the Ulster Unionist party and Patsy McGlone of the SDLP both achieved that threshold during the stalemates. That would allow an Assembly to exist, even if an Executive does not.

On Executive formation, we would call, first, to rename the joint office of the First Minister, reflecting the fact that one of those Ministers cannot order paperclips without the other, and restoring the intent and joint nature of that office. Ideally, we would then move on to the reforms that the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) suggested around St Andrews.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): What does the hon. Member think of the Alliance party's suggestion that there could be three First Ministers? Would that not make things even worse?

Claire Hanna: Bluntly, my view is that the agreement is trying to salve, resolve and manage a centuries-old division—a society that has been divided into two tribes. It is not my belief that creating a third tribe is the solution to that, but I understand that it is important that all parties feel that they are represented.

As I have said, on joint First Ministers, there are plenty of possibilities for further reforms. I think both the DUP and Sinn Féin have, at times, said that they would be very relaxed about the creation of an office of joint First Ministers; in fact, at different times they have used the phrase “joint First Minister”. As I say, the SDLP has been looking for consensus.

We would propose appointing the Justice Minister through the d’Hondt formula as well. It is worth saying that if we are talking about people’s votes counting equally, there have been times when the Alliance party, for example, had far fewer Members than the Ulster Unionist party or the SDLP, but was gifted an extra Ministry. Those distortions exist under the current rules. I do not believe in the principle that a Unionist or a nationalist is not fit to be the Justice Minister, and I think that Ministry should return to the d’Hondt formula.

Another modest proposal is a reform of the St Andrews veto within the Executive that allows a single party to prevent items even coming on to the Executive agenda. That could be progressed further with legislation for joined-up government, potentially something like the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 that exists elsewhere in the UK.

Meaningful reform is going to need a process, weight and urgency. If we limp along to the next election, there may not even be an Assembly that comes back after May 2027. Certainly, people’s belief in the primacy of politics and in the ability of the Good Friday agreement to solve their problems is ebbing away with every stagnant day in the Assembly. I have written to the other party leaders asking them to join me in the meeting that the Prime Minister has indicated he will have, and I hope that we can find some consensus.

5.13 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. We have had a catalogue of reasons why there need to be changes to the arrangements for government in Northern Ireland. We have had collapses, difficulty in getting a three-year budget, the fallout and the use of veto powers by the parties.

The thing that strikes me is all these things have happened under different Administrations in Northern Ireland over the last 22 years. When the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists were in power, the Administration collapsed about five times—

Claire Hanna: Who collapsed it?

Sammy Wilson: Well, it was collapsed by the parties that were in power at that stage, because they had the ability to keep it running—but they did not. It collapsed again when the distribution of seats changed. It collapsed for a number of reasons, but the important thing is that those arrangements were put in place to safeguard minorities. The Alliance party and the SDLP, which are now calling for reform, were the keenest to have that consensus requirement in the Belfast agreement.

Sorcha Eastwood *rose—*

Claire Hanna *rose—*

Sammy Wilson: I will give way in a moment. They are now proposing that consensus be removed and—here’s the thing—that we go to majority rule, albeit with a weighted majority of 66%. That is not reform; that is retreating to something that they condemned in the first place, and that they said required the arrangements in the Belfast agreement to be put in place.

Claire Hanna: Will the right hon. Member confirm whether he believes that the Assembly has or should have responsibility for international affairs, which is included in the Windsor framework, and can he outline where cross-community consent for Brexit was demonstrated?

Sammy Wilson: I find it rather odd that the hon. Member has talked about how dysfunctional the Assembly is but wants more powers for it. Either it is dysfunctional or it is not. If it is functional and she wants more powers for it, why do we need the changes?

Let us look at the words that are used. “Reform” is one, and I have noticed that another phrase—“keyhole surgery”—has come in. Of course, these are all euphemisms for removing the very safeguards that were required when nationalists were in the minority. That is why they were put in place. Now the arithmetic in the Assembly has changed, and we find that those parties that believed there should be safeguards for minorities no longer require those safeguards and want to revert to a form of majority rule.

Sorcha Eastwood: I am really glad that the right hon. Member is making this point, because there is a bit of an idea out there that this is about not protecting minorities. Does he not agree that the make-up of Northern Ireland is very different and that everybody is a minority, and therefore everybody—Unionists, nationalists and people like me who are neither of those things—deserves protection?

Sammy Wilson: If that is the case, the requirement for consensus rather than majority rule is even stronger, yet the proposed changes would remove those safeguards.

The difficulty of getting the three-year budget through has been mentioned. I served in the Assembly for a number of years; I was Finance Minister in the Assembly for a number of years. In the first year after I took over, we had an immediate 3% cut to our budget, and then we had a 2% cut year on year, under the coalition Government that existed at that time. We got a three-year budget through, despite the fact that the two biggest spending Ministers were outside with the unions protesting against any cuts.

