Wednesday
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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 14 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.

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House of Commons

Wednesday 14 January 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cost of Living

1. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential impact of her policies on the cost of living in Scotland. [907172]

7. **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential impact of her policies on the cost of living in Scotland. [907178]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): The measures announced by the Chancellor at the Budget will help families right across Scotland. Scrapping the two-child limit will benefit 95,000 Scottish children. We are putting more money into the pockets of 220,000 people in Scotland through increases to the national minimum and living wage, and the triple lock pension increase will benefit around 1 million Scottish pensioners. We are also cutting energy bills by up to £300 for those most in need.

Graham Leadbitter: While the Labour Westminster Government have been killing jobs, hiking energy bills and exacerbating the cost of living crisis, yesterday the SNP Scottish Government's budget cut child poverty, boosted funding for the NHS and slashed income tax for hard-working families. A clear majority of workers in Scotland will pay less tax than those in the rest of the UK. Does the Secretary of State support the action in the SNP's budget, or would he prefer that the lowest earners in Scotland paid more tax, as they do under Labour?

Mr Alexander: What is the reality? The governing philosophy of the Scottish National party is 19th-century nationalism. What is the reality of what we saw yesterday? The 19th budget from John Swinney. The idea that after 18 goes, the SNP will get it right at the 19th is frankly risible. We have the same record of failure with the SNP. If people want a new direction, they will have the chance to vote for it in May.

Liz Saville Roberts: England-only projects such as Northern Powerhouse Rail give the Scottish Government the Barnett consequentials that they rightly choose to use on cost of living support such as the Scottish child payment, but Wales is denied any such extra funding. The Secretary of State's Government have committed to learning lessons from HS2. Why can Wales not have the same means? I assure him that would allow a Plaid Cymru Welsh Government to spend in order to alleviate child poverty.

Mr Alexander: I think 19th-century nationalism is a bad prescription for Scotland, and it is also a bad prescription for Wales. We are proud of the fact that we are increasing public investment not just in rail, as we have heard today from the Transport Secretary, but more broadly across public services in every part of these islands.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is aware that the Scottish Affairs Committee recently conducted an inquiry into the Thistle safer drug consumption room in Glasgow. I hope that this innovative facility will help to cut drug death numbers in Scotland, but does he agree that the Thistle on its own cannot end the drug crisis? Does he therefore agree that a real-terms cut of £1.3 million to alcohol and drug services was entirely the wrong move in yesterday's Scottish budget?

Mr Alexander: This is literally and figuratively a deadly serious issue. As we have just heard from those on the SNP Benches, the SNP will be claiming in the coming months that this is as good as it gets for Scotland, but the reality is that its shameful record in Scotland is more than 6,800 drug deaths since it declared a public health emergency. That, let us be clear, is the worst drug-related death rate in Europe. It is a shameful failure by the Scottish Government. Despite all their claims about the budget yesterday, once again it was a missed opportunity to take a better approach. We have provided the resources, but alas we have a Scottish Government who are out of time, out of ideas and failing in terms of public health.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): After 19 years of an SNP Government, does the Secretary of State agree that yesterday's budget reflects broken public services and decades of economic stagnation? For many families, that means there is just too much month at the end of the money.

Mr Alexander: What is the reality after yesterday's budget from the Scottish Government? The reality after 19 SNP budgets is that hundreds of thousands of us are stuck on NHS waiting lists in Scotland; over 10,000 children are waking up in temporary accommodation, with no permanent home; and councils are unable to afford even the basics. Members should look at the comments yesterday about what the Scottish Government did to local government. They do not learn, they do not understand and they are out of time.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): One way to lessen the bite of the cost of living for hard-working Scots would be to cut their taxes, letting people keep more of their hard-earned money. Unfortunately, for the nationalists that appears to be anathema. Instead, they are increasing foreign aid spending,

which is reserved, to £16 million. They are introducing yet more tax bands and more new taxes, but nothing to incentivise people to find good, well-paying jobs. Conservatives know that you cannot tax a nation into prosperity. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Mr Alexander: Why did the Conservatives deliver a decade of low growth, high inequality and high taxes when they were last in power? Let us take a moment to have a look at their record. There was an 11% rate of inflation under the Conservative Government of which the hon. Member was part, interest rates hit the highest level in 40 years, and mortgages went up by £221 a month for families who were forced to remortgage after the mini-Budget. There are many people who have interesting observations on how to run an economy, but Conservative Front Benchers are not among them.

Economic Growth

2. **Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [907173]

3. **Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [907174]

6. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [907177]

9. **Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [907180]

10. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [907181]

14. **Chris Kane** (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [907185]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): Just last week, we launched the UK Government's £140 million local growth fund, which will help to deliver economic growth to five Scottish regions. Scotland will also benefit from around £700 million of other local and regional project funding over the next three years. In addition, as we pointed out in relation to the Budget, the UK Government have provided the Scottish Government with the largest block grant in the history of devolution.

Alan Gemmell: I thank the Secretary of State for the announcement of £11 million of local growth funding for Ayrshire. Ayrshire boasts internationally successful businesses in the engineering, advanced manufacturing, aerospace, defence and energy sectors, and I have been working with my excellent Ayrshire colleagues and the Ayrshire chambers of commerce to ask businesses what more we can do to grow the economy. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must support Ayrshire's most successful sectors and ensure this region plays its part in growing Scotland's economy?

Mr Alexander: Absolutely. I welcome the work of the ambitious Ayrshire consultation, and pay generous tribute to the work that my hon. Friend is doing. When I was Trade Minister, I visited companies including Ecocel and GE Aerospace in Ayrshire, and saw for myself the extraordinary potential for growth-driving sectors such as advanced manufacturing. As part of the more than £200 million the UK Government are investing in Ayrshire, the local growth fund will provide flexible, targeted support to help unlock exactly that potential.

Kenneth Stevenson: After years of increases to the cost of living, my Airdrie and Shotts constituents are understandably impatient for change, and want to see the benefits of economic growth in their communities and in their pockets. Can the Secretary of State provide further detail on how this Government are supporting the growth of local economies in North Lanarkshire, and what role does he see AI, advanced manufacturing and life sciences playing in that growth by helping to develop supply chain resilience locally?

Mr Alexander: Of course, North Lanarkshire has been at the heart of Scottish manufacturing for many decades. Since 2019, it has actually grown faster than the national average in Scotland, due to its highly skilled workforce and ambitious local development plans. I am delighted that large US companies such as CoreWeave have recognised that potential, with CoreWeave having invested £1.5 billion in North Lanarkshire's growing AI infrastructure. I can assure my hon. Friend that North Lanarkshire has a strong advocate and supporter in the UK Government—we are determined to fulfil that potential.

Liz Twist: Buses are hugely important to our communities and our transport network, so it is vital that Falkirk-based Alexander Dennis Ltd and its supply chain, including Dellner Glass in Consett in my constituency, are supported. It has taken the SNP First Minister over a year to recognise that. Can the Secretary of State set out how he is working with other Departments to ensure that jobs and the company not only survive, but thrive?

Mr Alexander: Of course, I warmly welcome the decision to keep Alexander Dennis's Falkirk and Larbert sites operational. That will be a huge relief to the talented workforce, not just in those parts of Scotland, but at Dellner Glass and other parts of the supply chain. I recently met the president and managing director of Alexander Dennis, Paul Davies, to discuss its strategic plans and the growth of UK bus manufacturing, and I am also supporting the positive progress made by the Department for Transport's UK bus manufacturing panel—the first of its kind—which brings industry leaders such as Alexander Dennis together with metro mayors to support manufacturing, boost regional economies and create jobs.

Mike Reader: As chair of the international trade and investment all-party parliamentary group, I am pleased that we are running the power of place campaign to encourage colleagues to highlight incredible small businesses that are exporting out of their constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that this initiative and others such as Brand Scotland are invaluable for showcasing the power of Scottish products in markets across the world, and will he meet me to explore the ways in which we can improve exports out of Scotland?

Mr Alexander: In my previous role as a Trade Minister, I was proud to promote world-class Scottish products from satellites to whisky. Since 2024, the Government have been working to extend those international trading benefits. For example, the UK-India trade agreement will boost the Scottish economy by an estimated £190 million a year. Both Brand Scotland and the power of place can help small businesses in Scotland and elsewhere to increase their global exports. I pay generous tribute to my hon. Friend and thank the international trade and investment all-party parliamentary group for its important work. I would be pleased to hear more from him about the work we can do together.

Euan Stainbank: In November, I called for urgent intervention to support the Forth valley's industrial economy. Since then, we have a £150 million deal to protect 500 jobs at Grangemouth's ethylene plant, £14.5 million in the Budget to unlock hundreds of new jobs quicker at Grangemouth, such as those announced at MiAlgae, and £9.8 million of local growth funding announced at Forth Valley college last week, despite some nationalists moaning that the money should have been sent to St Andrew's House rather than to Falkirk, Clackmannanshire and Stirling. What further steps will the Secretary of State be taking to support the vast economic potential of the Forth valley?

Mr Alexander: Just last week, I was with my hon. Friend in Falkirk announcing £9.8 million-worth of funding for the Forth valley region as part of the new local growth fund. Meanwhile, the UK Government are working hard to secure further investment for the Grangemouth site. Tomorrow, the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill), will be in Scotland signing a memorandum of understanding for the Forth green freeport, unlocking £25 million in capital funding to support economic growth in the region. That, frankly, is the difference that having a Labour Government with Scots at the heart can make to economies such as Falkirk's.

Chris Kane: Does the Secretary of State agree that yesterday's SNP budget, which metes out another round of civic vandalism to local authority budgets, demonstrates a failure to understand that economic growth is built from the ground up and requires well-funded local authorities delivering schools, infrastructure and clean, safe communities? Does he also agree that Scotland needs a Labour Government at Holyrood, with the same ambition for growth being shown by this UK Labour Government, if it is to unlock its full economic potential?

Mr Alexander: I sense that my hon. Friend has forgotten more about local government financing than John Swinney will ever know. The reality is that the First Minister has been writing budgets for 19 years in the Scottish Government, while at the same time Scottish local government has been pushed to the brink of failure. The independent analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that Scottish local government finance is set to see reductions averaging 2.1% a year in real terms. That would require each Scottish council to increase council tax by around 8% just to hold budgets constant. My question for the First Minister is the same the day after the budget as it was the day before: "John, where's the money gone?"

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that the Borderlands inclusive growth deal is an important factor in driving growth in the south of Scotland, and I am looking forward to speaking to the Minister next week about the deal. With such deals, the important thing is getting the money out the door. Over the years, a number of projects originally identified will not now go ahead. Does the Secretary of State agree that new projects should be brought on board, including replacing the bridges at Annan, which have been damaged in storms over recent years?

Mr Alexander: I know from the right hon. Gentleman's expertise and understanding of his constituency the challenge in relation to Annan and the fact that the bridges were swept away in the floods. I can assure him that my officials are working closely with the Borderlands inclusive growth deal partners to oversee our £65 million investment in projects in that area. We are endeavouring to strike a balance with ensuring that there is effective local leadership, but he makes a powerful case that in recent years we have not seen delivery at the pace that he and we would have wanted. I hope that next week's meeting is a constructive and useful opportunity to discuss these matters.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The SNP delivered yet another ambitious budget for Scotland yesterday. It saw almost £1 billion for rates relief, £5 billion for energy and climate change and a 10% uplift for Scotland's colleges. *[Interruption.]* The SNP has delivered 10.5% growth since 2007, compared with the UK's 5.1%. The question is not about what the UK Government will do for Scotland's economy, but what they will do to stop damaging it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Alexander: Through the shouting, I heard the claim that yesterday's announcement in the Scottish budget had helped Scottish colleges. I had the opportunity to visit Forth Valley college last week; I simply invite the hon. Gentleman to talk to the principal of that college, or indeed the principal of West college, or the principals of any of the further education colleges in Scotland. If he were to suggest for one second that the uplift announced yesterday touches the sides of the 20% cut that we saw previously, that would be an interesting perspective. I tell him to look at the numbers and not to judge this on the rhetoric; he should judge the cuts that his Government have delivered, and then come back and, perhaps, apologise to the young people of Scotland.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Business rates are crippling, particularly for the hospitality sector in my constituency, including hotels. We in Scotland have not seen the initiatives that have delivered business rates relief in other parts of the United Kingdom. The UK Government may be U-turning on this issue, but would they consider a cut in VAT for hospitality, so that businesses throughout the UK can benefit?

Mr Alexander: My initial glance at the Scottish budget that was announced yesterday suggests that in 2026 there will still be significant uplifts in terms of business rates across Scotland. That is a direct challenge to the claims that we have heard from the Scottish Government in relation to economic growth. I hope that as well as continuing to advocate and make the case to the UK

Government, the hon. Lady and her colleagues will take the opportunity to say that Scotland's high streets are being let down by the Scottish Government as surely as its public services are being let down.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Putting money back into people's pockets is vital for economic growth, but today the Government have signed the country up to the highest energy bills for offshore energy for the next 10 years, and to bills that we will be paying for 20 years. Can the Secretary of State explain how this will put more money into people's pockets for them to spend in high streets, rather than just spending it on higher bills?

Mr Alexander: Let us start with the facts. Our auction today delivers new renewable power, and building and operating that will be cheaper than building new gas. Let me give the hon. Lady the figures. Here are the key facts: the cost of building and operating new gas—£147 per megawatt-hour; the strike price that we agreed today—an average of £91. That means that the price of wind that we have secured is 40% lower than the cost of building and operating new gas power plants. What the hon. Lady has said is simply not true.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Tonight, millions of people will tune into "The Traitors", which was filmed at Ardross castle in my constituency. I really should have put on my Claudia Winkleman eyeliner for this one. The programme has brought millions of pounds and jobs to the highlands. What plans has the Secretary of State to encourage the screen industry to look at locations in Scotland like Ardross castle?

Mr Alexander: I defer to my Cabinet colleague the Health Secretary, given his expertise and knowledge when it comes to "The Traitors". He made a powerful case on television that he had watched the series, and I then had to catch up subsequently. Let me simply say that Ardross castle—not just the castle itself, but the scenes surrounding it—is a fantastic advertisement for Scotland. Only yesterday I was talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) about the huge potential for the film industry in Scotland, and we stand ready, along with our colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to do whatever we can to support screen in Scotland.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about supporting economic growth in Scotland. Perhaps he should check in with the local authorities across the highlands and islands, which, combined, have received absolutely nothing from the UK Government's local growth fund. Life is tough enough for our rural communities, and the decision to exclude them from the fund will only make things more difficult. Will the Secretary of State listen to the advice of the leader of Argyll and Bute Council, Councillor Jim Lynch, who desperately wants him to rethink this allocation?

Mr Alexander: I understand that the SNP's grievance machine does not run on facts, but let me introduce a few facts into the conversation. The highlands and islands are benefiting from more than £300 million in investment, including £80 million to support neighbourhoods through Pride in Place, and, of course, the £25 million for the Inverness and Cromarty Firth green freeport. I can attest to that, because I visited Inverness and announced it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The Labour Government are doing absolutely nothing to grow the Scottish economy, given the national insurance increase, the family farm tax, the unemployment rights Bill and the gutting of the oil and gas industry. Growth has been halved, unemployment is up and inflation is up. It is total incompetence. However, the Government are not only incompetent but weak—so weak that Scottish Labour announced that it would not oppose the SNP's budget before its members even knew what was in it. We know that they are not very good at government, but you would have thought that after all these years they might have worked out how to do opposition, wouldn't you?

Mr Alexander: Let us see whether this Opposition Front Bencher agrees with the Leader of the Opposition, because, of course, he does not need to take my word for the complete chaos left by the last Government. The present leader of the Conservative party is the one who admitted they had "no plan for growth", so we are not going to take any lectures from a party that delivered not just the Liz Truss Budget, but an economy high in inequality and low in growth.

Andrew Bowie: What we saw yesterday from the SNP was nothing more than the same old tired, stale Government with tired, stale gimmicks, handouts and an addiction to punishing hard-working Scots with the highest taxes for poorer services. There was nothing for growth, nothing for entrepreneurs and nothing for businesses, but what would we expect from the separatist pressure group cosplaying as a Government that is the SNP? Does the Secretary of State agree that, after 19 years, we need change in Scotland, and that the only party with a plan to cut tax, cut the benefit bill, support business and grow the economy is the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party?

Mr Alexander: Unsurprisingly, no. I half agree with the shadow Secretary of State in that, frankly, Scotland deserves better than a Government who, after 19 years, are claiming to be the change that Scotland needs. The reality is that, when I am on the doorsteps in Lothian East, I ask people inclined to vote SNP a single question, "Can you name a single area of Scottish public life that has got better over the last 19 years?" We have had two decades of talking about independence, and what do we have to show for it? That Budget is not the change that Scotland needs; the change we need is Anas Sarwar and Scottish Labour.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate the Government on the successful seventh round of the allocation of green energy in contracts for difference, nearly 20% of which are going to Scotland. It is good to see that, even amid their U-turns, a Liberal Democrat system from over a decade ago is still delivering. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the benefits are passed

on to the Scottish people through skilled jobs, working to upgrade the grid and, crucially, protecting and defending our offshore infrastructure?

Mr Alexander: I was last in touch with the Energy Security and Net Zero Secretary about an hour ago. I talked to him after the Cabinet, and I discussed these issues with him in the Cabinet. It is a very serious question, and it deserves a serious answer. The choice is not whether to build, but what to build, and our answer is clean home-grown power that the United Kingdom controls. Our answer is that we should build new renewables, because they are cheaper to build and to operate than gas.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I wish the Secretary of State the best for 2026. I am glad he caught "The Traitors", because I am so sorry to have heard the language used about Scottish Labour MPs by Labour MPs in the press recently. If what he is saying is the best way to improve our lives and our economy, why is Scotland the only part of the UK where child poverty is going down?

Mr Alexander: In part, child poverty will be falling because of the 95,000 kids we will help by abolishing the two-child benefit cap. It is not a coincidence that, in a single afternoon, our Chancellor of the Exchequer took the mantle from Gordon Brown as the politician who lifted the most kids out of poverty across the UK in a single Parliament. Gordon Brown had taken that mantle previously from Denis Healey. It is not a coincidence that Labour Chancellors lift kids out of poverty. That is what we do, and we are proud of it.

Stephen Gethins: I would take the Secretary of State a little bit more seriously if so many Labour MPs had not lost the Whip for backing our vote on tackling the two-child cap. The Scottish child payment, which has been described as "game changing", has been extended to provide additional funding for babies, meaning that those from deprived communities in Scotland get the best start in life anywhere in the UK in Scotland, so why on earth is Labour abstaining on the Budget? *[Interruption.]* Just as the Prime Minister turns up, maybe Labour can explain why it abstains and why it does not stand for anything.

Mr Alexander: We are not spending our time indulging in the games of opposition; we are getting on with the serious job of government. That includes delivering a record package of employment rights to help raise pay, because the critical point the hon. Member failed to mention is that three quarters of the kids in poverty in our country today are in working households. That is why the Employment Rights Bill matters, and that is why the 220,000 people being lifted out of poverty as a consequence of increases in the minimum wage matter. We have a comprehensive approach, which is why we have a comprehensive strategy.

Tertiary Education

4. **Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on funding for tertiary education. [907175]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's very passionate advocacy for higher education in Scotland. He will be well aware that the Scottish Government have received an additional £11 billion since the general election, money that could have been spent on Scotland's world-class universities and colleges, but as a recent Audit Scotland report shows, those institutions have been put under immense stress, with Scottish colleges suffering a 20% cut in real-terms funding since 2021. That is utterly shameful.

Dr Arthur: Scotland's universities have been facing a funding crisis that has been many years in the making. Funding for students in Scottish universities is currently over £2,000 less than it is in England. Universities Scotland yesterday, in response to the SNP Budget, made it clear that it will have little impact on this problem, as

"it does not adequately address"

the situation. No Government in Europe cares less about the education of their young people. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister make time to visit Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh South West to meet the vice-chancellor, Richard Williams, the staff and the students to hear about the impact of this situation?

Kirsty McNeill: I agree with my hon. Friend that Scotland's young people have been appallingly let down, which is why it is time for a new direction. I would, of course, be delighted to meet him and representatives of Heriot-Watt to discuss Scotland's desperate need for a new direction.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907257] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 14 January.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): May I start by condemning, in the strongest possible terms, the sickening repression and murder of protesters in Iran? The contrast between the courage of the Iranian people and the brutality of their desperate regime has never been clearer. We have called out this brutality face-to-face. We are working with allies on further sanctions and doing all we can to protect UK nationals.

Time and again under the Conservative party, towns and cities across the north were failed. Today, this Labour Government deliver change: a major new rail network across the north and a new northern growth strategy. That is the renewal that this country voted for.

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

Lincoln Jopp: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks, particularly about Iran.

Visiting schools in my Spelthorne constituency is one of the great joys of this job, so I was, frankly, appalled to hear that the Labour Member of Parliament for Bristol North East (Damien Egan) was prevented from

visiting a school in his constituency because he is Jewish. This is antisemitism and it is happening in plain sight. With all due respect to the Prime Minister, I do not want to know how he feels about this; I want to know what he is going to do about it.

The Prime Minister: Can I start by thanking the hon. Gentleman for raising this case, because it is very serious and very concerning? All Members of Parliament should be able to visit anywhere in their constituency, schools or other places, without any fear of antisemitism. We do take this seriously. We are providing more funding for security and support that we are putting in across the country, and we will be holding to account those who prevented that visit to the school.

Q2. [907258] **Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his commitment to delivering the Hillsborough law, but it has been proven that MI5 spent six years misleading the public and concealing information following the Manchester Arena bombing. There was no risk to national security because it was a closed hearing, so will the Prime Minister deliver justice for those families and confirm that the Government will bring forward an amendment that will make robust the duties and responsibilities of candour for all parts of the state, including individuals in the security services, so we can finally say, "Never again"?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. The Hillsborough law will right wrongs of the past, changing the balance of power to ensure the state can never hide from the people it should serve. I think some of the families are with us in the Gallery here today, and I will be meeting them later on this afternoon. I have always been clear that the duty of candour applies to the intelligence services. I made a commitment that we would not water down the Bill, and the amendments we have put forward strengthen it. It is right that there are essential safeguards in place to protect national security, and we have got that balance right. We will meet the families and outline the next steps on Monday in relation to that crucial balance.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I agree with the Prime Minister's comments on Iran. Today, Erfan Soltani faces execution for protesting in Iran. I am sure the whole House will be united in condemning that; our thoughts are with him and his family and the brave protesters fighting for their freedom against an evil regime.

I know the Home Secretary will be making a statement today on the West Midlands police. The first thing she should be announcing is the sacking of the chief constable. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) for relentlessly pushing this issue.

I welcome the Prime Minister's latest U-turn—I feel like I say that every week. Mandatory digital ID was a rubbish policy, and the Opposition are glad to see the back of it. Yesterday, the Health Secretary said that the Prime Minister's new year's resolution should be to try to get it right first—*[Laughter.]* It should be to

"try to get it right first time".

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting) *indicated dissent.*

Mrs Badenoch: Yes, you did say that. My question to the Prime Minister is: does he agree?

The Prime Minister: I am determined to make it harder for people to work illegally in this country, and that is why there will be checks, which will be digital and mandatory. I will tell the Leader of the Opposition what this Government are doing: whether it is on planning, child poverty, employment rights or investing in our NHS, we are taking the right choices for Britain, but the Opposition oppose every single one. She talks about U-turns and consistency, but her party, which used to recognise the challenge of climate change, now runs from it; it promised to cut immigration, but then lost control of it; it once took great pride in our diversity, but now talks of deporting our neighbours to achieve "cultural coherence". Don't get me started on consistency: the Tories had five Prime Ministers, six Chancellors, eight Home Secretaries and 16 Housing Ministers—they had more positions in 14 years than the Kama Sutra. No wonder they are knackered; they left the country screwed.

Mrs Badenoch: A lot of waffle, Mr Speaker, but it is still a U-turn. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner)—this is so interesting—has said:

"Labour MPs must think very carefully before defending policy decisions publicly. This stuff leaves us looking really stupid."

I am sorry to tell him that Labour MPs have been looking stupid for a long time. Let us look at some of the other things the Prime Minister did not get right the first time, starting with the family farm tax. Some farmers were so terrified that they sold their farms last year, only for the Prime Minister to U-turn two days before Christmas. Will he apologise for the misery he has caused countless farmers?

The Prime Minister: The principle we put in place on inheritance tax is the right one. We listened, and we made an announcement. What we are doing is turning the country around. *[Interruption.]* Yes, we have changed the country; we have changed the failed approach of the Tory Government, who crashed the economy and sent mortgage rates through the roof, left millions stuck on NHS waiting lists and presided over the worst Parliament for living standards on record. We are turning that around and changing that: inflation and interest rates are coming down, waiting lists are coming down and wages are up more in the first year of a Labour Government than in 10 years of a Tory Government.

I understand that the Leader of the Opposition is taking advice on change. She had in Nadhim Zahawi to ask his advice on how to change and how to save her party—please don't tell me she listened to his accountant! The next day, after giving her advice, he jumped ship to Reform—the 23rd former Tory MP to do so. I do not know which is more pitiful: the flood of former Tory MPs deserting her sinking ship or the Reform party so desperate to launder any old failed Tory politician.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister does not need to worry about me—I'm all right. I did not hear an apology to the farmers; has he even apologised to the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours), who stood up for farmers only to have the

Whip removed? The Prime Minister treats his MPs so badly. They follow his lead, and he hangs them out to dry every time.

Let us turn to another area that the Prime Minister has got wrong. His Budget doubled business rates for thousands of pubs. Will the Prime Minister tell us whether there is going to be any change to his business rates policy?

The Prime Minister: We are working with the sector to ensure that it gets the support it needs. I have to say that the Leader of the Opposition's new-found concern for pubs will come as a surprise to anyone who remembers the 7,000 pubs that were closed under the Tories. As Business Secretary, she did not say a word about it.

We support business, and we also support workers, which is why we have passed our Employment Rights Act 2025. On Monday, the Business Secretary and I went to Croydon to discuss the Employment Rights Act with workers there, who were very keen on the paternity and maternity rights that the Leader of the Opposition opposes. While we were at Ikea, they showed me their new prototype: the Ikea shadow Cabinet. The trouble is that nobody wants to buy it, it is mainly constructed of old dead wood, and every time you lose a nut it defects to Reform.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister did not answer the question about business rates. It sounds like he does not know what his policy is. It has been a farce from start to finish. On Monday, the Business Secretary said that the Chancellor did not even realise the impact of her business rates policy—no surprise there—and yesterday the tax office said that it did tell the Government what the impact would be. Can the Prime Minister be clear? Did he understand the impact of his own policy on pubs?

The Prime Minister: We are working with the sector. The right hon. Lady has not explained why she said nothing about the 7,000 pubs that closed on her watch. We are doing other things on the cost of living to help people and to make sure that they can get out and spend money in pubs and hospitality. We are boosting the minimum wage. What did the Tories do? They opposed it. We are freezing rail fares and prescription charges. What did they do? They opposed it. We are taking £150 off energy bills. What did they do? They opposed it. She said nothing when pubs were closing and she opposes every measure now.

The right hon. Lady said a moment ago, "I'm all right." She clearly did not listen to the advice of Nadhim Zahawi, because what he told her he has now made public. He told her that the Tories failed on mass migration and failed on our armed forces, and he told her that she is leading

"a defunct brand…that the nation…can no longer trust."

No wonder he has joined the Tory migration to Reform—it is the second Boriswave.

Mrs Badenoch: I asked the Prime Minister whether he understood the impact of his own policy; he did not say yes. The reason why he U-turns all the time is because he is clueless. He is blowing around like a plastic bag in the wind, with no sense of direction whatsoever. Let us be clear: this mess goes beyond pubs. The whole hospitality industry—cafés, hotels and restaurants, they are all being clobbered by Labour's tax hikes. There is an answer to this: Conservatives would abolish business rates for small businesses on the high street. *[Interruption.]* Government Members are all chuntering, but the Prime Minister is already agreeing with us on the family farms tax and he is already agreeing with us on digital ID; why does he not make it a hat trick and abolish business rates for the high street?

The Prime Minister: The Tories crashed the economy and now they want to give lectures. The right hon. Lady is wondering why nobody is listening to them—nobody is ever going to listen to them on the economy ever again. In 18 months, because of the decisions we have made, inflation is falling and the Bank of England says it is coming back down to target; we have had six interest rate cuts in a row; wages are up more in the first year of a Labour Government than under the first 10 years of the Conservative Government; and we beat the forecasts on growth for 2025. We are turning this country around after the appalling mess they left it in.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister says that no one is going to listen to us—who is going to listen to him? The winter fuel allowance? U-turn. WASPI women? U-turn. The two-child benefit cap? U-turn. Grooming gangs inquiry? U-turn. The family farms tax? U-turn. Digital ID? U-turn. Jury trials?

Hon. Members: U-turn?

Mrs Badenoch: We hope so. I think that is going to be the next one. Week after week, the poor people sitting people sitting behind the Prime Minister have to defend the indefensible, only for him to U-turn a few days later.

One of the Prime Minister's Cabinet Ministers told a journalist that

"What's happening at the moment is extraordinarily bad."

Another said:

"We've gone through a catastrophic series of mis-steps."

Yet another Minister said

"we are so unpopular at the moment I've come to the conclusion it's worth rolling the dice"

on a new leader. They are right, aren't they?

The Prime Minister: Here is the difference: I changed my party, and that is why we stand here with a majority Labour Government. The Leader of the Opposition sits there with her party that lost two thirds of its MPs at the last election, and she is losing more every week. They are queuing up to join the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) and his laundry service for disgraced Tory politicians. Meanwhile, inflation is down, wages are up and waiting lists are down. Labour is turning the corner and changing this country for the better.

Q4. [907260] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I am sure that you, and I hope others across the Chamber, will agree that we need to recognise and celebrate achievements. I say that because across the country knife crime offences are going down. Of course, more needs to be done, and more should be done, but this week's figures have shown that London has had its safest year ever under the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan.

In fact, the homicide rate in London is at its lowest since records began. Reform and the Conservatives repeatedly talk down our capital city. Will the Prime Minister join me in saying that they are wrong? Will he applaud those achievements?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend draws attention to the important work of the Mayor of London. Nobody should be talking our country down or talking London down. She is right to say that since we came into office the number of knife crime offences is down, but there is more to do. We are introducing new powers to seize knives and increasing the penalty for selling knives to under-18s. *[Interruption.]* What did the Conservatives—they are chuntering—do? They voted against those provisions. What is obvious about London and Reform is that it has got a candidate for mayor who does not like London, a new ex-Tory recruit who struggled to pay his taxes in this country and a leader who spends more time in France than in his constituency.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the Prime Minister's comments on Iran. I encourage him to go even further on sanctions and proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Sandra is 71. She has bladder cancer. Just after Christmas, she went into her local A&E. She had to wait 31 hours on a trolley or on a plastic chair to be admitted. Last year, more than half a million people waited for over 12 hours in A&E to be admitted—more than any year in the history of the NHS. This corridor care crisis was created by the Conservatives, but it has got worse under Labour. Will the Prime Minister end this scandal by taking up our plan to end all 12-hour A&E waits this year?

The Prime Minister: May I first say through the right hon. Member to Sandra that that is simply not acceptable for her or anybody else? I would appreciate it if he passed that on to her directly. We have put record investment into the NHS so that we can turn this problem around, and we are turning it around.

The right hon. Member puts forward his plans for change, but he never votes for the increase in investment and the measures needed to put them into practice. You cannot change things without investing in them. You cannot call for change and vote against a Budget that puts record investment into the NHS.

Ed Davey: We saw what happened to the last Government when they failed to improve the NHS, and if the Prime Minister is not careful, that will happen to his Government.

Last month I asked the Prime Minister to get a grip of South East Water, which had left thousands of people in Royal Tunbridge Wells without water. Now it has happened again, not only in Tunbridge Wells but in East Grinstead, Burgess Hill, Haywards Heath and other parts of Kent and Sussex. Families, pensioners, schools, care homes and businesses have been without any water since Saturday, and the water company bosses involved now stand accused of misleading Parliament over their failures. South East Water keeps failing its customers over and over again, so will the Government immediately strip it of its licence?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this, because the situation is clearly totally unacceptable. He will want to know that Ministers have chaired daily emergency meetings to hold the company to account to deliver on the change that is urgently needed in all the areas that he mentioned. We have also doubled the compensation rates for individuals and businesses and we are absolutely clear that the company must urgently invest in infrastructure. We will publish the water White Paper in due course, but we are holding those daily meetings to hold the company to account.

Q5. [907261] **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I am delighted by today's Northern Powerhouse Rail announcement—a downpayment on the north of England's future. Fulfilling Lord Blunkett's rail plan for Yorkshire also included upgrades to the Penistone line train, the spine that connects South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, coursing through eight constituencies and serving half a million people. When I was growing up, my dad opened Silkstone Common station as a Dodworth councillor. I want my legacy to be "Two trains an hour Tidball" for our Penistone line. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how we can secure funding for the second phase of the Penistone line upgrade scheme to achieve two services an hour?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend as a dedicated campaigner on this and so many other issues. I am delighted that today we are announcing a transformation in journeys across the north. Of course, this was promised many times by the Conservatives but never delivered. We are taking action and delivering. We are working with Kirklees council to prepare the business case for the first phase of upgrading the line, and I know that the Transport Secretary will be happy to discuss the details of that with my hon. Friend.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): At question time last week, the Prime Minister seemed to intimate that the Government were bringing forward amendments to the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. Within hours of him saying that, the Irish Government's Minister for Foreign Affairs said that any "significant changes" must have the

"full agreement of both Governments".

Is the Prime Minister intending to bring forward amendments to the flawed Northern Ireland Troubles Bill? Will he give me a reassurance that the Irish Government do not have a veto over legislation in this House?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I spoke to the Taoiseach about it in December, and I know that he is committed to delivering on this issue. The new legacy unit has been established in the Garda, and I am confident that the Irish Government's other commitments will be delivered as set out in the joint framework. For the first time, information held by the Irish authorities is being shared with the reformed legacy commission, meaning that more families and victims of terrorism are getting information about what happened to their loved ones.

Q7. [907263] **Mary Glindon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's leadership and our Government's clear commitment to tackling child poverty, recognising that high-quality education is one of the best routes out of poverty.

However, young people in one of the most deprived areas of my constituency who are attending Churchill community college have been taught in temporary accommodation for over 16 months. Can the Prime Minister use his good offices to expedite funding from the Department for Education to support rebuilding that school?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of what we are doing on child poverty, lifting half a million children out of poverty. The Conservatives' policy is to plunge them straight back into poverty, and they should be ashamed of that. The situation my hon. Friend draws my attention to is appalling. Parents and teachers are furious that the Conservatives left schools literally crumbling. We invested £20 billion to rebuild around 800 schools, and our aim is that all schools and colleges in England that are not being fully or substantially rebuilt are free from RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—by the end of the Parliament. I will ensure that a Minister meets her to discuss this issue.

Q3. [907259] **Mr Tom Morrison** (Cheadle) (LD): I visited Stepping Hill hospital in my constituency where I met the incredible team. They are working in some of the worst conditions. Staff showed me wards where sewage is coming up through the drains on to the floors, and ceilings dripping water on to vital equipment. The hospital has a £130 million repair bill, and the Prime Minister is the man who can change this. Will he meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) and the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) so that we can talk to him about this issue, get some investment and get the hospital that my constituents deserve?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising that. He knows we inherited a terrible situation: waiting lists, missed performance targets and hospitals such as Stepping Hill left to crumble—the Conservatives should be absolutely ashamed of themselves. I am pleased that the new out-patients building is open, and because of our decisions, the local trust will receive £75 million in capital funding. Progress is being made. His local trust has seen waiting lists fall by almost 3,000, and the number of waits of over a year is down by 67%. I will ensure that he gets the meeting he wants to discuss the details further.

Q9. [907265] **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): If reports are correct, Elon Musk has climbed down today under pressure from this Government. Let's be clear: stripping women naked without consent in real life or online is abuse. However, we do not know whether to trust what X says today, and this is not just happening on X. Will the Prime Minister join me and men and women across this House and across our nation to say to any app or AI company that we will not tolerate any abuse of men, women or children in this country and that we will act on enforcement?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. The actions of Grok and X are disgusting and shameful. Frankly, the decision to turn it into a premium service is horrific, and we are absolutely determined to take action. We have made it clear that X has to act and, if not, Ofcom has our full backing. We will introduce, and are introducing, legislation. To update the House, I have been informed this morning that X is acting to ensure full compliance with UK law. If so, that is welcome, but we are not going to back down. X must act. We will take the necessary measures. We will strengthen existing laws and prepare for legislation if it needs to go further, and Ofcom will continue its independent investigation.

Q6. [907262] **Llinos Medi** (Ynys Môn) (PC): As someone with personal experience of AI-generated images, the recent AI images shared on X, particularly those of children, sicken me. Yet the Leader of Reform, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), continues to defend Elon Musk. Anyone who defends platforms linked to the sexual exploitation of children forfeits any right to give lectures about protecting women and girls. What will the Prime Minister do to stop any political party from putting tech billionaires ahead of protecting our children?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising that. It is astonishing that Reform defends Musk on this issue. I said that the images are disgusting; Reform's position on this issue is disgusting. This is weaponising images of women and children and they should never be made, and that is why we are acting. Reform refused to do anything about it, but more than that, on the point she raised, it would scrap the Online Safety Act 2023, which stops children accessing pornography and content on suicide, self-harm and eating disorders. Reform is an absolute disgrace and knows nothing about protecting children.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are only on Question 11. If we want to get MPs in, the House is going to have to work with me.

Q11. [907267] **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Stevenage were appalled to hear Reform MPs oppose the principle of deploying British troops to maintain peace in Ukraine. Our brilliant armed forces have defended democracy in Europe across the generations, so it is shameful that the leader of Reform opposes that today. That is not leadership; it is surrender. Does the Prime Minister agree that Labour Governments always have and always will defend British interests, not those of Russian dictators or oligarchs?

The Prime Minister: This is a question of values and freedom. I am proud of the British workers, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, supporting our Ukrainian allies. Ukrainian soldiers are defending European values on the frontline every day. In the event of a ceasefire, a multinational force will carry out defence and deterrence operations and conduct training, planning, recovery and regeneration of Ukrainian forces. This week, the leader of Reform said that Russia had a casus belli—that means a justification for war—in invading Ukraine. He is a Putin apologist using Russia's talking points.

Q8. [907264] **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): The world is becoming more dangerous every single day. The Ministry of Defence has said that it needs an extra £28 billion to keep us safe. Well, I know where the Prime Minister can find it: stop this nonsense Chagos islands surrender policy, and spend that money on protecting the United Kingdom. Will the Prime Minister commit to that, or will he continue to put the interests of foreign Governments and countries above our own?

The Prime Minister: Diego Garcia is a vital military base with important capabilities for our allies. It is integral to our security. Our decision was welcomed by our allies, the Five Eyes, India and the United States. It was opposed by our enemies, including Russia. Now we can add the Tories and Reform to that list. The Tories are following Reform; Reform is following Putin.

Q13. [907269] **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I offer my condolences to the families of the four people who died in the road traffic accident that occurred over the weekend in my constituency. Families in Bolton South and Walkden are already benefiting from this Labour Government's actions—free school meals, free breakfast clubs, 30 hours of funded childcare and the scrapping of the two-child limit—which are taking nearly half a million children out of poverty. However, in Bolton South and Walkden and across the country, there is a chronic shortage of social housing and genuinely affordable homes. Will the Prime Minister now show the same ambition on housing, and commit to a major expansion of social housing?

The Prime Minister: My thoughts, and the thoughts of the whole House, are with all those so awfully impacted by the terrible road traffic accident in my hon. Friend's constituency over the weekend. On her question, we are determined to restore the dream of home ownership. That is why there has been £39 billion of investment to deliver the biggest boost in social and affordable housing in a generation. Through planning reforms, the new homes accelerator and new towns, we are determined to deliver the homes that people need.

Q10. [907266] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to the violence against women and girls strategy, but I and many others have concerns about stigmatising young boys, men and masculinity as inherently toxic, especially when suicide is the No. 1 killer of young men. Is it about time that we had a Minister for men and boys? This is about women and men, not women or men.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for what we are doing about violence against women and girls. I agree that this is not about women or men, or boys or girls; it is about both. That is why I was very pleased to bring forward our men's health strategy, one of the first of its sort, to deal with the challenges that young men in particular, in my view, have growing up, particularly to do with social media, and to go further on the question of suicide, which I know the whole House is prepared to work together on—and quite right, too.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): As trade envoy to New Zealand, I visited Eden Park in Auckland last year to hear about the exciting plans to bring the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo to New Zealand. Next month, that plan becomes a reality, and one of Scotland and the UK's greatest military displays will take place in Auckland. That spectacular event is testament to the exciting and successful trading relationship between the UK and New Zealand. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating and thanking everyone who has made it a reality?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, which is absolutely brilliant, as anybody who has seen it will attest. I am so pleased that it is heading to New Zealand. That is another example of Scotland's unique contribution to our international image, our culture and our tourism. We all wish them the very best of luck in their performance. I know that it will be very well received.