How did we do that? Instead of thinking we could just drive it through, as the current Sinn Féin Minister is trying to do, we had hours and hours of negotiations, compromises and so on to get it through. That might be difficult, but that is no reason to remove the requirement for consensus and the safeguards for minorities. We now have a cabal in the Assembly of nationalists, republicans, the Alliance party and a bunch of individuals, who form a majority and would be able to drive things through if it came to a majority vote.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My right hon. Friend is rightly alluding to the issue of consensus. Does he agree that the one fundamental

[Mr Gregory Campbell]

building block to making any progress is some form of consensual approach to how we make politics in the Assembly work? I am not talking about vetoes, but we cannot make progress unless there is agreement among the divided communities that make up Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: Of course, and we have seen how divisive some of the decisions made in the Assembly have been, whether on cultural issues or economic issues, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) pointed out. Alarm bells should ring if we are considering removing the fabric that is there to ensure proper discussion before final decisions are made.

I notice that there is not a great deal of interest in this debate from parties other than those from Northern Ireland—and selfish interest, as well. I do not care what has been said; this is selfish interest. In fact, we are now told that the Irish and British Governments should come together and try to force through the changes that the new majority cabal wish to impose on the Assembly. I think that is wrong, we will be opposing it, and there is certainly no logical, political or community reason why the changes that are being demanded should be made.

5.20 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I commend the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for securing this debate. That is probably where the consensus largely ends, although I suppose I could agree with her—indeed, I would put it much more robustly—that our system of government at Stormont has lamentably and demonstrably failed. The Executive eventually scraped together what passes for a programme for government; they now cannot agree a budget, and we have individual Ministers locked in litigation, one with the other. Of course, all that is against the background of the Executive almost more often being down than up.

The elephant in the room, to which no one has been prepared to refer, is this question: why is this system of government not working? It is very simple. If the only form of devolution we can have is one based on the prerequisite that a party that does not even want Northern Ireland to exist, never mind succeed, must be at the heart of the Executive, it should not be a surprise to anyone that that Executive stumbles and fails. You cannot say, “We will make a success of Northern Ireland, yet we need an all-Ireland.” The very *raison d’être* of Sinn Féin is, first, not to believe that Northern Ireland should even exist and, secondly, to ensure that it is not a success. There is no better place from which to make sure it is not a success than from the inside of Government. That is the fundamental reality.

Day and daily in Northern Ireland, we hear very clearly from the so-called First Minister that everything they are doing and everything they are working towards is about getting a referendum to destroy the United Kingdom and take Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom. If we create a system where those with that motivation, who have no desire to make Northern Ireland work, must be at the heart of government, and we

cannot have a Government without them, it should not be a surprise that the system fails. It is not rocket science.

Sorcha Eastwood: Actually, I agree: I want Northern Ireland to succeed and I do want to be a success for Northern Ireland. Does the hon. and learned Member not agree that the constant collapses are destroying the premise of a successful Northern Ireland and we should do everything we can to stop that happening?

Jim Allister: If the hon. Member had been listening more carefully, she would have understood why it is failing. It is failing because at its heart is a party that does not want Northern Ireland to succeed and, if it has the levers of power, will never permit it to succeed. That is the fundamental point.

What do we do? It is quite clear to me that the Executive is the failing side of devolution in Northern Ireland. It is the Executive that has collapsed multiple times. We need to distinguish the various strands of devolution. We have the Executive devolution, we have legislative devolution, and I suppose we have the scrutiny side of devolution. The latter two have actually worked, within limits, relatively well. The lamentable failure is on the side of the Executive.

If the only type of Executive that can be formed has at its heart a party that wants Northern Ireland to fail, the obvious answer is not to have an Executive of that type. We should sustain the legislative devolution and the scrutiny and pass the Executive powers to the central Government, but we should make their Ministers pass their legislation through the Assembly and make their Ministers’ actions subject to the scrutiny of the Assembly. Indeed, it would be far more vigorous scrutiny than at present, because at the moment the scrutineers who sit in the Assembly Committees scrutinising Ministers are members of the same parties that they are scrutinising. If Assembly Members were scrutinising Ministers from the Northern Ireland Office, it would be a lot more vigorous, I assure you.

If we are to get government that works, we have to face the reality that the current system is incapable of working. It will never work, because of the fundamental flaw that at its heart is a party that thinks that Northern Ireland should not even exist, never mind succeed. We have to circumvent that. If we cannot have an Executive that allows those who want Northern Ireland to work to govern, Executive powers must be vested where they will not be subject to that restraint and that flaw.

We should keep the part of devolution that is working. If we ever come to the point at which we are capable of forming a workable Executive, we should restore it, but we cannot go on as we are, limping from one crisis to another. Stormont is now a byword for failure in Northern Ireland. People just roll their eyes and laugh at the very thought of good government coming from there. We are only going to take politics further down the longer we cling to a system that is lamentably and totally failing. Let us get some new thought, which needs to be focused on getting an Executive system that can work. It does not need to be perfect, but I want to be very plain: flawed British rule, subject to the restraints of Stormont, would be preferable to destructive, malevolent Sinn Féin rule.

5.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for the way she presented the case. It is important that we do that in a measured way.

I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for 12 years before I came to this place. Each of these institutions, whether it be the one here in Westminster or the Northern Ireland Assembly, has its complications and should be challenged. There is no doubt that we have yet to find a perfect political institution; that is a fact of life. Do I want to see some changes at Stormont? Yes, I do. Although I am not an apologist for the Northern Ireland Assembly, I want to highlight that there has been delivery. Has there been much delivery, and has it been at the pace that I want to see? No. I would have liked to see a greater pace.

I should have welcomed the Minister to his place. I wish him well in his role, and I hope that he will be able to give us some encouragement.

Nobody denies that there is much work to do to demonstrate the effectiveness of these institutions in making a positive difference to the lives of people across Northern Ireland, but to say that there has not been progress over the past 12 months is not only inaccurate but facetious. I do not want to overstate the Executive's achievements but, just to give two examples, it is worth noting that Stormont has delivered significant investment in early years and childcare: 14,500 children now benefit from a subsidy that has slashed childcare costs for working parents. That is positive, because we can see the difference to people. My constituents have benefited from it.

Mr Gregory Campbell: My hon. Friend is outlining some of the benefits that have flowed from devolution, flawed as it is. Without denigrating the Minister, does my hon. Friend think we would have got those things if it had been down to the Northern Ireland Office, or did devolution deliver in the absence of the NIO?

Jim Shannon: That is the issue; my hon. Friend puts it well. It is better to have it in the hands of local people.

Jim Allister: On the childcare point, the childcare money was Barnett consequential. It was of the order of £50 million, but Stormont chose to spend only £25 million of it on childcare, so in fact under devolution we saw a diminution in what was available for childcare.

Jim Shannon: I am not going to get into a row, but under devolution we have seen the delivery of childcare. People see that in my constituency and every constituency in Northern Ireland, whether they like it or not. I tell you what: my constituents like it, and that is the point I want to make.

Sorcha Eastwood: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important to have a functioning Government in Northern Ireland, because the local growth fund and what the UK Government have done on that for Northern Ireland demonstrate that only Northern Ireland can look out for itself? We cannot expect others to keep doing it for us. That is why we need to change how we do things.

Jim Shannon: I agree with the principle of what the hon. Lady says; there are things that we can take advantage of through having a working Assembly. Another way we have an advantage is the £100 winter fuel payment and the medication payment provided for our elderly.

There are certainly barriers to delivery, but one of the major ones, and the most important need for reform, is the unelected death grip of Europe on Northern Ireland. That is the reform that I, and probably most Members with a Unionist point of view in this Chamber, would like to see. There is an irony in those in certain parties raising concerns about democratic wellbeing, while Members faithfully went through the Lobby to vote for the continuation of arrangements that undemocratically foisted on us hundreds of areas of law governed by a foreign jurisdiction, without any role or input from them or those that they represent, in the formalisation of the EU interference in British Northern Ireland.

Let me be very clear. The DUP is not opposed to improving how devolution works from day to day. There are changes we need to see, and discussions need to take place on how that would happen. As has been the case since 2007, we are committed to increasing efficiency, transparency and accountability within the institutions. The DUP has supported the reduction of the number of Government Departments, special advisers and Members of the Legislative Assembly per constituency, and supported the creation of an Opposition.

However, in the here and now, the focus should clearly be on delivering the bread-and-butter issues and improving the life of everyone in Northern Ireland. That is what the electorate expects, and it is what the DUP is committed to achieving. Any programme of reform or any agreement should be led by the local parties with a primary role for the AERC, and be fully accountable to the Executive and the Assembly.

I am running short of time, but let me be clear: any reform of the Northern Ireland Assembly must be a cross-party reorganisation, and must begin with the removal of EU and, I believe, Irish interference in order ever to have the buy-in of the Unionist people and the nationalist grouping. That is the immovable foundation of democracy and democratic institutions in Northern Ireland.

To move forward, we must put the quality of our constituents' lives above achieving political gain, regardless of how people live their life. In the interim, my party and I will continue to prioritise people over point scoring. I hope that that is replicated across all parties, but I have my doubts. What is my duty? My duty is to my constituents, to my country, to my wife and to my boys—my children.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): It is possible that there may be another vote shortly, so we will start with the wind-ups.

5.33 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) on securing this important debate. I recognise that I am new to this portfolio, and those who have spoken before me know far more about it than I do, so I am still in listening mode.

[Mr Paul Kohler]

I have found many of the arguments compelling, if contradictory. I invite the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) to intervene on me to explain her answer to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), if she wants to do so, because I would have liked to hear her answer. Maybe she can do so later.

I begin by reaffirming the Liberal Democrats' full, unwavering support for the Good Friday agreement. It transformed Northern Ireland by establishing institutions robust enough to bridge the deep sectarian divisions, an achievement that endures today. The Northern Ireland of today is not the Northern Ireland of 30 years ago, but maintaining the agreement does not mean preserving those institutions in aspic—quite the opposite, in fact.

As a former sub-dean at University College London's faculty of laws, I feel compelled to cite the warnings of its constitution unit, which in its recent work on Stormont reform highlighted how the current arrangements make institutional collapse all too possible and any recovery politically costly. The question we are therefore compelled to ask is whether strand 1 institutions are still fit for purpose in today's Northern Ireland, and, if not, what reforms are necessary.

Time does not permit an exhaustive list of the potential merits of reform, but three stand out clearly. The first is greater stability. Allowing the formation of the Executive to proceed when a party entitled to nominate the First Minister or Deputy First Minister refuses to do so would prevent a single party from vetoing Government altogether. That principle already applies to other ministerial posts, and would strengthen, not weaken, devolution and power sharing.