Q12. [907268] **Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): The police fabricated intelligence to get Israelis banned from Villa Park, as demanded by Islamists. That is not an isolated case. Forces cut deals with dodgy mosques and refuse to arrest preachers who incite violence; the Crown Prosecution Service uses the Public Order Act 1986 as an Islamic blasphemy law; prison governors do deals with Islamists to maintain order; and we all know about the rape gangs. Will the Prime Minister launch a review on the corruption of our criminal justice system by Islamists and the politics of communalism?

The Prime Minister: I disagree, as the hon. Member knows, with the decision of the West Midlands police. The Home Secretary will today make a statement in relation to that. Home Secretaries used to have the power to remove chief constables. That power was stripped by the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011. The hon. Member knows who was making decisions in the Home Office at the time—it was he, working for Theresa May, who stripped that power away.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I wish you a belated happy new year, Mr Speaker. However, for the 4.8 million leaseholders across England, it is not a happy new year; they will receive large bills in a matter of weeks. They have been waiting patiently for us, a new Government who said we would deliver change, to bring forward legislation on leasehold and commonhold. When will we see that legislation, so that we can put those leaseholders out of their misery?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. We will bring forward proposals very shortly.

Q14. [907270] **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Some 35,000 children, including my constituent Clover, live with uncontrolled, life-threatening epilepsy. Those who can afford it already benefit from prescribed medical cannabis, but families face endless delays, confused trials and a Home Office process designed for criminal misuse, not for healthcare. Will the Prime Minister meet me and affected families to discuss moving paediatric medical cannabis out of Home Office control, creating a pathway for proper trials, and NHS access, and ensuring that all children with life-threatening epilepsy get the care that they deserve, regardless of their family circumstances?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the case of Clover. NHS England and the National Institute for Health and Care Research recently agreed funding for two world-first clinical trials relating to the use of cannabis-based products. That could help these medicines to become more routinely available in the

NHS. I will ensure that she gets the meeting that she wants with the relevant Minister to discuss what else we are doing.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): The people I represent are fed up with Southern Water, when it comes to everything from sewage and broken pipes to water outages, even on Christmas day. In November, millions of plastic beads washed up on our beaches, and we discovered that they came from a Southern Water treatment plant. I am campaigning for water companies to stop using this outdated plastic bead method, and to bin the beads. We are really concerned about the impact on wildlife, and have a massive clean-up operation on our hands. More than 5,000 people have already supported my campaign with the Sussex Wildlife Trust. Does the Prime Minister share my horror about this dereliction of duty by Southern Water, and will he join me in calling for it to face the full force of the law for that terrible pollution incident?

The Prime Minister: I credit my hon. Friend with having helped to expose this scandal, and with working with everyone in her community to volunteer to clean up the beaches. That is the very best of who we are. People are right to be furious that, for far too long, water companies were allowed to get away with polluting our seas and beaches. The Environment Agency is leading a full investigation. More generally, we are ending unfair bonuses for polluting water bosses, abolishing Ofwat, and introducing tougher penalties to hold companies to account.

Q15. [907271] **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Ahead of the forthcoming consultation on local government reorganisation, last month Huntingdonshire district council voted for option E, a Huntingdonshire unitary council. That was a cross-party view, and the Prime Minister's own Labour councillors voted in favour of it. There is a suspicion locally that the Government favour option D, proposed by the Labour eastern regional office, which would see Huntingdonshire, and my constituency, split in two and combined with Peterborough. Will the Prime Minister offer assurances to my constituents and people across Huntingdonshire that the decision is not already a done deal, and that the democratic will of Huntingdonshire district council will not be overridden to satisfy an unelected Labour regional office?

The Prime Minister: There are no done deals here; we are going through the proper process.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): The staff at West Hertfordshire teaching hospitals NHS trust, which operates Watford general hospital in my constituency, have been very busy bees. They recently won trust of the year and a performance recovery award at the 2025 Health Service Journal awards. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the amazing team at Watford general, and thank them for all the hard work they have done to achieve this admirable accolade? Imagine what further achievements they will make when they have their new hospital and new facilities.

The Prime Minister: I will join my hon. Friend, and thank not only the staff in his hospital, but NHS staff across the country, who worked so hard over Christmas and new year, which is a notoriously difficult time.

Northern Powerhouse Rail

12.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Government's plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail. I realise that I am not the first Minister to talk about transforming infrastructure in the north of England, and I get why people there are sick to the back teeth of Westminster politicians promising the earth and delivering absolutely nothing because parties, whether that means the Tories or Reform, lack ambition and are incapable of doing, or are unwilling to do, the hard yards of delivery. That ends today.

It has been over a decade since the then Conservative Chancellor pledged a transport system fit for a northern powerhouse, and what came of it? We had High Speed 2 to Manchester and Leeds—both promised, both axed—rail services have let down commuters, and we have a railway still reliant on diesel trains and two-track Victorian infrastructure. We had levelling up, the integrated rail plan and Network North—just empty slogans, and emptier pockets to pay for them.

That gulf between rhetoric and reality has consequences. An unbalanced economy does not just affect growth; it strikes at the heart of the fairer country that we want to be. Political choices made over decades mean that a 40-mile commute to Manchester is a world away from a similar journey into London. Take Liverpool, which has only two fast trains an hour to Manchester; a direct rail journey from Liverpool to Manchester airport takes an hour and 25 minutes, when it is only 28 miles away. Or take Leeds, which is still the largest city in western Europe without mass transit; only a third of the population can reach the city centre in 30 minutes.

We are finally consigning this sorry political legacy to the bonfire of history. No previous Government have acted as swiftly and decisively to back northern leaders. We have made the largest ever investment in local transport. We have given the go-ahead to road and rail projects across the north, and we are allocating billions of pounds in pothole funding to local leaders across this Parliament. Today, Mr Speaker, we are going further. After years of under-investment in the north's rail network, I am proud to announce that we will deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail.

This is a generational commitment, building on the ongoing trans-Pennine route upgrade. We will invest up to a further £45 billion to create a turn-up-and-go railway along the northern growth corridor of Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield, as well as York. There will be regular services onward to Newcastle and Hull, and to Chester for connections to north Wales.

Make no mistake: NPR will transform how people travel. We will end the hour-long waits if people miss their train. We will attract more people to a railway that will be faster, more accessible and more frequent than ever before. For northerners who have long complained about being treated as second-class citizens, my message is simple: those days are over.

This is an ambitious long-term programme, but it is not HS2 reheated. I stood at the Dispatch Box last year and said that we would learn the lessons of that infrastructure project, and I meant it. Unlike the previous Government's Network North plan, which was announced without so much as a phone call to the mayors, we have been working directly with them on developing the proposals. I am proud to announce that every single one of those mayors is backing the plan today.

I am clear that NPR will not be a central Government vanity project. It will be rooted in northern communities, and designed, developed and delivered from the bottom up. We will also take the time to get this right. That starts with agreeing mature, stable designs as well as consents, all before construction. Finally, unlike HS2, this is not about the fastest line at any cost. Northern Powerhouse Rail will be the shoulders of this nation's rail network, improving services across the north and beyond.

Let me now turn to delivery. We are making £1.1 billion available to develop NPR over the next four years. This will proceed in three phases, sequenced so that passengers experience a better railway as soon as possible. The first phase will prioritise electrification and upgrades east of the Pennines for delivery in the 2030s. That covers the Leeds-Bradford, Sheffield-Leeds and Leeds-York corridors, including the stations. Alongside NPR, we will develop the business case for the Leamside line, as part of our broader plans for the north. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), who has been campaigning on this for over 20 years.

Phase 1's benefits will be clear. It means pressing forward with plans for a new station in Bradford, with funding secured to take it forward subject to business case, and it means working with local leaders on a redesigned York station masterplan. I would like to recognise the work carried out by Lord Blunkett in his Yorkshire plan for rail. It was his vision, endorsed by the white rose mayors, that informed our plan for phase 1, and I am proud that Lord Blunkett is backing our plans today.

Work also starts now for the second phase, west of the Pennines, with major construction planned for the 2030s. It includes a new route, and a predominantly new line, between Liverpool and Manchester. This will run via new stations, improving access to Manchester airport from across the north and north Wales, and to Warrington Bank Quay, with plans to deliver thousands of new homes. I have today instructed my officials to immediately resume work on the adapted hybrid Bill, so that we can reach planning consent for the parts of the route in Manchester. These plans align with the prospectus of the Liverpool-Manchester Railway Board, and I would like to thank all of the board's members, including the chair, former Rail Minister Huw Merriman, who is also backing our plans today.

The third phase, which takes us to the 2040s, will improve connectivity across the Pennines, over and above the trans-Pennine route upgrade currently under way. I see Bradford to Manchester, Leeds to Manchester, and Sheffield to Manchester as key routes that we will upgrade.

If we are to secure Britain's long-term growth, we must also recognise that future capacity and connectivity is needed along other major routes, such as the west coast main line, and ensure that this is reflected in our decision making now. I can therefore confirm this Government's long-term aim to see a full new north-south line from Birmingham to Manchester. That is one of the reasons why we have chosen the Liverpool to

Manchester route, as put forward by local mayors, because it is the only route that properly preserves our ability ultimately to build a new line south to address longer-term congestion and crowding challenges on the west coast main line.

Again, this plan will not be a revival of HS2, and no decisions have been taken on the specification or timetable. In the meantime, we will retain land that the Government have already purchased between the west midlands and Crewe. This will be an incremental programme of change, and delivery will be taken forward after NPR has been built. Nevertheless, I believe that laying out our strategy now is sensible, responsible and in the long-term interests of the country.

Today we are announcing a second rail revolution in the very region that gave us the first. The north powered Britain's past, and it can lead this country's future. This plan is a downpayment on the north's potential and part of a broader growth drive to lift the region's productivity, boost living standards and add tens of billions to the UK economy. At the heart of this lies connectivity, because only by strengthening the links between our northern cities and bringing their pools of talent closer together can the region begin to rival the other major growth corridors in Europe.

Too many northerners still face the choice of either staying at home and putting aspiration on hold or moving away in search of a better future. I say no more unfair choices and no more missed opportunities. Today we start delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.51 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): May I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement? She started the statement by saying that people are sick to the back teeth of Westminster politicians promising the earth and delivering absolutely nothing—and then she did exactly that. We on the Opposition Benches know what the right hon. Lady's statement marks today. It is not a strategy for the north or a genuine commitment to a project costed at £46 billion back in 2019, as the current Prime Minister then promised; instead, it is a flagrant attempt to silence their party's restless northern mayors, while Labour Ministers, who came into office with no plan to deliver on their promises, butcher the Budget.

Let us get straight to the point. The Secretary of State can bluster all she likes, but where Northern Powerhouse Rail is concerned, we have no construction start dates, no completion dates, no published or costed route map, no sequencing, no idea who will pay, or by how much, and no certainty at all, except that it will not be what Labour promised ahead of the election. She says that this is a generational commitment. Well, at this rate it will turn out to be a multigenerational commitment. If the Prime Minister wanted to deliver what he actually promised in opposition, he knows that he would have another black hole of billions, such is the genuine uncertainty caused to the sector by this announcement.

What we have is a commitment to fiddling with the paperwork without any secure investment for the actual project, yet the right hon. Lady expects this House to believe that this is some sort of investment in the north. She and her Ministers must be delighted that the Mayor of Greater Manchester overplayed his hand at the Labour party conference last year. Today he feels constrained to profess loyalty to the Prime Minister, perhaps with wonderment at his generosity—that is in public, but we all know what he is doing in private.

Does the right hon. Lady take this House, her own Back Benchers and the voting public for fools? Whether she does or not, the Prime Minister certainly does. He wrote in *The Yorkshire Post*, with some gall, that this announcement is

"a serious plan backed by billions of pounds of investment",

when we know from this statement that it is not. Can the right hon. Lady confirm how a £45 billion cap on a scheme costed as being way more expensive than that back in 2019 can possibly deliver projects already estimated to cost so much more than that value? What guarantees exist that schemes will be completed in full? When will this House finally be given the detail that it deserves? Perhaps she ought to remind the Prime Minister what he told *The Yorkshire Post* back in 2019, when he promised to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail in full.

Today's announcement offers nothing better than dither, delay and a further decade away from spades in the ground. How can the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister pretend that this is the delivery of Northern Powerhouse Rail when it is anything but that? By their own admission, no budget has been set out. The cap in funding gives no confidence that funding that will have to be raised from the private sector or through local taxes is in place. Can the Secretary of State tell the House which local taxes will have to rise, and by how much, to fill the gap created by her own £45 billion cap?

I know that the Secretary of State, like me, cares deeply about ensuring that Parliament is told the whole truth, but perhaps on this occasion it is the Prime Minister himself who should be lauded. He has said, time and again, that the cuts and downgrades that this Government have foreshadowed today represent nothing more than

"a betrayal of the North".

Is it not the case that this is a strategy from a desperate Government to make a cut appear to be an investment, and to attempt to save face with the British public? Spending months and months hiding their mealy-mouthed plans, only to reveal them with bluster and misplaced confidence, is a sad indictment of a sorry Government.

To come to this House today without dates, budgets or a plan for how to raise shortfalls after the cap is, frankly, pitiful. To spin this as a plan for the future is a disgrace, and one of which the Secretary of State should be ashamed. She cannot escape the fact that her party came into power with no plan on how to deliver on its promises, and its complete ineptitude in managing the public finances means that it is now having to U-turn on those promises. If the metro mayors and Back Benchers had any backbone, then rather than gelatinously jostling for position under the next Labour leader, they would acknowledge the truth in what I have said and call out this betrayal.

Heidi Alexander: I cannot believe what I have just heard, to be honest. I know that the hon. Gentleman is standing in for the shadow Transport Secretary, the

[Heidi Alexander]

right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), but I really hoped that he would have done a bit better than that.

The hon. Gentleman talks about no budget being set out. We have set out £1.1 billion to be spent over the next four years, which is far more than his Government ever spent on Northern Powerhouse Rail in the 14 years in which they had an opportunity to make improvements to the rail network in the north of England. If that is the way the Conservatives approach basic maths when we are spending more than £1 billion, I can see why the public booted them out of office at the last election.

We are working in collaboration with local mayors. We have agreed with them that where they see opportunity to boost economic growth beyond the core scope of the Northern Powerhouse Rail proposals, we will work with them to agree local contributions so that the full benefits of this investment can be realised.

More generally, this is a classic case of the hon. Gentleman writing the questions without listening to the announcement. We are delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail in full. We have set out our plans in full, we are funding NPR in full, and we will deliver it.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the previous Government and their aspirations. Let me remind the House of what that actually amounted to—the plan that got the location of Manchester wrong on a map, promised new tramlines that had already been built, and diverted funding away from the north to fix potholes in the south. That plan was not worth the paper it was written on, so we will take no lessons on this matter from the Conservatives.

If the hon. Gentleman will not listen to me, maybe he will listen to the people who run our great city regions in the north. The Mayors of West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and North Yorkshire said that

"we welcome the government's once in a generation commitment to improving transport across the North".

The Mayor of the Liverpool City Region said:

"After more than a decade of dither, delay and broken promises, this is the start of a new era, with a genuinely strategic approach and a government finally backing Northern Powerhouse Rail in full."

The Mayor of Greater Manchester said,

"Finally, we have a government with an ambitious vision for the North"

and a

"firm commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail".

Let me quote one more person:

"NPR is a project I've long championed…so it is excellent to see the government backing it in full".

Those are not the words of a Labour mayor or a Labour Minister; they are the words of former Conservative Rail Minister Huw Merriman. Our plans are backed by the mayors, by business leaders, and by the Conservatives' own former Rail Minister. That tells us everything we need to know about who is delivering for the north and who never did.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This is another hugely welcome transport statement from the Secretary of State for Transport and her team. Today's announcement promises levels of rail connectivity for communities from Merseyside to Tyneside that will compare to those of the London travel to work area. The question that I and many others have is: when will we see more details about the timescales and potential funding sources for phases 1 and 2 and, most importantly, phase 3—linking Birmingham with the Northern Powerhouse Rail network, which is so desperately needed and was so cruelly and ridiculously cancelled by the Conservative party in government—so that we can relieve the pressure on the west coast main line and link up London and Birmingham with the cities of the north?

Heidi Alexander: The Chair of the Transport Committee is completely right that the proposals we are announcing today will deliver rail services for the north that are comparable to those in London and the south-east—a "turn up and go" railway where people do not have to check the timetable before they go to the station, because they know that a train will be there within a reasonable timeframe and that if they miss their train, they will not have to wait an hour for the next one. She is right to press me on when more information about the different phases will become available. The first phase of improvement relates to the corridors into Leeds from Sheffield, Bradford and York; we will be progressing with urgency on those, as well as the plans for the new line between Manchester and Liverpool. Phase 3 of NPR relates to further trans-Pennine improvements beyond the trans-Pennine route upgrade, and we will say more in due course about our plans for Birmingham to Manchester, noting that the delivery of those plans will come after NPR has been completed.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I have read the statement—I am very grateful for early sight of it—and have listened to the Secretary of State carefully. The Liberal Democrats are massive supporters of Northern Powerhouse Rail, but all that is really concrete in this statement is just over £1 billion so that we can spend the next four years planning to perhaps come up with another plan.

The failure of the previous Conservative Government to deliver infrastructure projects such as this and HS2 was utterly depressing and embarrassing. However, I hope the Secretary of State will understand the scepticism of many of us in the north—not just Liberal Democrat Members—who fear that this Government are also being worryingly pedestrian, lacking the determination to deliver vital projects such as these, and that high-speed rail for the north will be delivered at a snail's pace if we are lucky. Would I be right to surmise from the Secretary of State's announcement that while we will see upgrades in the 2030s—still a long time away—we will not see trains running on the new track much before 2045? What confidence can she give us that we will not see even more slippage in that timetable? What guarantees can she give us that we will not see a repeat of the Conservatives' approach of stop-start, stop-start, stop-start, and then cancel?

Finally, I remind the Minister that the north of England does not stop at the M62. While we are proud of our cities of Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool, the biggest visitor destination in the north of England is Cumbria, yet there is not a single mention of either

Cumbria or Lancashire in the statement. It contains nothing about the vital upgrades needed to the west coast main line north of Warrington, especially in light of the recent derailment at Shap, and we continue to wait for the Government to invest in the all-important lakes line to Windermere, where a simple passing loop at Burneside would double the line's capacity at a fraction of the cost of Northern Powerhouse Rail, directly connecting Manchester airport to the heart of the English Lake district. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss these vital projects, to help prove that this Government's concern for the north includes the actual north?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are getting on with this, and we will see these improvements delivered. I do not share his cynicism that we will spend the next four years simply coming up with a plan; the £1.1 billion that has been allocated is for land acquisitions and early preparatory works on the Yorkshire schemes. We will see delivery in the 2030s, with passengers seeing the benefits of some of those schemes, but I will not make the same mistakes as the last Government made with HS2. They let contracts before the scope of schemes had been finalised, which was essentially a free meal ticket for building contractors. We will take the time to do this properly and spend taxpayer money wisely. Of course I want to see the delivery of rail infrastructure speeded up, but I also want to ensure that every single penny that this Government spend is well spent.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I could reassure him about the stop-start nature of plans being drawn up and then delivered. We have taken our time to come up with a credible, sequenced, prioritised programme of improvements, in stark contrast to the previous Government. I can assure him that this is a plan for the whole of the north of England, and when it comes to our Government's commitment to Cumbria, I gently remind him that the Department for Transport has invested over £13 million in Carlisle station, Cumberland has received an £18 million multi-year bus funding deal, and £10 million has been spent on a Borders rail viability study.[1] The hon. Gentleman should remember that we are investing across the north of England in improving public transport for the travelling public.

Mr Speaker: I call Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—it is nice to speak from the Back Benches for the first time in a very long time. I strongly welcome this commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail and the vision that underpins it. This will be game-changing for the north after decades of under-investment and poor connectivity; after years and years of indecision by the Conservative party, this really is going to transform lives. Does the Secretary of State agree that in order to ensure long-term reliability and capacity for generations to come, we have to solve the problem of Manchester Piccadilly station? That station finally having through capacity in an underground station will truly unlock connectivity between Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester airport and unlock the real potential of all regions across the north.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her contribution. She talks about Manchester Piccadilly; I am reminded of the words of Mayor Andy Burnham, who has said to me that he sees the potential of that station to be a King's Cross for the north. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we need to resolve the issue of throughput through that station, and I will be working very closely with the mayor on plans for that station, to ensure we unlock the regeneration at the heart of the great city of Manchester that we are all united in wanting to see.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I have spent years fighting to ensure that Bradford is at the heart of the north's rail network, so I very much welcome today's announcement. However, after decades of empty promises for the north from Whitehall, my constituents also need clarity. We have seen 13 U-turns in 18 months from this Government, including on the West Yorkshire tram network, so how much will be spent specifically on the Bradford station project, and when will that project be completed? With at least four general elections between now and 2045, which is the period of time that this statement relates to, my constituents and I are worried that this is simply another future U-turn.

Heidi Alexander: I can wholeheartedly assure the hon. Member that this announcement is good news for Bradford station. I have been working closely with Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, the leader of Bradford Council, and Tracy Brabin, the Mayor of West Yorkshire. We will be pressing forward with the work that is already under way with the council on a business case for Bradford station, and I am conscious that in doing so, we will be putting a young, dynamic city of 500,000 people at the heart of the northern rail network. We expect to reach decisions on the station by summer of this year, and we have made funding available to then move forward into detailed design, subject to the conclusions of that business case.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): February will represent the 25th anniversary of the opening of the second runway at Manchester airport in my constituency, with capacity for 60 million passengers. Does the Secretary of State agree that his announcement will finally allow the airport to achieve its full potential?

Heidi Alexander: I wholeheartedly agree with my good friend. The selection of the route between Liverpool and Manchester was to a large degree determined by the importance of providing better connectivity to Manchester airport, not just for people in the north-west, but those travelling across the Pennines from other parts of the north of England. It has the potential to be a real generator of economic output, and I look forward to working with him further on the proposals, given how dear that airport is to him and his constituents.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I completely disagree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) in his comments about the betrayal of the north by this Labour Government. While this plan is not by any means perfect, it is a damn sight better than what we saw from the last Government. At last week's Transport questions, I pressed the Minister about the improvements to the York area capacity scheme and was told that it was not ruled out. I was surprised to see no mention in the statement and the documents circulated today of that York area capacity scheme, which would relieve pressure and congestion at Skelton junction.

1.[*Official Report*, 28 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

[Tom Gordon]

That would improve the rail network and connectivity across the north. Will the Secretary of State rule out the cancellation of the Skelton junction improvements, commit to ensuring that they are part of the scheme going forward, and tell us why they were not mentioned today?

Heidi Alexander: In the announcement today, we are ruling things in; we are not excluding funding things through other funding sources. We will be setting out in the normal way such things as future rail network enhancement programme funding. I am happy to continue the conversation with the hon. Member about the further benefits we can bring to the York area. One benefit of NPR in particular will be to work with David Skaith, the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire, on the masterplan for York station and the massive brownfield regeneration opportunity—one of the largest in Europe—that lies directly next to that station.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to help everybody. Those Members whose constituencies are involved in this programme are the ones who I want to get in. We have got three statements. I know this statement matters, especially to the north, so we have got to get the people in. Please, if we can help each other, that would be useful.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This statement is welcome. The north of England has been held back for far too long, with our people and economy not being allowed to realise their full potential. The commitment to properly review the Manchester Piccadilly underground proposal alongside the Mayor of Greater Manchester is also welcome. Without that scheme, it leaves one route in and one route out, with trains forced to turn back on to the network. It is slower, second rate and not something the north can support. First, can we have more detail on the Manchester airport local contribution and how we will ensure it is fair and at a level that can be raised locally? Secondly, can we have a clearer idea on the timescales for the Birmingham to Manchester line?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will be having detailed conversations with local partners, including Manchester airport, and we will ensure that any contribution is fair and locally agreed. It is important that organisations that will benefit directly from the improvement of rail links make a contribution, and I look forward to those discussions happening in the coming months and years. He asks about the timing for the Manchester to Birmingham element of the route. I have been clear that the priority for investment is the three stages of Northern Powerhouse Rail. The improvements to Birmingham to Manchester would come after those schemes have completed construction in the 2040s.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Sadly, we have heard all this before. I admit that some of the last Government's ambitious proposals have not come to fruition, but the Labour Government are now finding that it is easy to criticise. I do not recall that the criticism coming from Labour Members when we were in power was, "Don't worry, by 2050 we can solve the problem." They were saying that they had immediate answers. I suggest that, instead of these ambitious proposals, the Secretary of State announces something that she can deliver. If she shook her petty cash tin, she could find the few thousand pounds she would need to extend the King's Cross to Lincoln service through to Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and so boost the local economy there—

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on! The hon. Member seems to be making a statement—there is not even a question in there. Secretary of State, I am sure you can rustle up a quick answer.

Heidi Alexander: I will ask the Rail Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman and update him on the particular scheme that he is advocating.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I welcome this fantastic announcement, particularly regarding the Leamside line, which runs from Pelaw in Gateshead through my constituency in Washington and on to Ferryhill in County Durham, and it is the line that will finally bring the metro to Washington, which I have campaigned on since I first stood to be an MP back in 2005. This investment will be transformative for my constituents and the whole north-east, so although we are still a little way off spades in the ground, does the Secretary of State agree that this truly is the difference that a Labour Government—together with Kim McGuinness, our Labour Mayor of the North East—make?

Heidi Alexander: May I just pay tribute once again to my hon. Friend for campaigning for the Leamside line over a long time? I recall her excitement when we announced the extension of the Tyne and Wear metro to Washington as part of the spending review, and I look forward to working with her further as we look at the business case for reopening the Leamside line, which closed many decades ago.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Safe, reliable and affordable railways are vital for economic growth in communities like mine. I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, because for too long we have not seen that investment in our northern communities. For too long, our infrastructure has been neglected and, as a result, our northern communities have not been able to fulfil their potential. I will build on what some Greater Manchester colleagues have been asking about Manchester Piccadilly. Some of the enabling work around Ardwick and Ashburys would unlock improved services to communities like mine on the Rose Hill line, or maybe even a tram-train to Marple. How can the Secretary of State ensure that communities like mine can feed in, so that this project reaches its full potential and gets a 10 out of 10, rather than a mediocre "meh"?

Heidi Alexander: One reason we have taken our time to work with the local mayors is so that we can properly ensure that the improvements to inter-city connections that will be delivered through NPR can be integrated with local improvements. Mayors in the north of England have had a multibillion-pound settlement through transport

for city regions funding. To unlock regeneration in many of the towns and cities with untapped potential, we need to that integration right.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I strongly welcome this statement, which recognises that Bradford, one of the largest and youngest cities, cannot be left behind any longer. I, along with my colleagues Madam Deputy Speaker—my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins)—and the leader of Bradford council, have campaigned for more than a decade for a new station and better connectivity. We cannot have Bradford waiting another two decades. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the new station and that connectivity will be part of phase 1 of this programme?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has championed the station in Bradford enormously over recent years, and I can assure him that we will press forward with the work that is already under way with the council on a business case for the station. We will reach decisions by the summer of this year. We have made funding available to then move forward into detailed design, pending those decisions.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): As a north-west MP, I of course welcome all efforts to improve connectivity across the north for my constituents, but the devil is always in the detail. I have looked at the Liverpool to Manchester proposals, and the journey would actually be 20 minutes slower than it is currently. The Secretary of State also talked about improving access to Manchester airport, but the link stops a mile outside the airport, and people have to take a bus from there. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that she will review the points that I have made?

Heidi Alexander: I was interested to hear the hon. Lady's contribution. She claimed that she supports anything that improves the public transport network in the north of England, but in September last year Reform came out with a clear objection to the Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme, telling the public that they should just accept their lot and be grateful. I look forward to hearing from her colleagues in future whether they have reversed their position on Northern Powerhouse Rail and finally seen the light.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I appreciate the Secretary of State's recognition of the lack of investment that there has been in the north of England, but it is not as though there has not been jam to go around. While there has been almost zero new investment in the north, in the south we have seen Javelin trains, the Jubilee line extension, Thameslink, the Elizabeth line and all the expenditure on HS2. Given that all that money has weighed down the south, and given that a crucial part of this scheme—I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for recognising this—is the underground station at Manchester Piccadilly, does she think it fair for local contributions to be expected for that, when most of the other schemes have been paid for through direct taxation? Why should the north not be treated in the same way as the south? Is it fair for local taxpayers to have to pay for what is part of the national infrastructure?

Heidi Alexander: I agree with my hon. Friend that the public in the north of England have had to put up with a second-rate transport system for far too long. We are determined to right that historic wrong, invest in the necessary upgrades, and get spades in the ground. I would just observe that when it came to Crossrail and the delivery of the Elizabeth line, there was a local contribution through a business rates retention scheme, and other investments in the capital have involved enterprise zones and land value capture. Those are some of the ideas that we would like to discuss with northern mayors.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Today's announcement directly affects Wales, given that it is footing the Bill for the Northern Powerhouse Rail project, along with HS2 and the Oxford-Cambridge railway—although I have to say that I am delighted for my northern friends. The price tag now owed to Wales amounts to about £6 billion, yet the Government expect us to be satisfied with £445 million over 10 years. How much longer does the Secretary of State think this farce can go on? Is it not time that rail is devolved so that funding can be directed back to the people of Wales, instead of to anything that is classified as an England and Wales project?

Heidi Alexander: The £445 million investment that was announced in the spending review is historic, and we recognise that there has been under-investment in Welsh infrastructure. However, this is really significant investment that will deliver new stations, faster journeys and better services for passengers, as well as connecting people to jobs and driving economic growth.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the improvements announced to the Sheffield-Leeds line and for some of the improvements to the Sheffield-Manchester line, although I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) that we need a through route to Manchester airport as well.

I particularly want to ask the Secretary of State about the tram-train project. She and the Mayor Oliver Coppard have committed to working on the business case for that project, and my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) has been fighting for it as well. Germany has been running tram-trains for 40 years, and the one pilot scheme in this country, involving a service between Sheffield and Rotherham, has been a success. Can the Secretary of State now see the development of tram-trains generating growth, housing and jobs in Sheffield as a precursor to rolling them out across the country, which would benefit a lot more areas?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend and I have been speaking about the issue of tram-trains in recent months, and I have also had more recent conversations with the Mayor of South Yorkshire about his aspirations in that regard. I look forward to working closely with him to ensure that we integrate properly the benefits that will be brought through Northern Powerhouse Rail, including schemes that my hon. Friend wants to be promoted in the South Yorkshire combined authority area.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My constituents stand to benefit enormously from the improvements in capacity and connectivity for Manchester airport and, indeed, Birmingham. The Secretary of State talked about growth in her statement. Does she agree that one

[Bill Esterson]

of the big benefits will be a reduction in congestion on the roads and the pollution that it produces? That is massively important, in relation to NPR and to the Birmingham to Manchester—and, I would add, Liverpool—part of the link in the north-west. The big difference we are seeing with this announcement is that the Secretary of State has set out an outline plan; in the dozens of announcements that were made by the Conservative Government from 2014 onwards, we never heard of such a plan.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is entirely right. A reliable, affordable, frequent public transport service, including the new rail line between Liverpool and Manchester, will enable and encourage more people to leave the car at home and make their journeys in a more sustainable way. It strikes me as ludicrous that at the moment it takes an hour and 25 minutes to travel on a direct train from Liverpool to Manchester airport—a journey of less than 30 miles—when it is possible to travel from Paddington to Reading, a journey of similar length, in 22 minutes.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire, I absolutely welcome the news that phase 1 of the Northern Powerhouse Rail project prioritises Yorkshire. It will generate growth and opportunities for people in my region, and it is a development for which members of the APPG, on both sides of the House, have long campaigned. With my city of Leeds in mind, may I ask when my residents will benefit from the phase 1 investment? May I also ask whether the Secretary of State agrees that we should accelerate the delivery of the West Yorkshire tram project, so that my constituents can benefit from both better railways and a mass transit system?

Heidi Alexander: The improvements for Leeds and the surrounding area that we have announced today are in addition to the existing improvement plans for Leeds station. The Government are considering Leeds South Bank as a potential location for a new town in an existing city, and I am very aware that Leeds is now known as the northern square mile because its attractiveness to financial services. I am working closely with Mayor Tracy Brabin to ensure that we deliver the mass transit system. I believe that Leeds is the largest city in western Europe without such a system, and we have to put that right.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the news today that we will finally get Northern Powerhouse Rail, and the news that it is starting in Yorkshire is historic. The world's oldest continuously working railway, Middleton railway, has operated since 1758, and the lines that are to be improved will be just metres away from it. That railway helped to kick-start the industrial revolution, and this project could kick-start a new revolution for the north of England. Is the Secretary of State working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to look at housing growth, at jobs growth and at maximising the benefits of Northern Powerhouse Rail in the same way as our Victorian forebears?

Heidi Alexander: Very much so, and if we were able to bring productivity in the north up to the average level, the UK economy would grow by about £40 billion a year. This is not just about trains or tracks; it is about leveraging in private investment, new jobs, new homes, city centre regeneration and breathing life back into our town centres. I look forward to working further with my hon. Friend on that.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): As the Secretary of State said, this is evidence that cross-Government working is in action, with the Treasury, the Department for Transport and the MHCLG setting the case, and establishing confidence that the north is open for business as the place to invest, to build and to live. We have a Government who have the self-assurance to shift away from the well-trodden path of growth traditionally centred on London and the south. The record is clear: the Tories under-invested in the north time and again, and Reform has already opposed everything that Northern Powerhouse Rail stands for—

Sarah Pochin: No, we haven't. That's a lie! *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. That was so loud.

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

Madam Deputy Speaker: I would welcome the Member withdrawing that.

Sarah Pochin: Yes, I do withdraw that. I am sorry. I apologise. However—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Jo White: Reform's betrayal of the north must never be forgotten.

For this to work, we need our council leaders and mayors to play their part. For constituencies such as Bassetlaw, Bolsover, North East Derbyshire and Chesterfield, our East Midlands Mayor must be part of the dialogue on the investment strategy for transport planning and connectivity. We all want to open our doors to businesses on the back of this, so will the Secretary of State ensure that Mayor Claire Ward has a place at the table?

Heidi Alexander: I work closely with Claire Ward, and I have enormous respect her work in the east midlands.

I recognise my hon. Friend's point about Reform's position on rail investment in the north of England. She had to deal with some chuntering from the other side, and I would just observe that the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) may like to google what one of her colleagues said back in September, when he was absolutely unequivocal that he would not back Northern Powerhouse Rail and that he would not back better public transport in the north. This Labour Government have exactly the opposite ambition.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which did an inquiry into HS2, I must warmly welcome the Secretary of State taking such a disciplined and clear approach to ensuring that this scheme is delivered, and delivered on time and with value for money, as the trans-Pennine upgrade

was. As a Bradford MP, I would like—with others, I am sure—to join in thanking her for backing Northern Powerhouse Rail, but particularly for backing Bradford. The new station and the improved link to Leeds will make a massive difference not only to the city of Bradford, but to the wider district. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the transport investments by this Labour Government will deliver not only better connectivity, but jobs and new homes to the whole of Bradford district?

Heidi Alexander: One of the things we have to achieve through Northern Powerhouse Rail is making sure that young people growing up in towns and smaller cities around the big conurbations can easily access the high-quality jobs in places such as Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle. I assure my hon. Friend that this Government's approach is about investing in skills, investing in transport and investing in opportunities for the future.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): A little more than two years have passed since the last Prime Minister chaotically took the axe to HS2 north and east of Birmingham, and the mayor at the time, Andy Street, failed the test of leadership and failed to stand up for our region. There is an obvious link between the east-west connections the Secretary of State has been talking about, and the south to north connections along the west coast main line. Will she and her Ministers meet and engage with west midlands MPs about the capacity issue she has set out, and can we not lose sight of the importance of the west midlands to east midlands connection, which is as slow as the connections in the north?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and other Members to discuss this matter further. I would also like to pay tribute to Mayor Richard Parker for working collaboratively with us in the west midlands, alongside Claire Ward in the east midlands, to make sure that we can improve not only inter-city connections, but the connections within big cities that are so important.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement confirming the biggest investment in rail connectivity in a generation, including £7.5 million for the South Yorkshire mayoral combined authority to kick-start plans to extend the South Yorkshire Supertram, including looking at a tram-train extension to Stocksbridge via Oughtibridge, Wharncliffe Side and Deepcar in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this tram-train extension will build on the Government's commitment today to finally give Yorkshire the transport network our communities deserve?

Heidi Alexander: We are committed to giving everyone in Yorkshire the transport networks they deserve. As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), we want to work with Mayor Oliver Coppard to explore further the potential of tram-train. I know she has been a fearsome advocate for the Penistone line in her constituency, and further engagement is going on with Kirklees council on that issue.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Like my Sheffield colleagues, I strongly welcome the Government commitment to upgrading our Sheffield station and putting in place faster and more frequent trains to Leeds and Manchester. This will increase our city centre regeneration, and will be of strong benefit to our universities and students who commute into the city. Will the Minister meet me and other South Yorkshire MPs to discuss timescales and to ensure that our infrastructure plans match the economic ambitions for growth and regeneration in Sheffield?

Heidi Alexander: I will certainly ask the Rail Minister to meet my hon. Friend and her colleagues. I do think that two fast services an hour between the key cities of Leeds and Sheffield is simply not good enough. We are committed to improving those services and to providing the capacity that is required at Sheffield station, and I look forward to discussing that further.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): This announcement is excellent news for northern towns and cities. Manchester airport is a large employer in my constituency, but since covid we have sadly lost direct connectivity from Stockport station into Manchester airport, so I think it is important to restore some of the pre-covid timetables. Can I also encourage the Secretary of State to look at the Access for All scheme? Unfortunately, it is far too slow, and far too many train stations do not have disabled access. To make rail better for everyone, we need to make it friendly for people with mobility issues.

Heidi Alexander: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of accessibility at rail stations, and I note the case he makes about Manchester airport. I would point out that, in addition to the new line between Liverpool and Manchester via the airport, which I have announced today, over £100 million of funding is going into Manchester airport station at the moment to lengthen the platform, so longer trains and more frequent services can call there. That investment is happening now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I ask Members to keep their questions short. Otherwise we will not be able to get everybody in, so please help each other out.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Can I begin by expressing my sincere and enthusiastic thanks to the Secretary of State for today's announcements? I have been campaigning, and some would say badgering Ministers, throughout my entire time in this place to address capacity challenges on the west coast main line arising from the steaming pile of mess left for this Government on HS2. I welcome the announcement that the Government intend to build a new rail line between Birmingham and Manchester, but following 14 years of mismanagement of projects such as this, how can the Secretary of State assure me and my constituents that these projects will actually be delivered, and how will they be insulated against the backwards, anti-growth, populist forces that we know would reverse these plans in a heartbeat?

Heidi Alexander: We are going to give the public the confidence that when it comes to rail infrastructure, we are spending taxpayers' money wisely. We will learn

[Heidi Alexander]

from the mistakes of HS2 and make sure we do the work properly to start off with, so we are not wasting taxpayers' money in the way that the previous Government did with their oversight of HS2.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): By my reckoning, York is the biggest winner of this new rail revolution. The new Haxby/York North station; the York station masterplan upgrade; the trans-Pennine route upgrade; and the fantastic NPR new connections—which does my right hon. Friend think delivers the most for my constituents?

Heidi Alexander: I am not entirely sure how to answer that question, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend has been a fearsome advocate for his constituents, and for improving public transport in York and the surrounding areas. I was delighted that we could confirm at the spending review that we were going to progress Haxby station in his constituency. I look forward to working with him further to unlock the potential in the city and region as a result of today's proposals.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I welcome today's announcement, which will unleash the potential of our northern regions and open the door to opportunities that have historically been denied to my constituents and so many across the north. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that bold and ambitious schemes such as Northern Powerhouse Rail will silence the north's detractors—not that many are in their places today—from the Tories, who left our rail network in the north of England on the brink of collapse, and Reform, who do nothing but talk down the promise of our proud and pioneering region?

Heidi Alexander: I could not have put it better myself. My hon. Friend is right that the public want us to be ambitious for the north and to make sure that the benefits of economic growth are spread fairly across the country. That is precisely what our announcements today on Northern Powerhouse Rail will do.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): For 17 long years, constituents across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages have had to deal with the complete failure of HS2 Ltd while Ministers were asleep at the wheel. The chaotic Conservative cancellation of the scheme did nothing to alleviate those problems and instead replaced them with uncertainty on uncertainty on uncertainty. Unfortunately, all today's statement does is confirm that that uncertainty will continue for at least another two decades. Can the Secretary of State confirm to me that HS2 Ltd, which is so hated by my constituents, will have absolutely no part in any rail infrastructure project north of Handsacre, that she will urgently ensure that me and other Staffordshire MPs have an opportunity to meet the Rail Minister, and that we can commit to the quick completion of the Handsacre to Manchester leg of HS2, with a view to releasing as much safeguarded land as possible as quickly as possible, so that constituents across my constituency, Staffordshire and further north do not have to continue to deal with the problems they have faced for so long?