The second is more effective decision making. Continued use of parallel consent and an overly lax triggering mechanism for a petition of concern has repeatedly blocked budgets, the election of a Speaker and legislation, even where there is overwhelming Assembly support. Replacing parallel consent with a weighted majority and restricting petitions of concern to their original purpose of protecting vital interests would still provide minority safeguards, absent the danger of deadlock. I would like someone to intervene on me on that point to explain why weighted majority does not give protection to minorities—because surely it does give some protection.

Sorcha Eastwood: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the situation we have, whereby Governments can simply go without being formed, would be anathema anywhere in the home counties, whether it is a local mayoralty or a regional district within GB? Surely to goodness that would not be tolerated in the UK—and Northern Ireland is indeed part of the UK.

Mr Kohler: I entirely agree. Compelling as many of the arguments are from all sides, a situation in which governance is not happening cannot be right and cannot be the solution. Surely, compromise must be reached.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman asked why weighted majorities do not give the protection that the consensus requirement gives. There are two reasons. First, it depends at what level the weighted majority is set. Secondly, if the weighted majority were seen to be used in a way that prevented changes or things getting through, we would

have exactly the same arguments about the weighted majority: that it should be reduced and reduced in order to free up any logjam. That is why consensus is much more important. It recognises that there are nationalists and Unionists, and that their interests have to be safeguarded.

Mr Kohler: That is helpful. The current 60:40:40 system strikes me as one that does protect minorities, while the danger of the consensus is that you get tripped up by hold-outs. That is what I see happening from my perspective outside.

Claire Hanna: The hon. Gentleman asked me to intervene. Unfortunately, the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) would not take my intervention, and I am sad about that. I was seeking to clarify whether his party's position had moved from being the quite radical one—more radical than my position or that of the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood)—of ending mandatory coalition and to a 90-Member Opposition. Did the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) understand that from the speech by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim?

Mr Kohler: I do not know. I would like to hear from the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim. I am happy for him to intervene.

Retaining the current arrangements comes at a real cost, both socially and economically. Political deadlock has hindered reforms in health and social care, while the ongoing divisions drain public finances through duplicated services, higher policing costs and lost investment. Those pressures have been compounded by Brexit. Northern Ireland did not vote to leave the EU, yet the previous Conservative Government's approach has created persistent problems along the border, in Stormont and across the economy—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt you, but I have to call the Opposition spokesperson now.

5.38 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. Hon. Members will be delighted to hear that I do not intend to speak for very long, but I congratulate the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) on securing this debate, which has largely been conducted in a very civil manner and has aired some very interesting positions.

The position of the Conservative party is that we are very much open to supporting political parties in Northern Ireland in reforming their institutions, but we stand by the principles of the 1998 agreement, in that we think that ideally any change must come from Northern Ireland itself.

Sorcha Eastwood: Does the hon. Member agree that the concept of Northern Ireland working is absolutely key and fundamental; that a system of government that collapses plays straight into the hands of those who are not particularly interested in a prosperous, progressive and inclusive Northern Ireland; and therefore that anybody who cares about Northern Ireland should be very interested in engaging in these conversations?

Alex Burghart: It is dangerous that the hon. Lady encourages me to hurry through my speech to get to the point that she has raised but, given that my speech is highly flexible, I will try.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Five minutes flexible.

Alex Burghart: Five minutes flexible. We very much hope that, as the institutions in Northern Ireland mature—they are coming up to 28 years old—we will have greater opportunity for a system in which collapse, which is never desirable, is not possible. In any functioning Parliament around the world, it should not be in the hands of one party to bring that process to a close.

I intend to take the remarks of the hon. Member for Lagan Valley about the home counties in the spirit in which they were uttered, but Northern Ireland, although it is as much a part of the United Kingdom as the home counties, is not the home counties. The home counties do not have the same recent political history as Northern Ireland, and the 1998 agreement was set up to reflect that. However, one of the things that binds everyone in this room together is that we genuinely all want the best for the people of Northern Ireland. We may have different ideas about how that can be done, but I think that that, as a motivating force, will ultimately enable a position in which stronger institutions are capable of delivering for people, whatever community they come from.

Several Members have raised the point that people in Northern Ireland are frustrated with their public services lagging behind those in other parts of the United Kingdom; we have health waiting lists now far longer than in any other part of the United Kingdom, and court delays. I should put on record my deep concern about the current barristers' strike; I worry very much about what backlogs will emerge from that.

Ultimately, we must nurture a world in which there is the tough political negotiation and the ability for compromise that the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) described. We can imagine him as Finance Minister, being able to have those tough conversations and get to a conclusion; that is ultimately what we all want. If there are things programmed into the current institutions that are preventing those sorts of conversations from happening now—conversations that happened years ago—we should certainly look at them.

I have not heard it before, so I was intrigued by the suggestion from the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) that the Northern Ireland Office should, essentially, run things and then be interrogated by the Assembly Members in Stormont. I think the existing—and any aspirant—Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would be utterly terrified of that prospect, but I have no doubt that it would provide a high level of scrutiny, because it would be possible for all political parties to unite against the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Probably the most pertinent subject—raised by several Members—at the kernel of this problem is majoritarianism. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley was quite right to say that those who are non-affiliated should be considered in that argument. In recent months we have seen, in the way Belfast city is being run, the threat of majoritarianism. Sometimes, when one community has complete control over a council, it starts to do things that will deliberately

antagonise another community. That style of politics is to be resisted and avoided. I hope that the combined good sense of the people in this room will ultimately lead us to a position where we have more effective political institutions in Northern Ireland, which enable the people there to get the services that they so richly deserve. I am sure it is possible. I look forward to working with everyone here over the coming years to see what possibilities exist.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the Minister. If he could leave a minute or so for the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) to wind up, that would be very helpful.

5.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) on securing the debate. She referred to the fact that she secured a similar debate only a year ago, and it is a tribute to her consistent campaigning and relentless focus on this issue that we are back here again. I knew then, as I know now, that her ambition is for Northern Ireland to be as strong as it can be for the people of Northern Ireland. As the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) has just said, I have no doubt that she shares that ambition with everyone in the Chamber.

It is important to note, as the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) said, that in the nearly 30 years since the signing of the Good Friday agreement, it has not stood still. Thanks to the St Andrews and Hillsborough castle arrangements, the Executive have responsibility for policing and justice in Northern Ireland. The “Fresh Start” agreement provided for an official Opposition for the first time. The New Decade, New Approach agreement provided for important changes to the petition of concern.

I know that the hon. Member for Lagan Valley, and everybody advocating for evolution in Northern Ireland's institutions, recognises the importance of reaching across the aisle, just as the architects of the original agreement did. They knew the importance of building a coalition of support. That support must come from not just the parties themselves, but the public as a whole. It was the Northern Ireland public who voted so decisively for the historic agreement 30 years ago. Let us be clear: any changes must work in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, not just the parties. In my mind, I ask whether it can command the widest possible support and if it improves the lives of the people in Northern Ireland. Fundamentally, as others have said, that is what we are here for: better outcomes for the people we serve.

It is important to place the debate in its full and proper context. Although the Assembly and Executive are not perfect—I dare say some would say that about our Parliament, too—as others, including the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), noted, the Good Friday agreement remains a landmark achievement for Northern Ireland. Indeed, I said in a recent debate that it is one of the finest achievements of the previous Labour Government. We would not be stood here nearly 30 years later if it were not for that Labour Government and the Conservative Government who came before them, particularly through the work of the then Prime Minister

[Matthew Patrick]

John Major. He helped to change the approach to bring about peace, as did those in Northern Ireland—politicians and not—who came together to give peace its chance. Without everyone—and I mean everyone—we would not be here looking at nearly 30 years of peace and prosperity.

Of course, no system is perfect, and that is certainly true of the strand 1 institutions, which for almost 40% of the time have not been functioning. I know that government is hard and power sharing even more so, so I pay tribute to those Ministers who are working day in, day out to address the serious challenges of bringing down waiting lists, tackling the cost of living crisis, driving higher standards in our schools and unlocking the potential of economic growth. I am encouraged when I see the Executive coming together to deliver on the issues that matter to the people of Northern Ireland. Yes, it is imperfect, but there is no such thing as a perfect system. All of us know that. That is why we approach these debates with humility and determination. Any proposed changes must deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked for encouragement, and I will always encourage debate among those who want Northern Ireland to succeed. I am pleased that we are having today's debate because it is healthy for a society to consider changes and improvements that might be made—indeed, we are reforming the House of Lords—and I also know how strong and genuinely felt calls for the reform of the institutions are, particularly from Alliance and the SDLP, as we have heard today. Many among the Northern Irish public will share that view. The 2024 Northern Ireland life and times survey clearly shows support for the Good Friday agreement as a whole and for its further evolution. I agree with the 68% of people in Northern Ireland who think that the Good Friday agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland. That is a remarkable vote of confidence in an agreement that is nearly 30 years old and continues to deliver for Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge the recent Assembly motion that called on the Secretary of State to convene a reform process between the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government. The UK Government's position is clear. The Prime Minister said last week, regarding the Northern Ireland parties, that

"we are always happy to discuss any proposals for reform that would lead to a consensus."—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 259.]

However—this is evident from some aspects of today's debate—I do not see a shared view on institutional reform among the political parties or, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland.

Claire Hanna: Does the Minister acknowledge that at the time of the Good Friday agreement, the parties did not arrive together at consensus, and nor did they with the likes of the St Andrews agreement, when things were distorted? Does he agree that it is unusual for all the parties to arrive at a fully formed agreement, and that a degree of facilitation is required?

Matthew Patrick: I agree that those parties did not come with a consensus already, and about the importance of their working together and finding consensus between

them. In the vein of what I have just said, I welcome the work of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which is considering reform of the institutions.

Robin Swann: I heard the Prime Minister refer to the work of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in the Chamber last week. Does the Minister realise that that has met only 12 times since 2024? It is not a Committee that is doing a lot of work or delivering a lot.

Matthew Patrick: The work of the Committee could be quite important. It could provide an opportunity for agreement on these important issues in the future, and I welcome its work. I have met the Executive Ministers in Northern Ireland and there is consensus on the need to improve public services that people rely on. I know it is a priority for them, and indeed it is for this Government.

Jim Allister: The Minister has talked several times about consensus. Can he therefore explain why, when given the opportunity to live by the fundamental principles of the Belfast agreement and cross-community consent, his party eschewed and dismantled that when it came to this question: should people in Northern Ireland, for the next four years, be subject to laws in 300 areas that they do not make and cannot change, and which are imposed on them by the EU treating Northern Ireland as a colony? Why did consensus not matter then?