Heidi Alexander: I will ensure that the Rail Minister meets my hon. Friend and regional colleagues. In taking the right long-term strategic decision about providing more capacity on the west coast main line, I recognise that some people will be dealing with more uncertainty today. I want to work with him and HS2 to make sure that we treat those people with the respect they deserve and that we seek to minimise the disruption to people's lives as far as possible.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Under the previous Conservative Government, Telford became one of the largest towns in the country without a direct link into London, we have a trainline into Birmingham and mid-Wales that is overcrowded, and private operators, who are falling over themselves to provide a solution, are being blocked by the Office of Road and Rail. I welcome today's announcements, particularly around the links between Birmingham and Manchester, but will the Secretary of State or the Rail Minister meet me to explore all options to get Telford connected to the capital?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to organise a meeting between my hon. Friend and the Rail Minister. He refers to some of the congestion challenges on the west coast main line with regard to train paths and putting on new services. That is why we have taken this long-term strategic decision today, recognising that we will have to address congestion and capacity challenges in that part of the rail network. As I say, I will be happy to organise that meeting for him.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, like you, I am a proud northerner. For too long, we have had to face challenges of under-investment in the north, so this is good news, particularly for Yorkshire. The plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail, alongside the upgrades to the trans-Pennine route, which are on time and on budget, will be a game changer for our communities and our economy. Will the Secretary of State outline how they will support regeneration and communities in northern towns such as Huddersfield, and how NPR will build on and connect to the trans-Pennine route upgrade?

Heidi Alexander: Phase 3 of the plans we have announced today will deliver improvements above and beyond the work that is happening at the moment with the trans-Pennine route upgrade. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the success of that programme in being on time and on budget—very different from the mega-project of HS2. I am very keen that we emulate the successes of the trans-Pennine route upgrade through Northern Powerhouse Rail. Of course, it also provides great opportunities to the thousands of people who are currently employed on the trans-Pennine route upgrade, who can get jobs working on the Northern Powerhouse Rail programme in future.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): This is brilliant news today, not just for the north of England but for north Wales too. With investment already in place for the north Wales main line, it will give us better connectivity for tourism, employment and leisure to our great northern cities and beyond. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that we must continue to work together cross-border to give my constituents the seamless transport system that they deserve?

Heidi Alexander: I do agree with my hon. Friend. I have a very close working relationship with Ken Skates, the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales. He and I are working on how best to prioritise the record £445 million the Government committed at the spending review to improve Welsh rail infrastructure. I am always happy to talk to my hon. Friend about her ideas on what more we can do to improve the experience of the travelling public in Wales.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): As a Yorkshire MP, I could not be more proud of the fact that it is a Labour Government who are delivering this change. I urge the Secretary of State to look again at the Calder Valley line. It needs electrification, perhaps as part of phase 3, which was promised by the Conservative party in 2015 but then dropped after the election. Could she please look at that again?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the Calder Valley line and the importance of further electrification of the network. If I may, and in the interests of time, I will ask the Rail Minister to write to my hon. Friend with further information on that, but I appreciate that it will be important for his constituency.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Northern Powerhouse Rail will be great for economic growth across the north and that will very much benefit my constituency. My constituency is geographically located in such a way that it should be great for travel to London, Liverpool and Manchester. Sadly, at the moment it is usually terrible for travelling to any of them. Will the Minister please meet me to talk about accessibility at Sandbach station, the quality and regularity of services across all those areas, and how we can make Northern Powerhouse Rail deliver for Cheshire?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that contribution and appreciate how important it is to improve the quality of rail services to all the destinations she mentioned. Some benefits of the plans we are proposing today are, for example, that in parts of Yorkshire—I appreciate that that is a different part of the country—we could see enhanced services to London. I would be happy to have a meeting with regional colleagues to discuss the specific issues she has raised.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I understand why the Secretary of State has today taken the sensible long-term decision on the future capacity needs on the west coast main line, but for residents in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, who have had 17 years of worrying, it means more years of worrying for them. Can she assure me that she will listen to the concerns of businesses and nearby residents when making decisions about land powers, and will she meet me and other impacted Staffordshire MPs to discuss this matter further?

Heidi Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the measured way she has put it. I know that the issue is close to the heart of her constituents, and I know that the Rail Minister is very keen to engage further with her and other affected Members on this issue. I can assure her that he will be in touch shortly to discuss the issues and a way forward.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to improving connections to Manchester airport, and I hope she will support my calls for a direct line between Stoke-on-Trent railway station, which serves most of my constituents, and Manchester airport. As the Secretary of State has heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), although we welcome the intent and ambition of this statement, a number of Staffordshire MPs have concerns and questions about the impact locally. I have heard from countless people in Newcastle-under-Lyme about their experience of the disgraceful and failed HS2 project; people in my constituency want clarity, to be heard and to know that there will be no repeat of the distress and destruction they were forced to live with. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for offering us a meeting with the Rail Minister, but we would benefit hugely from a meeting with the Secretary of State herself as soon as possible.

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to join the meeting I have already committed to on behalf of the Rail Minister; I think that would be appropriate, given the breadth of issues that have been raised today. On the issue of a direct service from Stoke to Manchester airport, I know that West Midlands Railway is considering the feasibility of amending its Stafford to Crewe service.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I welcome the fact that we are delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail—promised by the Tories, abandoned by the Tories and now delivered by this Labour Government. It will make a big difference to my constituents. However, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to put on the record my ask that the Secretary of State work with the Mayor of Greater Manchester on extending the tramline to Bolton North East and ensuring better services on both Northern and Avanti West Coast.

Heidi Alexander: I know that we need to improve the performance on both the Avanti West Coast and Northern routes; the Rail Minister and I are seized of the importance of doing that. I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to work with the Mayor of Greater Manchester to ensure that the inter-city improvements we have announced today are properly integrated with the local mass transit improvements that she is advocating.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I very much welcome this generational investment, which will benefit not just rail in the north of England but the whole country through economic growth and regeneration. I particularly welcome the investment going to Sheffield, which is a city used by my constituents not just as a destination but as a connection to elsewhere. Bearing Sheffield in mind, I invite the Minister not to lose sight of the benefits of electrifying the midland main line south of Sheffield—it remains unelectrified down to South Wigston—which would drive significant growth for people in Mid Derbyshire and benefit the country as a whole.

Heidi Alexander: We had to take some difficult decisions on electrification as part of the spending review this year, but we continue to keep the potential of full electrification of the midland main line under review as part of our plans to decarbonise the railways.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I welcome the Government's announcement today on Northern Powerhouse Rail. However, in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent we are still in stasis, with legacy issues such as the HS2 compound at Yarnfield, which is costing millions. I ask the Secretary of State for clarity on plans for our railway services in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent and for HS2 legacy issues such as the Yarnfield compound.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of the Yarnfield compound; I am not sure that she and I have actually spoken about it directly before. If she could write to me with more detail, I would be happy to come back to her to let her and her constituents know what more we can do to provide certainty on the way forward.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Our region, from our big cities to our small towns, is ambitious for our future. We are hungry to play our part in our country's economic recovery and have been impatient for the Government to see our potential after so many years of undelivered promises. Today's announcement to invest in NPR shows that this Government will meet that ambition head-on.

The previous Government issued an instruction to the HS2 Phase 2b hybrid Bill Committee to remove the Mid Cheshire sections of the route from the Bill. Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether this Government intend to retain or withdraw this instruction? If they intend to withdraw it, will she write to me with details of the status of any undertakings and assurances made by HS2 to my councils and constituents as part of the petitioning process, which would not be delivered for more than a quarter of a century and by an organisation that may, by then, no longer exist?

Heidi Alexander: I understand the importance of these issues to my hon. Friend and his constituents. I have instructed officials today to resume work on the adapted hybrid Bill. If I may, given the detailed nature of his question, I will respond to him in writing to ensure that I get the information correct.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): We on the Labour Benches are from the north and fight for the north, and this Labour Government will deliver the economic justice that we deserve in the north. As the Secretary of State will agree, I am sure, Darlington is the home of the railways, with our proud industrial history of British rail manufacturing. Will she outline how this investment and this plan will deliver for British rail manufacturing in my constituency and the rest of the north?

Heidi Alexander: I am left under no illusions that my hon. Friend is from the north and will fight for the north. Having enjoyed a very hospitable evening with her in Darlington at the Hitachi rail manufacturing plant, I know how critical that employer is to her region. I am pleased that today's announcement is not only an investment in rail infrastructure, but a downpayment on that manufacturing base and its future in order to realise the full economic potential of the region.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Over the past five years, per-head transport spend in the east midlands has fallen to just 54% of the UK average—the lowest of any region or nation. Rail funding is even more unequal, at £175 per head in 2023-24, which is barely 40% of the English average. With the Tories scrapping the east midlands leg in October 2023, HS2 will not be coming to my constituency, so while I welcome the ambition and scale of today's announcement, I ask the Secretary of State to look once more at electrification of the midland main line, which will have an immediate economic impact and can be delivered in this Parliament.

Heidi Alexander: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies), we are keeping this matter under review. We had to take the difficult decision not to fund it in the spending review. That is not to say that the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) are not benefiting from improvements on the railway—I know that the Minister for Local Transport is particularly excited about the new fleet of East Midlands Railway trains, which are providing a much better passenger experience for my hon. Friend's constituents. We are determined to keep building on those sorts of improvements.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I believe that the Secretary of State has inadvertently misled the House on Reform's voting record. We have always supported more transport in the north. I ask your advice on how we can correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am grateful to the hon. Member for letting the Chair know that she wished to raise this matter. However, the Chair is not responsible for how the Secretary of State answered her question.

West Midlands Police

1.58 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): With permission, I will make a statement on the decision to ban the travelling fans of Maccabi Tel Aviv from attending a game at Villa Park in November last year. The decision was taken by Birmingham city council, following the advice of the safety advisory group, which acted on a recommendation by West Midlands police.

The House will be familiar with much of the detail, not least as the Home Affairs Committee has applied itself to the matter with its customary forensic focus, but it is important to begin this statement by laying out the facts. On 8 October, at a meeting with a number of chief constables from across the country, I was informed that West Midlands police force was considering its options to ensure the game could be conducted safely. As the minutes of the meeting show, a ban on fans was one of the options under consideration.

Such policing decisions are subject to operational independence. Politicians cannot dictate how the police choose to manage risk, so although my Department sought information thereafter on what decision was to be taken, I did not seek to influence it. I did not because I could not while a range of options were still under consideration. All options remained on the table until a decision was eventually taken by the safety advisory group on 16 October. The decision taken that day to ban the travelling fans was clearly of considerable national and even international importance. Maccabi Tel Aviv fans who sought to travel to this country to enjoy a football match were told that they could not, because the game's safety could not be guaranteed. This came, lest we ever forget, just two weeks after the most horrific antisemitic terrorist attack this country has ever known. On 16 October, the day the decision was taken, the Prime Minister and I both voiced our considerable concern, setting out our belief that the game should go ahead with all fans present.

The Government sought further information from West Midlands police and offered the resources required to ensure that the game could go ahead. A subsequent meeting of the safety advisory group was then arranged, on 24 October. At that moment, its chair requested

"a wholly fresh consideration of the issue",

at which point the intelligence provided by West Midlands police hardened, and the recommendation to ban fans was upheld.

In the days that followed, it was clear to me that an external review of the decision was required, as well as a review of wider questions around safety advisory groups. On 31 October, I commissioned a rapid review by His Majesty's inspector of constabulary and fire and rescue services, Sir Andy Cooke, and on 27 November, as the intelligence that the force provided was called into doubt, I asked him to look specifically at that issue.

Today, I have received Sir Andy's interim report, and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House. Sir Andy's findings are damning—there is no other way to describe them. The force, we now discover, conducted little engagement with the Jewish community, and none with the Jewish community in Birmingham, before a decision was taken. As Sir Andy says, it is no excuse to claim, as the force now does, that high holy days during the relevant time prevented engagement.

Most concerningly, Sir Andy describes, in the approach taken by West Midlands police, what he characterises as "confirmation bias". This means that rather than following the evidence, the force sought only evidence to support their desired position, which was to ban the fans. This saw West Midlands police speaking to Dutch police following a game in which there had been fan violence, while failing to speak to police in other countries—Greece, Ukraine and Denmark—where Maccabi Tel Aviv had played more recently, and where things had gone more peacefully.

The West Midlands police engagement with the Dutch police is one of the most disquieting elements of Sir Andy's report. The summary provided as evidence to the safety advisory group ahead of its crucial meeting on 24 October was inaccurate. Claims including those about the number of police officers deployed, the links between fans and the Israel Defence Forces, the targeting of Muslim communities, the mass tearing down of Palestinian flags, and attacks on police officers and taxi drivers were all either exaggerated or simply untrue.

In his report, Sir Andy is clear that the force's validation of intelligence was a cause for "significant concern", and that record keeping within the force was "poor". He was "especially concerned" about the handling of sensitive information that should never have been shared without redaction. Sir Andy also points to a series of public statements from West Midlands police that we now know to have been misleading. He shows that the police overstated the threat posed by the Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, while understating the risk posed to Israeli fans if they travelled to the area. The term "misleading communications" also extends to the words of the chief constable himself at his appearance in front of the Home Affairs Committee; he claimed that artificial intelligence tools were not used to prepare intelligence reports—a claim since refuted by one of his own officers, who blames incorrect evidence on "an AI hallucination".

I know better than most that West Midlands police officers do their duty bravely, day in and day out. Sir Andy's report does not argue that the entire force is failing, but it is clear from the report that on an issue of huge significance to the Jewish community in this country, and to us all, we have witnessed a failure of leadership that has harmed the reputation of and eroded public confidence in West Midlands police, and policing more broadly.

Faced with a game of such importance, the chief constable of the force, Craig Guildford, should have ensured that more professional and thorough work was done. As Sir Andy says, the shortcomings detailed in his report are

"symptomatic of a force not applying the necessary strategic oversight and not paying enough attention to important matters of detail, including at the most senior levels."

The ultimate responsibility for the force's failure to discharge its duties on a matter of such national importance rests with the chief constable. It is for that reason that I must declare today that the chief constable of West Midlands police no longer has my confidence. It has been, as I understand it, over 20 years since a Home Secretary last made such a statement, but on the evidence provided by Sir Andy Cooke, the chief inspector of policing, that is now the case.

[Shabana Mahmood]

Until 2011, the Home Secretary had the authority to dismiss a chief constable, but the power was removed by the previous Conservative Government. Today, only police and crime commissioners hold that power, so the chief constable's future rests with the local police and crime commissioner, and not with me. I am sure that Simon Foster will now follow all due process as he considers the question for himself. However, I believe that this case illustrates that Home Secretaries should, in future, have that power restored to them. When a chief constable is responsible for a damaging failure of leadership, the public rightly expect the Home Secretary to act, and I intend to restore their ability to do so. I can announce today that the Government will soon reintroduce the Home Secretary's power to dismiss chief constables in the light of significant or persistent failings, and that this will be part of the Government's upcoming White Paper on wider police reform, with legislation to follow. I do not expect the power to be used often, but it must be available at those rare moments when it is warranted.

Sir Andy Cooke's report is devastating. It catalogues failures that did not just affect the travelling fans but let down our entire Jewish community in the west midlands and across the country. I speak today not just as Home Secretary, but as a Member of Parliament for a Birmingham constituency. In his report, Sir Andy says that he believes that the police acted in an attempt to avoid long-term damage to local community relations; if that is the case, what a grossly misguided effort it was.

Peaceful, harmonious communities rely on a police service that, above all else, pursues the truth. We live in a world where misinformation flows freely and dangerously; in this case, the police added further misinformation to the public debate, when they could and should have provided the truth, which could have allayed fears. In doing what it did, West Midlands police force did not support community relations; instead, it inadvertently made things worse. This must serve as a lesson to police forces throughout the country—a reminder that they are called to their profession to serve truth and the law, and to police our streets without fear or favour, and that community trust and cohesion depend on them doing that above all else. With that, I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.8 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): This is a shameful episode. West Midlands police had evidence that Islamist extremists based in Birmingham planned to attack Maccabi Tel Aviv fans. Let us call that what it is: vicious antisemitism. We cannot allow violent Islamists to impose their will on our country, yet that is exactly what West Midlands police, through weakness and fear, allowed to happen. The force should instead have confronted the Islamist extremists. In fact, it should have investigated the extremists for inciting racial hatred, as Jonathan Hall KC said only yesterday. Instead, the force capitulated to the Islamist mob by banning the Maccabi fans.

But it gets worse. The West Midlands police force then tried to hide what it had done. The police fabricated a claim that it was the Maccabi fans who were the dangerous ones. They claimed that a previous game in Amsterdam had led to violence by the Maccabi fans. That claim was a pack of lies from start to finish. The Mayor of Amsterdam and Dutch police have now confirmed that West Midlands police simply made the whole thing up. The chief constable must be fired.

A moment ago, the Home Secretary claimed that she has no powers to dismiss the chief constable, but she failed to mention section 40 of the Police Act 1996, which remains in force today. Under that, she as Home Secretary has the power to direct the police and crime commissioner to do things—including dismissing the chief constable—where

"any part of a…force is failing to"

act

"in an effective manner".

That test is clearly met: part of the force—the chief constable—is indeed failing to act in an effective manner, by the Home Secretary's own analysis. If she is unfamiliar with that legislation, I have a copy of it here. The Home Secretary must today use her section 40 powers to direct the police and crime commissioner, Simon Foster, to dismiss Craig Guildford. She must stop pretending to have no power and actually act.

We now come to the role of the Home Secretary in this scandal. In a briefing to the BBC on 17 October, a source close to the Home Secretary—we all know that means her special adviser, acting with her authority—said that the Home Secretary first knew about the possibility of a ban on 16 October, the previous evening. We now know that is untrue. From evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee last week, and from the Home Secretary's own admission just now, we now know that Chief Constable Guildford personally briefed the Home Secretary on 8 October that it was likely that away fans would be banned, and that that was the police's recommendation. Will she apologise for allowing her adviser to give the BBC untrue information on 17 October?

The Home Secretary must now answer this. She knew on 8 October that it was likely that away fans would be banned. That was over a week before the final decision was taken on 16 October, yet in those critical eight days, it appears that she did nothing to investigate further, or to try to stop the ban. In evidence to the Home Affairs Committee last week, the chief constable said that when he briefed the Home Secretary on 8 October about the likelihood of the ban, she merely "noted"—that was his word—what he said; she did not ask further questions, or show curiosity about what she was being told. She did not personally convene any meetings attended by her in the following eight days, or take any personal steps to clarify the situation. She expressed concerns and took action only after the decision became public on 16 October, by when it was too late. She was asleep at the wheel at the critical time.

Given the disgraceful events that followed, does the Home Secretary now accept that she was wrong to personally ask no questions—officials may have done, but she did not—between 8 October and 16 October? Does she accept that it was wrong to stand by and do nothing during those critical eight days? By the time she did take action—after 16 October—it was too late. By standing by during those critical eight days, she allowed the ban to happen and let the Islamists win. Will the Home Secretary apologise to the House for that inexcusable inaction during those critical days? Will she also commit to exercising her section 40 powers to direct the police and crime commissioner to dismiss the chief constable?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me first say to the shadow Home Secretary that I have long and very personal experience of standing up to extremists in Birmingham, not least in the last general election campaign. I think my track record speaks for itself, and I am a woman who knows of what she speaks—clearly unlike him. He appears to be unfamiliar with the law, and indeed with Sir Andy's findings in his report. Let me remind him of a few things.

First, it was the Conservative Government who removed the Home Secretary's direct power to remove a chief constable. That power used to be in section 42 of the Police Act 1996, but it was repealed by the Conservatives; the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 explicitly removed the power. I will quote from the explanatory notes to that Act. I suspect that the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) drafted and approved them when he advised the former Home Secretary, Baroness May, so he will be aware of what is in them. They say:

"The Secretary of State does not have power to direct a police and crime commissioner to suspend or remove a chief constable."

That is the law passed by the previous Conservative Government.

Chris Philp: I am talking about section 40.

Shabana Mahmood: If the shadow Home Secretary made himself familiar with how the law is to be interpreted and implemented, he would well know that section 40 of the 1996 Act, which remains in force following the 2011 Act, cannot be read in isolation. When such matters are litigated before a court, a court would be aware of the direct powers removed by the repealing of section 42—we cannot read the two sections in isolation. If he paid any attention to the detail, he would know that, and he would know that the Home Secretary does not have the power that he claims I have.

Secondly, I suggest that the shadow Home Secretary and other hon. Members, in their own interests, pay attention to what Sir Andy has written in his report of today. On page 11 he deals with what the chief constable has suggested was the reading of the meeting that took place on 8 October. Let me give the House a bit of context. That was a meeting of police chiefs that I called following the attack in Manchester on 2 October. I had already announced that I was going to look at police protest powers and I had asked the most senior chief constables in the land, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing and, indeed, Sir Andy Cooke to attend a meeting with me.

Towards the end of that meeting, we did some horizon scanning of other difficult decisions coming up that might have public order consequences, and this was one such matter. It was mentioned briefly by the chief constable, and his recollection of it is absolutely untrue. The chief constable did not say to me, or indeed to anybody else in that room, that West Midlands police had already made the decision to reduce the allocation of tickets for Maccabi Tel Aviv fans to zero but that it was ultimately a decision for the safety advisory group when it next met—that is categorically untrue. If that had been the case, given the seniority of everybody who was in the room and heard what was said, that would have elicited a reaction not just from me and my officials but from many of the other senior policing officials present.

What was made clear to me was that the ban was a possibility but it was one of a number of options being considered. As late as 15 October, the football policing unit made it clear to Home Office officials and the Policing and Crime Minister that all options were still on the table. The next thing that we or anybody else knew about it was when the decision was taken on 16 October.

It is important that all hon. Members stick to the facts on this matter. As Sir Andy has made clear in his factual findings in his report, there will be those who wish to play politics with this matter, but I am afraid that does not meet the test of evidence as set out in the report. I recommend that the shadow Home Secretary pays some attention to the detail.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab): Is the Home Secretary able to say who was the most senior police officer who reviewed all the evidence—AI or otherwise—and signed off the decision?

Shabana Mahmood: Ultimately, the final decision on the West Midlands police's recommendation to the safety advisory group was from the chief constable.

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

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The recommendation by West Midlands police to ban Maccabi Tel Aviv fans was clearly an incredibly serious mistake. That has been shown in evidence by Sir Andy Cooke's damning report. Not just the decision but how it was made and the fact that misleading statements were covered up is damning. The latest examples of how artificial intelligence was used in coming to the decision, after multiple denials, beggar belief and risk seriously undermining public trust in the police, and not only in the west midlands but across the whole country.

The chief constable of West Midlands police does not have the Home Secretary's confidence. He does not have mine, and I assume that he does not have that of most of the House. He needs to consider his position and go now. I am pleased that the Home Secretary went to quite unprecedented levels to say that he should go, and I am pleased that she has spoken to the House first. Will she meet the police and crime commissioner later today to call for the chief constable to go?

We need the Independent Office for Police Conduct to investigate what has gone on in West Midlands police. Will the Home Secretary ensure that takes place? We have already seen delays to the Hillsborough law and its duty of candour, including just this week. Does the Home Secretary agree that this incident shows the need to put the Hillsborough law on to the statute book as soon as possible? Finally, we need urgent transparency and clarity on the use of AI by police forces. Does the Home Secretary agree, and what plans does she have to ensure that guidance is given to police forces?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Lib Dem spokesperson for his remarks. I have, as a matter of courtesy, informed the police and crime commissioner in advance of making this statement that I would be saying that I do not have confidence in the chief constable of West Midlands police. I have also reiterated and made it clear that any statutory process, and any decision under the statutory

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process on further action against the chief constable, would be a matter for the police and crime commissioner himself. He must consider that on his own terms, and I am sure that he will be making his own statement once he has had a chance to absorb the findings of Sir Andy's report. Given that there could be a statutory process, I will not be commenting on what may or may not be happening, in order to respect the independence and integrity of any future decisions.

On the IOPC, I expect that the police and crime commissioner will consider his position on this matter and approach the IOPC if he deems it necessary, but that is a judgment for him. I also expect the IOPC to consider whether these findings mean that it should use its own power of initiative to conduct an investigation. The hon. Member will know that it is independent, and it would be improper for me to seek to direct it in any way, but it does have those powers and I believe it has already indicated that it will consider the position again, once it has had a chance to absorb the findings of Sir Andy's report.

I agree with the hon. Member that this case proves why we need a duty of candour on all public officials, and I look forward to the Hillsborough law becoming an Act of Parliament at the earliest opportunity. On the use of artificial intelligence by police forces, I will be returning to these matters when I publish—I will come to the House to make a statement—the policing reform White Paper. This is important because AI is an incredibly powerful tool that can and should be used by our police forces, but regulating it to make sure it is always accurate is a matter of legitimate concern to us all, and I will be saying more about that in due course.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. It is disappointing, but perhaps unsurprising, that some of the evidence presented to the Home Affairs Committee was an AI hallucination. As I look to the back row of the Opposition side of the Chamber, I ask the Secretary of State whether she shares my suspicions that there was indeed political interference with the work of the Birmingham safety advisory group. What will happen if that turns out to be the case?

Shabana Mahmood: Having commissioned Sir Andy to investigate these matters, I think it is important that we reflect on his findings. He found that there was no evidence that police officers were motivated either by antisemitism or as a result of political interference, or were otherwise behaving with malign intent. It is important that I follow those findings from the independent inspector and act accordingly.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): This is truly a sad day for British politics. Despite all the rhetoric in this House, Brummies know the truth: this is nothing but a witch hunt and the chief constable is being thrown under the bus. The Home Secretary knows all too well that West Midlands police have a reputation for working with all communities; it has never caved in to community pressure. We all know this because we regularly have far right protests and marches in our city. The police could have done a better job in terms of procedure, yes, but their reason for banning Maccabi fans was the same from day one. We all know about the unashamed racism and violence, and that is the reason they were banned, because that would have been brought to the streets of Birmingham—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is getting to his question.

Ayoub Khan: The police did their job and now they are being punished for it, so I ask the Home Secretary: is it worth throwing our chief constable under the bus just to show that the words of the right-wing media and Dutch officials, under pressure from Amsterdam city hall, matter more than our British police?

Shabana Mahmood: You would think that the hon. Member, who I believe used to be a barrister, might be more cognisant of the actual facts in this matter. I am responding to findings made by His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services—that is, the independent inspector of policing. It is a sad day for all those who believe that policing should occur without fear or favour. I would encourage him to read the letter from Sir Andy Cooke, published today, in detail and reflect on whether he believes that we as a country should be able to rely on and trust all information put out by the police. The hon. Member purports to speak for every Brummie in the city, but I think other Brummies in this Chamber know that is simply not the case. I will tell him what every Brummie, and indeed every citizen of our great country, needs and deserves: that when the police carry out a risk assessment, we can trust it and rely on it, and that they will always be open and frank about what is really going on. That is not what happened in this case, but it is what we all should expect and deserve, whichever community we belong to. It is what we all need for our collective safety and for the cohesion of our country.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): It is absolutely clear that, by lies and conspiracy, the chief constable of the West Midlands created a no-go area for Jews in one of our major cities. He cannot, by whatever mechanism, continue in office, but will the Home Secretary consider prosecuting him for malfeasance in public office, or in some other way, because we cannot let such an appalling activity by a public servant continue in this way by just sacking him?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend will know that it is not for me to make decisions on prosecutions. I am sure that the IOPC will consider all the findings made by Sir Andy Cooke and act upon them, once it has had a chance to make that assessment. The IOPC is independent and it would be inappropriate for me to say anything further from the Dispatch Box about what it, or indeed any other prosecutorial authority, might do. That is not a power that the Home Secretary has.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary—who, like me, is a local west midlands Member of Parliament—for her well-judged statement, but is not one of the villains of this piece the police and crime commissioner himself? When we, in government, set up the PCCs in 2010, the aim was that they should represent our constituents to the police. Sadly, the reality has been the reverse, and nowhere

more so than in the west midlands, which is why I strongly support the Government's decision to abolish the PCCs. Can we please ensure that this is not yet another policy announcement upon which the Government will U-turn?

Shabana Mahmood: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will be pursuing the policy that I have set out, which is to abolish the post of police and crime commissioner. I will return to the House with a White Paper and will make an oral statement in the not-too-distant future, setting out what we consider to be the best mechanism for oversight of policing at local level, as well as a reset of where some of those powers sit and another reconsideration of the Home Secretary's powers. I am sure that we will be discussing these matters in detail in the weeks to come. Sir Andy makes some of his own remarks in relation to the police and crime commissioner, but I think it is known that the commissioner was not briefed in the way that we might have expected on these matters. I am sure he will be setting out exactly what he knew and when, when he responds to Sir Andy's report.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I welcome this statement and this clarity. The findings are damning. I was born and bred in Birmingham and I am a local MP, and I know that in my community there is very little trust in the police. Does the Secretary of State agree that, in an increasingly political world, it is important that in future all chief constables have the skills to work in this new world and that they are able to engage with all communities?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Birmingham colleague for her question. That is exactly why I have made the statement I have, because I believe all of us in this country need to be able to trust the police when they come forward and say that they have risk assessed an upcoming event and come to a professional judgment as to whether the event can take place safely. We all need to be able to trust that they have gone about making that risk assessment in a way that is robust, consistent, in line with the law and, frankly, just plain old truthful. That is not what has happened in this case. It is why it has been debilitating to public confidence in policing in our great city and across our region, but also across the country. It is why I set out what I have said about losing confidence in the chief constable and why I believe some powers for oversight of policing need to return to the Home Secretary directly.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to talk about the need for the information to be out there and for openness. In the light of that, can she clarify whether any Government officials talked to Maccabi Tel Aviv as a club or through either of the embassies to discuss the decision by the club to say that away fans would not travel even if the ban were lifted?

Shabana Mahmood: I think all the conversations that have happened were set out by one of my officials and by the Policing Minister when they gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee. I am not aware of any other discussions, certainly not from the Home Office. I can write to the right hon. Member in case there were discussions in other Departments that might also have had an interest.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It was right and proper to have an independent report commissioned, the findings of which no one can challenge because it was done independently. We need to be cognisant that it is not just the chief constable who is made the scapegoat in all this; the safety advisory group had a huge part to play, and members of it were biased and had an agenda. Some of them, I am ashamed to say, belonged to my party. Will the Home Secretary agree that tough action needs to be taken against the individuals who set out to influence the decision on a personal basis, rather than as an independent member of that safety advisory group?

Shabana Mahmood: Sir Andy Cooke will return to the wider questions as to how safety advisory groups function, who is on them, the role they play and the way in which they should carry out their duties, so we will return to that part of my hon. Friend's remarks in a later session in this House when the rest of Sir Andy's report is completed and he makes his final findings on safety advisory groups. But I share his concern that it is incumbent on us to ensure that the arrangements we have in place are capable of delivering a dispassionate, fact-based finding as to what risk an event poses and that other political agendas are not brought into play when what we are talking about is the proper functioning of the cultural life of our country.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): This has been a dark moment for policing in the west midlands. I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for putting on the record her belief that the chief constable of the force should go. For the avoidance of doubt, I agree with her. This has always been about the police being able to fulfil their role objectively without fear or favour. Repeatedly, the Jewish community are made to feel that they are the ones who are the problem. That cannot go on. We have seen in this instance that the police have surrendered to the pressure placed on them by an Islamic community that sought to create a no-go zone for Jews within the west midlands. That is not acceptable. Will the Home Secretary update the House on what the Government are doing to flush out antisemitism across public institutions and society at large? If she has not got time to expand on that today, will she come back to the House and give a statement as soon as possible?

Shabana Mahmood: Antisemitism is a terrible stain upon our country, and it is incumbent on all of us to work together to stamp it out wherever it occurs. Sir Andy's findings, of course, do not suggest that anybody at the police force level acted because they were motivated by antisemitism or with malign intent, but it is undoubtedly the case that some individuals making representations to the police may well have been motivated by antisemitism. I also know others made, or wanted to make, good faith representations to the police about the fear of public disorder on the night, but some individuals will have been motivated by antisemitism. That is why it is so important that when the police carry out their duties, they follow the facts and that when they make their risk assessments, they do so on the basis of facts and their professional judgment as to whether something can go

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safely ahead. We all need to be able to trust the police when they assert what their risk assessment has told them. That has not happened here. Sir Andy will come back with further findings about the functioning of safety advisory groups. I am happy to discuss those with the hon. Member and others in this House, as well as wider policy measures that we will need to take as a Government and as a country to stamp out antisemitism once and for all.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. The west midlands is an incredibly diverse area, and this whole episode has had a significant impact on community cohesion and confidence in West Midlands police, particularly among the Jewish community but among all communities. I therefore add my voice to the calls for the chief constable to resign his position forthwith, and others involved in this shameful episode should also consider their position. The police have a duty to act without fear or favour. Engaging with selected people or organisations is always a recipe for disaster, particularly as community groups very often have their own agendas. As somebody who has engaged in many safety advisory groups over the years as an event organiser, it is clear that the rules need changing, that there must be more transparency and that the ability to manipulate their proceedings must be removed. Will the Home Secretary provide more information about the review into safety advisory groups that she has announced?

Shabana Mahmood: I expect to receive Sir Andy's further findings, particularly in relation to how safety advisory groups function and what changes we might need to make, within the next couple of months—no later than that. I will return to the House to enable all Members to take part in a debate once those findings are out. I agree with my hon. Friend—in the end, we are all safer when we know that we can rely on the police to do their job without fear or favour. We do none of our ethnic minority communities, or indeed any minority community of any description, any favours if we allow a suggestion to take hold that the police change their responses to things based on which community is involved. Everybody is safe when we know we can trust the police to follow the facts and do their jobs properly.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The Jewish community in this country, including many in my constituency, feel under siege right now. Sadly, this is not an isolated example; it is just another example of where elements of the British state appear to err on the side of the aggressor in the name of community cohesion. We have another example before us. Will the Home Secretary, in her capacity as a senior member of the Government with responsibility for tackling extremism, take the same robust approach to schools that are banning Jewish Members of Parliament from visiting them on exactly the same community cohesion grounds? It has to stop, and a more robust approach must be taken by the Government.

Shabana Mahmood: The incident of banning a Jewish Member of Parliament from the school is obviously disgraceful, and the right hon. Member will know that other senior members of the Government have already spoken out about this case. It is unacceptable. I hope he will see that the approach I have taken since I have been Home Secretary is to ensure that the law of our land is applied equally without fear or favour and in a consistent manner that gives every community across the country a sense of what they can expect from their local police, without feeling that they are in a postcode lottery and that it very much depends on the nature of the particular chief constable and the approach they take locally. That is exactly what I am trying to achieve with protest powers and with wider thresholds in relation to the Public Order Act where I have asked for an independent review by Lord Ken Macdonald KC, which will report soon. My intention is to ensure that every citizen of our country knows when it comes to all matters of law and order that we are all on exactly the same footing, and that is right for all our citizens.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. The picture Sir Andy paints of serious failings in the West Midlands police is utterly shocking, and the Home Secretary is completely right to withdraw confidence. Given the huge damage this saga has caused, what does the Home Secretary think can be done to ensure something like this never happens again?

Shabana Mahmood: This matter has been of interest to all policing leaders across the country, and it is why I addressed the final remarks in my statement to policing leaders everywhere because it is important that we learn the lessons from this event, and I hope that everybody will hear that message loud and clear. Operational independence will always be respected, but we all as a country—every citizen and every one of us as parliamentarians and members of the Government—need to know that when the police make a risk assessment, we can trust that assessment and rely on it.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I am proud that my father was a West Midlands police constable for 29 years, policing football matches during some of the darkest days of English football, but the Home Secretary is clearly right that there has been a failure in the leadership of West Midlands police over recent months. The Prime Minister rightly said that oversight for the police ultimately lies with the police and crime commissioner, which does not seem to have been the case here. The police and crime commissioner also has a specific responsibility for improving local relationships by building confidence and restoring trust in local communities, but both confidence and trust in West Midlands police have clearly collapsed. The Home Secretary is right to say that the chief constable needs to go, but should the police and crime commissioner not also consider his position?

Shabana Mahmood: I direct the hon. Member to Sir Andy's findings about what the police and crime commissioner knew—in fact, he was not kept up to date—but I am sure that once he has absorbed Sir Andy's findings, he will set out himself what he thinks on these matters and what he intends to do next. It is not for me to put words into his mouth.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Although I am a proud Wolverhampton Wanderers fan and, as a season ticket holder, regularly go to football games, for

much of my life I was prevented and discouraged from going to a football game. I was told that because I wore a turban and because of the colour of my skin, I would be attacked. Can the Home Secretary assure the House that we will never again have a situation in this country where football fans cannot go to a game because their safety cannot be guaranteed?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes that point very powerfully. That is why it is so important that all police forces always do everything they can to ensure that matters of great cultural and sporting significance in this country can go ahead safely, and that people are not prevented from going to and enjoying a game just because of who they are or their faith.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Among the catalogue of failure here is the news that the decision was partly made on the basis of a hallucinated AI report about an entirely fictitious football match. What assessment has the Home Secretary made on the extent to which AI is being used by police forces across the country? Does she know of any other consequential decisions that may have been made using unverified AI? Finally, last month, after two months my Select Committee, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, finally received a response to our letter on this issue from the assistant chief constable Mike O'Hara, who said that he was

"satisfied that the policing operation conducted with communities and partners was effective, proportionate and maintained the city's reputation as a safe and welcoming place for everyone."

What is the Home Secretary's message to him?

Shabana Mahmood: The contents of that letter have now been superseded by Sir Andy Cooke's august report and findings. I hope that everybody who asserted that there was no problem here, and that everything worked exactly as it should, will now reflect on what they have said and done and give the rest of us confidence that these mistakes will not happen again.

AI is an incredibly powerful tool and has a big role to play in assisting the police, particularly when it comes to sifting through evidence at speed and improving other productivity measures so that they can get on with the job of finding criminals and bringing them to justice. It is important that it is used accurately, does not lead to misleading statements, as we have seen in this case, and protects the validity of evidence, which ultimately has to be strong enough to hold up in a court of law. I will be saying more in just a few weeks' time in the policing reform White Paper, which will set out the Government's approach and expectations of the roll-out of AI to policing more broadly.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. As a Birmingham MP, I have set out on a number of occasions in the Chamber my serious concerns about both the decision and the way in which it was made. It is clear that the chief constable's position is untenable. I pay tribute to the many police officers who are working hard to make Birmingham safer for all its communities.

However, this decision did not arise in a vacuum. Put simply, if a sufficient professional culture had been followed at every level and by every individual in West Midlands police, this decision would never have been made. Does the Home Secretary agree that there must now be sufficient assurance that other decisions, including those that may not have the same national profile, but are important to my constituents, have not been tainted by a similar failure of process? If the chief constable resigns or is removed, does she agree that measures must be put in place to ensure that the highest operational standards are maintained for everyone in Birmingham?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my fellow Birmingham Member of Parliament for his comments and questions. There is no broader finding of systemic failure in Sir Andy's report. The failures that have been highlighted in the approach to evidence and the way in which the risk assessment was carried out relate to this specific event. He gave us no cause for concern about broader West Midlands police practice. However, I am sure that the police and crime commissioner and others, myself included, and all Birmingham MPs will want to assure themselves of the robustness of the procedures that the West Midlands police have in place. I am sure that we will return to these matters as this case develops further.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary for her robust statement and the leadership she has shown this afternoon. On community relations, can she assure me and other Members that lessons will be learned from this report and that other chief officers of other forces will look upon it as a reminder that they should be acting on behalf of the whole community that they seek to serve? She said that she was not able to direct the west midlands PCC to dismiss the chief constable, but is she confident that there will be no conflict of interest and that the PCC will not feel conflicted in removing the chief constable? Of course, I am sure that the chief constable still has honour, and therefore might choose to resign.

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman is right about community relations. Many people acting in bad faith and with malign intent across our country want to set Britain's Muslims against Britain's Jews. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we do not allow those efforts to succeed. On the police and the approach to community relations, I am clear that all of us, whoever we are and wherever we are in the country, must be able to rely on the police when they tell us that the foundation of their risk assessment is robust and secure. If we cannot trust the police on that, we have lost much more than just good and effective policing.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that I do not want to comment from the Dispatch Box on what the police and crime commissioner might wish to do; that is a matter entirely for him. He will make that choice independently. I am sure that he will have to ask questions about that. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that there is no conflict of interest simply because I have set out a view. It is important that I set out my view in the House, having commissioned a report from the independent inspector, but the police and crime commissioner is unfettered in how he approaches things. That is a matter for him, as I have made clear to him and as I am sure all his legal advice will tell him.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for her words, particularly about the dedicated frontline police officers of West Midlands police who serve my community and hers. It is clearly time for the chief constable to go. It is

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right that we expect a high standard of community engagement across all our communities from all our senior public servants, which has clearly not been met in this case, as we have explored thoroughly in this statement. More broadly, will the Home Secretary urgently bring forward a community cohesion strategy that tackles extremism and antisemitism and sets out clear expectations for how we live together in this great country of ours?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me assure my hon. Friend that all matters of community cohesion are under intense discussion across Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has already set up a taskforce to deal with antisemitism. I am sure that the Prime Minister and I will have more to say in the coming weeks about how we might take a fresh approach, but this is a question for wider Government, because although the Home Office interest is in countering extremism, as it should be, our broader interest in community cohesion sits across the rest of Government. I can assure her that it is a cross-Government effort.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Home Secretary has rightly lost confidence in the West Midlands chief constable, who kowtowed to thugs, abandoned the Jewish community and blamed Jewish fans. The question for the Home Secretary now is this: if the police and crime commissioner fails to fire the chief constable, will she still have confidence in that commissioner, and will she make the new legislation retrospective, to ensure that action is delivered?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman will know that we do not generally use retrospectivity in our legal system, and to take such a step would be a new innovation. He should wait for the full proposals, which I will publish in the policing reform White Paper. The next decision—if a further decision is made—is for the police and crime commissioner. It would be completely wrong for me to try to influence, comment on or get ahead of that decision from the Dispatch Box. As we have discussed, the police and crime commissioner has those powers under the 2011 Act, and it will be for him to reflect on whether he wishes to use them.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): This sorry saga with West Midlands police reveals a serious story about public life in Britain. It has become clear that employees in our public institutions do not recognise, understand or perhaps care about antisemitism in the police, local government, universities, political parties and elsewhere, and they are all too willing to accept at face value the claims by antisemites that their real objection is to the Israeli Government. They are unwitting agents of an agenda from the far left, the far right and Islamists. Antisemitism is rampant and unrelenting. Does the Home Secretary recognise the urgent need to take action, and will she consider a cross-departmental extremism strategy to address ideological antisemitism and other forms of extremism?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for her point, which was well made, about the stain of antisemitism in our country and the breadth and depth of ways in which it presents itself. I am well aware of those problems and working hard to resolve them. A cross-Government effort is under way, and we will have more to say in due course. I assure her that, as Home Secretary, my duty is to ensure that our legal system—law and order, and policing—is robust enough to withstand attempts to frustrate or improperly influence that system. It is important to remember that Sir Andy Cooke did not find that antisemitism was a motivating factor for the police officers who made the decisions in this case—nor were they subject to improper political interference or acting with malign intent. I accept her broader point, however, and reassure her that we are working on that carefully.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): To build on the comment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), the Jewish community in my constituency have felt under siege for a decade now. It is worth paying tribute to the Prime Minister, who, when he was Leader of the Opposition, drove out of the Labour party the people who had given antisemitism a safe space. Let us not be under any illusion, however, because many people still feel that they have a safe space for antisemitism—be it in our universities, where huge numbers of students believe that they can hassle Jewish students with impunity, or in our hospitals, as outlined in the Lord Mann and Dame Penny Mordaunt report, which I know the Secretary of State is trying to address. Antisemitism is blatant and people are allowed to get away with it.

We must call out antisemitism at all levels, so I call out the deputy leader of the Green party, who I am ashamed to say is a Leeds city councillor. He drove the Jewish priest of the University of Leeds into hiding, and he is still hiding. That must be called out. Will the Home Secretary use every effort of her office and across Government to ensure that where antisemitism is still given a safe space and is not addressed, the Government call out the leaders of those institutions and consider what action may be taken? This is another watershed moment—as odd as that sounds—and this time, something really must be done.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the Government are taking action across a range of different Departments—Education, Health and the Home Office—to drive out antisemitism in every way it presents itself. I am particularly cognisant of the impact on our institutions and of how the democratic underpinning of our society can be overcome, frustrated and thwarted by antisemites undermining the very basis on which we run our country. I assure him that every effort is being made.

As someone who has suffered racism and discrimination because of my faith and race background, I think I can speak for most ethnic minority people on the view that we generally take on these matters, which is that none of us is safe until all of us are safe. There has to be solidarity across our country and for every one of our communities. It is the collective whole that makes this country great.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): As a member of the Home Affairs Committee, I have been following this matter closely. Last autumn, safety advisory groups from Birmingham and Leicester banned or scaled down

Diwali events. Does the Home Secretary agree that councillors should be removed from SAGs, and that there should be greater transparency to ensure that there is no reliance on confirmation bias, which is, in my view, intertwined with the risk of predetermination that local authorities have a duty prevent when carrying out judicial duties?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend and other members of the Home Affairs Committee for their work on this and other matters. There are question marks over the way in which safety advisory groups function. As she remarks, there have been other incidents in which people have asked questions about how controversial decisions came to be made. That is why I asked Sir Andy to look more broadly at the functioning of safety advisory groups and to come to a view on their make-up, the transparency required of them, and the process by which they should make decisions. It is a little early to make determinations about whether any politician should be represented on those groups. If the system works well, local politicians can bring a local perspective with knowledge that only they have, but if that turns into an improper attempt to force their own political agenda, it cannot be tolerated. I hope that when Sir Andy publishes his findings, we will be able to return to where policy or legislative change is needed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the tone and content of the Home Secretary's statement. She will be well aware that when Maccabi were drawn to play at Villa Park, there were attempts by extremist elements in the community to prevent the fixture from taking place at all. When those attempts failed, they moved on to trying to get fans banned because the club comes from Israel and the fans are Jewish. I have been to Villa Park on multiple occasions. It would have been perfectly possible for those fans to be escorted by coach from the airport to right outside the ground, and then away from the ground immediately afterwards. It was clear that Aston Villa fans were not going to attack Maccabi fans, but extremists elements in the community were. It is clear, then, that the police concocted evidence to support that case. Although I completely agree with the Home Secretary about the chief constable, the senior leadership of West Midlands police also have questions to answer about who fabricated that evidence and whether it was done under orders. If the chief constable has to go, surely they have to go as well.

Shabana Mahmood: I know Villa Park well because, until the general election, it fell within my constituency boundary. After the decision was made, the Government and I—through my officials—asked West Midlands police whether the match could be policed in other ways to enable it to go ahead. We were clear that banning fans is an extreme action and that, in the general run of things, we should want cultural events in our country to take place. I recognise the picture that the hon. Gentleman paints. The findings are damning, as many hon. Members have said.

On the wider issue of other officers, I made the remarks today about the chief constable because he is the individual who leads the force. These events have happened on his watch. It was for him to set a culture in which all the risk assessments were done properly and where confirmation bias could not have taken hold, and it is he, of course, who made assertions and gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in the way that he did. It is now for him to reflect on that; he may have things to say in the coming days. It is now for the police and crime commissioner to consider what further actions he might wish to take, including under his broader responsibilities to make sure that the force is functioning as it should.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): As an alumnus of the University of Birmingham and former resident of Selly Oak, I have found this whole saga pretty astonishing from the start. We have had mistake after mistake and evidence that turned out to have been made up, and meanwhile the bond of trust with our Jewish community, which had already been under increasing pressure, has been caused further damage. Mistakes are made, but when they are this serious and include presenting falsified evidence to a Committee of this House, somebody has to take responsibility. I echo the calls made by Members across the House for the chief constable to do the decent thing and resign, and to do it today.

Shabana Mahmood: I have set out in my statement what I think. Others will need to reflect on their positions and what further steps they might take. I agree with my hon. Friend, however, that the findings of Sir Andy Cooke's report are damning and devastating, and once the bond of trust between a community and the police breaks for one community, it breaks for every community, which is why these findings are so serious and why I have had to say today what I have said about confidence in the chief constable.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If I understand correctly the presentation of Sir Andy's independent report by the Home Secretary, it says that the police knew that the visiting fans were not likely to attack the home community. Does it make clear whether they thought that the home community were likely to attack the visiting fans, because if they thought that and then inverted reality to blame the visiting fans, that would surely put the chief constable in an absolutely impossible position.

Shabana Mahmood: The findings in Sir Andy Cooke's report are about an overstating of the risk posed by the travelling fans and an understatement of the risk posed to those fans by others in the local community, so it is not a case of one thing being presented as fact and the other not. There has been an overstatement and an understatement, and the effect has been a risk assessment that was imbalanced, wholly skewed in one direction and did not adequately deal with all of the risks posed. I believe that one of the reasons suggested for a possible attack from home local individuals against the travelling fans was community relations. It is why I stand by what I said in my statement: community relations in this country are not served by overstatements and understatements and by hiding the full picture in order to keep things calm; the truth is what helps us all to stay safe, and that is what the police should have held to in this case.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I genuinely welcome the content of the Home Secretary's statement and her answers to other Members. It is clear that the west midlands chief constable's position is no longer tenable, but I accept the Home Secretary's

[Mark Sewards]

explanation of why she cannot remove him today and I am pleased that she will reintroduce that power in the near future. It is a national scandal that Maccabi Tel Aviv fans were not able to attend a football match in the UK's second city for what we now know were totally fabricated reasons. What does the Home Secretary say to them, and how can she reassure Israeli fans of any sport that this will not happen to them again and that the law will be applied equally without fear or favour?

Shabana Mahmood: The message needs to go out loud and clear to everyone that our expectation is that every police force that is making a decision on any cultural or football or other sporting event in our country has to do so by following the facts and acting without fear or favour. If the police do their job properly, we will always be able to put on events, police them safely and allow people in our country and from abroad to enjoy the great spectacle of football, a pop concert or other things. They are important parts of how we function as a country and they can only carry on being that if the police do their job properly.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Will the Home Secretary confirm that the Prime Minister was also told that a ban was likely in advance of the announcement? The Home Office and No. 10 were in touch according to the official documents. Was she told of the intelligence of 5 September that armed Islamists intended to attack the Israelis? On the point about operational independence, I worry she is overstating things: it is obviously wrong for politicians to tell police officers who to investigate or arrest, but for public order situations there is often a role for the Home Secretary when the planning work is under way before the operation. That is recognised in law and it is why the Prime Minister himself has called for particular policing decisions in public order situations in advance. Will the Home Secretary therefore confirm that, when she was told that the police would seek a ban on away fans, she did not ask to see the intelligence to justify the ban? Did she test the logic? Is it really true that she did nothing at all?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is presenting a particular picture of operational independence, which he knows is a difficult line to tread for all Home Secretaries and something that is guarded very closely by police. It would have been wholly inappropriate for me to try to carry out my own risk assessment, and if I were to challenge West Midlands police on the basis on which those decisions were made—as I was subsequently able to do once a decision was made—I would have been dependent on what they were telling me in the first place. I was not told that they would seek a ban on visiting fans; I was told that all options were on the table and that that was one of the things that was being considered. I was not told that it was going to be done. I refer the hon. Gentleman to Sir Andy's letter: the first paragraph of the final page of that letter sets out what actually happened and I absolutely refute any suggestion that I was told definitively on 8 October in the way that the chief constable has suggested. That did not happen.

On contact between the Home Office and No. 10, that would have happened in the usual way, but the first any of us were aware of the decision being brought forward and being made earlier than anticipated and that a ban was going to be pursued was on 16 October. I was not aware of any intelligence about any planned armed attacks by local people; that was never put to me.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): As a member of the Home Affairs Committee, I asked Chief Constable Guildford on two occasions whether AI was used in the preparation of the police report and he denied it both times, so I am pleased the truth has emerged and he is now considering his position. However, may I press the Home Secretary on the use of AI? I hear what she said, but while we await the Home Office's guidance, will she issue preliminary instructions to chief constables asking them not to use AI in such circumstances?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Gentleman particularly for his assiduous work on the Home Affairs Committee in relation to the hearings on this matter. I would hope that all police leaders have heard loud and clear the issue in relation to AI. I do not think any of them would want to fall foul of an AI hallucination. At best that is a deeply embarrassing finding, but it is also pretty damning of the overall approach taken in this case, and I am sure all police chiefs will want to make sure they do not get into the same position. The Home Office will set out our broader vision for how AI should be used in policing, because it clearly has a role to play, and how the police should hold themselves to account and the regulations under which the use of AI should be monitored, so that we can all have confidence that it is being used appropriately.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Any procedural failings by our police force or any public authority must be investigated, corrected and prevented. The letter from Sir Andy Cooke mentions that certain risks were overstated and understated, and that should be weighed, but statements in this House that incidents in Amsterdam were "completely fabricated" are also fabricated statements. Sir Andy acknowledges:

> "There is evidence that Maccabi Tel Aviv fans targeted Muslims and pro-Palestinians"

in Amsterdam. A report by Kick It Out Israel identified 118 incidents of racist chanting by Maccabi Tel Aviv fans during 2024 and 2025, which is the highest for any club in the Israeli premier league. UEFA fined Maccabi Tel Aviv €20,000 and imposed a suspended away fan ban for their match against—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I ask the hon. Member to sit down while I am standing. There needs to be a question to the Home Secretary.

Iqbal Mohamed: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is open season on Islamophobia in this Chamber. I am completely against any kind of racism, and antisemitism must be quashed, but so too should Islamophobia. Will the Home Secretary confirm that there is no reference to antisemitic decision making by the police in Sir Andy Cooke's report and that there is no mention of any Islamist influence in his report? I have the report in front of me—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I call the Home Secretary.

Shabana Mahmood: I say to the hon. Gentleman and all Members of the House that we should be led by the findings of the independent inspector, who has been very clear on where evidence was overstated and where it was understated. He has said that he believes that confirmation bias was at work and that there have been significant failings by West Midlands police in this matter. That is why I have said what I have said in my statement today.

I reiterate more broadly to the hon. Gentleman and everybody else that there are people in this country who want to set our minority communities against one another. Every Member of this House should want to police that boundary and to make sure that that does not take hold in our country. We can only be confident that we are subject to the same law, wherever we are in this country, if we all trust that the police will apply themselves without fear or favour. It is in everyone's interests to make sure that these issues are dealt with properly. Every citizen deserves the same sort of response from the police, so that when they tell us that something is true, we can believe them. That has not happened in this case and it needs to happen in the future.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on whether it is appropriate for Members of this House to call into question the intentions of Members when asking questions of the Home Secretary on this issue and to accuse us all of peddling Islamophobia.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I remind all Members to be careful and moderate in their language and to treat this Chamber and Members within it with respect. If we do so, we cannot go far wrong. Although that is not a point of order, it is a matter for the Chair and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising it. That concludes the statement.

I will now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Public Order Act 2023 (Interference With Use or Operation of Key National Infrastructure) Regulations 2025—*[Interruption.]* Order. The Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 110, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

Offshore Wind

3.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): With permission, I would like to make a statement about the seventh contracts for difference allocation round and the results for offshore wind. Eighteen months ago, the Government set out on our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower. That was a mission rooted in a simple argument: if we want to take back control of our energy from the petrostates and dictators, if we want to bring down bills for good and if we want to create a new generation of secure, well-paid jobs, the right choice is to get off the rollercoaster of international fossil fuel markets, which caused the worst cost of living crisis in memory. For a year and a half, that mission has faced determined opposition from a well-funded band of doomsters and defeatists. Today, we publish the results of our latest offshore wind auction and with it we prove those doubters and naysayers wrong. Let me set out the results to the House.

On coming to office, we inherited the fiasco of the fifth allocation round—a failure of the Conservatives' making that trashed the crown jewels of our energy system—in which not a single offshore wind project was secured. That is their legacy; that is the legacy of the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho).

Our last auction round, allocation round 6, got the industry on its feet again. Today it roars back stronger than ever. We have secured 8.4 GW of offshore wind, enough to power the equivalent of more than 12 million homes. There are winning fixed offshore wind projects in every part of Great Britain: Dogger Bank South off the coast of Yorkshire and Vanguard off the coast of East Anglia, two of the largest offshore wind farms in the world; Berwick Bank in the North sea, the first new Scottish project since 2022; and Awel y Môr, the first Welsh project to win a contract in more than a decade. On floating wind, the emerging technology of the future, we have successful projects in Wales and Scotland—the Erebus project in the Celtic sea and Pentland in Scotland—backed by pioneering investment from Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund.

Taken together, that is a record-breaking amount of offshore wind capacity procured in a single auction. It is the most successful offshore wind auction in British history and the most successful ever to be carried out anywhere in Europe. That is what it means to deliver on the promise we made to the British people. Against the backdrop of the global headwinds facing the industry, this is a huge vote of confidence in Britain's drive for energy sovereignty and abundance.

Let me explain why these results are so important for the country. First, they are a major step forward for our clean energy mission. Alongside our work driving ahead on onshore wind, solar, batteries and nuclear, they put us firmly on track to take back control of our energy and deliver clean power by 2030. We have only to look at events around the world to see that we live in increasingly unstable and uncertain times. Fossil fuel shocks have caused half of the UK's recessions since 1970. Last year, wholesale gas prices spiked by 15% in a single week after global instability in the middle east. We must also never forget the impact of Russia invading Ukraine; family finances, business finances and the public finances

[Ed Miliband]

were wrecked as a result of our being left exposed to fossil fuels. This exposure leaves us incredibly vulnerable as a country, and we do not have a moment to waste in ending it. That is why our mission is so important.

Our record-breaking results show that our approach to building things again in this country is working. We are more secure in our energy system today than we were yesterday thanks to these results, and we look forward to building on this momentum as we look ahead to AR8, which we are on track to open later this year.

Secondly, on cost, the results show that offshore wind is cheaper to build and operate than new gas. Today we publish updated estimates of the levelised cost of electricity, the standard industry metric, which includes the cost of building and operating new gas-fired power stations—the same metric as was published under the last Energy Secretary. These estimates show that the cost of building and operating a new gas-fired power station is £147 per megawatt-hour. By contrast, I can inform the House that the average price for fixed offshore wind in today's auction was £90.91 per megawatt-hour. In other words, it is 40% cheaper than the cost of building and operating new gas, but do not take my word for it. This is what the head of Energy UK, which represents gas, nuclear and renewable generators, said of renewables this morning:

> "We need to invest in new power generation, and this is the cheapest form."

I know that some people want to pull the wool over our eyes on this, but they can only do so by comparing the cost of building and operating new renewables with the cost of operating but not building new gas.

Here is the reality: faced with years of under-investment in our energy system under the previous Government, and with power demand set to increase by at least 50% by 2035 and to more than double by 2050, there is no alternative to building new energy infrastructure in this country. We can choose to stop building renewables and just build new gas plants, as the Conservatives want to, but it is clear that offshore wind remains significantly cheaper to build and operate. Credible, independent research confirms that the renewables that we have already built are bearing down on wholesale electricity costs, having reduced wholesale prices by a quarter in 2024. Our mission is right: clean power is the route to bringing down energy bills for good.

Thirdly, today's auction cements the offshore wind industry's position as a jobs and growth engine for Britain. It is at the heart of our industrial strategy. These projects will unlock £22 billion in private investment and support at least 7,000 good jobs across the country, from the Scottish highlands to the Suffolk coast. Members across the House know that so many people in our country ask where the good jobs of the future, for themselves and their children, will come from. Clean energy is central to the answer. The previous Government failed to act to ensure that offshore wind generated jobs and supply chains in this country. By contrast, we will use every tool at our disposal to ensure that turbines, foundations and cables are made and built in Britain, creating good, well-paid jobs with strong trade unions. That is why this auction, for the first time, included a clean industry bonus to reward investment in ports and factories in the areas that need it most.

I can inform the House that in this auction, the industry has responded with ambition. The clean industry bonus will crowd in billions of pounds of private investment and support thousands of jobs in supply chains across the country. We look forward to setting out the full results in due course, as we drive forward on the 100,000 offshore wind jobs that our mission will support by 2030.

Let me close by saying that Britain faces a choice over the coming years. We can seize the opportunities of clean, home-grown energy to cut bills and create jobs, or we can double down on our exposure to fossil fuels. In calling for us to cancel this auction, our opponents made their choice: they are setting their face against cheaper, clean, home-grown power, against 7,000 jobs supported today and thousands more to come, against taking back control of our energy sovereignty, and against action on the climate crisis to protect our children and grandchildren. This Government have made our choice: we choose energy security, lower bills, good jobs and the climate. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.20 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

What the Secretary of State has done today has given a massive boost to the profits of multimillion-pound energy companies, but will be paid for by consumers through their bills. What do the prices show us? First, wind power is not getting cheaper as promised. These are the highest prices that we have seen in a decade. Today's strike prices, in a like-for-like comparison, are much higher than last year's prices. If we use the Secretary of State's own figures on the worth of the contract extension—he extended it to 20 years—the prices are 24% more expensive than last year's. That is an enormous year-on-year increase, which is much higher than inflation.

Can the Secretary of State explain why building a wind farm has suddenly got so much more expensive? Well, I can. It is because by setting himself completely unrealistic targets, he advertised to multimillion-pound wind developers that he would be buying whatever they were selling, no matter the cost. He flexed all the rules, he extended their contracts, and he gave the wind developers everything they wanted, and they repaid him with the most expensive prices for wind power that we have seen in a decade.

The Secretary of State wants us to celebrate the fact that he bought a bumper round—in his own words, the "biggest in history". Let us take his key argument on levelised cost of electricity. If he had looked at or replied to any of the letters that I have sent him, he would know that I did not agree with using a LCOE to compare wind power and gas power. He will know that I started—*[Interruption.]* He might want to listen to this; he might learn something. He will know that I started a full systems cost, which he cancelled, even though I urged him to continue it. That is because the full cost of these contracts to the consumer is £95 in today's money, plus inflation and the extra costs that come with wind, such as turning off the turbines when it is too windy, having a back-up gas plant when it is not

windy enough, and connecting the turbines to the grid. He has underplayed the true cost of wind in people's bills. By the way, it is not just me saying that this is how we should look at cost; wind developers say the same. Sir Dieter Helm and senior economists say that we should look at the full systems cost.

When the Secretary of State talks about the comparison with a new gas power plant, he is wilfully ignoring the fact that he needs to build new gas plants anyway. What does he think will power the country on wintry days when the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow? Even his own plans acknowledge that it is gas power. In his plans, he will build the same amount of gas plants anyway, but he will just run them 4% of the time. Would anyone here buy a house that they use 4% of the time? Well, I guess out of all of us, it is probably the Secretary of State who would.

Here is the problem: the Secretary of State is having to build more and more capacity, lots of which will sit idle most of the time, which means higher costs for a less productive energy system. These are all costs that the Secretary of State is choosing to ignore, but even if we use the figures that he is quoting today, which underplay the cost of wind, the truth is there. If we take out the carbon tax that he is choosing to impose, the cost of a gas power plant running fully is roughly a third cheaper than offshore wind. That is written in black and white on page 33 of the report, if hon. Members would like to check. He is hoping that Labour Members will not read what he has published today, but I hope that they do, because it should be facts, not ideology, that drive the decisions that we make for our energy system.

People out there are at breaking point. They get up every day, they go to work, and everything they earn is being eaten up by Labour's taxes and their bills. Last time we spoke across the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State tried to tell me that people's energy bills are going down, not up. Nobody out there believes him. Energy bills have gone up five times under him because of his policies, and now he is celebrating this botched wind auction that has seen him sign up to the highest prices for wind power for a decade—prices close to 20% higher than the cost of electricity.

The question is: how on earth can the Secretary of State bring bills down with these higher prices? That is what people were promised. This will be the private finance initiative of the energy system, and it will be in place long after he has gone from this place. I warned him that if he set himself completely unrealistic targets, the wind developers would have him over a barrel, and that is what has happened. He talks about fossil fuel spikes, but he does not talk about the ongoing de-industrialisation of this country because of uncompetitive electricity prices—prices that he is locking us into for two decades.

I have three simple questions for the Secretary of State. Will he finally publish a full systems cost of clean power 2030? Will he confirm that he will still need to build gas power plants for dispatchable power? If that is not his policy, what will keep the lights on when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine? Does he have a forecast for the constraint payments, and how much does he expect to pay wind developers to turn off when it is too windy?

Ed Miliband: That was a lot, as they say. Let me deal with what the right hon. Lady said point by point. First, we will take no lectures from her on energy bills. She presided over the worst cost of living crisis in history, and not once have we heard a word of apology. This Government are taking £150 of costs off bills. How are we doing that? By raising taxes on the wealthy. She opposes every one of the measures that we are taking.

Secondly, I know this is painful for the right hon. Lady, but I am using the same metric that she endorsed in November 2023, when she was Energy Secretary. She published the document, and she knows the truth about that metric: offshore renewables today are 40% cheaper to build and operate than new gas. However much she tries to struggle or flail around, those are the facts, I am afraid. She asks about carbon pricing. It is very interesting that even when we take off carbon pricing, gas is still more expensive, on the figures we published today. Her sums simply do not add up.

What is really rich is that the right hon. Lady asked about constraint payments. Why do we have constraint payments? *[Interruption.]* I am answering the question. We have constraint payments because the Conservatives failed to build the grid when she was the Secretary of State. Get this, Madam Deputy Speaker: now she comes along, complains about constraint payments, and opposes every piece of energy infrastructure that we try to build in order to bring down the constraint payments. It is extraordinary. Here is the right hon. Lady's big problem. She is making a massive gamble on fossil fuels, which is exactly what the Conservatives did when they were in office, and we know where that led: the worst cost of living crisis in memory, leaving us at the mercy of petrostates and dictators, and leaving the British people to pay the price.

We were elected with an historic mandate to end the Conservatives' record of failure, and that is what we are doing. We are ending the sell-out of our energy security, cutting bills, creating hundreds of thousands of clean energy jobs and protecting future generations. Let me sum it up: the right hon. Lady failed, and we are delivering.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call the first Back-Bench Member, may I remind Members that we have an important debate on Ukraine later this afternoon? We will look to finish this statement at about 4 pm, which leaves us with around 30 minutes. Please keep questions and answers short.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Energy Secretary deserves enormous congratulations on moving from the "botched" auction round 5, to use the words of the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), to the record success of auction round 7. The strike price will see no increase in consumer bills—indeed, Aurora says that it is likely to see a reduction in bills—and it is 40% cheaper. The Secretary of State set out in great detail how this will be cheaper than gas. Does he agree that demonstrates once and for all that renewable energy is good for bills?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People can have incredibly short memories in this House, particularly the Opposition. We are only five years on from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We know—

[Ed Miliband]

Claire Coutinho: Gas is falling!

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Lady says from a sedentary position that gas is falling, but she is just making a gamble. At the time of the greatest geopolitical instability in a generation, she is gambling on stability. I am not going to make that gamble. We will have home-grown clean power, and we are going to take back control.

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

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I welcome the results of the AR7 allocation. This is about protecting working families from volatile fossil fuel prices set by foreign powers that have repeatedly used oil and gas as geopolitical weapons. Relying on Trump's America or Putin's Russia to keep the lights on puts us all at risk. Renewable energy is the cheapest form of energy, and it is only through renewable energy that we can deliver permanently low and secure energy prices and help with the cost of living crisis, and not just today but in the long term. While procuring 8.4 GW of offshore wind puts the country on track for the Government's 2030 clean power target, research from RenewableUK shows that is the minimum needed, leaving very little room for delays—

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): A very independent source!

Edward Morello: It is a source none the less.

That places even greater importance on AR8. I hope that the Government will commit to their timetable to open AR8 by the summer and to announce the results by the end of the year. Meanwhile, there is still work to be done to bring down bills for working families and businesses, which is why I urge the Secretary of State to look at Liberal Democrat proposals to phase out the outdated renewable energy certificate scheme and replace it fully with a contracts for difference scheme.

We must also be honest about the impact of Brexit on energy bills. *[Interruption.]* We cannot get through this without mentioning it. Will the Government commit to accelerating negotiations to re-engage with the EU's internal energy market to ensure access to cheap electricity when we need a guaranteed energy source and an export market for when we over-produce? *[Interruption.]* Despite the noise from the science-denying, fossil fuel lobbyists on my right and the Putin apologists behind me, this is good for Great Britain and the right decision for consumers, and it promises a better and cleaner future.

Ed Miliband: Good lines.

Let me deal with that question briefly, following your injunction, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, AR8 is important, and we absolutely want to stick to the timetable—the hon. Gentleman is right—and we are rebuilding confidence in the industry. Secondly, we continue to look at proposals from him and others on doing everything we can to cut the cost of electricity, which he is right about. His broader point is also right. This is about how we make the right long-term decisions for the country, and I am grateful for his support.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I am old enough to remember when a Conservative Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said that he wanted Grimsby to be the Riyadh of offshore wind. I also remember the shadow Energy Secretary, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), attending offshore wind conferences and championing the sector, so where she stands now is in direct opposition to where she was just a few years ago.

I, for one, am pleased to see the east coast offshore wind industry strengthened through today's announcement. It will help to deliver energy independence for the UK and secure existing jobs in the sector—there are 12,000 jobs related to clean energy in Lincolnshire. How does the Secretary of State see today's announcement benefiting growth in the supply chain and delivering new industrial investment in places such as Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right—bandwagon-jumping is basically the Conservatives' policy, and they have jumped on the anti-net zero bandwagon. She makes serious and important points about the future. Indeed, she is a brilliant champion for this industry and for her area, because there are huge opportunities for Grimsby as a result of this auction. She will know that RWE was particularly successful in the auction, and we look forward to working with her and RWE to ensure that we deliver for her constituents.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): How are the figures that the Secretary of State has announced today compatible with the Climate Change Committee's seventh carbon budget last year, which said that the cost of offshore wind at 2023 prices would be £37.80 per megawatt-hour in 2035? He has just announced £90.91 per megawatt-hour, so how can that be a bargain basement price? Is this not a rip-off of the consumer, who will now face extortionate energy prices for at least 20 further years?

Ed Miliband: No, I do not agree. The hon. Gentleman, in all seriousness, should look at the need to build new energy generation in this country—we are going to have a 50% rise in electricity demand by 2035, and we have to build something. If he wants to build a whole fleet of new gas-fired power stations, he can decide to do that, but the figures we have published today show the costs of that, and those power stations would be more expensive to build and operate than the offshore wind that we have announced today.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. In particular, the Government are delivering for Scotland once again with more renewable energy investment. He also talked, rightly, about Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine and why they have had a direct impact on ordinary people in this country, who we must protect now and in the future. We must protect both these new projects and existing infrastructure from outside attacks, so can the Secretary of State say a little bit more about how he is ensuring that as much as possible of the technology for these excellent projects will be made in the UK, and how he will protect them, as well as existing infrastructure, from foreign actors?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We have about 20 minutes left. Questions need to be shorter, and answers need to be just as short.

Ed Miliband: That is why the clean industry bonus is so important. We will be announcing more about this tomorrow, because it is going to lever in massive amounts of private investment, including in supply chains.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the rollercoaster of prices. We obviously understand that gas prices go up and down, but they do come down. We are now stuck at the top of the rollercoaster he has talked about for 20 years. How is that going to reduce bills?

Ed Miliband: I just disagree with the hon. Lady. She is making a massive gamble on the future—she is gambling that gas prices will fall. We are giving this country the assurance that we can have clean, home-grown power and lower bills for good.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on structuring the auction to drive down the strike price and reduce consumer energy bills. It is worth reiterating that this means renewable energy will be 40% cheaper than gas. Importantly, though, this is also about creating jobs, specifically in coastal industries. Could he elaborate a little on the clean industry bonus and, in particular, how he might be able to support supply chain jobs in our coastal communities?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks very well on these issues, and she is absolutely right to ask that question. The great thing about the clean industry bonus is that for the first time we are rewarding manufacturers for investing in Britain. It is going to leverage in multiple amounts more private investment compared with public investment, and I believe it can be of massive benefit to our coastal communities.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but it is important that my constituents can feel the effect in their pockets. Does he accept that the biggest reason why people are not benefiting from cheap renewables is that electricity prices are still set by gas most of the time, and what steps is he taking to break that link, beyond simply building more renewables?

Ed Miliband: That is an incredibly important point, and the great thing about clean power 2030 is that it will mean gas sets the price much less of the time. With contracts for difference, the reduction in prices feeds through to bills.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): This is a fantastic announcement for the UK, and it is also fantastic to hear that the Secretary of State is already preparing for AR8. Can he assure the House that his Department is going to focus as much on the mid-term and long-term storage that we need to support all this growth in generation?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Battery storage and long-duration storage, for example, are things that we are working on as a Department, as is Ofgem—they are crucial parts of the jigsaw.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Secretary of State is going to pay a floating wind farm £216 per megawatt-hour. Can he explain how that will lower fuel prices for my constituents?

Ed Miliband: This is about an innovative technology. The hon. Member is right that it is expensive at the moment, but the experience we had with offshore wind, onshore wind and solar was that by investing in it at the front end, we then lowered the price through deployment, and that is what has meant it is a cheaper technology. We are supporting floating wind, and we think that is the right thing to do. It is a crucial next frontier when it comes to the offshore wind industry.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Despite representing an entirely landlocked constituency, offshore wind matters greatly to me, as the largest employer in Stafford, GE Vernova, produces critical components for the sector. Can the Secretary of State assure me that any and all future manufacturing requirements for this sector will recognise those companies that are investing in the UK, building skills and providing good jobs? Can I again ask him to join me in Stafford?

Ed Miliband: I have a long-standing promise, which I will fulfil—*[Interruption.]* Everyone seems to know about that promise to visit my hon. Friend's constituency to see what GE Vernova is doing. She makes an important point about ensuring that procurement, in which I know GE Vernova has a particular interest, should as much as possible be from the UK. My Department is working on that through not just the clean industry bonus, but many other things that we are doing.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Although the news on Berwick Bank and Pentland is hugely welcome, it risks masking serious jeopardy for Scotland's offshore wind sector. There is great worry that today's news represents a longer-term shift in the renewables industry from north to south, due to the unfair and disproportionate transmission charges regime. If Scotland's offshore wind sector is to have a future, we need to see reform of transmission charges before auction round 8—will we?

Ed Miliband: Even by the standards of the UK all-comers record for SNP miserabilism, that question takes some beating. I think the hon. Member gets the award. This is a great news story for Scotland, and not just in terms of Berwick Bank but in relation to floating wind. We want to carry on with that progress in AR8.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): This is a fantastic announcement for Mid and South Pembrokeshire, as it enables Wales's first floating offshore wind farm. How will the Secretary of State work with developers to maximise their use of local supply chains, so that communities such as mine can see the real benefits in jobs and local economic growth?

Ed Miliband: I congratulate my hon. Friend, because he has been a brilliant champion of this industry, and I am so glad about today's announcement. He is absolutely right. I want developers and all of the businesses involved to hear his message and his question loud and clear: we

[Ed Miliband]

want to see this development built in Britain, and it is incredibly important that we work with those businesses, and we will, to ensure that it happens.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Secretary of State has inadvertently misled the House. I have gas-fired power plant developers willing to build and operate at last year's price of £79 per megawatt-hour. Will the Secretary of State admit that, with inflation, the bids today are some 25% higher than that £79? By the time that capacity is built, the cost will be almost 50% higher than £79 per megawatt-hour.

Ed Miliband: With the greatest respect, I trust our analysts in my Department more than I do the hon. Gentleman when it comes to arithmetic. As he is somebody who I think has had an interest in the past in solar panels—

Richard Tice: On roofs.

Ed Miliband: Ah, so it is all right for him, but just not for anyone else. That tells us a lot.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea, I welcome the floating offshore wind test and demo model awarded a contract for difference in the Celtic sea. It will open up the Celtics sea to investment. There are other test and demo models in the Celtic sea. What can the Secretary of State say about the role of GB Energy to kick-start these test and demo models, as well as supply chains?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point. GB Energy has invested in the Pentland project in Scotland. GB Energy is operationally independent from us, so it makes its own decisions, but it shows that combined with the CfD, GB Energy can play a nurturing role for this technology, and that is incredibly important. It is what other countries have done for a long time, and it is now starting to happen here.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): The price that has been fixed today is higher than gas with the reduction of carbon tax and higher than the average for gas for all of last year. South Shropshire residents' energy bills have been going up since the Secretary of State has been in post. Can he promise when energy bills will come down for my constituents?

Ed Miliband: We will be taking £150 off bills in April, but let me refer the hon. Gentleman to a report produced by the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit, which explains that having renewables on the system means that we do not pay for expensive gas whose price is much higher than the average wholesale price. According to the report, by not procuring that expensive gas we have brought down the wholesale price by at least £25 per megawatt-hour. It is an important report, and the hon. Gentleman should read it.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this huge offshore wind investment, which will bring good jobs and opportunities for businesses to south-west Wales, as well as reducing bills and increasing energy security. Will he liaise with appropriate colleagues to ensure that the necessary investment is made in the port of Port Talbot, and can he give any indication of the construction time in the Celtic sea and the proposed time for the delivery of electricity to the grid?

Ed Miliband: I assure my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion on these issues, that we are very much engaged with Port Talbot and the port on this issue, and with Associated British Ports, because it is important that we make those investments in the port. She should watch this space.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): As a former offshore wind engineer, I am delighted that the Government have secured record offshore wind capacity, and I say, genuinely, "Well done." However, what is even cheaper than renewable energy is the energy that we do not need to use because our homes are more energy-efficient, so the Government's scrapping of an energy efficiency programme last year without announcing what would replace it was less welcome. Can the Secretary of State assure my constituents that when the long-delayed warm homes plan does emerge, it will ensure that everyone can have a comfortable, warm, energy-efficient, affordable home?

Ed Miliband: I am grateful for the tone of the hon. Lady's question. I will return the compliment, and thank her for her kind words about this auction round. She is entirely right about the importance of our warm homes plan and investing in energy efficiency; the plan will be coming very soon, and that is what it will do.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): This news is very welcome to those of us who believe in a swift transition away from fossil fuels. Can the Secretary of State confirm that as a result of today's auction round, supply chain jobs, including those in places such as Hayle and Falmouth in Cornwall, will remain at the top of the Government's agenda?

Ed Miliband: Yes. My hon. Friend, who speaks so well on these issues, is absolutely right. There are huge opportunities for Cornwall in this area of offshore wind. One thing that I have been doing with my Department is transforming it from simply an energy policy Department to an energy and industrial policy Department, because this Government believe in industrial policy.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State give a clear assurance that not a single offshore wind project procured in this round will be built with technology made by Chinese slaves?

Ed Miliband: We will certainly not be doing that. We want as much as possible of this to be built in Britain.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. The port of Leith in my constituency is well placed to support logistics and manufacturing for Berwick Bank, which has been successful today. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss ensuring that every job possible is secured as a result of this investment?

Ed Miliband: I look forward to having conversations with my hon. Friend. I think that there are huge opportunities for Scotland, and the Government intend to maximise them.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Of course we welcome the new offshore wind projects in Wales and all the anticipated jobs, but if only we could guarantee that profits would stay in our communities and the use of local supply chains were contractually hardwired! Will the Government ensure that time is secured for a debate on the Crown Estate (Wales) Bill, so that we can discuss how the people of Wales will receive their fair share of offshore wind profits?

Ed Miliband: I fear that securing time in the House is way above my pay grade. *[Interruption.]* I promise that it is. Let me say more generally to the right hon. Lady that I agree with her, and that we are looking at the Procurement Act 2023 and how it works. Ensuring that we procure as much of this as we can in the UK is incredibly important, and it is taken seriously throughout Government.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this investment. We are hearing some real chutzpah from the Opposition, who seem to have forgotten that it was they who imposed the ban on onshore wind. We need to remember who is in favour of tackling the issue of green energy and bringing down bills. The other side of this, however, is getting the electricity to constituencies such as mine. What progress is being made on upgrading the grid, and what timeline has my right hon. Friend for conveying the electricity to people who need it?

Ed Miliband: I agree with my hon. Friend. I am old enough to remember Boris Johnson, and he used to trumpet the potential of this. He used to talk about it as the future and how it was going to build future jobs, but the Conservatives have abandoned all that. They are miserable pessimists about our country.

As for my hon. Friend's question, I think she is absolutely right. She will welcome the fact that NESO has undertaken the biggest overhaul of the grid we have seen in a long time, reordering the queue to ensure that we procure the power we need in the right places and that we give priority to the projects we need.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Today's announcement of a record-breaking auction securing over 8 GW of wind power—enough electricity to power over 12 million homes—is clear evidence of this Labour Government delivering on our clean power mission, and it will help my constituents have lower bills in the future. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is good for jobs, good for growth and good for energy security?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I think the point about energy security is crucial because we live in an uncertain world. We need our own home-grown clean energy, and that is what we are doing.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Energy Secretary has talked about the clean industry bonus and supply chain opportunities. What commitment will he make that, for every tower and turbine that goes up, British steel is being used and Teesside jobs are being created?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend, with whom I have discussed this, is absolutely right. We want to do everything we can to ensure we use steel from Britain in this process. Part of this is about what we legislate for, and part of it is about the conversations we have with the developers to ensure they do that. I am setting a very clear expectation on this, and I expect developers to do everything they can to meet it.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the not just one, but two offshore wind projects in Wales, with billions of pounds in investment and thousands of new jobs putting Wales firmly on the map as a clean energy producer. We are delighted to see Awel y Môr in north Wales, and the benefits for Clwyd North are clear—skilled, well-paid local jobs and a huge boost for local supply chains. Along with new nuclear at Wylfa, north Wales is finally getting the clean energy investment it deserves under this Labour Government. May I thank the Secretary of State for this investment in north Wales, and will he join me in meeting the apprentices at Coleg Llandrillo who are already training for these jobs of the future?

Ed Miliband: I would really like to do that. The Prime Minister and I, with the Chancellor and indeed the First Minister of Wales, had a fantastic visit to north Wales when we announced our small modular reactors there, and the excitement among the students at the college about the future we are building was so palpable to see. I must say that that is the difference between the Government and the Opposition. We are embracing that future and building that future for those young people; they, frankly, are selling those young people down the river.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the investment for the Norfolk Vanguard project, which will play an enormous role after being awarded over a third of total capacity under these contracts. The Secretary of State has spoken about the benefits for jobs. Can he speak specifically about how we will ensure young people now at school and in college will benefit with apprenticeships and training in these industries?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We will be setting up five technical excellence colleges in clean energy, and they will be incredibly important in training young people for this clean energy future. There is a huge number of opportunities out there. Part of this is about the training, but another part is about young people getting to know about these opportunities. I was at an amazing jobs fair in the north-east—organised by Kim McGuinness, the mayor of the north-east—which brought together some of the developers with young people, and the excitement among those young people about this future was so palpable. We need to do more of that.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on proving that contracts for difference for offshore wind really do work. I am particularly pleased to hear how much

[Alex Sobel]

floating wind is in this contract. I know he is always looking to the future, so could he update the House on what his Department is doing about emerging offshore technologies such as offshore thermal, offshore wave and offshore tidal?