Matthew Patrick: The hon. and learned Gentleman raises a point about cross-community consent in the Windsor framework. The democratic consent vote is premised on cross-community support, and if the vote does not obtain cross-community support, that will require an independent review, and it will mean that the next vote is in four years rather than eight years. As the hon. and learned Gentleman knows, this happened in December 2024. Ultimately, I would say that it is right that such a change to trading arrangements that addresses the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland should rely on a majority in the Assembly.

I turn to public service transformation. I am immensely proud that, through the last spending review, the Government secured a £19.3 billion settlement for Northern Ireland, which is the largest settlement in the history of devolution. The funding was secured so that the Northern Ireland Executive can deliver the public services that the people of Northern Ireland deserve. If that was not enough, a further £370 million was secured through Barnett consequentials just before the new year. I believe that that funding provides the basis—the very foundation—through which the Executive can transform public services in the months ahead.

Robin Swann: The Minister knows that I have challenged the Secretary of State about the transformation fund that was set up when the Executive came back two years ago. Does he agree that it is lamentable that that money is still not completely spent and not completely allocated? A committee has been formed to assess the best projects, rather than actually getting on with supporting the Ministers who want to make transformation a real thing.

Matthew Patrick: I will briefly come to the hon. Member's point in a moment, but I wanted to touch on some of the improvements that we are seeing. I pay tribute to the

Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt, and his commitment to transformation, under which we are seeing waiting lists to start to fall. My hope is that we can go further.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the transformation fund. We have reaffirmed our commitment to the £235 million fund, £129 million of which has been allocated to six projects that I believe can transform public services. The £61 million for the primary care multi-disciplinary teams will enable a crucial shift from hospital treatment to preventive care. There are other things that I wanted to mention, but in the interests of time I will skip forward.

I once again thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley for securing this debate. I recognise and entirely respect the strength of feeling on this issue and the views that people in the Chamber hold. It is a conversation that rightly continues. Any reforms must command the widest possible support, and the people of Northern Ireland must be at the heart of any proposed changes.

The Good Friday agreement showed us that when people put their differences aside, and put the public interest first, we can achieve great things. I am committed to helping the Executive to realise their ambitions for a stronger Northern Ireland. As we look forward to the future and the hope of improved public services, I take a short moment to step back and reflect on how far we have come. When the agreement was reached 30 years ago, people could never have dreamed of having a debate on such a topic. Such a sea change is remarkable—I pay tribute to all who played a part in it—and 30 years on, I, too, believe that a further shore is reachable from here.

5.55 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 13 January 2026

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Natural Environment in England: Office for Environmental Protection Report 2024-25

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): The Office for Environmental Protection has today published its latest report on the Government's progress in improving the natural environment and a briefing note on the revised environmental improvement plan. The OEP plays an important role in monitoring and reporting progress towards goals in the environmental improvement plan and the 30x30 targets. The Government welcome the OEP's latest report and will consider the assessment carefully and respond to the recommendations in the summer.

Following a review launched in July 2024, the Government published a revised environmental improvement plan on 1 December 2025. We welcome the OEP's advice in informing the review. Our revised EIP sets out this Government's steadfast commitment to the ambitious, statutory Environment Act 2021 targets. It is our road map to improve the natural environment and people's enjoyment of it. It ensures that nature's recovery is a key priority, fundamental to the Government's approach to growth.

Our EIP goes further than the previous plan. We have a clear plan and process, with ambitious but achievable goals and targets. We know the scale of the challenge. We are also matching our ambition with action.

We are reforming the sustainable farming incentive to make it simpler and fairer, and to enable as many farmers as possible to benefit and to help nature thrive. This will help us meet our ambitious EIP targets—including to double the number of farms delivering for wildlife.

Last year marked the highest rate of tree planting in 20 years—over 10 million trees—and we have started planning two of three new national forests.

The Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 is already transforming the water sector for good, with swifter penalties enabled for environmental offences and new pollution reporting requirements. Alongside this, over the next five years, £104 million in private investment will upgrade our water infrastructure and cut pollution.

We are acting decisively to improve air quality—tackling pollution at its source to restore nature while supporting communities to breathe cleaner air.

By advancing our circular economy, we are further reducing environmental harm, turning waste into opportunity and creating green jobs across the country. Industry estimates that our waste reforms will underpin £10 billion of investment in new recycling facilities. Simpler recycling has now come into effect for all workplaces with 10 or more full-time equivalent employees in England, requiring workplaces to separately recycle dry mixed recycling, paper and card, and food waste. We formed a circular economy taskforce, comprising members from industry, academia and civil society across

the UK which has undertaken extensive engagement to ensure that the circular transition reflects the needs and insights of all involved.

By recognising the pride, enjoyment and wellbeing that people across the country take in nature, we are boosting opportunities to access the outdoors—including launching the first of nine new national river walks on Boxing day, with the Mersey valley way.

The EIP brings such actions together and explains how they support each of our missions. It is a whole-of-Government plan.

It is only by the Government working hand-in-hand with individuals, communities, businesses, farmers, public and third sector organisations that we will deliver the EIP and the Environment Act targets. Collective action is essential.

The Government remain committed to improving the natural environment and will continue to work with the OEP to ensure delivery against our environmental objectives.