Ed Miliband: Those are incredibly important technologies, and we need to do more to help bring down their cost. Tidal schemes will be in the next auction pot, and we are continuing to look at how we can deploy more of them in our country.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State and his team on today's announcement, not least because it draws such a stark contrast. He has announced the largest ever offshore wind auction in history, whereas one of his predecessors came to this House to announce the largest ever Government energy subsidy to households in history—those were the words from the previous Government's press release. That £40 billion was necessary, but it was the result of the previous Government's failure to secure our energy supply. That cost our households thousands and taxpayers billions. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this announcement will secure our energy future and ensure that such a catastrophic failure can never happen again?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks so well on these issues and he is so right. This is about energy sovereignty and our security as a country. When the Conservatives were in government, at least under Boris Johnson, they seemed to understand that. That is why it is so regrettable. Of course, this is about the climate crisis, good jobs and lower bills, but it is also about security in an uncertain and dangerous world. The Opposition are, frankly, surrendering our security and what they are proposing is incredibly dangerous.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank the Energy Secretary for the leadership he has shown with this record-breaking step forward for renewable power, which underlines our commitment to delivering the clean, secure energy our country is crying out for. It is important to note that the scale of energy secured—at a 40% lower cost than new gas—was only possible because of reforms to the auction market design. We did not tolerate the mechanisms that failed under the previous Government; we innovated to deliver better value. Will the Energy Secretary ensure that we do not rest on our laurels, but continue to innovate in auction design to ensure that we get the best possible value for money and the biggest possible capacity outcomes from future auctions, too?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks very knowledgeably on these issues and he is absolutely right. We changed the auction design not just to be able to see the so-called bid stack, which they could not under the previous regime, but to allow more projects in to increase competitive tension to get a better deal for the bill payer and the taxpayer. He is absolutely right: we should keep innovating for both fixed technology and other technologies to maximise value for money and deployment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Dr Jeevun Sandher—I hope it has been worth the wait.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Affordability is the biggest issue facing our country and climate change is the biggest issue facing our planet. That is why today's announcement is such, such good news: wind power 40% cheaper than natural gas. Bizarrely, Reform called that lunacy. The shadow Secretary of State used to agree with us and she used to support the Climate Change Act 2008, but now she agrees with Reform. Does the Secretary of State believe that the shadow Secretary of State may be planning to join the best and the brightest of her former colleagues and become defector No. 21?

Ed Miliband: It was worth waiting for. I will let the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) speculate on her own future and whether she is going to join another political party. In all seriousness, I do think it is sad. The truth is that we used to pride ourselves as a country on competing, between political parties, to succeed when it came to building our clean energy future. It is deeply regrettable. There are many sensible voices on the Conservative side who shake their heads when I talk to them about the direction their party has taken. Fundamentally, my hon. Friend is right: this is central to tackling the affordability crisis, central to tackling the climate crisis in our country, and central to giving us energy security.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We got through that in 48 minutes, which is much faster than we hoped. Well done to everybody.

Points of Order

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I attempted today to submit a written question to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government regarding the unredacted plans for the proposed new Chinese Communist party embassy in London. The Table Office, however, refused to table it on the grounds that the Government have effectively issued a block, refusing to answer any questions relating to the proposal in any way. That, of course, follows yesterday's urgent question, when the Government refused to put up a Home Office Minister, despite the question being about national security. Please may I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. How are the Government able to block answering any questions on a matter of such national importance, and how do we get the answers we deserve if we cannot get them in the Chamber, or in written questions?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for raising her point of order. Responses to questions are, of course, a matter for the Government rather than the Chair, but paragraph 22.19 of "Erskine May" states:

> "Questions for written answer are not in order which renew or repeat in substance questions already answered or to which an answer has been refused in that session of Parliament."

If the Government have refused to answer questions on a specific matter, further questions would therefore not be in order. However, that may not be the case in this instance. I suggest that she seeks further advice from the Table Office on what other routes are open to her to pursue her concerns. *[Interruption.]* The Government Whips are acknowledging that this is something, no doubt, that they will continue in their conversations as well.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The House has already seen the chaotic, last-minute pulling of today's consideration of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, which has been moved to next week. The House will know that the convention is that the Government lay their own amendments ahead of amendments from the Opposition in order to give us time for consideration. The Government pledged to make us aware of their amendments before the House rises today so that we would have at least an hour, perhaps, to consider what we might put forward, but we are still no closer to seeing what the Government wish to amend. On top of that, we were offered a briefing on Privy Council terms, to be attended by myself and a colleague, which was cancelled at the last minute. The handling of this Bill, which relates to matters of national security, is chaotic. How can we ensure that the House is in a position to lay amendments that respond to the Government's own amendments?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order, which those on the Front Bench will no doubt have heard. The amendments will be available for Members in the usual way after the deadline for tabling has passed—I think he accepts that that has not yet passed. No doubt he has put his point on the record. Discussions between those on the Government and Opposition Front Benches are not a matter for the Chair.

BILL PRESENTED

HOSPITALS (ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Helen Morgan presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that patients spend no longer than 12 hours between arriving at the accident and emergency department of a hospital and being admitted to hospital, transferred for care elsewhere or discharged; to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for measures to eliminate the provision of accident and emergency care services in corridors and other spaces not intended for the provision of such services; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 January, and to be printed (Bill 366).

Banks (Financial Exclusion and Access to Finance)

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

4.1 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require banks to measure and disclose their performance in reducing financial exclusion, including exclusion from affordable credit, and in improving access to finance for small- and medium-sized businesses; to establish a system for rating banks according to that performance; to require banks to cooperate with credit unions and community development finance institutions to address financial exclusion and improve access to finance for small- and medium-sized businesses; and for connected purposes.

I declare at the outset that I am a member of the M4Money credit union.

Dal Dhillon is a great Coventry entrepreneur who runs Dhillon's Brewery, Dhillon's Spire Bar and the Sky Blue Tavern, which, together, are helping to fire up Frank Lampard's growing army of Coventry fans as they push for the holy grail of premier league promotion. When Dal wanted to expand his businesses, he hit a stumbling block that affects many growing businesses: accessing affordable finance. His application was rejected by a mainstream bank, so Coventry and Warwickshire Reinvestment Trust—a community development finance institution or community bank—stepped in. It is not for profit, accredited by the Financial Conduct Authority, community-focused and takes the time to understand the entrepreneur, their business and their ambitions. In essence, it is a proper community bank. Since 2010, CWRT has loaned more than £37 million, helping small and medium-sized enterprises overlooked by traditional lenders in their communities to start up, grow and thrive.

Thousands of small and medium-sized businesses are sadly locked out of access to affordable credit at the moment, meaning, in short, that they cannot get fair banking. This holds back too many people in too many communities from turning strong ideas for new inventions or new services into more jobs, new high street ventures or just great commercial opportunities.

For the entrepreneur who does not have a track record or assets, access to business finance and financial advice is a huge challenge. Indeed, the cost of business finance in the UK is higher than in other comparable countries. When in government, senior figures at one bank told me that the typical business client who received personal sit-down financial advice had a trading income of £10 million or more. According to the Federation of Small Businesses, which is concerned about access to the funding its members need and supports this Bill, nearly half of small businesses recently rated the overall availability and affordability of new credit for small businesses as poor.

At the same time, millions of people across the UK do not have access to affordable credit when they need it most. More than 20 million adults are now classified as financially underserved—a 50% rise since 2016. One in three adults faces barriers to mainstream credit, often leaving them without safe or affordable options. Some 12.5 million people have no savings to fall back on in a crisis and almost 2 million have turned to illegal lenders in the past 12 months alone.

As the team at the excellent London Mutual credit union pointed out to me when I visited last week, not having fair access to affordable credit can mean that people have to use payday loans, forcing those who can least afford it to put up with higher charges and interest rates—paying a poverty premium. It means it is harder to save, and more costly to buy key things like a fridge or to repair a broken boiler. In short, it is harder to pay for life's unexpected costs.

The financially underserved do not live far away; they are in all our communities. They are among our families, they are our friends, and they are certainly our neighbours. I welcome the work that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench have put into establishing a financial inclusion strategy. My Bill seeks to build on that good work. We need to go further if the loan sharks are to feel that their opportunities are shrinking, and if we are to see credit unions doubling in size and community banks unlocking more of the business ambition in our country, especially in the most economically deprived areas.

A fair banking Act would require the Financial Conduct Authority to analyse the performance of mainstream banks, according to their size, on the provision of equitable access to credit for individuals and small and medium-sized enterprises. It would create a published ratings system that showed which banks were doing well and which less so. Banks could improve their ratings by expanding their provision of affordable lending to underserved communities and businesses, and by creating partnerships with community banks or community development finance institutions.

I am not interested in bashing Britain's banks—they are critical to our economic future, and huge sources of wealth and jobs for British people and for all our communities—but I do think they could do more. There are fair banking requirements in other countries, most notably in the US, where most British banks already operate comfortably under them. There are of course differences between the financial services environment in the US and here in the UK. A UK fair banking Act would need to focus on small business lending and an individual's ability to access affordable credit, and less so on mortgage lending, which is a key issue in the US.

American fair banking requirements mean that British banks invest in left-behind communities in the US. They invest in and work happily with community banks or community development finance institutions—indeed, British banks are among the largest investors in US CDFIs. They do not lose money and there is often joint lending by CDFIs and banks. In the reports they have to publish they celebrate, for example, their work with women entrepreneurs and with black and ethnic minority businesses.

The question for those British banks is why they will not back such requirements here. Why will they not do more with community banks and credit unions in the UK? To be fair, there is some investment in CDFIs from Lloyds and J. P. Morgan, but it is striking how many other major banks invest in CDFIs in the US but do not invest similarly here. As a result of US requirements, British banks are already used to working with the disclosure requirements that I envisage introducing through the Bill. The majority of the data needed for the disclosure requirements under the Bill will already be collected by the FCA in, for example, its consumer credit product sales data, so it would not be over-regulation.

Following detailed research for the fair banking campaign, conservative estimates suggest that the requirements in the Bill could result in, for example, an increase in the level of annual lending here by CDFIs and credit unions from an estimated £250 million a year up to £3.3 billion a year. That would transform the prospects for thousands of entrepreneurs and financially underserved people in all our communities.

There have been some suggestions that the measures in my Bill might overlap with existing laws and regulations, including the recently introduced consumer duty. Unfortunately, that duty applies only to people who are customers, so people who apply to banks and are turned down are excluded from it. Also, no mechanisms or metrics are currently in place, or being proposed, on measuring banks' performance on expanding access to affordable credit as a whole.

Specifically, there is no current framework for benchmarking banks' actions on providing affordable credit or on working with credit unions and CDFIs. There is currently no mandate for banks to expand access to affordable credit, and no incentive for them to work with credit unions and CDFIs to do so. What the widespread exclusion from credit demonstrates is a major market failure. Current measures are not working and voluntary measures are not enough. The measures in my Bill would end that failure.

Talent, and entrepreneurial talent in particular, exists everywhere in the UK. We need to give that talent the chance to flourish, and more affordable sources of credit are key to that. No one in crisis should be forced into punishing levels of debt or worse because the mainstream banking sector has locked them out.

I am grateful for the support of the Federation of Small Businesses, Small Business Britain, Richard Marshall of Pall Mall Barbers, the Building Societies Association, the Association of British Credit Unions, the Co-op party, Responsible Finance and the excellent team at the Finance Innovation Lab. A fair banking Act is a common-sense, proportionate measure that could have transformative benefits for businesses and communities across the UK. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gareth Thomas, Dame Meg Hillier, Sarah Champion, Liam Byrne, Sarah Owen, David Burton-Sampson, Lloyd Hatton, Bill Esterson, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, Nick Smith, Anneliese Dodds and John McDonnell present the Bill.

Gareth Thomas accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 February, and to be printed (Bill 363).

Ukraine

4.11 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

Next month marks four years since Russia launched its illegal and barbarous full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but Ukraine has stood strong. We have stood alongside Ukraine and will continue to do so. I am particularly proud that this week also marks one year on from our agreement of a crucial 100-year partnership with Ukraine—I know that it enjoys wide support across the House—which we will celebrate and take further forward this week.

This has been four years in which the Ukrainian people have stood firm, bravely resisting the assault on their sovereign territory, and four years of enduring relentless drone and missile strikes that have killed civilians and torn through homes, infrastructure, hospitals and schools. Like many hon. Members across the House, I have been in Kyiv while such attacks have been under way. I have seen the devastation and damage caused and the implications for the civilians—the ordinary people of Ukraine—who face that. I have been in the bunkers where children have to take their lessons because of the attacks, and I have heard the harrowing stories of those who have been abducted and taken by barbarous and illegal Russian action.

Just last week, Russia launched 252 drones and 36 missiles at targets across Ukraine in yet another attack that killed and injured dozens of civilians and left millions without power or heating as temperatures plunged to minus 20°. The attack also included an Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile that struck critical infrastructure near the Polish border. Russia's use, for the second time, of a hypersonic IRBM in Ukraine—this time close to NATO territory—is a reckless and dangerous escalation. Moscow claimed that it was responding to an alleged Ukrainian attack on one of Putin's residences, which is a baseless allegation and yet another example of Russia using disinformation to justify its actions. Just last week I discussed disinformation with hon. Members at the Foreign Affairs Committee. I know that it is an issue that many of us across the House take deeply seriously.

As an aside, I note the absence in the Chamber yet again of one party—we all note that, as there is a strong cross-party consensus on Ukraine. Of course, that party has willingly repeated Russian narratives on NATO and Ukraine, and indeed its former leader in Wales took bribes from Russia to share those narratives. Reform Members might like this to go away, but it is not just their words that speak volumes; their absence does, too.

I genuinely commend the Opposition and the other parties present, because I have had many conversations with the Members here, and I think all of us, whichever side of the House we are on, have stood resolutely with Ukraine since the start of this conflict. That very much represents where the British people stand on this illegal and barbarous aggression on our continent. We know from our own history what such aggression can mean, and we will continue to take that stand. I am proud of those in my constituency and all our constituencies who continue to support Ukrainians in the UK, and continue to stand with Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

[Stephen Doughty]

Russia's barbaric actions come against the backdrop of US-led peace negotiations. Time and again, Ukraine has shown that it is the party of peace, and just last week, President Zelensky came together with world leaders and the United States in Paris to discuss next steps. We welcome the significant progress that has been made, and the work of President Trump and many others to take that forward. Alongside France, the UK has led the coalition of the willing, carrying out detailed military planning on the security guarantees that are needed to insure against future Russian aggression in the event of a peace settlement.

In Paris, at the largest meeting yet of the coalition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister joined President Macron and President Zelensky to sign a declaration of intent. That declaration confirms that in the event of a peace deal, the UK and France would deploy forces to Ukraine. It paves the way for a legal framework under which British, French and partner forces could operate on Ukrainian soil, securing its skies and seas and regenerating its armed forces for the future. As the Prime Minister has said, if British troops were to deploy under this agreement, the matter would come before this House for a debate and a vote. The Paris declaration agreed between us and our coalition partners sets out the security guarantees that are to be activated once a ceasefire takes effect.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have previously suggested that to have an occupied eastern part of Ukraine under Russian control while the western part of unoccupied Ukraine was left as a military vacuum would be a recipe for disaster. However, it is of concern that the alliance that stood firm at the end of world war two to ensure that West Germany did not get encroached upon by Soviet forces from the east is not still in being, as far as Ukraine is concerned, because of the ambiguous attitude of President Trump. Does the Minister have a view on why President Trump is so clear when it comes to dictatorship in and aggression by Iran, yet has such a strangely different view when it comes to the same two features of Russian behaviour?

Stephen Doughty: I have huge respect for the right hon. Gentleman, as he knows, but I would gently disagree with his suggestion. On President Trump's leadership, in the important discussions that took place in Paris with the United States and other coalition partners, it was set out clearly how security guarantees would be activated. More broadly, I am proud that we continue to stand with the United States in NATO, and proud of our commitment to article 5 and to defending the security of the alliance. That is absolutely crucial to our security, and the security of all of us in the alliance.

We of course support all the progress towards a just and lasting peace, but it is crucial that we keep Ukraine in the fight. We all know that its armed forces are fighting heroically and with great determination. Like many Members, I have met those who have served on the frontlines in Ukraine, and seen the extraordinary bravery and fortitude that they show, but we must recognise that they are under immense pressure, so we need to get them the support that they need to defend themselves, and to ensure that they have support in the future.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Today the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has been given an open letter from the Chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament, Ruslan Stefanchuk. He has been here, and I have met him a few times. He is urging

"the immediate delivery of air defence and air-to-air missiles".

Ukraine is in desperate need of them, and he has asked all NATO members to speed up this delivery as much as possible.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his comments, and for sharing what the Speaker of the Rada has said. I too have met him. He is a remarkable individual, as indeed are all the Ukrainian MPs we have all met. They stood up to defend their Parliament at the most difficult of times: at the time of the invasion. He raises important points. These are all matters that the Secretary of State for Defence, the Minister for the Armed Forces and others are looking at.

We are very much looking at all the immediate needs, and of course, we stand ready to support Ukraine wherever we can. Indeed, that is why we have led the 50-nation Ukraine defence contact group, alongside Germany. We secured £50 billion in military aid pledges last year, and we are going further. In Project Octopus, we have developed an advanced air defence interceptor drone, which is to be mass-produced in the UK. We are developing a new long-range ballistic missile to boost Ukraine's firepower and defend against Putin's war machine.

We continue to lead, not only on supporting Ukraine, but on galvanising partners to maintain support. I met my good colleague from Portugal this morning, and discussed the contribution that Portugal has made. Indeed, many countries across Europe, large and small, have stepped up, and it is important to acknowledge that European partners increased aid by more than 50% in 2025, compared to the year before. In December, as colleagues will know, the European Council agreed a €90 billion loan to help meet Ukraine's needs, and of course we are also providing up to £4.1 billion in support through a World Bank loan guarantee that runs until 2027.

Of course, as well as the military support that we need to provide to Ukraine, now and into the future, so that it can defend against and deter future threats in the event of a settlement, we must rachet up the pressure on Putin to de-escalate the war, engage in meaningful negotiations and come to the table. I am proud that this Government have sanctioned over 900 individuals, entities and ships under the UK's Russia sanctions regime, including Russia's largest oil companies and 520 oil tankers. Last week, as colleagues will know, the UK supported the United States in intercepting the sanctioned vessel Bella 1 in the north Atlantic as it made its way to Russia.

We are working with international partners on further measures to tackle the shadow fleet. Those include additional sanctions, steps to discourage third countries from engaging with the fleet, increased information sharing, and readiness to use regulatory and interdiction powers. By choking off Russia's oil revenues and squeezing its war economy, we are showing Putin that he cannot outlast us.

Our sanctions are biting hard. There is clear evidence of their impact: Russia's oil export revenues are at a four-year low. We are preparing to implement further

significant sanctions this year, which have been announced, including bans on importing refined oil of Russian origin, and a maritime service ban on Russian liquefied natural gas, which a number of Members have rightly called for over past months.

As a result of our actions and those of our partners, Russia's economy is now in its worst position since the full-scale invasion began. We are also taking the crucial steps to stop the third-country circumvention of sanctions. Whether it is intercepting crypto networks that are flooding resource into Russia, the components and other things on critical lists that it might be using in drones, or the energy revenues that it is generating, we will not cease till we find every way in which Putin is attempting to circumvent our regimes. I am proud to work closely with colleagues in Departments across Government on this, but also, crucially, with European, United States and other partners. That is having a tangible impact, and is as crucial as the direct support that we provide.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I agree that the foreign exchange earnings of the Russian economy have been badly damaged by the sanctions, but we are also coming to the conclusion, are we not, that it is legal for Western powers to intervene on the fake flag fleet—the shadow fleet—as we saw last week? What plans do the Government and our allies have to make the whole business of exporting Russian oil and gas far more risky, by undertaking a large-scale interception of the shadow fleet?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member will note that I chose my words about future actions carefully. I will obviously not go into specifics, but let me just say that we know what Putin is doing. We know where he is taking things and what is happening, and we will not hesitate to act where we can, lawfully, to choke off those revenues that go towards fuelling the war against Ukraine. Let us remember that that is exactly what they do. Let this be a warning: we will not hesitate to use the powers we have—lawfully, of course—wherever we can.

Stuart Anderson: I thank the Minister for giving way a second time. In December, I went on a cross-party trip with NATO to South Korea; we heard that its Government have changed their position on Russia and are now looking to open plants in Russia. They spouted the Russian lines against NATO. I have fed that into Government, but we have recently signed a huge trade deal with South Korea. Is it a concern in Government that people we are trading with are now shifting their position on Russia?

Stephen Doughty: We continue to work and engage with all partners around the world about the reality of any loopholes or routes that could be supporting the war. As we all know, troops from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea were brought in by Russia to fight. There are also often entities and individuals operating within countries, and we try to bring those to the attention of the authorities of our partners and friends, so that they can take action, but we will not hesitate to sanction and take action, where appropriate.

Turning to the crucial issue of accountability, we are working closely with Ukraine and its allies to hold Russia accountable for its heinous crimes in Ukraine. We are a founding member and chair of the conference of participants of the register of damage, which allows Ukranians to record losses, injury or damage caused by the war. In December, I was proud to visit The Hague to sign, on behalf of the UK, the convention to establish an international claims commission, which will assess claims under the register of damage to determine future compensation. We are also supporting the office of the prosecutor general of Ukraine and the International Criminal Court to ensure that allegations of war crimes are fully and fairly investigated, using independent and robust legal mechanisms.

As I mentioned, tens of thousands of boys and girls have been snatched from their families, deported and indoctrinated by Russia. We are clear that this is a campaign to erase a nation's future. We cannot allow that to happen, so we are backing crucial efforts to identify those children and bring them home, and we are working with partners on that. We have committed more than £2.8 million to helping to trace and return them. We welcome all that colleagues have been doing to raise awareness of the issue globally.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): Last year, I moved my constituency office into Bosnia House, a former police station that was taken over by Anes Ceric, the CEO of the Bosnia UK Network, and his organisation. The network supports all communities, including Ukrainians, Syrians and Bosnians. There are such facilities not only in my constituency, but across the country. More help needs to be provided to ensure that the Ukrainians who settle in this country are fully supported, not only to achieve a better life, but to integrate with other communities. If any support—for example, any money drawn from sanctions—can be targeted at those organisations, it would be most gratefully received.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is right to point out the contribution of the many organisations across the country that have reached out to support Ukrainian communities. I have certainly seen that in Cardiff, where some fantastic groups have done that; I know that is reflected in my hon. Friend's constituency. There is a strong heritage in this country of individuals who fled conflict working to support others who have done the same. I have seen that repeatedly in many different groups. I pay tribute to all of them, and to all the people up and down Britain who have brought Ukrainians into their homes and supported these efforts in many other ways.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): While we are on the subject of Russian war crimes, James Scott Rhys Anderson is one of the only Britons to have been captured by the Russians. He was tried—the Foreign Office believes on false charges—and charged with being part of a terrorist group and illegally entering Russia. He was sentenced to five years in a Russian prison, and will then be transferred to a Russian penal colony, rather than being treated in accordance with the Geneva convention. What progress has been made on securing his release?

Stephen Doughty: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are well aware of the number of cases. Russia has obligations under the Geneva convention, and we expect them to be upheld. We regularly raise these cases at the appropriate levels. I am happy to talk to him

[Stephen Doughty]

separately about that specific case, but he can be assured that I am well aware of that and a number of other cases. We are clear that international law must be upheld, including the basic principles of treatment of prisoners of war and situations involving children. That goes to the heart of the nature of what the Russian regime has been doing and the lengths it is willing to go to. We urge the upholding of the commitments to basic decency and the treatment of individuals, to which we are all signed up.

We are standing with Ukrainian people on the ground in their hour of need. We have provided more than £577 million in humanitarian support for vulnerable citizens since the invasion began, including those forced to flee their homes. This year we will spend up to £100 million on support, including to help families through this harsh winter. We have upped our support in energy, particularly in response to regular attacks on energy infrastructure. A lot of our work is to help to mitigate that, but the scale of those attacks is severe and they have a daily impact, as Members can see in media reporting and from what we know on the ground.

There is no firmer friend for Ukraine than the UK. Indeed, our commitment runs deep. I have mentioned the crucial 100-year partnership that the Prime Minister signed with President Zelensky in Kyiv. That agreement has enhanced co-operation across defence and security, science, trade and culture.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his update, particularly the in-depth overview that he is giving us. Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali), I would appreciate an update on the work that the Minister is doing to support families in this country. I commend to him the work of the Ukrainian community centre in Reading, where there is a Ukrainian language library. It is one of the very few in the south of England, and people visit from west London and Oxford to use it. It is important that families are able to maintain their native language and that children can retain their culture at this difficult time. Will he say a few words about the importance of that form of domestic support?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. Indeed, there is a similar initiative—a Ukrainian language library—in my constituency. It is absolutely crucial that that support is given, not only because it is the right thing to do for those young people, enabling them to maintain a connection to their culture, heritage and language, but because it stands in stark contrast to the attempts by Putin to wipe out their language, culture, history and heritage—not least through the abduction of children and continued attacks. One of the most moving moments during my visit to Kyiv was in a bunker under a school, where I saw the remarkable fortitude and resilience of young people and their teachers in the face of Russia's attempts to destroy their lives physically and psychologically. They stand firm and resilient, as Ukrainians do. That should be a lesson to us all.

Under the 100-year partnership, as well as the joint development of drone technology, trading links, digital connection and other matters, we also have important school-twinning programmes. Those things will, collectively, deliver long-term economic growth and security for the UK and Ukraine, and strengthen ties between our nations.

I will end my remarks as I know that many Members wish to contribute. The UK's support for Ukraine is iron-clad. The Ukrainians' security is our security. We fully support US-led efforts to secure a just and lasting peace. As we have said repeatedly, only the Ukrainian people can decide their future. We remain committed to the principle that international borders must never be changed by force, and any deal must guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty and security—and, indeed, Europe and the United Kingdom's security—in the future. In the meantime, we will not hesitate to keep supporting Ukraine and ensure that it has the military equipment to defend itself, while sustaining the economic pressure on Putin to cut off the revenues funding this barbaric war, and ensuring accountability for the appalling scenes of destructions and devastation, be they against children, infrastructure or the whole nation of Ukraine. Slava Ukraini.

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

4.34 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): We are at a crucial juncture in this conflict and the stakes could not be higher. It has been nearly four years since Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, a period nearly as long as the duration of the first world war, with many of the same horrors that our soldiers witnessed in those days—trench warfare, a war of attrition—being witnessed today by a generation of young Ukrainians and Russians who are being decimated in their hundreds of thousands. We have also, tragically, seen the horrific mass deportation of 20,000 Ukrainian children. This is nothing short of a war crime. Make no mistake: on the line is the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. The freedom and democracy enjoyed by its people and also the entire security architecture of the west are at stake. The threat is especially acute in the eastern flank, for countries such as Moldova, and in the Black Sea, but this reaches far beyond the region; it is about the security of us all.

European countries are already having to protect their borders from malign Russian activity. We have had to do so for years, and will continue to do so, but I felt that 2025 was a real turning point. We need only look at what has been happening in Poland, whether Russian drone incursions or railway sabotage. Romania and Estonia have both had their airspace outrageously violated by Russia. And the Royal Navy has had to be activated to intercept Russian ships, including the Yantar, and we all know the real purpose of that ship.

Russia is already waging a sophisticated hybrid and sub-conventional campaign against us. The reality is that we must be prepared for sustained tension with Russia for many years to come. But the outcome of the war in Ukraine is central to whether that threat is checked or emboldened, and this extends beyond just Russia. The fact that Putin is now reliant on North Korean personnel and ammunition should shame him, but it should also warn us. The war has become a testing ground for an authoritarian axis that will not stop at Ukraine if it is allowed to succeed.

All of us want to see this war end. It is unjust, unprovoked and entirely of Putin's making. It is therefore of no surprise that Putin appears completely insincere about wanting to reach a genuine ceasefire. We understand that initiatives to end this war, led by the United States of America, are progressing, at least on the Ukrainian side, and it would be helpful to hear from the Minister, when he winds up the debate, his latest assessment of those talks and their direction of travel.

It is also important to recognise where responsibility lies. Time and again, Ukraine has shown a willingness to engage in discussions aimed at ending the conflict. Russia, by contrast, has repeatedly demonstrated a lack of seriousness and sincerity. If ceasefire proposals are rejected or negotiations undermined, the obstacle to peace lies not in Kyiv, nor among Ukraine's friends, but firmly in Moscow.

One principle must remain non-negotiable: the Ukrainian people must be sovereign in their own land. They have paid in blood to defend themselves and their homeland, and decisions about their future, their borders and their security arrangements must be made by Ukraine and Ukraine alone. No peace imposed from outside will endure, and no settlement that ignores the will of the Ukrainian people can be sustainable. As we have done throughout history, Britain must continue to show international leadership in defending that principle, so I would welcome an update from the Minister on what the UK is doing diplomatically to that end.

It is crucial that we achieve a just and lasting peace. Putin must not emerge strengthened from a potential settlement; we must not give in to him, because the lesson of the last 20 years is that he always comes back for more, with a persistent desire to exert control over neighbouring states and to challenge the post-cold war settlement in Europe. It is clear from the statecraft he is using that he has his KGB playbook out right now. Putin has not abandoned his territorial ambitions. He wants to subjugate Ukraine lock, stock and barrel.

A lasting peace is not about conceding to aggression. Territorial concessions would mean rewarding Putin's barbaric attacks on the Ukrainian people. Britain must lead the way again on sanctions and keep tightening the screws on Putin's war machine. Moscow should be denied safe harbours for its tankers and profits and the EU should step up and ban Russian oil and gas sooner than it currently plans, in 2027. Will the Minister confirm whether he has been pressing his counterparts in the European Union and European capitals to do exactly that? The Atlantic alliance must lead a new pincer movement to further constrain Russia's energy revenues and stop Putin getting his hands on military equipment.

The issue with Russian oil persists. Countries are allowing the purchase and whitewashing of Russian oil on their watch. We know the businesses, refineries and individuals who are profiting from Russian energy exports, so do the Government plan to take further action against those enablers?

It is clear that we need to go a lot further on sovereign Russian assets. We welcome the £2.26 billion loan made by the UK to Ukraine off the back of the profits from immobilised Russian sovereign assets, but the Government cannot view that as the end of the road. Instead, Ministers need to be working around the clock, including with the City of London and our allies, to find innovative and workable solutions that allow us to go even further and to drive other G7 and European states to do the same. What is the current status of talks with the EU, the United States and the G7 partners? Specifically, what recent discussions has the Minister had with his Belgian counterpart? What is the UK doing to help move things along? Does the Minister agree that when those sanctioned assets are mobilised they should be used not just for the reconstruction of Ukraine but to support the Ukrainian people as fast as possible?

For all the talk of negotiations, we must not lose sight of the fact that the GDP of the UK and our allies combined colossally outweighs that of Russia, and we need to leverage that in every right way. We need to ramp up our defence industrial base now for the long term, because we know that, for Russia, sustaining its war economy will come at an enormous price at a time when it is already reeling from sanctions, with interest rates at high levels not seen in decades and with welfare payments having to be slashed.

Last week we learned of the Government's vision for British troops on the ground in Ukraine, should a peace agreement be reached. That deployment of British troops is, I believe, one of the most serious decisions a Government and a Parliament could ever take, so there are a number of vital details that we need to understand about what exactly the Government's plans are for any future deployment. These include the rules of engagement, troop numbers, how rotations could work, the composition of the force, whether any British soldiers will be actively involved in policing or patrolling any border or demilitarised zone, and what air and naval assets would be provided as part of any multinational force for Ukraine. The British people will expect answers to those vital questions before we consider sending our boys out to a conflict zone, potentially risking the lives of courageous British servicemen and women.

The Government must confirm the contributions of other countries and the nature of any security guarantees, particularly with regard to the United States and Germany. We need Ministers to confirm whether soldiers operating in Ukraine will be subject to the European convention on human rights during any deployment. Will the Minister clarify which Government budget such an operation will be funded from? Does he agree that this underscores the imperative of spending 3% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament? His Majesty's Opposition have called for that and I hope that the Government will do the same. Kicking the can into the next decade, with no road map, is simply not going to cut it in the world in which we currently live. We must do everything in our power to deter an invasion of this kind of any other country. In principle, Britain must be involved in any and every effort to provide deterrence against such aggression in future.

Two things are also critical in the immediate term. First, Ukraine must continue to receive the military aid it needs to fight back against Russia's increasingly savage war, and Putin's ability to wage this war must be further undermined, for example through biting new sanctions. Secondly, any initiatives to secure an end to the conflict must deliver peace on the terms of the Ukrainian people, and with full involvement of Ukraine. We cannot allow Putin to be strengthened. Will the Minister provide an update on how the UK is ensuring Ukraine is able to meet the increasingly savage tactics being used by Russia?

[Andrew Rosindell]

To conclude, in the early days of the war, the previous Conservative Government played a pivotal role in coming to the aid of the Ukrainian people. Just as Margaret Thatcher stood up to the threat of Soviet domination in eastern Europe, and fought for the freedom and the democracy of eastern Europeans, ultimately leading to the fall of the Berlin wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union, my party led at the outset of this invasion, and continues to stand with the people of Ukraine.

As usual, it was British leadership that set the direction of travel for many European countries. It was the British people who provided approximately £12 billion in overall support, including military and humanitarian aid. With our allies, it was Britain that imposed the largest and most severe set of sanctions that Russia had ever seen, to cripple Putin's war machine. It was Britain that hosted the Ukraine recovery conference in 2023, raising billions for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. And it was Britain that established Operation Interflex, which has now trained over 50,000 Ukrainian recruits on British soil since the illegal invasion of 2022. When freedom is threatened, Britain stands resolute.

Today, we feel as passionately as we did four years ago about defending and restoring the freedom that the Ukrainian people earned back in 1991. Long has Britain stood for the cause of freedom, and long may that continue.

4.48 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I have been complaining at home recently because the heating broke down, and I felt that was not being taken seriously by my other half. It was minus 1°C, I was really cold and I had been moaning about it for a week. Then it was pointed out to me that right now in Ukraine, in Kyiv, it is minus 12°C, although it feels like minus 16°C, and overnight it will be minus 17°C. To stop myself moaning, I have put the temperatures in London and in Kyiv on my phone.

I keep remembering that in Kyiv ordinary men and women are having to battle against the cold, and their infrastructure is being deliberately attacked by Putin to try to undermine their morale. What happened on Monday night? There were 293 drones and 18 missiles in a bombardment. Air defences shot down 240 drones and seven missiles, but there was damage to critical civilian infrastructure in Kyiv and across Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, Sumy, Kharkiv and Donetsk.

There are now several hundred thousand households without any power or heating. There are 500 high-rise tower blocks where people are really cold, and they have acute shortages of electricity. The Russians are doing this on purpose. This is not proper warfare. This is such a basic thing—you are not supposed to target civilians when you are at war; it is against the law. When you are at war, you are at war, so go for the combatants; do not go for the children, nursery schools and housing estates. Do not bomb blocks of flats. That is not right or proper; it is illegal, immoral and wrong.

The people are exhausted. They are about to hit their fourth year of being at war with Russia, but what is so amazing is the strength, focus, fortitude and bravery of these people, which has absolutely hit me in the heart when I have talked to Ukrainians. They are absolutely determined to keep their country Ukrainian, and they will not allow the Russians to win. No matter how hard it is, how cold it is or how many people are lost, they will continue to fight. They stand resolute, and we stand with Ukraine and with those brave people.

On the Foreign Affairs Committee, we have had the honour of not only visiting Ukraine, but having a number of meetings with the Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Committee. Its members have varied over the years. During the most recent meeting, the chair was the only person we could see. I joked about it to start with—I was going, "They ought to turn the lights on." What an idiot! They do not have any lights or any power. The members were talking to us from their cars, because they could put on the heating and a light in their car and talk to us that way. That was how we had a meeting with the Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Committee, but the members of the Committee showed up and told us what they had to say. We stand with Ukraine—this bravery!

There are many things that we can do. I am really encouraged to hear that we are bolstering the work that we need to do when it comes to the shadow fleet. If anybody does not understand it, the shadow fleet is a fleet of ageing ships of obscure ownership that are uninsured and often environmentally unsound. They are being used to transport sanctioned Russian oil products to get around the oil price cap.

I hope that we can find legal grounds for deploying military assets against the shadow fleet under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 and do insurance spot checks on false-flag ships, some of which were expelled by the countries for which they used to wave the flag and claim they came from. Some of those countries do not even have a shipping register, yet the ships still claim that they belong to those countries. If the ships are not insured, we can really take action, and I am glad to hear that we are going to step that up. That sort of sanction busting must stop.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): On that point, two tankers from the shadow fleet were scheduled to go through the channel earlier today. The shadow fleet exists solely to keep money flowing to the Kremlin, while threatening maritime safety and environmental security. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK Government should be mindful of other aspects relevant to this debate as we continue to pursue the shadow fleet that allows Putin to wage his unwarranted and unlawful invasion?

Emily Thornberry: I agree completely. We need to be as creative as possible when it comes to the shadow fleet, and there is always more that we can do. The Foreign Affairs Committee and many of its talented members are always available to give as many suggestions as the Government wish to hear. One thing that worries me is that it is all very well having creative ways of imposing sanctions, but they are only as good as their enforcement. When I push the Government on exactly how much effort they are putting into enforcement and how much investment is going in, I am always concerned that although those sanctions may look good on paper, things may be slipping through the net. We need to ensure that we mean what we say, and that we do it.

There are a couple of other issues that I would like to briefly cover. First, although there is a hot war going on in Ukraine—that is one war that is going on in Europe—we are all agreed that Europe is also at war with Russia

on another basis. That is the new hybrid warfare, the sort of warfare that is more difficult to identify, whether Russia is subjecting us to sabotage, cyber-attacks, or misinformation and disinformation. We are at war with Russia, and it is trying to undermine our democracies and our countries. Nowhere is that clearer than around the Black sea, which is of huge strategic importance to Russia. The countries around the Black sea, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, have all been subjected to a level of hybrid warfare that we need to look at, not just because we need to be of assistance to them—we are all in this together—but because that is a portent of what could happen to us.

Yesterday, the Committee heard from Ana Revenco about the ongoing hybrid warfare that Moldova is subjected to. It is at the forefront of hybrid warfare; it faces cyber-attacks, illicit financing schemes, prolific information manipulation campaigns and political rhetoric espoused by Kremlin-linked actors. Some of us in the Chamber might be thinking, "We already have some of that—in fact, we probably have all of that", but we only have it at a low level. However, we are heading for elections, and elections are always a time when a democracy is at its most vulnerable. We must not be complacent, but I fear that sometimes we are. We are a great democracy; we have been going for a long time, and we think, "Oh, it'll be fine", because of course we are an island. If, like Finland, we had Russia right on our border, we would have a very different attitude, but in modern times, whether or not we have a land border, Russia can still try to influence our democracy by undermining us. If we open our eyes, we can see that there is ongoing disinformation that is trying to undermine our democracy right now, and the problem is that the public are not alive to it. The last thing anybody ever wants to admit is that they have been lied to and they have fallen for it. Trying to explain to them afterwards that they have done so is just impossible, so we need to ensure that we counter that disinformation right now.

For the Russians, Britain is the No. 1 enemy in Europe. Looking at their rhetoric and the sorts of things they say about us, it is Britain they loathe more than practically any other country. I am proud of that, but we need to be mindful of what it means for our country. The Russians believe that we are responsible for triggering the second world war and many subsequent conflicts. In today's context, that is projected on to the war in Ukraine, where Britain is portrayed as not merely a supporter of Kyiv, but the architect and main driver of the conflict. Listening to some of the things their secret service has been openly saying about us, it is as if everything that is happening in Ukraine is down to us—I wish it were, but the rhetoric is definitely against us. They advance a conspiratorial vision in which Britain is acting as not just Ukraine's ally but the mastermind behind a proxy war, persuading Europe to fight to the last Ukrainian. The chairman of the state Duma even alleged recently that we were orchestrating specific incidents, such as the shelling of Belgorod, close to the Ukrainian border. So it goes on. Russian propaganda routinely accuses the UK of being involved in terrorist attacks and acts of sabotage targeting Russia, or Russian nationals. The allegations include the poisoning of Litvinenko, the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic sea—it seems that all of this is down to us—and the terrorist attack committed by Islamists at the Crocus City Hall.

Russian propaganda continues to point the finger at Britain. It used to be America, but for some reason America is not in Russian sights so much any more, and we are. In a way, we should be proud of that, but we need to be mindful of it, and we need to stick together and stand with Ukraine. We stand with Ukraine—the Ukranians are fighting the war for us, and we continue to give them every support—and we should be proud of that. I am proud of the fact that in this country and in this House—with the exception of those who are not present in the Chamber this afternoon—we are united behind them. We remain united, and we must remain united until the end—until victory. Slava Ukraini!