[HCWS1236]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK-Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council 2025

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The 13th UK-overseas territories joint ministerial council was held from 24 to 27 November 2025 in London. The council was attended by elected leaders and representatives from Anguilla, Ascension, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, the Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, the sovereign base areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The overseas territories make invaluable contributions to our British family. The UK has a responsibility to defend the OTs, to ensure security and good governance of the overseas territories and their peoples.

The JMC is the highest forum for political dialogue and consultation among the elected leaders and representatives of the overseas territories and UK Ministers. We met under the strapline of "Protect, Grow, Sustain—Together". This reflects the UK's desire to build closer relationships, based on mutual respect and inclusion, and to transform the UK's relationship with the overseas territories for us to deliver greater security, prosperity and sustainability.

In my capacity as Minister for the overseas territories, I chaired the council. During the council, the Foreign Secretary met elected leaders to discuss UK and overseas territories' priorities. Other UK ministerial colleagues who participated in the discussions included: the right hon. Lord Hanson of Flint, Minister of State at the Home Office; the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh); the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Katie White); my hon. and learned Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury; Lord Coaker, Minister of State at the Ministry of Defence; and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards). The UK Special

Representative for Nature Ruth Davis OBE, the UK Commonwealth envoy, and representatives from UK Export Finance, the National Cyber Security Centre, the Alan Turing Institute, Health Innovation Kent, Surrey, and Sussex, the Glasgow 2026 Organising Company, AtkinsRéalis and British Expertise International also participated in discussions.

We were deeply honoured by His Majesty the King hosting a reception at Buckingham Palace for those attending the joint ministerial council. The Commons Speaker hosted a dinner for elected leaders and representatives in Parliament.

The UK Government and the elected leaders and representatives of the overseas territories reaffirmed our support for the five principles I set out last year to guide the UK's relationship with the elected Governments of the overseas territories: devolution and democratic autonomy for the overseas territories; listening to the overseas territories, following the principle of "nothing about you without you"; partnership with the overseas territories based on mutual respect and inclusion—rights come with responsibilities; good governance and ensuring proper democratic accountability and regulation; and defending the overseas territories' security, autonomy and rights, including the right of self-determination.

The council agreed priorities and set out commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead. The elected leaders and representatives of the overseas territories and I agreed to develop partnership compacts between the UK and any territory that wishes to join. Partnership compacts are intended to provide tailored, practical frameworks for advancing shared priorities, and to signal a renewed commitment to partnership. At the council we agreed the basis upon which to develop the partnership compacts in a collaborative manner. We agreed that the 2012 overseas territories White Paper remained the component foundation of our partnership as complemented by recent statements and agreements. I confirmed our intention to develop a UK Government charter to strengthen commitments from our side on how the UK Government engage with the overseas territories.

The key themes of discussion at this year's council were: continuing the reset of the relationship between the UK and the overseas territories; security and irregular migration; economic growth and diversification; tackling illicit finance; AI and innovation in healthcare; cyber-security; nature, climate and the environment; official development assistance; and sport and the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth games. We also discussed a range of other issues. The discussions were open and forward-looking, demonstrating a mutual commitment to strengthening the partnership.

We discussed the crucial work of overseas territories in managing unique and globally significant environments and ecosystems, as stewards of 94% of Britain's unique biodiversity, and we reflected on the outcomes of COP30. With the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh) and Dr Gemma Harper OBE, Chief Executive of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, we launched the UK overseas territories biodiversity strategy—the UK and the overseas territories united for nature.

We reviewed the complex security and irregular migration threats facing the overseas territories. The UK is committed to collaborating proactively with all territories to fulfil

our duty to defend the people of the overseas territories and strengthen security and justice across the UK family. Together with the elected leaders and representatives of the overseas territories, we emphasised that these serious challenges, including from serious and organised crime, require sustainable solutions through comprehensive, multi-agency approaches—including co-ordination, defence, operational support, reform across security and criminal justice sectors, regional co-operation and targeted action addressing underlying social issues.

According to Office for National Statistics data, the UK's trading relationship with its overseas territories would place them collectively among the UK's top 25 trading partners. We are committed to strengthening this partnership and supporting practical steps to unlock further growth. The JMC included sessions with UK Export Finance and a business engagement and networking event with UK companies delivered in partnership with British Expertise International. We will continue to build on such initiatives to help deliver mutual prosperity for peoples in the UK and overseas territories.

The UK and overseas territories reaffirmed our joint commitment to tackling illicit finance, by upholding and continuing to strive for the highest international financial standards. I noted the importance of the overseas territories delivering on previous commitments, including at the last joint ministerial council, to expand access to their registers of beneficial ownership. We welcomed the launch of St Helena's publicly accessible register of beneficial ownership, and the commitment by the Falkland Islands to implement their register next summer. We welcome the launch of legitimate interest access registers of beneficial ownership in the Cayman Islands—and their commitment to make further improvements to user access—and the Turks and Caicos Islands. The UK underlined the urgency of delivering progress in that constructive endeavour with territories that have yet to satisfy our expectations on access and transparency on these issues. We agreed to hold further technical discussions and I will chair a discussion with elected leaders at a ministerial illicit finance dialogue in the first quarter of 2026. The UK reiterated its ultimate expectation of fully public registers of beneficial ownership in the overseas territories, and we will continue to pursue that objective in future discussions.