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

5 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I welcome the time for this debate on Ukraine today, as we meet at a key moment. American peace proposals welcomed by the Kremlin suggested demilitarised zones and buffer areas. Those phrases sound technical, but their consequences could be catastrophic. The Ukrainian people see such proposals for what they are: a ruse to circumvent Ukraine's defences and continue the invasion later. Russia's relentless assault in the east has intensified, despite it passing the grim milestone of a million Russian troops killed or injured on the frontline. Zaporizhzhia, a city of 670,000 people, is now under serious threat. Russian drones are striking the city. The emergency services have prepared a plan to evacuate a third of the population if fighting damages the nearby nuclear power station. That is the reality of Putin's war.

President Trump is unreliable, unpredictable and disdainful of the rule of law—one need only look at his actions in Venezuela. Britain must take an active role in ensuring that Ukraine's interests remain at the heart of all future negotiations, reinforcing collective deterrence and signalling that European security and Ukraine's sovereignty remain non-negotiable. That also requires honesty about the United States. What concrete security guarantees have actually been secured, and can the Government seriously assure this House that those guarantees would endure beyond the next conversation between President Trump and Vladimir Putin?

The United Kingdom and France have committed to the potential deployment of troops in Ukraine, should a peace deal be agreed. Any discussion of UK or French troops on the ground must be about deterrence, not escalation, and limited in scope, tied to a political settlement and never an open-ended deployment. It is right that the Prime Minister has committed to putting any deployment of British forces to Ukraine to a vote in this place, but any such commitment must be credible. That means having the personnel, the equipment, the logistics and the funding in place not just to deploy, but to sustain a force over time. Serious questions remain about our current ability to do that.

Will the Minister set out in clear terms how the Government intend to ensure that any future deployment to Ukraine will be fully resourced, properly equipped and sustainably funded, and not announced before the means to deliver it exist? The Government must increase the size of our armed forces, plug gaps in military capability and fix the broken procurement processes.

[James MacCleary]

The lack of a clear defence investment plan for our military undermines the credibility of announcements of overseas deployments.

Alongside military deterrence, we must also apply maximum economic pressure. Yesterday morning, residents in my constituency were surprised to wake up to find various fruits and vegetables and cans of milk distributed across our beaches in Seaford and Newhaven. A container ship passing through the channel had shed some containers in the past few weeks, and those have now washed up. Another day, my residents could find their beaches covered in oil leaked from a sanctioned Russian tanker from the Russian shadow fleet also passing through the channel. That is why we must take every action possible to restrict the shadow fleet, not just to prevent the flow of money into Russia, but because it presents an active threat to this country's economic, military and environmental security. We therefore welcome the Government's announcement of a ban on UK companies providing services such as insurance or maintenance to ships carrying Russian liquefied natural gas. That is a big step in the right direction and we genuinely welcome it.

Carriers owned or insured by the UK have transported £45 billion-worth of Russian products since 2022. We must do more. The Government's recent oil price cap reduction is insufficient. Liberal Democrats believe that the cap should be lowered at least to $30 dollars a barrel, with stricter enforcement to ensure that no UK money supports Russia's war effort. The Government should also be giving serious consideration to a total ban on Russian oil and gas exports. I think that many people would share my astonishment at the news that the UK still imports £1.7 billion-worth of goods and services from Russia, and that the figure actually increased in 2025.

The most impactful contribution that the Government could make is pushing for allied action to unlock frozen Russian assets. My hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) has introduced a Bill to enable billions in frozen Russian assets to be seized and the proceeds to be directed to Ukraine's defence and reconstruction. It is also welcome that the Government are threatening legal action to secure £2.5 billion from Roman Abramovich's Chelsea sale. Liberal Democrats have called for that for over a year. It should never have taken as long, but we welcome forward movement. Putin must be punished, not rewarded, and it was deeply disappointing to see the European Union fail to agree on a reparations loan using Russian assets. Britain must show greater resolve and make Putin pay—literally—for his invasion.

We are all appalled by the abduction of tens of thousands of Ukrainian children. That is a war crime. We support the Bring Kids Back initiative and the Yale School of Public Health's humanitarian research lab, but those initiatives are in danger because President Trump has cut their funding. Again, frozen Russian assets could be used to fund the shortfall. Support for Ukraine also means doing right by Ukrainians here in the UK: Ministers must provide certainty on length of leave to remain and urgently resolve the status of young Ukrainians studying at our universities and colleges, who cannot be left in prolonged legal limbo.

Russia continues to pose a profound strategic threat through its invasion, cyber-attacks and energy coercion. That threat extends far beyond Ukraine, to the Baltic states in particular, and deterrence must therefore be pan-European if it is to be credible. It would be wholly inappropriate to contemplate restoring Russia's G7 membership, and the UK must oppose its readmission. The UK must also step up its contribution to European defence through NATO, the Joint Expeditionary Force and deeper co-operation with our European allies, and must be unequivocal in defending the sovereignty of all NATO partners in areas including the High North and Greenland. Aggression and violations of sovereignty will not be rewarded.

As we debate in comfort, Ukrainian soldiers man defensive positions in freezing conditions. Ukrainian civilians flee their homes; Ukrainian families live with the daily terror of drone and missile strikes. They are fighting for freedom, sovereignty, and their very existence. They are fighting for principles that we claim to hold dear: democracy, the rule of law and self-determination. Will we stand with them for as long as it takes, or will we allow fatigue and the bullying of autocrats to erode our resolve? Liberal Democrats are clear: we will not look away; we will not accept an unjust peace; we will push for the maximum economic pressure, for seizing frozen Russian assets, for proper support for Ukraine's defence, and for democratic oversight of any British military involvement.

The unity of this House, with one party a small but notable exception, reflects the strength of the British people's commitment to our Ukrainian friends. They must be tired, but we must never tire of talking about them in this place. They are fighting for all our futures, and we must continue to stand by their side for as long as it takes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Sixteen Members wish to speak. I do not want to impose a time limit, but if everyone speaks for about eight minutes and monitors their speaking time, everyone will have an equal time in which to speak. Let us try to be mindful.

5.8 pm

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I shall try to follow your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let me begin by paying tribute to what Members have said already, and also to the fact that a number of Members in all parties have contributed in many different ways in trying to stand up for the Ukrainian people, not only in speeches in the House but through the initiatives that they are taking.

I want to talk briefly about my own motivation, which starts in Syria. Here I should refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which includes a reference to my role in that regard. As Members will know, I have a deep-seated passion for seeing that the Syrian people have a proper free and inclusive future after years of brutal dictatorship from Assad, and, of course, Putin was central to that. Half a million people died in Syria because of the actions of Assad and Putin, and I question whether Putin would have felt emboldened

to invade Ukraine—Crimea—in 2014 if our country and the United States had taken a stronger role back in 2013, when that red line was set.

I want to take a moment to reflect on what the Minister said about parties not being present, because another party is absent too: Your Party. Members of that party and of the hard left look at this conflict in Ukraine and blame the west. Hon. Members may remember the ridiculous statement that blamed NATO expansion for Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Let us be absolutely clear: there was no excuse, and there never will be any excuse, for Putin's actions in Ukraine.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, if anybody has any doubt about Putin's motives or morality, they should look at who his partners are in this war? Iran is a country that is killing its own people on the streets and is now executing them. Is it not the case that Putin is an absolute disgrace, and anybody who shows any sympathy for him really should look at who his friends are?

David Taylor: I think we know who Putin's friends are, and that is a matter of public record. I completely agree, and if I had had time during my question on the Iran statement yesterday, I would have spoken about the role that Iran is playing in Ukraine. Shahed drones, which all of us who have been to Ukraine have had to cower from, are being provided by the Iranian regime, so the sooner it falls the better.

I want to praise Conservative Members for the role they played, alongside my own, in the lead-up to the conflict. In particular, I praise Ben Wallace for his role, especially in putting in place the next-generation light anti-tank weapons, because it was so crucial at the start of the conflict that Kyiv did not fall. Much as we may praise the actions of our Government or any other Government, we must of course praise the bravery of the Ukrainian people at the start of that conflict in stopping the tanks rolling into Kyiv.

I am very grateful for the work that Ministers and the Prime Minister are doing to support the Ukrainian people, and we have heard some of the figures about the billions going on defence spending. I am particularly grateful for the £3.5 billion that will be spent on hardware under the defence industry support treaty, and the continued support for Operation Interflex training and for the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which has over 50 partners, as well as for the British built octopus drones that will be so crucial.

I absolutely welcome the talks towards a ceasefire. Who would not want a ceasefire? I also welcome the commitment with France to deploy peacekeepers at some point in the future. However, we must continue to support the Ukrainian people, because I fear that the Russians will use any pause in fighting as an opportunity to re-group and go again. We cannot be under any illusion about the threat from Russia. Many of us have been part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I had an opportunity to visit our fantastic troops in the Tapa base in Estonia just before Christmas, which really brought home just how real the threat from Russia continues to be.

I have made a couple of trips to Ukraine since the conflict started. The most recent one, almost a year ago, focused on drone technology and the imperative of supporting the Ukrainians in defending themselves. I had some absolutely amazing meetings while I was there, including with Deputy Defence Minister Sergiy Boyev, as well as with Ukrainian MPs who many hon. Members will know, such as Dmytro Natalukha and Oleksander Marikovskyi, who are members of the Economic Affairs Committee. Dmytro referred to the vital importance of drones and the need for what he called the Kalashnikovs of the sky. A Kalashnikov is of course a very durable weapon, and if it does break in any way it is very easy to repair. As well as the most important high tech, the Ukrainians continue to need the everyday drones that can help on the frontline to do reconnaissance, so that they know the Russian positions, and help them as they try to advance. Yes, we need investments in advanced technology, but we also need the Kalashnikovs of the sky—weapons for which parts are easy to come by and that are easy to repair.

On drones, I echo a point made by the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). I agree that we need to look at how we can get more UK finance into Ukraine through joint ventures that can help with the production of drones. If we can work with the City of London to look at ways in which we can unlock any barriers that may exist, that would be a worthwhile venture, because we need to get more capital into the country to help Ukrainian companies, as well as our own, to build drones. The Octopus drone scheme is a brilliant example of our trying to work with the Ukrainians. There is a real opportunity here. The Ukrainians have the data, and the lived experience that can help us to build drones together. That will help us, and will help them in this war. I hope that, in the wind-ups, the Minister can talk about how we can work with the City of London to unlock more capital that will go into the country.

I want to talk briefly about a second trip I made, way back in 2024, when I was but a humble candidate. There are a number of organisations up and down the UK involving ordinary people who are trying to help in a grassroots way, in any way that they can. At a time when there is so much talk about charity beginning at home, and about problems here, it is remarkable that so many ordinary people have stepped up to help people they will probably never meet. Some have gone to Ukraine, and I want to pay tribute to them. I went there with an organisation called Help99. It delivers pick-up trucks that farmers do not need any more. Soldiers use them on the frontline to get from A to B. To go back to an earlier point, long-range missiles and expensive technology are really important, but we also need the things that will help soldiers on the ground. I pay tribute to those organisations. I had the privilege of hosting an event on this subject in Parliament last year, at which over 60 individuals and over 30 organisations from around the country came together.

I encourage the Government to look at ways that any excess vehicles on the Government estate, be they at the Home Office or at Network Rail, can be donated cheaply. Let us get the Treasury to write off these vehicles. It would not cost that much money, and it would make a difference to ordinary soldiers on the frontline.

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

5.16 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that you want us to keep our comments fairly brief, so to save time, let me say that I associate myself completely with what was said by the Minister, the Opposition spokespeople and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in support of Ukraine. Ukraine's fight is our fight. They are a brave and noble people showing enormous courage. None of us here has any sympathy whatever for Putin and what he has done. We should be reasonably confident and not downhearted. We should be proud of what we have done as a nation from the very start.

We should not assume that Putin will necessarily win. He has an economy the size of Spain, or perhaps Italy. We have vastly more resources. These regimes can seem very strong, but they can collapse very quickly. Who knows what will happen? He is only a prototype dictator. In these four years, he has only marched 30 miles; Stalin marched all the way from the Volga to Berlin. Yes, all right, he is refusing all these peace offers, and he is determined to get the rest of the Donbas. I agree that over four years, with thousands more dying and his economy destroyed, he might get another 30 miles, and get the rest of the Donbas, but so what? What will that achieve for his country? It is so cruel, unnecessary and pointless. There is criticism of Mr Trump, but at least he is trying to get some sort of peace deal. Our influence is limited, but we should support his efforts. One thing we cannot support is cravenly getting a peace deal that allows Russia to grab territory that it has failed to get over the past four years, and get the fortresses that Ukraine needs for its survival.

There is hope. I know that some people think that this is almost as bad as Germany invading Poland in 1939. It is almost worse. I have made it my job over the past 40 years, partly because my wife is half Russian, to try to understand the Russian psyche. It is worse, in a sense, because so many nationalist Russians, who are not the Russians I know or associate with, view Ukraine—Ukraine means "border country"—as part of Russia. They view Kyiv, the source of the Russian Rus, as we view Canterbury, so I am afraid these Russian nationalists will not give up. They want to grab the whole country, so we must remain firm.

I would go along with anything the Government wanted to do in support of Ukraine in terms of sanctions: upping sanctions, stopping tankers—anything they like. However, in the few moments that I have, I want to question the Government on the idea of sending a small force of British troops. We are part of the coalition of the willing; I do not want it to be the coalition of the naive willing.

I have sat through so many of these debates: the debate on Iraq—I was one of only 15 Tory MPs to oppose Blair's invasion—the Afghanistan debates; and the Syria debate, in which I refused to support Mr Cameron. There is so much danger in deploying perhaps just 7,000 under-resourced British troops to a country the size of France, with a population the size of France's and an 800-mile front—a country where 7,000 people have been dying every month. Now, if America was prepared to come in, or if there was a NATO operation, I think the House would be very willing to accept our involvement, but compare this with what happened in West Germany. Compare the size of our Army now to the size of our Army then. Do you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we had 120,000 service personnel in Germany? We had 55,000 British troops, excluding the RAF, in West Germany; we had 900,000 NATO troops in West Germany, including the Bundeswehr. America was totally committed.

I noticed what was said by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary). They did not immediately say that they would support the Government. Instead, they asked some quite serious questions. If we have this debate, we have to go on asking those questions. What are the rules of engagement? What happens if I am right, and Putin accepts some temporary ceasefire and then marches in again? What would happen then to our 7,000 troops?

Emily Thornberry: I am listening very carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman says, and I take on board his points, but we have yet to give sufficient emphasis to whether Putin actually wants peace. I fully understand that plans need to be made in case there is a peace, but that is rather based on the idea that he wants to stop, and I, for one, am not really sure that he does.

Sir Edward Leigh: I agree with that entirely. I am not sure that this will ever happen. I am not sure there will ever be a ceasefire. I think Putin is determined to carry on for another four years and another 30 miles. However, as the national Parliament, and given the size of our Army and the resources that we have, I think that we have a right to question the Prime Minister on this. Now, I quite understand that for the Prime Minister, this is hell. He has to deal with the NHS, the farmers, the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats—much better to grandstand on the world stage and say, "Yes, we are prepared to put our troops on the ground," but it is grandstanding, and it is extremely dangerous.

I will end on this point. Just imagine—I know it is probably not going to happen—that there is a ceasefire, and we put troops in, and Putin marches again. Does anybody here really, in their heart of hearts, want to be involved in a shooting war with Russia? I have grown-up children. Does anybody here want their son to be called out there, and to be killed by a Russian drone, as thousands of brave Ukrainians have been? This is serious stuff. I am pleased that the two Opposition parties are asking the questions—that is what we all need to do.

5.24 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): It will come as no surprise to colleagues across the House to hear that the issue I want to focus on is the treatment of the Ukrainian children. When I first visited Ukraine, this was the issue that struck me to my core. Russia has stolen 20,000 Ukrainian children from their home, and Russian authorities themselves report that more than 700 Ukrainian children have now been officially registered in Russia—a heinous war crime that continues unabated today.[1]

Some 1.6 million children in the occupied territories are being subjected to militarisation and indoctrination. In recent months, we have seen clearer and deeply disturbing evidence, and have heard harrowing testimony from Ukrainian children who have been abducted by Russia, and from those trapped in the occupied territories,

1.[*Official Report*, 15 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

that the militarisation of Ukrainian children is accelerating at pace. It is no longer about propaganda quietly slipped into classrooms. We now see the deliberate transformation of schools into instruments of war—an $8 billion down payment on Russia's future military.

Ukrainian children are being placed on so-called specialised tracks and funnelled into paramilitary movements that are now formally embedded in the education system. Children are prescribed mandatory hours of military training and are forced to attend military camps. If they refuse, they risk failing their secondary education, which leaves conscription into the Russian military as the only future left to them.

One child told Save Ukraine:

> "They showed us different types of grenades and mines. How much pressure a mine can withstand when it explodes. How to lay mines, clear areas, set tripwires, dig trenches. While I was digging a trench, they deliberately threw in a grenade to make it feel like a real battlefield."

Another child recently rescued by Save Ukraine reported that Russian soldiers conduct psychological testing, asking them questions like, "How do you feel about killing? Do you enjoy hurting people? Do you want to be a tank operator or a pilot?". The fear of violence, punishment and forced conscription is not an isolated experience. It has become a daily reality for those living in the occupied territories. This is not education; it is coercion. It is cold, calculated and chillingly familiar from the darkest chapters of history on occupation.

Those children who are not trained to fight are trained to police. They are being shaped into the next generation of law enforcement officials. Whose laws are they being taught to enforce? Putin's. They are laws that silence dissent through violence, that tear children from families, and that allow children as young as 14 to be prosecuted for terrorism, with penalties reaching life imprisonment, simply for opposing Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Children in the occupied territories live under constant surveillance. Their phones are checked, their social media is monitored, and any sign of Ukrainian consciousness is routinely treated as suspicious, disloyal and extremism. Russia's treatment of Ukrainian children reveals its long-term strategy, with deep security implications for Europe and NATO.

I am proud of the leadership that the United Kingdom has shown in standing with Ukraine, in everything from the arms we have supplied to the sanctuary we have provided, but I am deeply concerned; although reports suggest that we are 90% of the way towards a peace agreement, the language on the abducted Ukrainian children remains disturbingly vague. There is no clarity on how the stolen children will be traced. There is no clarity on how they will be returned, and bear in mind that many have been trafficked to Belarus or North Korea.

What happens to the youngest children who were ripped from their homes, who may not be able to remember a time before they were placed with Russian families? Who will adjudicate if there are disputes about children's documentation, bearing in mind that many mothers in the occupied territories were forced to register their children as Russian simply to secure maternity care?

There remain disparities between the individuals whom we in this country have sanctioned for the forced deportation of Ukrainian children and those sanctioned by the EU and the US. I have flagged those disparities with the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I completely understand that he cannot comment on further designations, but I urge him to look again at that list.

I thank the Minister sincerely for his efforts, and I know that he takes this issue incredibly seriously. To that end, I urge him to ensure that the same determination and resolve shown to the international coalition of the willing is now, at this pivotal time in peace negotiations, shown to the international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children. Will he push for a meeting of that coalition again at the earliest opportunity so that it can establish a clear post-war plan to secure international consensus on the fate of the abducted children, and to make it clear that their return must be a non-negotiable next step in any peace deal between Russia and Ukraine? There can be no lasting peace without the return of the stolen children. Slava Ukraini!

5.30 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I shall be as brief as I possibly can be. I very much welcome the debate, although it did come as a bit of a surprise. I think one of the reasons why not many Members are in the Chamber is that they were not really prepared for it, the Prime Minister is not here and there is no proper motion. Out of 400 Labour MPs, fewer than 20 are in the Chamber, which I think projects an unfortunate message for a Government debate on Ukraine. I welcome it nevertheless, but I look forward to a proper debate on a proper motion to which everyone will have to turn up—there might even be whipping—to hear what the Prime Minister has to say, particularly about the deployment, which I will come to.

I will not repeat the speech I had the privilege of delivering in the debate granted to me by the Backbench Business Committee on 4 December. However, I will reiterate that Russia cannot win this war militarily; it will only win because of western weakness—our weakness and lack of resolve. If we support Ukraine, Russia cannot win. That is why its diplomatic efforts are so vigorous.

There is far more that we could do. In particular, we could rearm our own armed forces much more quickly. I get smiles from Government Front Benchers when I say that, because they agree with me, but the Government are not delivering the scale of defence spending increases that we need.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Briefly, because I want to be as swift as possible.

Ian Roome: Just today it has been reported that 18 tankers from the Russian shadow fleet have passed through the channel since the Defence Secretary's statement to the House on 7 January on curtailing Russian oil exports. Does the hon. Member agree that we must show the Russians that we mean what we say?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I completely agree. There should be a NATO operation to intercept every ship that comes into NATO's operational area in the north Atlantic and

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

the North sea around the north of Scotland. We could choke off a significant amount of this, but we are not doing so; we are letting it carry on. Getting all of Europe's NATO powers in line with that is a problem, but let us do it. Together, the NATO nations in Europe could show Trump that we are prepared to deliver for European security, but we are not doing that at the moment.

It is essential for us to discuss the so-called coalition of the willing. We all know that there are already some armed forces personnel in Ukraine providing advice, logistics, training and intelligence, and supporting planning and headquarters—that sort of thing. There is probably more that we can learn from the Ukrainians about fighting the Russians than we can teach them. But is 7,500 troops in formed units—a brigade—supporting a combat battalion or two what we are talking about? I have grave doubts about that, including on the rules of engagement and how we would provide force security. Would we not just be presenting a lovely target for the Russians to attack? They might not attack it directly—it might be "accidental"—but it would blur areas and create all sorts of problems if we were so overt. I have my doubts, unless we have a force in there that can actually fight and defend itself against the Russians. How we would respond in such a situation, were Russia to escalate, is a very open question.

I have no desire to be an armchair critic of the Government's policy, and this brings me to the main point that I want to make. It has become fashionable to believe that Parliament has a right to tell the Government when and when not to deploy troops, but there is no constitutional basis for this whatsoever. In fact, the Prime Minister assumes his office, takes the seals of office and takes the responsibility upon himself about when to direct the armed forces into harm's way. There is no constitutional impediment to him doing that.

What we saw in the Syria debate—I commend the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) for his excellent speech—was a humiliating abdication of the Government's responsibility. They knew that it was right to deploy armed force in Syria, but they then volunteered not to do so because of a finely balanced debate and vote in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister stood there and said, "I get it." This was really O-level politics and O-level statecraft. It was ridiculous, and the hon. Gentleman is completely right to say that it projected weakness when we knew that the Russians were supporting the Syrian Government in deploying chemical weapons and murdering their own people. It was also weak of Obama to say this was a red line and then fail to do anything about it. We projected weakness and we invited Putin to try again, and I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman about the consequences.

The point is that the Government have the responsibility to make this judgment. They cannot pass this judgment on to 650 armchair generals jaw-jawing in the House of Commons when we do not have the intelligence or the assessments. We can express our views and we can hold the Government to account for the outcome of what they decide, but I put it to the Minister that in that debate on Syria we learned that a Prime Minister does not resign when he loses such a crucial vote. Part of that was to do with the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. If he had made it a vote of confidence, would he have won it? If not, would there have been a general election? No, there would not have been. He might have had to resign, but there would not have been a general election. We were at a very artificial point.

I put it to the Minister that if the Prime Minister were to bring a vote to the House of Commons this time and lose it, he would either have to resign and hand over to somebody else or call a general election, because we no longer have a fixed-term Parliament. We are back to real accountability, and the accountability that counts is at the ballot box, in the final analysis. The one power the Prime Minister has is to call a general election and ask the King to dissolve Parliament. If he had lost such a vote, that would be the only honourable thing for him to do. He cannot come here and engage in the kind of abject, humiliating abdication of responsibility that we saw before.

On the other experience, the Government of the day won the Iraq vote, and I happen still to think that was right. We have a democracy of sorts in Iraq, and Iraq is no longer a Russian puppet, but who in this House still believes that was the right decision? The polls went in favour of the Iraq war at the last minute, and maybe that helped Tony Blair get the vote over the line. Was that a good basis for making a decision? No, it was not. Either the Government make such a decision for themselves and hold themselves accountable to this House, or the Prime Minister should not accept the seals of office and become Prime Minister, because that is the job.

5.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to start by thanking the Leader of the House for giving us this debate. He could have chosen any topic to fill the space this afternoon, but he chose this debate on Ukraine. It is a privilege to serve as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine. I can see many members of the APPG here. The group is not full, so other Members can still join. We would like to have every Back-Bench Member of the House as a member of the APPG.

I want to start with a first-person narrative about what is happening in Ukraine now, as we approach the midway point of the Ukrainian winter, in the middle of January, and the reality of the lived experience of what midwinter in Kyiv really means and feels like. Russia continues to have the ability to strike on a daily basis and to take out Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Its energy security is constantly under fire.

I spoke with Lesia Vasylenko—I know many people here know Lesia—who chairs the British group in the Rada, and who is in Kyiv. She told me:

> "I have had no heating in my flat for four days and it's minus 10"

—this was yesterday; it is now minus 13°—

> "This is the situation in half of Kyiv. No electricity too, apart from a couple of hours in the night. Some buildings have no water. I'm writing this to you in total darkness and wearing four layers. Schools are not working. The sound of generators is less and less heard as they are breaking down en masse, given that they are not designed to work non-stop"

and in such low temperatures. She continues:

> "Hospitals are also working at limited capacity. And every night Russia is deliberately hitting more and more power generating facilities and gas infrastructure. The task is to freeze Kyiv out. At one point mayor Klitschko even appealed to the people of Kyiv to

leave the city. Putin's invasion nearly four years ago has resulted in millions fleeing their homes, hundreds of thousands of casualties, and relentless attacks on hospitals, homes and schools. This includes Russian state sponsored abductions of Ukrainian children,"

which my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) spoke brilliantly about,

"and the arrest of my colleagues at the OSCE, Dmytro Shabanov, Maksym Petrov, and Vadym Golda,"

who I know my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) is raising as an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe rep on Ukraine. Lesia is the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly chair of the parliamentary support team for Ukraine.[1] I am happy that we can support her and continue to support the work going on now. On our support for Ukraine's energy infrastructure, Octopus signed a significant deal with DTEK, a large private energy company in Ukraine, for £100 million. We need to see much more like that.

I was pleased my hon. Friend the Minister spoke about that bunker under the school on the south bank of Kyiv that we went to together when we were in opposition. We need to think about those children now—not in that school, which has a generator, but in their homes freezing, and all those other millions of people in Kyiv now being frozen out. We need to do more not just to provide emergency energy generation, but that long-term, secure renewable energy. For us, renewable energy is a matter of the energy transition—we just had the statement right before this—but for them, it is national security. It is the difference between being able to heat their homes, keep the lights on and use their mobile phones, and not being able to do so. It is much easier for the Russians to take out a gas-fired power station or a nuclear power station than it is to take out a wind or solar farm. We need to ensure that we do everything we can on Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

As chair of the APPG, I write many letters every week to enable Members of the Ukrainian Rada to visit us here. That is not just about Members of the Rada but right across the piece, because so many Ukrainians have family members here and other ties to the UK. It is still so difficult for Ukranians to get visas. I ask the Minister how we can further reduce bureaucracy for Ukrainians to come here and how we can liberalise those short-term travel visas, which are still difficult to get.

Sanctions are one of the few non-military tools capable of influencing Russian policy. They act as leverage that should not be given away without meaningful concessions. Without conditions, such as a withdrawal to the 1991 borders and binding agreements on reparations, a ceasefire could freeze the conflict in a way that perpetuates instability. Europe and the UK cannot repeat the mistake of 2014, when sanctions over Crimea and the Donbas were limited and political will dissipated. That leniency enabled Moscow to believe that further escalation would be tolerated and led to the full-scale invasion in 2022. Whatever happens—whatever negotiation or agreement—we need to keep Russian sanctions in place and continue to restrict its ability to operate, because my concern is that otherwise we will allow future conflicts to happen, because Russia's territorial ambitions are not constrained just to Ukraine or to any agreement to freeze the conflict.

Phil Brickell: Will my hon. Friend give way on the topic of sanctions?

Alex Sobel: I will.

Phil Brickell: My hon. Friend is a tireless champion for the UK-Ukraine relationship, including through the 100-year partnership. Does he agree that it is worth commending the Government for the action that has been taken in the past month on issuing a licence through the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation to move the £2.5 billion of Chelsea football club proceeds that have remained frozen for four years now? That money could be used to support the victims of conflict, including in Ukraine. Will he join me in calling on the Government to move faster on unlocking the more than £700,000 of assets that belong to Petr Aven, one of Putin's closest oligarch friends? They have been frozen for quite some time now by the National Crime Agency and could also be used to support the Ukrainian people.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has taken too long to see that Chelsea money. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) talked about the aid convoys. Imagine what they could do to support Ukraine, the generators we could buy and the energy infrastructure we could build with the billions from the Chelsea sale.

David Taylor: I hope that if that money is unlocked, we look at ways to compensate for the money that is going into Ukraine by freeing up money that might be able to go to other conflicts around the world, where we have sadly made some reductions due to the cut to the aid budget.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is inviting me to comment on our official development assistance cuts, on which we probably share the same opinion. There is a principle here about reparations, whether they are from the Russian state, from individuals who have benefited from this war or from the gangster kleptocracy that runs Russia. We need to do both those things. There is a wider discussion to be had about how we can support Ukraine and retrench some of the money for other areas, particularly Syria and, hopefully, Iran, that need ODA money from the UK now and in the near future.

As my time is nearly up, I will ask a couple of questions that the Minister can answer at the end of the debate. On the much-vexed question of our deployment of troops to Ukraine, it is very early. I want to counsel some Members that when they are talking about this, their language and approach is very reminiscent of the run-up to the second world war and Lord Halifax's approach. There was an agreement in Munich, Chamberlain said that it would be a peace in our time, and then the war started—it came to us. Russia's territorial ambitions are not limited; they are unlimited. We need to be cognisant of that. We need to be on the front foot, not on the back foot. I understand all the concerns about our ability to deploy troops. What planning are we doing at this stage? What is the process? What can we do to reassure MPs and the public that we are making the right planning steps towards that?

On what we can do now, the plans announced to develop new tactical ballistic missiles with Ukraine to strengthen its ability to defend itself against Russia are welcome. I am sure the Defence Minister will be able to answer this question: can the Government talk more

1.[*Official Report*, 19 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

[Alex Sobel]

about how and when we will do that and what the timelines are? Our own air defences are insufficient. We need to think about the future. If this war is protracted—if Putin does not settle and we do not get to a ceasefire—we ourselves could be threatened by drones, missiles and all the things we hear about every day in Ukraine. We need to be ready for our own defence, as well as the defence of Ukraine.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. There are still 12 Members who wish to speak. I was not going to propose a formal time limit. Perhaps, before I do, Members could restrict themselves to about five minutes and learn from each other's examples?

5.49 pm

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I associate myself with the Minister's comments, for which I thank him.

I have some significant and substantive questions to ask, but I will reflect for a moment on the human side of this conflict, which is important. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) did that very well, as she always does. I have travelled a lot to Ukraine over the past 20 years for work and other purposes. One of the most significant visits was on Thursday night, when I drove into Kyiv during the bombardment. I was reminded that that bombardment, in the early hours of Friday morning, was not aimed at any military target, but at the energy infrastructure, as temperatures in Kyiv reached minus 15°C and minus 20°C. It was nippy, Madam Deputy Speaker, but, unlike so many people, I had somewhere warm to go. What told us perhaps a little more about the Russian Administration, and the way in which they conduct their war, was the double-tap strikes. They hit apartment blocks, and shortly thereafter they hit again, killing the ambulance workers who are reacting.

I then travelled to Sumy—I believe I was one of the first British Members of Parliament to do so since the full-scale invasion—which has a partnership agreement with Angus council in my constituency. The sense of solidarity must go beyond Kyiv, and I am sure that our friends in Kyiv would not mind that. I want to give a shout out to the people of Sumy who welcomed me. As we lay flowers for the 37 people who were killed in an artillery attack as they were out shopping, we were moved on very quickly—we could not even mourn or mark our respects for much longer. As the governor of Sumy told me, that human element is so important. I give a shout-out to Timmergreens primary school in my constituency. Miss Baird's class, led by Mrs Biesok, wrote letters to children in Sumy. Although I took other gifts, including a tartan scarf—colleagues from Scotland will understand—and mentioned other areas of connection, it was those simple letters from primary school children in my constituency that meant so much to everybody in Ukraine. They were exceptional and beautifully written.

I pay tribute to those children, because their efforts remind us of the more serious issues that we are dealing with. That human element tells us why Ukraine is fighting and why we have a responsibility, across Europe, to help Ukraine in its time of need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there must be accountability for those Russians who have carried out massacres and raped, violently tortured and killed people, and they must be taken to court and put in prison?

Stephen Gethins: Accountability is so important, as I know the hon. Gentleman and other Members agree.

On the local element, will the Minister say something about the 100-year agreement? I know that this place has an important role in the response to the war in Ukraine, but the message I received during my travels at the weekend was how important local-to-local solidarity is. Will he say something about the conversations that he has had with devolved Governments and local administrations on the 100-year agreement. Matters such as education are for those administrations, rather than the Government, and it is important to involve others going forward.

The most substantive issue is that we face a significant challenge in European security and have done for some years. The transatlantic relationship is not quite what it was—we must look to Canada in many ways. The common European approach to defending Ukraine, which is, after all, defending us, will be incredibly important. The Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), has been very thoughtful on these issues, and it would be good to hear his reflections on deepening that co-operation.

Over the weekend in Ukraine, I heard so many thank yous—we hear that so many times when we visit. But that is the wrong way around. We should be saying thank you to Ukraine from us all.

5.53 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): We have heard powerful speeches today. Those of us in the Chamber are united in support of our friends in Ukraine. Members have spoken about their own experiences of support, and about the support given by Members who are not present. But we must remember this: Members of the Ukrainian Parliament—the Rada—are doing far more than we could ever do. They are fighting the war; they are on Putin's hit lists.

We here must show that resolve, because what we say in this Chamber is not heard and watched only on the TVs of our constituents; it is watched by our allies and our adversaries, so what we say here does matter. We also know that our ally, Ukraine, depends not just on words: the Ukrainians need the tools to carry on the job, and they must know that they have no truer friend than this country and that we will be with them until the very end.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): As we know, Russia is trying to destroy Ukrainian identity, so I am absolutely delighted that Epsom is putting on a Ukrainian "festival of friendship" week this month. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is absolutely vital that we provide the opportunity for Ukrainians in the UK to celebrate their culture here?

Kevin Bonavia: Absolutely; the hon. Lady makes a good point about Ukrainians we have given sanctuary to in this country. They are making a fantastic contribution

and should be proud of their identity; just as many of us, even if we are not doing it today, wear the Ukrainian flag alongside the Union Jack, they should be proud of that and never lose that identity wherever their lives may take them.

Going forward, the world must be clear about this country's position on the future of this horrific conflict. Yes, we want peace, but not at any price, and we must be clear that no peace can be made without the people of Ukraine. We have a proud history in this country of defending democracy, but we have blots on our history, too. We decided the future of Czechoslovakia without the Czechoslovaks; we must not do that now, and we should urge our allies that they must not do that either. That must be at the heart of this Government's policy.

Beyond that, this is about soft and hard power. There are people talking about hard power politics out there. I speak as a lawyer who believes in the rule of law, but law without the power behind it is just empty words, so I commend efforts by this Government to increase that hard power. This country is getting serious and needs to get more serious, and I am sure many Members in this House will support the Government to do precisely that. If we do not, and if there is a peace, which is just a pause for Putin, we know what will happen next. Those Ukrainians are on the frontline of Europe and—make no mistake— not just Europe: this hostility goes right across the world to our allies across the Atlantic and beyond.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is right that the world should know and be in no doubt about the UK's position on Ukraine, and nor should we be in doubt about Putin's ambitions. He described as a geopolitical catastrophe the falling apart of the Soviet Union, and Russia's 800-year most modern history is one of almost relentless expansion. Does he agree, therefore, that anybody who denies Putin's ambitions for territorial expansion is denying both that statement by Putin and Russian history?

Kevin Bonavia: Absolutely, and we must not underestimate Putin. He is clearly a student of history, but he draws the wrong lessons from it. That man was a KGB agent in East Germany; when the Berlin wall fell, his world fell apart. He is now trying to rebuild that world. So this does not stop in Ukraine; it goes right across all those members of the then Warsaw pact. When I went to eastern Poland last year as a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I saw our Typhoon jets being scrambled to check out a Russian plane right on the edge of that. This is happening day in, day out; that man's ambitions have no borders.

So I urge this Government, this House and this country to be resolute in defending the future of Ukraine, because its future is also our future.

5.59 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I want to put it out there to all Members that, in the coming weeks or months, we will potentially vote to put our troops in harm's way. I have put a friend on the back of a Hercules, in a coffin, in a foreign conflict. That is not something I want to see in this conflict. I am the only Member of this House on the Ukraine-NATO interparliamentary council and I stand in complete support of Ukraine, but it is not a given that we will put troops in harm's way. We need to set that out clearly.

I want to talk about deployment based on my experience. First, I want to look at two historical deployments, both of which I was on—in Bosnia and Kosovo—to set out some of the challenges to which it would be good if the Minister responded later. Bosnia is 12 times smaller than Ukraine, and at the start there were 2,400 troops. That increased to 11,500 troops during the mid-'90s when the British armed forces numbered a quarter of a million. In 1999, I was in Kosovo, which is 55 times smaller than Ukraine, and the number of troops, including those on stand-by, was 19,000. The British armed forces then numbered over 200,000. For reference, the number of British armed forces today is at around 136,000—significantly fewer. That figure has been declining for 30 years.

What would a deployment look like today? No numbers have been disclosed formally, but the number we have seen so far in the media is 7,500. That equates to 15,000 per six-month period, as there would be 7,500 deployed and 7,500 on pre-deployment training. Over 12 months, that would equate to 30,000 troops tied up in, preparing for or coming back from Ukraine. That is almost half of our Army. It does not necessarily include the naval and air assets that would need to be in the region, which would represent a significant commitment as well.

If we are looking at stabilisation in any peace deal provided by British troops in some way, shape or form, we need to bear in mind, as we have all stated today, that Putin does not respect international law. We do not believe he wants peace. If he says, "I am going to have peace," and we put British troops right on his border, we have to consider seriously what we will do if he changes his mind or reneges on any deal.

There are 39 million Ukrainian residents. The rule for military deployment of a stabilisation or peacekeeping force, as the Armed Forces Minister will know, is about 20 to 25 troops per 1,000 residents. That will equate to 600,000 to 800,000 troops, roughly the size of the Ukrainian armed forces. What will our 7,500 and France's 7,500 do with a highly capable Ukrainian military that has been there for a long time?

There is a cost, and I would like to understand what considerations there are and what information will be made available over the coming weeks and months, because this will be a hot topic. How are we planning for a withdrawal and how are we planning to put troops in? We must have a clear, coherent strategy for how our troops will operate, for how long and under what commitment. Why are we looking to operate outside NATO or the JEF? Both Bosnia and Kosovo were NATO missions. We have that framework, and I am very concerned that the coalition of the willing will not work as coherently as the JEF does with NATO. How will the deployment be funded? Even this week, the chief of the defence staff has said that there are in-year pressures and that if cuts are not made, the budget will be exceeded, which is not allowed.

I have concerns about the rules of engagement. Putin does not respect any international law. How will our troops be protected, not just in the short term but in the long term? These are questions that we should be bringing to the House early on. Without a major intervention from the Government for an increase in funding—we

[Stuart Anderson]

need at least a brigade's strength more to put the proposed level of troops into that region, given the numbers we have in the UK armed forces, on the sick and not deployable—we do not, I believe, have the operational capability to have sustainable forces, in conflict or peacekeeping, in Ukraine.

6.4 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I had the privilege of joining a parliamentary delegation to the Yalta European Strategy conference in Kyiv in September. That conference came at the very moment of the incursion of Russian drones into Polish airspace, reminding us that it is far from only the future of Ukraine that is at stake: their fight is our fight and it is Europe's.

At the conference, the Foreign Secretary, on her first international visit in that role, announced 100 sanctions against Russia, and crucially £142 million to support civilians in frontline communities. I will focus my brief remarks on the importance of humanitarian support for some of those in Ukraine's civilian community who have been most acutely affected and harmed, and whose experiences and voices need to be more widely heard.

When Russia brutally invaded Ukraine in 2022, millions of people were forced to flee, but to leave their homes has not been an option for many disabled people or for more than 260,000 Ukrainian people with learning disabilities. Dependent on their families and carers, they have had to stay in the midst of the invasion. Missile and drone attacks are terrifying for the whole community, but particularly for autistic people and those with learning disabilities.

Raisa Kravchenko has been at the forefront of supporting and protecting disabled people over these past traumatic years. On my visit to Kyiv, I met Raisa and her colleague Yulia Klepets, who founded the all-Ukrainian non-governmental organisation coalition for persons with intellectual disabilities. They told me how Raisa spent 25 days sheltering in a basement with her son Oleksiy, who has a learning disability, without food, electricity or gas, and how support and coping strategies that parents have used to support their children have been wrecked by the invasion. They told me about Vitaliy Zegelev, who had not left his Kyiv apartment in three years, who was terrified by air raid sirens and wholly dependent on his mother. That took a toll on his health and safety, and Vitaliy died. These are war crimes for which Russia must be held accountable.