We welcomed the work of overseas territories in sanctions implementation and enforcement and reiterated our offer to work with overseas territories to enhance this area of work. A range of other detailed discussions were also held bilaterally on specific issues affecting the overseas territories related to constitutions, public services, infrastructure and relations with neighbours and the UK.

We agreed a joint communiqué, which was issued following the conclusion of the council and published on the gov.uk website.

[HC1237]

UK Small Island Developing States Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): I wish to update the House on the Government's decision to publish a refreshed UK-SIDS strategy for 2026-2030. This strategy sets out the major strands of UK support to SIDS climate and economic resilience, based on partnership.

Small island developing states are essential UK partners on global issues such as climate change, economic growth, combating crime and energy security. SIDS represent 20% of the UN family, steward vast ocean territories through their exclusive economic zones, and are hotspots for biodiversity globally. The UK shares deep connections with many SIDS, particularly through the Commonwealth, and we recognise their special circumstances, including their vulnerability to extreme weather events and global economic shocks.

Many SIDS have made progress towards achieving sustainable development, yet their inherent vulnerabilities remain. Global geopolitical competition, a changing landscape on development, and increasing climate and nature challenges means the risks are rising. We need a more tailored approach that reflects SIDS' special circumstances and our new approach to modern partnerships. At the fourth international financing for development conference in Seville in July 2025, the international community agreed that a new chapter is needed for development and sustainable growth. We are now looking to build on this consensus, including the "Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS" from 2024.

The UK-SIDS strategy builds on these foundations and will help us to support SIDS' economic and climate resilience. We will focus activity across three areas:

Partner—We will partner with SIDS to build resilience and support sustainable development through climate adaptation, disaster risk finance, aid effectiveness, governance and human rights.

Reform—The UK will drive reform in the international finance system to increase SIDS' access to climate finance, tackle unsustainable debt and mobilise private sector resources. We will amplify SIDS' voices to ensure that international systems better take account of SIDS' special circumstances and capacities.

Grow—We will support SIDS as they protect nature and the ocean and promote their blue economies. We will work with SIDS to enable resilient, inclusive economic growth and diversification.

In delivering the strategy, we will support the UK's wider international objectives, support multilateralism and also benefit from the ideas and energies that SIDS themselves bring to international debates on development, sustainable growth, biodiversity, climate change and a reformed international system. Ultimately, our strategy is about empowering people and countries to direct their own future and reduce their reliance on aid. A responsive, modern partnership with SIDS includes lending our voice to advocate for issues important to SIDS internationally. At the same time, we will ensure that our partnership with SIDS and other actors will further UK values and interests, stand up for freedom around the world and support SIDS to plan for their own sustained progress and resilience.

[HCWS1238]

Petition

Tuesday 13 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Illegal Waste Dumping

The petition of residents of the constituency of Bicester and Woodstock,

Declares that the discovery of one of the largest illegal waste dumps in the UK on land near Kidlington, located metres from the River Cherwell and on a known floodplain, has caused deep concern; further declares that rising river levels pose an imminent risk of contaminated waste entering the river and surrounding soil, and that there is also a risk of fire at a site adjacent to the A34; further declares that the cost should not be met through council tax.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to press the Government to direct the Environment Agency to clear the illegal waste at this site urgently and prevent waste from entering the River Cherwell.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Calum Miller, *Official Report*, 9 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 282.]

[P003146]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):

The Environment Agency has been working closely with partner organisations through the locally convened strategic co-ordinating group to monitor the potential community and environmental impacts on the site and have put in place mitigations to protect the river from waste in the event of heavy rain and flooding. While it is not the Environment Agency's responsibility to clear illegal waste sites, and it is not funded to do so, it has the power to clear waste in exceptional circumstances, if there is a significant risk to the environment.

On 11 December 2025, the Environment Agency made the exceptional decision to progress works to entirely clear the site of waste. This followed new information and advice from the fire and rescue services that indicated the increased possibility of a fire on site. The scale of this fire risk presents an overriding public imperative.

The Environment Agency is working rapidly to implement a safe, systematic and focused clearance plan. Details on the timeframe for clearance have been shared. The Environment Agency has to ensure that this vast amount of waste is handled correctly and moved to the right facilities without causing further damage to the environment.

The Environment Agency is monitoring risks at the site and will respond to any change in situation promptly. The current risk of the waste entering the river is very low. A barrier has been installed at the site to prevent waste entering the river; this is to safeguard both the environment and public safety in the event of rising river levels or flooding.

The Environment Agency has been carrying out water quality sampling of the River Cherwell to check for potential impacts of run-off or leaching from the waste. Having sampled both upstream and downstream of the site, they have found no indication of pollution entering the River Cherwell because of the waste.

The illegal dumping at this site has been a blight on the community, with potential impacts on the local environment, emergency services and the economy. The Environment Agency has been leading a major criminal investigation through its national environmental crime unit to find those responsible. One person was arrested last month in connection with the incident. Those responsible for committing waste crime, rather than taxpayers, should cover the cost of the clean-up. The Environment Agency will continue to pursue the criminals to ensure they face justice and to recover the clean-up costs.

The Environment Agency's engagement platform, available at <https://engageenvironmentagency.uk/engagementhq.com/thames-regulated-industry-sites> will be kept up to date with the latest information.

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PETITION

Tuesday 13 January 2026

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Tuesday 20 January 2026**

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