Before the invasion, Raisa and Yulia were campaigning to move more disabled people out of care institutions and into community support. That work has been utterly frustrated, and now disabled people in care institutions have been targeted by Russian forces for kidnapping, as highlighted in the vital report by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter).

The disabled community in Ukraine is at breaking point and beyond. We are providing support. The £25 million funding from the UK Government for the social protection for inclusion, resilience, innovation and transformation—SPIRIT—programme for Ukraine is welcome, as it will provide support for disabled children, but we have to go further and do more. The international community needs to do more to intervene in the human rights emergency for disabled people, as for so many other groups in Ukrainian society.

I am keen to engage further with colleagues in Government on these issues. Alongside the all-Ukraine coalition, Inclusion Europe and UK Friends of Ukraine, I have published a report on the impact of the invasion on disabled people, which I hope will help Parliament consider what more we can do to support that community of Ukrainian people who have been so badly affected.

The experience of disabled people is just one aspect of the crimes committed against the people of Ukraine. We must look to the prospect of a peace agreement, but at this moment we have to ensure that we are doing all that we can to support Ukraine militarily, and in terms of the humanitarian need, including for disabled people and those who provide care and support.

The resilience of Raisa, Yulia and their colleagues is awe-inspiring. Their lives have been devastated for the sake of Putin's ambitions. We must understand the scale of the task of reconstruction, the cost of which is estimated at $1 trillion. We have to hold Russia accountable for that. Russia must be penalised financially to ensure that we can support a full reconstruction and all of the communities that have been so badly affected and harmed because of Russia's illegal actions. We must do all that we can to intervene in this humanitarian crisis.

6.8 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Like many in this House, I stand with Ukraine and its defence of the frontline of Europe, and I am proud to do so.

A couple of weeks ago, I was helping some of the local Ukrainians who are living in my constituency under the Homes for Ukraine scheme to move home. They were being visited by their father, who is a senior officer in the Ukrainian navy. He was very grateful for the fact that we are keeping his family safe, and he said how important it was to the Ukrainians that we were able to do so. However, there are still some things that we need to do to ensure that they safely remain here in the UK. One of the daughters had just applied for the extension to Homes for Ukraine—the Ukraine permission extension scheme—to which people can apply only 28 days before their visa runs out. She had been waiting for more than 28 days, and she was worried that she would not be able to stay without a visa. I ask the Government to look at enabling the renewal of those visas sooner than 28 days before they end. Last year, I was able to win an extra two years' certain stay for Ukrainians on those visas. That was fantastic, and I thank the Government for doing that. However, we still do not know how that is going to work and whether we will still have the problem of the 28 days and people having to wait right up until the very end of their visas.

None of the Ukrainians I know in the UK are sitting back and waiting for help; they have all gone out and got jobs. They are starting businesses, doing things and rebuilding lives here, and we need to look at how we can make that work. One of the issues for the family was qualifications. Their daughter had highly rated qualifications in maths and physics from a Ukrainian school that were not recognised by the school in the UK. It would be helpful if the Government could provide guidance to

our schools on the extent to which they can recognise qualifications from Ukrainian schools. That was one of the family's explicit asks.

Let me add that we should look at what we can do in terms of dentistry. I have a Ukrainian dentist in my constituency who is going through an elongated process to try to requalify to practise dentistry in the UK. Goodness knows that we need all the dentists we can get, so let us help them and make it easier for them to settle here for longer.

There is a problem with the Ukraine permission extension scheme. If Donald Trump is able to magic a ceasefire out of thin air, which I and probably this House feel is very unlikely, we will be in a position where we technically and potentially have peace in Ukraine—I dream of that day, but I do not expect it to be soon. However, if we have peace, we know that the Ukrainian visas will be ended. The visas will finish, and we will expect people to go back, but we all know that there is a difference between peace and safety. We know that Ukraine is covered in unexploded ordnance and landmines, which could take up to 40 years to clear. The land could gain peace, but it will not be safe.

I have a lady in my constituency whose village is in the Russian-occupied zone; it has been demolished, and her house is rubble. She has lost her husband, brother and father, and she has nothing to go back to. I want to ensure that we look for settlement in the long term. Ukraine has recently changed its law to allow people to hold second passports, but the UK is not yet on the list of countries with that agreement. I urge the Government to look at that to ensure that we have a process towards long-term settlement in the UK, so that those industrious Ukrainians who have started businesses can thrive and develop and contribute not only to our economy, but to the rebuilding of Ukraine.

We can do many things. I applaud the Government for all that they are doing, but we can do more. I ask that they please help the Ukrainians to help themselves and to help us. Slava Ukraini!

6.12 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): At the outset, may I acknowledge your staunch and consistent support for the people of Ukraine, Madam Deputy Speaker? You have most recently represented Mr Speaker at the international Crimea platform to reinforce Ukraine's sovereignty.

My heart goes out to the people of Ukraine both in Ukraine and in Bournemouth. I commend Ukraine Relief, which has a donation centre at Castlepoint shopping centre in my constituency, and the work of Karol Swiacki and other Ukrainians across Bournemouth.

Whether the peace that President Trump creates is durable will depend on whether he applies sufficient pressure to Vladimir Putin to secure it. We do not yet know the final outline of a peace deal or even a ceasefire, but we know that the Trump Administration have pressed Ukraine before to make concessions. When granted a summit with President Trump in Alaska, Putin demanded more territory than he had already seized in his war of aggression to date. The Administration responded not by pressuring Russia, but by putting more pressure on Ukraine. Arms were withheld and intelligence was withdrawn, and the assistance that remained was limited and slow. Kyiv has been left perpetually uncertain about the reliability of US support, and the offer of a 15-year US security guarantee as part of a peace plan should give us pause, too. Fifteen years will go by in the blink of an eye unless the guarantee is exceptionally robust, and unless the armed forces of Europe's democracies—ours included—are integral to enforcing it. Otherwise, I fear that Moscow will wait, rebuild, and return when the clock runs out. As the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) was saying, we need to be mindful about what a deployment looks like, and we need to ask the serious questions. I know that the Prime Minister—a good, serious and patriotic man, having to deal with the insanity abroad and difficult conditions at home—is charting that course as best he and this Government can, and I know that he puts the safety of British troops at the heart of what he does.

Without genuine stability, Ukraine cannot rebuild in peace; boardrooms will not make investments over the long term. We know, too, that this would not be peace; it would be merely a ceasefire, a temporary pause. Given the temptation to renew aggression—a temptation that we know Putin cannot resist—brutish competition for continental dominance would define this decade and, sadly, the next. We have to keep the peace, as well as make it, and the only way that we can do that is through robust security guarantees. Unfortunately, that means that we need to come to terms with a changed world. We have not known this fear for a long time, but it is a feeling that Ukraine knows every single day in its bones.

Uniquely, although the United States has been the richest and most capable country in world history, nations have not chosen to balance against it; they have chosen to ally with it—this is a reversal of all we have known in history—because America sought collective security, self-determination, open trade, institutions, legitimacy and purposeful democracy. However, today, that strategic capital is being diminished consciously, as a matter of policy, by the Trump Administration. That is not happening everywhere in the US security apparatus, it should be said, but it is happening at the highest level, where political decisions are being taken. I have lived in America, I have travelled it widely, I have had the privilege of studying international security at one of its universities, and I have a deep affection for its dynamism and its democracy. However, we must face the fact that in its national security strategy, Ukraine and Europe are less of a priority than other parts of the world. European defence planners now have to spend their days tracking Russian troop movements; calculating whether Putin might, before the end of the decade, order an attack against a NATO member, as he did against Ukraine; and wondering whether the United States will come to our defence. We need to rearm faster, and we need to improve and significantly increase our weapons manufacture.

We also need to move closer to European democracies on defence and security—not closer to the EU per se, which may be too inflexible, but closer to our like-minded European democratic friends who care about peace and democracy, and who will themselves put forward a programme of rearmament. In facing the world as it is, and trying to rearm and increase our diplomatic influence to meet it, we need to recognise that there will be people in our country who do not like this. In France and Germany, we see the rise of the far right and the populist right, who are seeking to make an issue of rearmament. We in this House need to be united. We know that there are

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those on the Opposition Benches, but not in attendance today, who will protest against our rearmament and our commitment to Ukraine. We in this House need to be united behind Ukraine, democracy and peace. As far as we can, we should not play party politics; we should rebuild the consensus that has lasted for so many years. To me, that consensus seems to be under threat today.

6.18 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I have spoken about Ukraine and, indeed, initiated debates on Ukraine a number of times over the past 12 years. Of course, 12 years ago was when the war that Russia is waging on Ukraine started, with the annexation of Crimea. Over those 12 years, I have visited Avdiivka, Mariupol and Berdyansk, all of which are now under Russian occupation.

I am proud that as a result of our pressing the Government over that time, the UK started supporting Ukraine through Operation Orbital. That was before the full-scale Russian invasion, but since then, we have been in the vanguard. That is because we have a duty as an original signatory to the Budapest memorandum, and because we believe that independent sovereign states should not lose territory as a result of military aggression, but also because Ukraine is our frontline. Putin's threat extends not just to the territory of Ukraine, but to all those countries that used to be part of either the Soviet Union or the Warsaw pact, particularly the Baltic states.

I am proud of the extraordinary resilience and courage shown by the Ukrainian people. People have talked in this debate about the fact that it will be minus 16ºC tonight, when 70% of Kyiv has no electricity—and that is also the case for large parts of Odessa, Kharkiv and a number of other cities. The losses during this war on both sides have been truly horrendous; there have been well over a million Russian casualties. Although the number for the Ukrainian side has not been released, it is almost certainly well over 100,000. We can understand why the Ukrainians want to see an end to this war, but they want a just and lasting peace.

The original plan advanced by Steve Witkoff and President Trump—the so-called 28-point plan—was utterly unacceptable. It required Ukraine to accept the loss of its territory, and to commit to never having NATO troops on its soil. The plan that is apparently now coming forward is, we are told by President Zelensky, 90% agreed, but he has described the requirements on territory as being "very difficult". While it must be for Ukraine to decide on the terms of any peace, the idea that Russia will be allowed to keep any of the sovereign territory of Ukraine is difficult to stomach.

As we have debated, the peace plan may involve the deployment of troops as a security guarantee, and I share the concerns that a number of Members have expressed about how that will operate. While it is important that we talk about how a settlement might be enforced, there is a strong chance that we will not get one. Sergey Lavrov has said in the past 24 hours that the prospect of a ceasefire is simply not serious. Since talk of this peace plan was advanced, Russia has stepped up its attacks. The number of drones and missiles landing across the whole of Ukraine has gone on increasing. The settlement plan may involve stationing NATO troops on Ukrainian soil, as we have been debating, but Putin has made it absolutely clear that that is a complete red line, and something that he will not accept.

We need to prepare ourselves for the real risk that this war will go on for a long time, so I say to the Minister: where is plan B? Plan B has to involve much tougher action against Russia. It needs to involve seizing Russian assets and stopping trade with Russia. It means arming Ukraine to an extent that has not been possible. I welcome the recent announcements, including on Project Nightfall in the past week or so, through which we will supply Ukraine with long-range missiles.

On assets, the Foreign Affairs Committee this morning heard from the chief executive of the Chelsea humanitarian fund, and representatives of the legal firm advising it, about the difficulties in achieving what we all want, which is the use of the money from Chelsea football club to support Ukraine. Will the Minister please meet them? There are some serious legal obstacles. They said that they have a solution, but they are anxious for an opportunity to discuss it further with the Minister.

I would love to think that this war will come to an end soon—my friends in Ukraine pray for that every night—but let us be prepared for the fact that it may go on for much longer, and that we will need to do a lot more to put pressure on Russia to stop.

6.23 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I have spoken consistently about the need to protect the international rules-based system. Not only is that system under direct and indirect threat throughout the world, but in Ukraine it has clearly failed, in so far as Russia invaded. This is a moment not to jettison it, but to redouble our defence of it, as we have done in the past. Britain has a proud track record: the world wars; the cold war; the liberation of the Falkland Islands, Kuwait and latterly Iraq; our actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Kosovo; and the no-fly zone in northern Iraq. In each case, we defended brave victims against bullies. We used military force to uphold the rights of nations and of human beings.

We know that intervention has a chequered history. Arguably, the warlords and some dubious Governments noticed the abject failure of the international community to prevent the genocide in Rwanda. Even in cases where we took military action, others watched and drew conclusions. Malevolent actors around the world must have looked upon the former Yugoslavia and noticed that a quarter of a million civilians were killed before the international community got truly serious, with American leadership finally ensuring that NATO took decisive action. Need I add that Saddam Hussein got away with breaching every known international law before the Americans, this country and others belatedly took action? Belated tough action, feeble action, or the absence of action—which is itself an action—all have profound consequences. Many people forget that Russia's move to consolidate its strategic military influence in Syria only proceeded apace once the west and the international community had signalled that they would not enforce the most basic of red lines and act against Assad for using chemical weapons. Surely that must have emboldened Russia in other in other parts of the world, such as Ukraine—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor).

Despite the excellent efforts of the British military and diplomatic missions in Ukraine, which ramped up military and other support long before 2022, and which I commend, we can say with hindsight that it was self-evidently insufficient.

I have always been hugely reassured by the almost universally cross-party nature of this Parliament's steadfast support for Ukraine—this is Parliament at its best—but at this crucial moment, we must do everything we can to ensure that the sacrifice of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians is not in vain. More generally, we must make sure that the rules-based system does not wither on the vine.

I want to say something about what is happening in my constituency, where there are two home fronts at work. One is our own, here among British citizens. It is crucial that they realise just what is at stake. It is not an exaggeration to say that if we get this wrong, or if we do not get it sufficiently right, war will come ever closer to these shores. The public will have to make sacrifices, because that is what is needed to defend democracy. Secondly, there is the extended Ukrainian home front in communities such as mine in Rugby, where families, schools and businesses have welcomed Ukrainians as they flee conflict. It is being supported by civil servants nationally, and especially by settlement teams in, for instance, Warwickshire county council, who do excellent and compassionate work alongside their district council colleagues, charities, volunteers and, most important, our citizens. It is also supported by community groups such as the Rugby branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, whose work I have seen. This is Britain at its best, living up to our values of welcoming those in need.

Let me share with the House some direct testimony from Ukrainian families who have been in touch with me this week. This is what they said:

> "Russia is systematically targeting the energy system, using hundreds of drones and missiles. Radiators go cold and water freezes in the pipes.
>
> People no longer live by the clock, but by the moments when electricity briefly returns. Children do their homework at night. Parents cook food in the dark hours.
>
> Civilian life itself is the target, not military locations. The aim is to break people, to exhaust them, to destroy society from within.
>
> And then there are the night attacks. Sirens, explosions, the constant fear, they don't let you sleep.
>
> Your body is tired, but your mind stays awake, waiting for the next sound.
>
> This is what it does to your mental state: you live in constant anxiety. You are always on edge…Even in silence, you are listening.
>
> Supporting Ukraine's energy system, its air defence and its logistics is not abstract assistance. It is the simplest and most effective way to save millions of lives and to prevent a new humanitarian catastrophe in Europe."

There is a great deal at stake, but, as the Government have made very clear, we will not turn our back on Ukraine; quite the reverse. We will strengthen international law and the rules-based system, which, in conjunction with military power, keeps us, our allies and the wider world safe.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Members will be interested to know that I will call the Front Benchers at 6.40 pm. There are four more speakers, with a total of 12 minutes.

6.28 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Four years ago, when Putin invaded Ukraine, people around this country opened their hearts and their homes to Ukrainian people, and I thank them for their generosity. I particularly thank those in my constituency who welcomed people to their homes, supported them, and continue to support them to this day.

According to the latest council figures, there are just over 1,000 people from Ukraine in Lincolnshire, and I want to focus on them. Just last weekend in Sleaford, I met a group led by Kelly Breislin and Betty Berthebaud. I thank them for their work in trying to bring the Ukrainian community together, and in helping them to navigate the various different systems within the British state. I met women, predominantly, and children. I also met an accountant, a doctor and a dentist, and I met a masseuse who had set up her own business in my constituency. They were grateful first to the British state and to the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson for supporting them and their country, but they were also thankful to the people who had supported them as their hosts.

The Ukrainians told me of their trips out of Ukraine and the fear that many of them felt. I met two young ladies, who were just 18 when they left, as friends together, to come across to live with a family in Ruskington. I thought of my own daughter at a similar age, and how it would be to let her go to an unknown country, to live with an unknown family, in such circumstances. They told me about the cultural and language challenges they had. One of them told me about her recent visit to Ukraine at Christmas and the five days of power outages she had there, as well as about the difficulties and fear she had going back for that short period.

One lady explained about how her life was on hold. When the Ukrainians first came here, they were quite content just to be safe and to have no fear of bombs. However, as time has gone by, they think of the jobs and careers they had, the futures they want to have and the difficulties they have in progressing them. For example, one young lady talked about the training challenges. She cannot do an apprenticeship because her visa does not last long enough for that, and if she wants to do a university course or a training course, she will have a similar problem. Someone wanting to stay has to apply for a new visa, and they cannot apply until 28 days before they are due to leave, but that causes problems with employment, and they are all very keen to work.

I want to ask the Minister specifically about Ukrainians in the medical profession, because it seems to me that we have a shortage of both dentists and doctors. For example, the cardiothoracic waiting list went up not just last month, but over the last year, and it is higher than it was when we left office. Yet there is a cardiothoracic surgeon in my constituency who is currently unable to practise, and is instead working in a factory. I appreciate that time is very short, so I am not able to go through all the examples I would like to give, but could he or the relevant Minister write to me with the various schemes available for people with such skills to be able to use them to the fullest while they are in this country?

6.31 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I want to speak briefly about Russian intent, the coalition of the willing and sanctions on Russia, and I will of course do so using open-source reporting and analysis. First, however, I want to praise the courage and determination of the Ukrainian people, because we of course look to them for our own safety. That is not an exaggeration, and I think it is worth articulating what we mean when we say that Putin will not stop at Ukraine.

Putin has previous experience, including of invasions, in Georgia, Crimea and Moldova. In this conflict he has talked about the legacy of Kyivan Rus', and what Russia now refers to as "Russkiy mir"—the so-called Russian world—meaning that part of the world which is Russian in culture and Russian speaking. Indeed, 25% of Estonia's population and 25% of Latvia's population are ethnically Russian. NATO members have ethnic Russians living in them, and it is to them that we must look for the defence of Europe.

We must think about the coalition of the willing, which the Government were talking about last week. I have frequently asked about security guarantees for Ukraine, but I am still uncertain about the purpose of this proposed deployment. We have heard the term "reassurance", but we have also heard the word "peacekeeping". Is this peacekeeping, peace enforcement, deterrence, defence or a tripwire? A little bit more information would be needed before this House votes on what is meant by the coalition of the willing.

The west has repeatedly called Putin's bluff successfully. We did so when we provided armour such as the Challenger 2, fighter jets such as the F-16 and deep-strike weapons such as Storm Shadow. However, the deployment of British troops is different because of the ambiguity about what the west would do if the troops were targeted. I accept that might be intentional, and that we might practise deliberate ambiguity, but just as we have deliberate ambiguity, Russia tends to use plausible deniability. A former Defence Secretary said on the radio last week that we could see a situation in which an attack on British troops is claimed by Russia to be the work of separatists in Ukraine, or even a false flag operation.

I appreciate that if this does ever come to a vote, we will get an opportunity to have a much more extensive debate, but those are my comments for today on the coalition of the willing.

6.34 pm

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Last year in Ukraine, a Ukrainian MP told me that her husband had served on the frontline for eight years. She asked me if, in the event of a peace agreement, I would support British ground troops. I have, of course, questions about British ground troops, but I said that I would and that I am also potentially liable to serve myself. As a reservist soldier, I am proud to be under the same obligations to serve as any British soldier, because we live in times of enormous peril and we have a responsibility to lead.

We are threatened in the east by dictators and in the west by autocrats. Indeed, it is an open question whether liberal democracy will succeed in this century as it did in the last. Ukraine has been bearing the brunt of that fight and its sacrifice has bought us time. Ukraine still has a credible path to a just peace. European NATO GDP alone is 10 times the size of Russia's, yet Russia has been spending $40 billion a year more than Ukraine and her western allies on the war in Ukraine. If we closed and exceeded that gap today, by seizing the $300 billion in frozen Russian assets, then not only could Ukraine secure a just peace, but we would deter Putin from crashing into eastern Europe and testing article 5.

With President Trump disgracefully threatening NATO allies as well, smaller democracies must ensure that we are economically and militarily strong enough to defend ourselves together. It is the example of the United States, a country that I love, that can show us how. In the 1940s, refugees fled from the Nazis to the United States. They built the atomic bomb and they won the war. In the process, they developed a method of public research and development that academics now acknowledge has powered US technological and economic dominance ever since.

The Chancellor has recognised that. In the spring statement, she used the £2.2 billion increase in defence research and development to upgrade long-term UK GDP growth by £11 billion a year. The current and former Presidents of the European Central Bank called on Europe to borrow to invest in defence research and development not only to deter Russia, but to lift Europe out of the economic stagnation that has held back the continent and the United Kingdom since the financial crash in 2008. We can do this too.

President Reagan described America as a beacon. Sadly, it appears that that light is now fading, but I believe it has burnt long enough for other democracies to see it. Now, it is up to us, the smaller democracies, to ensure that we are also humanity's best last hope.

6.37 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): A serious concern shared by Ukrainians in Wokingham relates to the crimes of the Russian army. Over 20,000 children have been abducted since the start of Russia's invasion. This disgusting tactic of the Russian armed forces, authorised by Putin, threatens to rob Ukraine of its future. I would like to know from the Minister whether the Government recognise that those massive abductions constitute war crimes. Will they hold Putin to account for those crimes by implementing the outstanding International Criminal Court arrest warrant against him?

It is not just Putin who has been shown to be a bad actor. My constituents write to me all the time to express their disgust at Trump's behaviour. Whether it is bullying Zelensky in the White House or extorting a vulnerable country for its minerals, the President has acted shamefully. If Ukraine cannot rely on Trump, then Europe must be all the more united in its support of Ukraine. Trump has shown time and again that he does not care about international rules and obligations, and is more interested in cosying up to autocrats and increasing the coffers of the wider Trump family. Threatening to invade Greenland is the latest proof that Trump is not pro-democracy and cannot be trusted by the international community. The Government clearly must focus on joining with our European neighbours to support our friends' territory and way of life, and not just Ukraine. If we do not do so, history tells us that the aggressor will turn their attention to the UK, which is a situation we really do not want to happen.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the shadow Minister.

6.39 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): To start, I reiterate the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) made in his opening speech: we are at a major crossroads in this conflict and the stakes could not be higher. On the line is Ukraine's sovereignty, the freedom of its people and the wider security of Europe—in truth, the security of all of us.

It can be easy in this House to speak in abstractions, such as the rules-based order, hybrid threats or deterrence, but the reality is brutally concrete. When Russia is allowed to advance by force, the consequences do not remain on the eastern flank; they spill into energy markets, cyber-attacks, disinformation and sabotage. Most importantly, they shape the calculations of every hostile actor watching to see what the west will tolerate. We all know that Russia is waging a sustained and hostile campaign against all of us and we must therefore be prepared for long-term tension. The outcome of the war in Ukraine remains central to dealing a decisive blow to that wider threat.

I will touch on a number of the points that we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members across the House today, kicking off with the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) spoke powerfully about the lion heart and resolve of the Ukrainian people, talking about their day-to-day life and how they have been attacked repeatedly by the brutal regime in Russia. She talked about energy and the barbaric nature of Putin's regime and what it is forcing on the Ukrainian people, which needs to stop. She also raised a number of points about the shadow fleet, which I will comment on later.

The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), raised an important question about deployments of British troops to Ukraine. I am looking forward to hearing the Minister's response.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) spoke of an almost unified position across the House, with the exception of a few parties. I really hope that the parties that do not support that unified approach take a long, hard look in the mirror and work out whose side they are actually on. I want to align myself with the hon. Gentleman's words about former Defence Secretary Sir Ben Wallace, who played a decisive role in the early few years of the Ukrainian war.

The Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), made the point that Ukraine's fight is our fight—a point that we mainly agree on. We cannot consider giving Putin territory that he has failed to capture over the past four years.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) talked powerfully about the 20,000 stolen Ukrainian children. To put that into context, that is 20 schools-worth of children who have been taken over the Russian border. It is a disgusting and almost inconceivable practice, and we must not allow the world to forget what Putin's regime has done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) has raised the issue of Ukraine numerous times over the past few years; I think we can all agree that when he speaks, everyone listens. He raised the diplomatic efforts that Russia is now trying to push along, which are so intense because, I think, it has worked out that militarily it cannot win. We know that is the rule of the game now, so we must increase pressure on the Russians and play them at their own game.

The chair of the Ukraine APPG, the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), talked about the pressure that the Ukrainians are currently under, again referring to heat and energy. I thank him for the work he has done to connect Ukrainian MPs with Members across this Parliament. I know how cold it gets in Arbroath, so when the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) talks about it getting down to minus 20° in Kyiv and says that it is a bit nippy, I know that he speaks from experience. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) made a number of important points about the fact that we all want peace, but that it cannot be peace at any cost. That is a point that we must continue to discuss.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson), who is a former soldier and a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, raised really important questions about the nuts and bolts of the politics. I will discuss troop deployments later in my speech.

There were valuable insights and contributions from the hon. Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker); from my constituency neighbour, albeit separated by an estuary, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley); from the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes); from my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who has done a great deal for Ukraine over the years; and from the hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger).

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) talked about the generosity of her constituents who had welcomed Ukrainians into their homes—a story we have heard across all our constituencies—and the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), who is also my constituency neighbour and a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, talked powerfully about Russian intent.

We all thank the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) very much for his service and his willingness to deploy if there is a deployment to Ukraine. Lastly, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) talked about war crimes. We need to remember that and enforce the law once there is peace.

We all want this war to end, but we have seen delay, obfuscation and maximalist demands from Putin when it comes to peace—a familiar strategy designed to divide allies and buy time. So I say to Ministers: pursue diplomacy, of course, but do so with your eyes wide open. As Churchill warned, "You cannot negotiate with a tiger when your head is in its mouth." It is important to state that if a weak settlement is reached, it simply starts the clock on rearmament. Putin will not stop.

As has always been the case, it is for Ukraine to decide its own future, and any settlement must involve Ukraine, to secure a just and lasting peace under its terms. What matters most is that Putin cannot emerge

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strengthened. Conceding territory rewards aggression and sets a dangerous precedent far beyond Europe. Nor should Putin's regime be welcomed back into the international fold, as if this was some sort of misunderstanding. This is a war of choice, an imperial project, and Putin has not abandoned his ambition to subjugate Ukraine.

That brings me to sanctions, assets and energy, where rhetoric must now become action. Although we welcome the £2.26 billion loan to Ukraine taken from profits from immobilised Russian sovereign assets, I believe we need to go further—a number of points were made on that today.

Several points were made about the Russian shadow fleet, and I welcome the reports that the Government are exploring a clearer legal basis to detain stateless vessels. But what matters now is resolve. Sanctions that are not enforced are not sanctions at all; they are merely suggestions. As the Minister for the Armed Forces and I know all too well, Britain has world-class maritime forces in both the Royal Marines and special forces, with near unrivalled experience in complex boarding operations. We should be working with allies to deter, disrupt and degrade the Russian fleet.

A number of unfolding situations are linked to Ukraine. The regime that is currently in power in Iran has been funding the Ukrainian war. Will the Minister say a few words on the unfolding situation in Iran and on UK troops being taken out of middle-eastern bases?

I visited the United States shortly before Christmas, and a congressman made a point to me that should land in every European capital: Americans cannot care more about European security than Europeans care about their own security. The gap between ambition and readiness cannot be closed by speeches. We have heard comments today from the Chief of the General Staff about the separation between the strategic defence review and the need to increase defence spending.

We must now match moral clarity with seriousness. Putin will not stop because we ask; he will stop when he is made to stop. This is the moment to get real and do the right thing. We stand with Ukraine and we will ensure that Ukraine wins the peace as well as the war.

6.49 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their thoughtful and considered contributions, and for their continued commitment to a free and sovereign Ukraine. It is worth pausing to note that Russia has now been at war with Ukraine longer than it was involved in world war two, and just last month there were 35,000 Russian casualties—just think about that. So when we talk about planning, plans, regeneration and capabilities, the severity of the situation in Ukraine is not lost on the Ministry of Defence or on this Government.

As we approach the fourth anniversary, and indeed the fifth year of fighting, since Putin's illegal full-scale invasion began, and as we intensify work towards a just and lasting peace, it is our collective commitment and our unity that sends the strongest message to Kyiv and the Kremlin that we, the United Kingdom of Great Britain Northern Ireland, stand with Ukraine.

I say this gently: be wary of the words we say in this House, because they are interpreted very differently in Moscow. Yes, we have to be honest to the democratic process, but we must also recognise the second and third-order implications of what we say here and how that reverberates around the world. When we said "for as long as it takes", we meant it. So before I address the questions raised in the debate, I want to be clear that Ukraine's security remains our security, as so many hon. Members said today, and without a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, Europe is less secure and the UK is less secure. That is why we, on both sides of the House, have been at the forefront of international efforts to increase pressure on Putin's war machine and seize the opportunity to secure a just and lasting peace. That has arisen from President Trump's commitment to the end of the war. It is also why we will continue to do all we can to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to secure that peace and sustain it.

I appreciate the support for our approach that has echoed from almost all aspects of the House. I will try to address the questions raised by right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) talked through security guarantees. I reassure him that our Chief of the Defence Staff, our Secretary of State for Defence and our Prime Minister have worked tirelessly to deliver, and hopefully put in place, the security guarantees. That is really important, because it is linked to peace and force posture. No security guarantees mean no peace and indeed no force posture—they are all intrinsically linked. I also reassure him that I have complete and utter confidence in our military's ability to generate the force, prepare the force, deploy the force, and sustain and then reconstitute the force, if they are asked.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) made the excellent point that, in sum, history does not repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme. With Georgia, Chechnya one, Chechnya two, Syria, Libya, Ukraine and Ukraine again, Russia is repeatedly and consistently disregarding, in all ways, shapes and forms, the historical norms put in place after the second world war. I also welcome his comments that Ukraine unites us all and is above politics. That is one of the greatest strengths of this House.

I empathise with what was said by the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and absolutely support him in saying that there are no braver forces than those standing in front of the Russian machine. What I would say is that I would never ask someone to do something that I would not do myself. If I believe that our way of life or that of our allies is under threat, I will happily go to the front.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) on behalf of all Members of the House for the sterling work she has done to highlight the plight of 20,000 children, and put in place the process to return them to their rightful home. It is worth noting that that is Russian doctrine in action. We are dealing with a barbaric nation that has, as part of its doctrine, to steal, kidnap and re-educate large swathes of the population. We are seeing that playing out in Ukraine.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) raised a valid point linked to the details of the operational plan. There will be a time and

place where we will need to talk and discuss cross-party what that looks like. To do the detail in the Chamber would do nothing other than give the advantage to our adversary.

I also welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments about armchair generals. I have full confidence in our generals, admirals, air vice-marshals and air marshals to deliver. When tasked, we must ensure that we do not apply political pressure on them to such an extent that we end up with politicised advice. I would also agree that the inability to vote on Syria emboldened Russia and resulted in a whole cascade of events, which, one could argue—if one played this game back in Ukraine—leads back to some of those decisions in the first place.

I completely agree with the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) that Ukraine must be at the centre of any negotiations. I deeply respect the gallant insight and understanding of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson). He talked about putting troops right on the Russian border, and about numbers, rotation, peace support operations, peacekeeping and comparisons with the Balkans. Language really matters when we are talking about military tactics and doctrine. It is really important, and it is our job in the Government to ensure that those Members with a vested interest understand that detail when the time is right, so that we can represent it correctly in the House. Again, I have complete faith in our military leadership. I absolutely commend the hon. Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) for his work on supporting disability inclusion in Ukraine.

I shall sum up the questions and allude to some of them later in my speech. On the comments made by the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed), the peace negotiations are not down to us; they are down to the Ukrainians. We are enabling and supporting, but the Ukrainians must be the very centre of gravity of those negotiations, and we are supporting them to do so. On the shadow fleet, I completely concur that we have some of the best capabilities in the world. There is much to be done. We have done a lot already, but there is more to do and I would say: watch this space. On Qatar, I will not be drawn into comments on force posture, but I can say that the safety and security of our forces is absolutely at the forefront of my mind during any period of instability.

The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) asked about the details of the deployment. From my perspective, the conditions that he puts on us are almost as many as Putin would put on the peacekeeping force itself. To talk about troop numbers, rotations, border policing, naval assets and jets at this point in time would give away too much information to our adversaries who are watching, or perhaps to individuals who are not on these Benches today. It is really important that that information is shared at the right time and place and in the right forum so that we can unify the House and come up with the right political and military decisions to deliver the support to Ukraine that is required.

Stuart Anderson: I welcome the Minister's summary of this debate. Will he commit to ensuring that every Member outside this place can have that information to help inform our decisions when the time is right and without operational security breach?

Al Carns: We will always provide the briefings at the appropriate levels.

I would like to thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). She made a really important point about hybrid warfare. This is important. There have been several comments about there being no border with Russia, but let me tell you, there may not be a border but there is a frontline. That frontline sits in the north Atlantic, in cyber-space and in influence space, and it has been breached every day of every year. According to the National Cyber Security Centre, there were 20,000 attacks in 2024, 400 of them serious and 89 nationally serious. This costs the UK £15 billion every year. Hostile state activity against the Ministry of Defence is up by 50%, and global instability at the start of this conflict increased food prices, through fertiliser cost inflation, to their highest point in 45 years.

One of the key lessons that many Members have mentioned is the resilience of the Ukrainian people, and this is why we need to think about resilience here in our nation. A country's security is measured not only by what it can deploy overseas but by what it can deny its adversaries at home. A society that can absorb shocks from pandemic, cyber-attacks, economic disruption, corruption and, importantly, disinformation leaves hostile state actors with far fewer options. Resilience is not a soft concept; it is a hard requirement of modern deterrence. I support Ukraine 110%, as I know the House does. Briefings will come at the right time and in the right place to deliver the right decision here in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

Oil Refining Sector

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Stephen Morgan.)*

7 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this Adjournment debate, and I thank Mr Speaker for granting it. As I advised the Speaker's Office and with the Minister's agreement, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) will take a few minutes of my time. To some extent, the points I will be making are similar to those in my Westminster Hall debate, which took place on 11 December.

Before I turn to the specific issue of the closure of the Prax Lindsey oil refinery in my constituency, I want to question the Government's position regarding energy security. The loss of Lindsey oil refinery will reduce the UK to just four refineries. All of that makes us even more reliant on imports in a turbulent global situation. As we know, world markets can result in supplies being disrupted. At a time when we have an unpredictable American Administration, we are becoming more and more reliant on American-owned businesses, and I question whether that is wise.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for introducing the debate. Of course, as local Members of Parliament, we must be primarily concerned with our constituents who have worked at the refinery. Is it not the point, which he powerfully makes—we have just had a debate on Ukraine—that in an increasingly dangerous world, the Government must look into their own hearts about whether their policies on energy security are meeting national security?

Martin Vickers: I thank my right hon. Friend the Father of the House, who makes an important point and strengthens the argument I was trying to make. We are exporting skilled jobs, and the Government seem to find that acceptable. The Minister has previously stated that the market would adjust as, indeed, it has, but it raises the question of whether, if another refinery were to close, at what point we will recognise that we must retain some refining capacity in the UK—surely for strategic reasons, if no other.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate and for his Westminster Hall debate. We sit on opposite sides of the Chamber, but I thoroughly respect how much he has stood up for his constituents and the wider oil refining industry in the United Kingdom, and I thank him for that.

I will speak about Grangemouth and specifically the jobs that have been lost there—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman will not speak about Grangemouth. The debate is about the Lindsey oil refinery, and interventions must be brief.

Brian Leishman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was under the impression that the debate was on the wider UK refining sector. On that note, we talk about just transition—it is often mentioned in this Chamber—but job losses and no future jobs are the definition of a very unjust transition.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Equally, I recognise how he has stood up for his constituents over the Grangemouth issue, and I compliment him on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I also thank the hon. Member for bringing forward the debate. He is right to refer to the Lindsey oil refinery, but all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is affected by the sector if we become vulnerable and reliant on foreign entities. Does he agree that for the nation's energy security and future energy provision, we need to right this wrong and invest in British-based refineries and energy provision, because otherwise everybody in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will suffer as a result?

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. No debate would be complete without such an intervention. He is absolutely right that it is the United Kingdom's energy security that we are referring to.

To turn to the future of the Lindsey refinery, which has been part of the local economy in my constituency for over 50 years, the closure is a tragedy not just for the immediate workforce, 124 of whom have already been made redundant, but for the area as a whole: the bars, restaurants, hotels, haulage firms, Humberside airport, catering suppliers—the list goes on. North Lincolnshire council receives around £2 million a year in business rates, which could steadily reduce over coming years. Needless to say, that would leave an enormous hole in its budget, which would have a consequent impact on the local community.

At last week's question time, the Secretary of State said in reply to me that fault lay with the owner, Prax. I agree that the directors bear responsibility, but it is my constituents who are feeling the consequences. A Minister has previously stated that the Government are not in the business of saving failed businesses—even, it seems, when they are a vital national resource.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The hon. Member is right that the UK Government said that they are not in the business of saving failing businesses, but they have washed their hands of some of the key factors that contribute to those businesses failing. For example, they are signalling about new licences in the North sea, but these refineries use vast amounts of energy. In the UK, we enjoy the highest industrial energy prices in the developed world. That is the Government's responsibility.

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that energy costs have played a major part not only in the struggles of Lindsey oil refinery, but in those of other businesses, particularly manufacturing businesses. The Government's comment that they are not in the business of saving businesses seems rather strange coming from Labour.

Ministers have repeatedly said that there is a legal process that the insolvency practitioners must follow. Of course, I accept that. I have previously said that I feel that the

Government are hiding behind the administrators, because they have refused to consider the wider implications of the refinery closure, for example on the local economy, the workforce and national energy security.

I have asked on more than one occasion if the Government would prefer a sale of the whole business that would allow it to resume production. Alarm bells rang for me when I received a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Katie White), following my Westminster Hall debate. It said:

"The sales process remains ongoing, with the Official Receiver and Special Managers continuing to engage with all interested parties. However, they have confirmed that none of the credible"—

that is the important word—

"offers received would enable a return to refining operations within the next few years or allow all employees to be retained."

I note that she refers to "credible" bids—so we have an acknowledgment that there were indeed credible bids—and to a timeframe. That contradicts the Government's repeated statements that there were no credible bids. Either there were credible bids or there were not. Which is it, Minister?

In fairness to the Minister, when the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and I met him last week, he did at least acknowledge that the Government would have preferred a sale of the business in its entirety.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Picking up that point, if there was a serious bid to buy the whole site—to invest in it, keep it going, maintain the jobs and grow the number of jobs—surely that should have been taken into account, not only in the interests of the local area, but in the strategic interests of Lincolnshire and the country. Will the hon. Gentleman therefore ask the Minister to ensure full transparency in this whole process so that we can establish whether or not there were credible alternative bids to keep Lindsey oil refinery going?

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman supports the point that I was making. I got it in writing from the Under-Secretary that there were credible bids. The issue of credible bids is one of the most important unanswered questions following last week's announcement about the sale of the assets to Phillips 66, which I should say is an excellent local employer and provides hundreds of well-paid jobs. I have corresponded or met with four consortia that wanted to buy the business in its entirety. When I spoke to the union representative yesterday, he said that there were seven such expressions of interest. The four consortia I have been in contact with referred to FTI Consulting—the agents—and have reached the same conclusion: they have been ignored and not allowed to put forward their case in sufficient detail for any informed judgment to be arrived at.

The Minister will no doubt be aware of an email to the Prime Minister from James Ascott, who is acting on behalf of Axiom. In the email, Mr Ascott said that Ministers

"have publicly stated that no bids were received for the full Lindsey Oil Refinery site that would safeguard the future of refining operations and protect jobs. This statement is factually false. Our company did submit a fully funded, credible bid for the entire site on behalf of our client, expressly structured to preserve and continue operations, safeguard jobs and provide a full credit and liability solution, and a separate cash acquisition value of £400 million… This bid existed."

Dave Doogan: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way again. He is setting out a seriously curious sequence of events for a well-intentioned Government relative to a vital industry. Is he concerned, as I am, that this is more about the beliefs of the Secretary of State than the industrial imperatives of these islands? The Government are failing in their pursuit of decarbonisation, but they are succeeding in deindustrialisation.

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the Government's overall policies in relation to net zero.

Adam Wilson of Falcon Petroleum wrote to me describing

"the unsatisfactory experience we have had with the bidding process with FTI… We own and operate 4 refineries in Europe and the middle east. With advancement of technology we have been able to go carbon neutral at all our refineries. We had pledged to turn LOR carbon neutral within 2 years if we had successfully purchased it."

I could give other examples, but what I have said so far makes it clear that the approaches to FTI from consortia that wish to purchase the whole business and continue production have been rebuffed. Potential investors, employees and all those affected have a right to know why. The Government have chosen not to get involved. Yes, they have offered a training guarantee, which is helpful, but much more is required. At a meeting with me and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes last week, the Minister suggested that the Minister for Investment, Lord Stockwood of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and local authorities and all agencies could help to provide investment in the area. We must sit around the table with them at an early opportunity. We need better transport connections, and early decisions from the Government on the many proposals in their in-tray that could boost the Humber region economy.

To sum up, why did the Government not act to ensure that production continued, and engage more fully in the process to achieve that? When will the Minister and Lord Stockwood visit the area and put in place a structure that helps us to recover the local economy? How many jobs will be saved by the P66 deal? The receiver's job is to ensure the best deal for creditors, so will the Minister explain why a sale of the assets rather than the business better achieves that? The Government are one of the creditors, so how much are they owed and how much of it will the P66 deal return to the Treasury? I look forward to his response.

7.13 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing the debate and for being so gracious with his time.

For workers and their families across the Humber, the past six months have been bruising to say the least. People who have spent their working lives keeping a complex site safe, compliant and productive have faced prolonged uncertainty—and they have done so with dignity and professionalism. I put on the record my support for them and give assurances that they are always at the forefront of my mind when I am pushing for clarity in this House.

[Melanie Onn]

It is important that accountability matters in who is ultimately at fault for the collapse of the refinery. In September last year, the High Court froze about £150 million-worth of assets belonging to the former owner of the refinery, Winston Soosaipillai—also known as Sanjeev Kumar. This action will be welcomed by the workers and communities who have paid the price for Mr Soosaipillai's reckless financial mismanagement, but what happens to those assets? For how long will they be frozen? Can they be used to support and develop the site, or support some of the interventions that the Government have discussed?

As the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham has detailed, there are concerns about the official receiver process, and there is some justification for them. The whole process has been incredibly opaque, and it has been very difficult to engage in communications under legal frameworks that barred Government and elected representatives from having any kind of input. The targets that the official receiver was working to have not been clear at all. We are in the dark, as are the workers, and that has caused even more uncertainty and distress for people.

Is this really the best outcome for the site? I am encouraged by Phillips 66 taking on the site, but it cannot be ignored that ministerial correspondence has said that there were credible bids. We have heard the numbers; they are disputed—is it four, seven, one, or none? We do not know, because we cannot get any answers on that. The Government have shifted position, and now say that there were no credible bids, or certainly none that provided any immediate refining capacity, or allowed the site to be run as a going concern. We understand that there may well be commercial interests involved, but could we not open the books, and see the matrix that the official receiver used and how they reached their decision, under Chatham House rules? Then at least elected representatives would be able to make an assessment on behalf of their constituents. Surely the Government could do that.

Dave Doogan: The hon. Lady talks about our need to scrutinise what was deemed a credible bid. Will she ask the Minister whether the Government will apply "commercial in confidence" rules in order to cover their tracks when it comes to what was and was not a credible bid?

Melanie Onn: I disagree with that, but I urge the Government to be prepared to open up on some of the process. I understand that there will be commercial sensitivities, but I hope that a route can be found to enable us to scrutinise the information available.

Sir Edward Leigh: We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) that there are bidders, and they think that their bid is credible. I think we are entitled to tell the Government that we do not want asset-stripping here. This is not just about the local community; we are talking about a vital national resource, and the House of Commons needs to be informed, big time.

Melanie Onn: We have also had trusted privilege, as a House, in the past; we were able to see secure information and secure documents. All of us were able to go to a room and sign in to read documents on exiting the European Union, for example. There are ways and means of doing these things, and of placing trust in elected representatives. Much of the information from companies was made available to local representatives anyway, because they emailed the details to us. It would be interesting to learn why the official receivers deemed bids not to be credible.

I will move forward, because decisions have already been made, and it would be challenging, to say the least, if we went backwards on this. The written statement of 22 July delivered by the Minister for Energy confirmed important commitments for those directly employed at Lindsey: a package guaranteeing jobs, a redundancy scheme that will end in March—another 240 people will be made redundant then—and a training guarantee. There have been concerns about that training guarantee, and I would ask the Ministers to look more closely at that as we move forward.

7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): I thank the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this debate. I know that he and other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), have been engaging closely on this issue with the Minister for Energy, who stands ready to continue to engage with them on the detail.

Let me start with Prax Lindsey oil refinery. It entered insolvency on 30 June 2025 because of the untenable position in which the owners left the refinery, which gave the Government very little time to act. I know how difficult the process has been for the workers, their families and the local community. The insolvency process at the refinery is led by the court-appointed official receiver, who must act independently, in accordance with his statutory duties. Since the insolvency, we have worked with the official receiver to protect workers, and to ensure the safety of the site and the security of fuel supplies. That has also allowed time for bidders to express an interest in the site and its assets.

After a thorough process to identify a buyer for the site, the official receiver has determined that Phillips 66 is the most credible bidder and can provide a viable future for the site. I am glad to say that the sale is expected to complete in the first half of 2026. As many hon. Members will be aware, Phillips 66 is an experienced and credible operator of a Humber refinery, next door to Lindsey. It already supplies fuel to the region and has consistently turned a profit in recent years. The sale allows Phillips 66 to quickly expand operations at its Humber refinery.

The company has decided not to restart stand-alone refinery operations at Lindsey. In its words, not mine,

> "Due to the limitations of its scale, facilities, and capabilities, evaluations have shown that the refinery is not viable in current form."

Although that is disappointing, it is not totally unexpected, given the long history of problems with the business. We understand that the previous owners, Total, sought to sell the refinery for several years and sold it to Prax for a nominal amount. Since Prax's acquisition in 2021, the refinery has recorded about £75 million of losses. In addition, following a thorough assessment of offers,

the official receiver confirmed that no offer was put forward that would credibly see a return to refining operations in the next few years.

Phillips 66 plans to integrate key assets into its Humber refinery operations, expanding its ability to supply fuel to UK customers from the Humber refinery. That is positive news for boosting domestic energy security, securing jobs—including hundreds of new construction jobs over the next five years—and creating future growth opportunities for renewable and traditional fuels. That being said, Ministers in the Department and I recognise that this is a very worrying time for workers, and I am glad to report that the remaining 250 directly employed workers are guaranteed employment until the end of March, although that will be cold comfort to many of them. Phillips 66 will provide further information on the number of jobs that will be retained as it moves towards completion of the sale in coming months. The Minister for Energy has asked Phillips 66 for clarity as soon as possible, and to retain as many jobs as possible. The Government will continue to support the 124 workers affected by redundancy last October.

Richard Tice: The bottom line is that P66 is mothballing the site, and will use certain bits of it for parts, rather than investing in its other site. Will the Minister allow a full, open and transparent look at alternative bids that would have kept the site open, and would have allowed us to keep many more jobs and to retain a strategic national asset?

Martin McCluskey: The hon. Gentleman will know that such discussions are commercially confidential, and the official receiver has undertaken an independent process to come to his decision.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes mentioned, the support for the 124 workers affected by redundancy last October includes a training guarantee to ensure that they have the skills that they need, and are supported to find long-term jobs. That goes above and beyond the usual support offered in insolvency situations. I am pleased to confirm that many —the majority—of those workers have already taken up this offer. My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy will be pleased to discuss any issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes thinks may emerge to do with the training guarantee.

I believe that the agreement with Phillips 66 marks the next step in securing an industrial future for the site and for the workers, who were badly let down by the former owners. The circumstances surrounding the insolvency are deeply concerning, and that is why the Energy Secretary immediately demanded that the Insolvency Service launch an investigation into the owners' conduct and the circumstances surrounding the insolvency, which is ongoing.

Turning to issues in the broader UK oil refining sector, the UK's refineries continue to play a vital role in maintaining reliable supplies of essential fuels that keep transport moving, industry operating and support households with their day-to-day lives. We appreciate that their contribution goes far beyond fuel alone. They are anchors for local economies, providing well-paid, skilled jobs and supporting a wide web of supply chains, which involve everything from chemicals to plastics to advanced manufacturing.

Refinery facilities also enable the production of specialist materials that many of our industries rely on. For example, the Humber refinery produces the UK's only anode-grade petroleum coke, used in electric vehicle technology, while Fawley's output of specialised rubber helped to ensure vaccine vials could be produced securely during the pandemic. Crucially, our refineries are also adapting for the future. They are investing in modernisation, low-carbon fuels, and technologies such as carbon capture, which are all essential to the UK's transition to net zero. The Humber region will have a major role to play in that over the coming years. While overall fuel demand is expected to shift over time, sectors such as aviation, maritime and heavy industry will continue to depend on refined products well into the future. We want to preserve our refining sector and keep it competitive.

Melanie Onn: On the point about keeping UK oil refineries competitive, what will be the Government's position at the European Union summit in May, in discussions on the emissions trading scheme? What will they take forward?

Martin McCluskey: I will write to my hon. Friend on that point about the carbon border adjustment mechanism and the ETS.

As was set out in the autumn Budget, we are reviewing critical policies to address the challenges that the sector faces. I will briefly go through the steps that we have already taken to help the downstream sector adapt and stay competitive. First, through the renewable transport fuel obligation and the new sustainable aviation fuel mandate, we are backing the production and use of cleaner fuels. The Humber refinery is already delivering sustainable aviation fuels at scale, and refineries at Fawley and Stanlow are benefiting from Government support through the advanced fuels fund to bring next-generation fuels to market. We are also working to de-risk investment in sustainable aviation fuel production through the revenue certainty mechanism.

Secondly, we are working closely with industry on major decarbonisation efforts, including carbon capture and hydrogen projects, within industrial clusters such as Viking and HyNet, which will be central to keeping UK manufacturing competitive as global markets tighten emissions standards. The UK ETS Authority's decision to maintain current benchmarks for the 2027 scheme year provides the consistency and breathing room that energy-intensive industries need to plan investments and manage costs effectively.

In the autumn Budget, we committed to assessing the feasibility of including refined products in the carbon border adjustment mechanism. That is a key priority for industry, and it would help ensure that UK refineries were not undercut by imports produced to lower environmental standards. Collectively, these measures signal our determination to create the conditions for continued investment, innovation and long-term competitiveness as we transition to a low-carbon economy.

Looking ahead, the Government are deepening their engagement with the sector to ensure a smooth and secure transition in the coming years. It is important to note that Minister Shanks led the first ministerial—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The Minister will know that we do not refer to our colleagues by their names.

Martin McCluskey: Thank you for reprimanding me, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister for Energy led the first ministerial roundtable with the sector for more than a decade, and will continue to engage with the industry.

In closing, let me be clear: we recognise the importance of the Lindsey oil refinery and the Lindsey site to the local community and the national economy. The integration of its assets into the Humber refinery will boost energy security and support high-quality employment locally. The UK refining sector matters, and that is why this Government are acting. From supporting low-carbon fuel production and deploying carbon capture and hydrogen, to launching a call for evidence that will shape our long-term strategy, we will work with industry, devolved Governments and the community to deliver a managed transition.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

PUBLIC ORDER

That the draft Public Order Act 2023 (Interference With Use or Operation of Key National Infrastructure) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 27 November 2025, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 110.

Division No. 409]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allister, Jim
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Bell, Torsten
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Rachel
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Burton-Sampson, David
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carns, Al
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Downie, Graeme
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
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
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Lockhart, Carla
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCluskey, Martin
McDonald, Chris
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
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, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
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
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Rutland, Tom
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Shannon, Jim
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, David
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Stainbank, Euan
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren

Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Wilson, rh Sammy
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane *(Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy)*
Adam, Shockat
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Aquarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Blake, Olivia
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Campbell, Irene
Cane, Charlotte
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chope, Sir Christopher
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Creasy, Ms Stella
Dance, Adam
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Dean, Bobby
Denyer, Carla
Dillon, Mr Lee
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Forster, Mr Will
Foy, Mary Kelly
Franklin, Zöe
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Green, Sarah
Hanna, Claire
Hinchliff, Chris
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Liz
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Clive
Jones, Ruth
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Leishman, Brian
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Maskell, Rachael
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
Medi, Llinos
Mierlo, Freddie van
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Murray, Susan
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Opher, Dr Simon
Osborne, Kate
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Ramsay, Adrian
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Trickett, Jon
Voaden, Caroline
Whittome, Nadia
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 January 2026

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

Ajax Programme

9.30 am

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Ajax Programme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. This debate has been a long time coming. Such is the Kafkaesque procedure for selecting debates that this application was granted only at the eighth time of asking; I had first requested a debate on this subject on 1 September 2025—over four months ago. Since then, the Ajax programme has gone from on track to throwing a track, and the outlook for the programme and our armoured capability, the future of armoured infantry as a concept and the current deployability of 3rd (UK) Division are now all very much under the microscope.

In this debate, I am not seeking to apportion blame, point fingers at individuals or orchestrate a witch hunt. It is clear that the Ajax programme has been failing for a number of years, although I will go on to question some of the recent specific decision making regarding the programme. Accountability sits with successive Ministers. The slow progress on delivery appears to be an issue between the Army, the Department and General Dynamics.

We can skip over the potted history of the Ajax programme—others will cover that—but, to paraphrase Rodgers and Hammerstein, "How do you solve a problem like Ajax?" Although it was based on an existing General Dynamics platform, the Army made so many additions and revisions to the existing capability that it is now considered to be bespoke technology. We are talking about a staggering 1,200 capability requirements for each of the six vehicle types under the Ajax umbrella.

The March 2022 National Audit Office report on the Ajax programme details the fact that neither the Department nor General Dynamics fully understood some component specifications or how they would be integrated on to the Ajax vehicle, leading to consequential changes to the overall design, disputes between the Ministry of Defence and General Dynamics and, inevitably, programme delays. Both the MOD and General Dynamics have been criticised for underestimating the scale of the work, the technical challenge and the sequencing of the work. General Dynamics blamed the MOD for not having fully defined acceptance criteria; the MOD blamed the General Dynamics safety documentation. The contingency within the programme was quickly used up and the programme was suddenly four years behind schedule.

Noise and vibration issues were recognised in mid-2020, with a stop notice issued in June 2021. All dynamic movement and transition activity was halted while the programme underwent a significant reset. The Army resumed training on Ajax in 2023, but paused again in November 2025. The programme's issues from 2020 to 2021 are well documented. Those issues are a failure to establish effective governance, complex assurance arrangements, high turnover of senior staff, an ineffective programme board, weak project controls—the list goes on. The most stark, however, was

"an over-emphasis on achieving its IOC"—

initial operating capability—

"target date, which meant that it prioritised time and cost over capability. As a result, it pressed ahead with the programme without resolving performance issues."

Given what we know now and the issues encountered less than three weeks after IOC was declared, I would like to hear an assessment from the Minister as to whether he believes that that is still an issue today.

Initial operating capability for the Ajax programme was declared on 5 November 2025 by the Government; I stress "by the Government", because several stages to that process were not made public until last month. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry confirmed to me:

"All criteria for Ajax Initial Operating Capability…were met on 23 July 2025 and following a period of review, IOC was declared by the Army on 15 September 2025."

We know that only because it was written on a cake in a General Dynamics promotional video of the Minister's visit to Merthyr Tydfil. Additionally, he confirmed:

"Before declaring Initial Operating Capability, I received written assurances from the Chief of the General Staff and the acting NAD"—

national armaments director—

"that the vehicle was safe to operate. Within the letter note AJAX the vehicle was described as 'demonstrably safe to operate'."

The Minister added that

"prior to Ajax Initial Operating Capability being announced, I sought assurances in writing from the Chief of the Defence Staff and the National Armaments Director that the system was safe to operate, which I received."

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for initiating this important debate. Does he agree with me that it is important for the Minister to set out that in 2022 I and colleagues on the Defence Committee went to Merthyr Tydfil, did a review and clearly stated that IOC was nowhere near deliverable in the timeframes proposed? Does my hon. Friend think it is worth the Minister setting out what checks against the Defence Committee report were done when looking at IOC?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. I was not going to cover it in my speech, so it is definitely worth adding to the record for the Minister to address in his response.

The interim National Armaments Director, the new National Armaments Director, the Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff represent our most senior leaders within defence. It is hard to believe that they all would have signed off a vehicle platform that was inherently unsafe or where it was a sketchy 50:50 decision. How did we reach a point where four-star senior officers and equivalents had the confidence to sign off the vehicle's initial operating capability, which then received ministerial approval, only for it to blow up in everybody's face weeks later like a Wile E. Coyote Road Runner trap?

The March 2022 National Audit Office report states:

"The Department believes that the contract also incentivised GDLS-UK to prioritise production milestones over the quality and performance of the capability."

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

It goes on:

"The contract incentivised GDLS-UK to achieve production milestones resulting in it continuing to manufacture vehicles while technical issues remained unresolved."

Can the Minister give any clarity on whether that is still the case today, given that General Dynamics signed off achieving all the criteria required to meet initial operating capability, only for the entire programme to collapse less than four months later? Initial operating capability was also signed off by the Army on 15 September, before ministerial sign-off was granted on 5 November.

Last year, the then Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry stated that

"The Armoured Cavalry Programme (Ajax) is projecting the delivery of over 180 operationally deployable platforms by the end of 2025."

Despite the various travails of the Ajax programme, production has continued throughout the training pause. As a result, we know that the Army has received just under a third of all Ajax platforms across all variants. It should be noted that the 2022 National Audit Office report highlighted that the compressed programme schedule flagged that there would no longer be time to validate the design of capability drops 3 and 4 before manufacture. Given that we are now in capability drop 3, can the Minister confirm whether the designs were validated before these vehicles were assembled and delivered last year?

The Minister also confirmed that

"It is anticipated that a further 110 platforms will be delivered in 2026, with the remaining 297 platforms delivered by 2028."

With 180 Ajax platforms delivered, a similar number still to be accepted by the Army and all 589 hulls having now been completed in Spain, on current timelines the complete production run will have been completed by mid-2027. I believe that includes bringing all vehicles up to capability drop 4 standard.

Assuming that any resolution to the current training pause does not involve the mother of all factory recalls, there could potentially be an idle factory in Wales. What plans are there for the Merthyr Tydfil factory beyond the middle of next year? With only 18 months' work left to complete, can the Minister assure General Dynamics employees in Wales that they will have a job once Ajax production is complete? Can he assure those employees that there will be no redundancies, given that we have no plans to purchase any more vehicles and that export plans are yet to materialise? While I appreciate that UK Defence and Security Exports sit within the Department for Business and Trade, can the Minister confirm what progress UKDSE has made regarding any potential export sales?

One of the main reasons why we are debating this topic today, and the reason for such media interest, is the social media content that has emerged from the factory and from Army personnel regarding the workmanship on the vehicles. To that end, I would like to recognise the efforts of Alfie Usher, aka Fill Your Boots, who has been instrumental in putting heat and light on this issue on behalf of service personnel. For obvious reasons, I am no trade unionist, but he has been the unofficial secretary-general of the unofficial armed forces union for some time.

I know that the Armed Forces Minister has previously liaised with Alfie on issues, and—I say this only partially in jest—perhaps the Government should reconsider his application to be the Armed Forces Commissioner. The Government are struggling to fill the role. Alfie's application got binned back in August, but he has been doing the job unpaid since then anyway.

For those who do not follow Alfie's account—any politician with an interest in defence really should—I should say that between the exposés and topical memes, Alfie has been the bête noire of General Dynamics and the Army, operating as chief whistleblower and ensuring that the voice of those on the ground can be heard. There have been multiple examples of concerns shared by him via social media on behalf of service personnel tasked with prepping newly delivered vehicles. A variety of issues have been highlighted and I ask the Minister, if he has not done so already, to include Alfie within the scope of the ministerial-led review to ensure full transparency and the inclusion of service personnel. They are the end users of this vehicle, and too often we ask our personnel to put up and shut up. An organisation that dines out on moral courage and pretends that it values 360° feedback should make sure that it listens to our soldiers, irrespective of how refreshingly blunt their views might be.

The evidence shown by Fill Your Boots has put heat and light on the production and assembly issues upon which blame has been placed. During the first pause in 2021, the MOD and General Dynamics did not agree on whether the levels of noise and vibration of Ajax vehicles breached contractual requirements. Given that the same noise and vibration issues potentially remain unresolved six years later, can the Minister clarify what does constitute a contractual breach?

Through 2020-21, General Dynamics undertook a supposedly in-depth review of the Ajax programme to confirm the root cause of noise and vibration issues, identify solutions and then validate them through extensive testing. They identified that noise and vibration issues were caused by the track, suspension and running gear; the engine and its mounting in the vehicle; quality issues including bolting, cable routing and welding; and performance and integration of crew headsets. The vehicles were thoroughly assessed using a noise and vibration calculator, whatever that is, to determine

"the safe operating envelopes for the platform across different speeds and terrains."

The noise and vibration calculator provided by General Dynamics did not measure noise and vibration, which the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory raised concerns about. It estimated the maximum safe exposure time on Ajax vehicles for given conditions based on measurements from early trials. In August 2020, the first noise-induced hearing loss symptoms were reported by soldiers. In September 2020, DSTL discovered an error in General Dynamics' measurements, which meant that vehicle crews might have been overexposed to noise and vibration. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry has told me:

"Whole Body and Hand Arm Vibration Levels were well understood, and effective mitigations were in place."

But they cannot have been effective, or why would personnel still be suffering from noise and vibration-related sickness? Will the Minister confirm that any analysis of the root cause of the current noise and vibration sickness

does not use the General Dynamics noise and vibration calculator, and instead seeks to use a metric that does not raise concerns with DSTL?

The measures implemented by General Dynamics included the implementation of an effective hearing protection and combined communication system, an improvement to the overall Ajax build quality, a review and amendment of build tolerances for key crew interfaces, changes to seat structures to provide greater vibration attenuation—that sounds very much like new seat cushions—and improvements to track tensioning procedures to ensure correct track tension, which reduces vibration.

On the track tension, I am aware that composite rubber tracks are now mature enough to be viable for a vehicle the weight of Ajax. Although there are still issues regarding track replacement, given that the whole track has to be replaced rather than a single track link, I note that the General Dynamics Ajax Blackjax demonstrator vehicle at DSEI had this fitted. I ask the Minister what assessment his Department has made of the feasibility of switching to composite rubber tracks as a potential solution going forward?

The 2022 National Audit Office report outlined that there were 27 limitations of use on Ajax vehicles in September 2021; 22 were safety-related and 11 were critical to achieving IOC. Can the Minister give the House assurances that those 11 limitations were resolved prior to initial operating capability being declared in 2025? Could the Minister also confirm what contractual payments were made to General Dynamics on the achievement of the criteria for initial operating capability in July 2025 or the formal declaration of initial operating capability on 5 November 2025? What is the total amount paid to General Dynamics as of today, and how much still remains to be paid? What delivery milestone will trigger the remaining payments?

With those resolutions to the previous issues identified in mind, we know that three exercises took place between IOC criteria being achieved on 23 July and ministerial IOC declaration on 5 November. We have not heard of any instances of noise and vibration sickness occurring among vehicle crews during those three exercises. Will the Minister confirm that there were no noise and vibration sickness issues among crews during those three exercises?

I asked the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry what discussions his Department had had with General Dynamics, the senior responsible officer and the British Army regarding the Ajax programme between 23 July and Exercise Titan Storm in late November. Instead of a response, the Minister told me:

> "I have directed a Ministerial review that covers elements of his question. I will update the House in due course."

The Minister was happy to tell me that he met with key stakeholders, including meeting General Dynamics after the programme was paused, but, much as I have tried, the Government have scrupulously avoided disclosing any information about what ministerial discussions have taken place with stakeholders between 23 July and 5 November.

On 1 January, I asked a named day question for answer on 7 January 2026. I asked:

> "how many noise and vibration injuries were sustained…between 23 July 2025 and Exercise Titan Storm".

Strangely, I have not received a response yet, a week after one was due—it is almost as if this is an issue that the Government do not want to disclose. Will the Minister clarify the answer to written question 101920 and put on the record how many noise and vibration injuries were sustained between the achievement of initial operating capability criteria by General Dynamics and the start of Exercise Titan Storm?

The March 2022 National Audit Office Report states that the Department

> "knew of noise and vibration issues before soldiers reported injuries but was not aware of the severity of potential problems. Reporting of issues identified in trials was limited and slow, meaning that safety concerns were not shared or escalated by the Army or…DE&S".

Has that culture been addressed? Concerns were first raised about noise and vibration by the Army trials team in late 2019, but did not appear in quarterly programme reports until March 2021. To what extent have we seen the same issue repeat itself last summer?

In December 2025, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry confirmed to me that

> "Of the 61 vehicles of all AJAX types involved in the exercise, 23 AJAX Vehicles were linked to soldiers suffering from noise or vibration injury."

I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed where those 61 affected vehicles were manufactured. Were they part of the first 100 Ajax vehicles manufactured and assembled in Spain, or were they later vehicles whose hulls were manufactured in Spain but were assembled at the Merthyr Tydfil facility? Can he also confirm whether the early production vehicles from capability drop 0 to 2, which were identified as not being fully compliant with requirements, have now been retrofitted and what capability drop are they currently equipped to?

The Minister also confirmed that

> "On 22 November…during a routine training exercise, around 30 soldiers operating in Ajax reported being affected by noise and vibration exposure."

For 30 soldiers to be affected by the same noise and vibration sickness, with identical symptoms, as a result of a known issue supposedly resolved by 2023 is simply unacceptable. It is incredibly important that we are able to understand whether there were any instances during the three exercises prior to Titan Storm and indeed to identify whether there have been any instances of General Dynamics employees affected by noise and vibration exposure during the same period, prior to or after the 23 July IOC criteria achievement milestone.

In November, I asked the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry how many compensation claims related to noise and vibration symptoms incurred during the use of Ajax variants had been made since the start of the armoured cavalry programme. The Minister informed me that it would take time to collate and review the information needed to answer the question, and that he would write to me. It is now mid-January and I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide that information in his response. It should not take two months to work out how many compensation claims have been made relating to Ajax. If I were Minister, I would have a close eye on the running tally, particularly in preparation for this debate.

On 8 December the Minister confirmed:

> "We are currently undertaking reviews into the medical injuries sustained by Ajax crews, and more details on the findings will be published in due course."

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

Will the ministerial-led review he has commissioned or the report from the Defence Accident Investigation Branch contain the details of those findings? In that review, will he confirm how many service personnel are undergoing treatment or have been diagnosed with hearing loss following audiometry protocols after operating within an Ajax variant?

Regarding when the vehicles will be able to recommence training, any decisions on the pause are to be made by Ministers after the investigations by the Defence Accident Investigation Branch have concluded. That suggests that the pause will be lifted after the investigation but before the conclusion of the ministerial-led review. Will the Minister clarify the timeline for the investigation, which he previously stated would take at least two weeks and so should be approaching conclusion, and the ministerial-led review, for which we are yet to see the terms of reference, which were due before Christmas? I appreciate it will still be autumn until the defence investment plan is published in March. Will the pause on the use of Ajax be lifted before the conclusion of the Minister's review, given that the noise and vibration issues may not have been identified, let alone resolved?

This debate is about the future of the Ajax programme. Although the near future revolves around the resolution of the immediate issues that followed Exercise Titan Storm, beyond that the programme will need to achieve full operating capability, but crucially, it will be the tip of the spear in our armoured doctrine. So, a good start would be to have an armoured doctrine that is coherent.

In 2014, we ordered 589 vehicles out of an optional 1,328—below the Army's required fleet size at the time of 686. Although that was not necessarily a defining error at the time, subsequent decisions, even as recently as last summer, have compounded the issue, bringing us to a situation where our armoured fleet is now completely unbalanced—increasingly so given the evolution of modern conflict since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the ubiquity of drones at all levels, and the current global arms race.

When Ajax was commissioned, we were still undertaking combat operations in Afghanistan. Since then, we have had multiple defence reviews, and changed our focus to the Indo-Pacific and now to the High North, and now we are talking about putting troops in eastern Europe as a deterrent to a belligerent Russia. The irony is that we still have much of the same armour designed to do that job the first time round.

The original plan was for Ajax, alongside Boxer and Challenger 3, to provide the backbone of the Army's armoured capability within Integrated Force 2030. March 2021's "Defence in a Competitive Age" outlines how the Army would use Ajax in its two close-combat armoured brigade combat teams, and as part of its deep reconnaissance strike brigade combat team—formations that are now putatively in place.

We cannot discuss the future of the Ajax programme without discussing how the Army plans to use Ajax within those brigade combat teams. As somebody with a background in armoured infantry, who formerly held an admittedly niche specialisation in anti-tanks, I have more than a keen interest in the future of our armoured capability. Being something of a tank-spotter, I note some glaring capability gaps based on the information provided by Ministers over the past year or so.

Let us start with the basics. In December 2024, the right hon. Member for Liverpool Garston (Maria Eagle), the then Minister of State for Defence Procurement and Industry, stated in a written answer to my question:

> "On current plans, Boxer will be delivered to four Heavy Mechanised Infantry Battalions and Divisional Enablers."

Seven months later, however, on 15 July, she stated:

> "The Army intends to reorganise its Heavy Forces units in 3 Division, such that all four would become Armoured Infantry Units based on the Ajax and Boxer family of vehicles."

She subsequently went on to state:

> "The Army intends to equip the Regular Infantry Units within 3 (UK) Division with Ares in the infantry troop carrying role: 1 Mercian, 1 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, 1 Royal Welsh and 5 Rifles."

What happened between December 2024 and July 2025 that saw such a fundamental change to the future of the infantry, and indeed our entire armoured capability? The number of Ares platforms to be provided has not changed since 2014: just 93. For reference, the current land equipment table shows that we currently have 604 Warrior. Ares's role was originally "protected mobility reconnaissance support" and latterly to "deliver and support specialist troops". It has never once been earmarked as an infantry-fighting vehicle.

The present Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), then gave this written response to my question:

> "The Ares variant of Ajax is designed for mounted close combat and is being delivered to the Field Army. The decision to field Ares with Infantry Battalions was taken after a considerable assessment programme."

I would be interested to know whether the aim of the Ares assessment programme was simply to justify the existing total of 589 vehicles, or actually to highlight the capability required, because whichever question the Army asks, the answer always appears to be 589 Ajax vehicles. I asked to see the outcome of that assessment programme but was told that its disclosure would

> "be likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces".

I suggest that, given the enemy knows that Ares does not have any armour-defeating weapons capability, the issue around prejudicing capability lies elsewhere.

Let's walk that back a step. In my opinion, the Ares variant is not designed for mounted close combat. It is equipped with a remote weapon station that can mount a 50-calibre machine gun at the heaviest. As someone whose specialisation in the Army was armoured infantry, I know my way around a 30 mm canon. A 50-cal cannot defeat armour; it is no substitute for 40 mm APFSDS, which is the round that its Ajax brother uses.

In September, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport stated in a written answer that Ares would be,

> "used to deliver and support specialist troops across the battlefield. The term 'specialist troops' is used informally, and in this context refers to Anti-Tank Javelin Teams, Snipers and Support Troops."

But by November that had changed again, with the same Minister contradictorily stating:

> "Anti-tank platoons within Armoured Infantry units will be equipped with Boxer variants".

So which is it: Ares or Boxer for Javelin platoons? Will armoured infantry battalions be tracked or a mix of wheeled and tracked, with the logistical implications of that? Will Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

light aid detachments have both Ajax and Boxer repair and recovery variants? Where are we going to keep the additional vehicles? What is the training burden of mixed armoured fleets, thereby doubling driving cadres, maintenance training, and vehicle commanders' courses? Have we even bought a recovery variant of Boxer yet? The Army's own website suggests it is not one of the variants within the 623. This approach is incoherent and suggests that the Army does not really know what to do with the capability it will shortly have.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On Boxer specifically, just before Christmas I received an answer to a parliamentary question from the Department, saying that it now will not give the initial operational capability date for Boxer, and that it is subject to the long-awaited defence investment plan. Does my hon. Friend agree that Boxer has already slipped by years, and that we cannot let it slip any further?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I absolutely concur with my right hon. Friend that Boxer is a vital capability—even more so, given the training pause that we are now encountering with Ajax—and we need to get Boxer into service as quickly as possible. I welcome the speeding up of that process overall.

Meanwhile in October, the then Minister for the Armed Forces had stated:

"Currently ARES will be fielded to Training Regiments, Armoured Cavalry units and Armoured Infantry units."

As I said, we have ordered only 93. For reference, in order to reflect the establishment of an armoured infantry battalion, we would need 45 Ares to replace the capacity of the Warrior FV510, notwithstanding how many Athena variants we would need to cover the 511 command variant. Where is the capacity to have vehicles at training regiments and armoured cavalry units? There is no redundancy built into the current vehicle fleet.

The 93 Ares platforms equate to just 23 per battalion with no spare capacity, which is not even enough to replace three rifle companies' worth of the Warrior FV510 variant. Can the Minister explain what the future establishment of these armoured infantry battalions will be? I appreciate that he will not have that information to hand—I do not think the Army knows yet—but will he write to me and explain how an armoured infantry battalion will be structured using Ares and Boxer?

The demise of Warrior leaves a yawning capability gap that will be difficult to adequately replace without a new IFV. The then Minister for the Armed Forces stated that,

"there is no direct replacement for Warrior",

and:

"There are no plans to extend the out-of-service date for Warrior beyond 2027, and as such an extension is not under consideration."

The then Minister also stated:

"As the ARES platform is delivered into service, tactical doctrines will be reviewed accordingly."

I do not expect the Minister to answer the question or to know the ins and outs of armoured infantry doctrine, but he should raise the question with the Land Warfare Centre, and with the infantry battalions that will receive Ares, to ask them how the platform will be used and what capability will then be lost.

By removing a main armament from the armoured infantry's firepower we fundamentally change the way that the vehicle is fought. It changes the way the vehicle can move cross-country, effectively removes the option to move in bounding overwatch, and means it can never engage enemy armour. Doctrinally, it turns the armoured infantry into mechanised infantry.

Doctrinally, Ares is more akin to the Mk3 Bulldog. Despite that, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry this week informed me that Ares

"is more suitable to be employed in the direct battle, rather than in the close support role".

Given the glaring absence of a main armament on Ares, I would dispute that assessment, which seems convenient rather than well thought through. Bulldog itself is due to be replaced in 2030, so what progress has been made in procurement of the Patria 6x6?

Crucially, in December, the same Minister stated:

"There are no other platforms within the Army's armoured fleet which can fulfil the armoured reconnaissance role; Ajax has been specifically designed for this purpose."

With that in mind, and given that the entire Ajax fleet is grounded for an unspecified length of time pending an investigation by the Defence Accident Investigation Branch, with support from the Army Safety Investigation Team and General Dynamics, can the Minister state how the armoured reconnaissance capability of the British Army is currently being provided given that statement, and therefore what is the deployability of 3rd (UK) Division without any formation or armoured reconnaissance capability, or even the deployability of an armoured battle group from within 3 Div?

The parlous state of the British Army's armoured capability is on the cusp of being thrust into stark relief by the Prime Minister's announcement last week that we had committed troops to the multinational force for Ukraine. While any detail on that force structure is currently pure speculation, it was reported by *The Times* that those troop numbers would not exceed 7,500. On a three-form cycle, that is circa 22,000 troops—the majority of the field army. If they are to be more than a speed bump for the vanguard of the Guards Motor Rifle Brigade, they will need capability that they simply do not have today.

Challenger 3 has no timeline, with manufacturing due to commence only once the tank's performance has been proven in the demonstration phase. It is not going to appear anytime soon. The Government have no plan for the remaining 140 Challenger 2s that are not due to be upgraded, and not even a promise that the plan will be outlined in the mythical defence investment plan. That is against the backdrop that the defence investment plan is unfunded, with a black hole of somewhere around £20 billion, give or take an Ajax programme budget. There will be cuts, and there will be delays. Out-of-service dates are going to be stretched to their limits. Bulldog is already 63 years old, and I am sure that it is no coincidence that it will be 67 when it reaches its out-of-service retirement date.

The Chief of the General Staff wants to implement the 20-40-40 land warfare concept, of which Ajax is a key part, working in tandem with Project Asgard. That is the capability that could and should provide a continuous on-land deterrent along the eastern flank defensive line, reduce our sensor-to-effector time, and achieve the nebulous

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

tenfold increase in lethality by reducing the kill chain to well inside the sub-seven-minute timeframe that defines the current frontline in Ukraine.

Ajax cannot be scrapped. The Army needs it. There is no plan B, and given that it is a fixed-price contract, scrapping it will save no money anyway, despite Ministers confirming that the Government have sought legal advice from the Government Legal Department. The Government have not even considered a viable alternative option in CV90, and starting that process from scratch will take the best part of a decade before we even see a vehicle, based on current queues.

Put simply, Ajax needs to be delivered, primarily because the Army needs to restore its armoured reconnaissance capability. Additionally, there is a second order effect: confidence. The British Army badly needs to restore faith in Ajax as a platform. For all the negative stories and press, the Army and the Government must work out how to rebuild confidence in their ailing platform. I know what it is to be given kit that I do not have confidence in, and to have to use it on operations and wonder whether it will let me down, or worse. I know that the Minister can sympathise with that view. We must restore faith in the platform, not only for the soldiers expected to operate with it, but for its appeal from an investor and export position.

The long-term future of Ajax depends on the ability of General Dynamics to sell it overseas. The most advanced armoured fighting vehicle in its class should be an easy sell to the nations currently in the process of rearming and upgrading. We have a history of exquisite sovereign capability that nobody else really wants: Challenger 2, Warrior, even the SA80. Each of those has suffered from a lack of development over its life cycle, too often a day late and a dollar short.

Mr Francois: I thank my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way. As well as the delays to Boxer, there are now strong rumours about further delays to the upgrade of Challenger 2 to Challenger 3. As Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land is responsible for both programmes, does my hon. Friend agree that it really needs to sort itself out and get on with it?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I thank my hon. Friend again, and I absolutely concur. With the delays to Ajax, we can no longer afford to fail to upgrade Challenger 2 to Challenger 3. The fact that the timeline of that has slipped to indefinite is a serious concern for our armoured capability.

A successful export programme would fuel development of the platform and allow it to improve over multiple iterations. It would enhance our own capability, and allow us to benefit from the first-mover advantage of adopting a common vehicle platform that can be expanded with the addition of an IFV and a mortar variant, putting us in the vanguard of armoured development in the drone age. But that cannot happen without the vehicle proving its capability—first with the soldiers, then with our allies. In a crowded field, that should be a top priority.

In "The Iliad", Ajax loses a competition to Odysseus and, distraught by the result and conquered by his own grief, plunges his sword into his own chest, killing himself out of shame at his own failure. The irony should not be lost on any of us. Fix Ajax, and fix it quickly. There is a war coming.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. We are looking at around three and a half minutes each.

9.59 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on securing this important debate. My constituency is home to General Dynamics, and its site at Pentrebach is where Ajax vehicles are currently assembled. I am here today to try to represent the views of the 700 or so workers at the site, many of whom are my constituents.

In relation the concerns raised in November, as I said in the Chamber following the recent urgent question, safety is the priority and of paramount importance. It is essential that everything possible is done to keep our brave servicemen and women safe. I am aware that General Dynamics is working closely with the Government and the MOD to try and get to the bottom of what happened in November and put right anything that needs to be in response. Since initial concerns were identified in 2021, the company has worked closely with the Government and robust testing has been carried out over a number of years by the company together with the MOD and the Army.

General Dynamics has operated in south Wales valleys for many years and acquired the site in Merthyr Tydfil in 2014. Since then, hundreds of my constituents and others from surrounding areas have been employed on the Ajax programme and have dedicated themselves to playing their part in building a platform that is at the forefront of our defence readiness. Just two months ago, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry was in Merthyr Tydfil to celebrate the milestone of the IOC being awarded. I was present that day and the whole workforce was upbeat about the contribution that it was making to the nation's defence story.

General Dynamics has been committed to the local area, and I am aware that there are ongoing discussions around export of the Ajax platform to other countries. This, of course, would mean sustaining jobs and creating additional jobs in my constituency and in the supply chain across south Wales and beyond.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): Many of my constituents are employed in this sector, by General Dynamics and in the wider supply chain. Would my hon. Friend agree that those are the very types of secure, well-paid jobs that we need across the south Wales region?

Gerald Jones: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend's comment. It is important that we have certainty for those jobs and sustain and increase such jobs across south Wales, because that is integral to this Government's growth agenda in communities in Wales and across the UK.

Merthyr Tydfil has a long, proud and historical association with the defence of our country. Merthyr was the largest iron-producing town in the world at the time of the industrial revolution, producing cannons

and cannonballs for the Royal Navy, leading to a visit from Admiral Nelson himself in 1802 to the Cyfarthfa ironworks. Our area is keen to renew that role in the 21st century and play a part in creating quality defence capabilities with our dedicated and committed workforce.

As I mentioned earlier, currently more than 700 people are employed at the site and those skilled and long-term employment opportunities are vital to the ongoing regeneration of the valleys—an area where heavy industry, such as coal mining and steel, has now ceased, and new industry and employment opportunities are so important to creating hope and growth in our communities. In addition, as a proud supporter of the Union of the United Kingdom, it is hugely important that people across the whole of the UK feel included in the defence sector and ongoing Government investment in the defence capability should benefit communities in the UK and particularly the south Wales valleys.

In closing, I ask the Minister to address a few points. While I fully appreciate that the investigation has to take its course, does he have any indication of what timescale is in place for the investigations to be concluded? The longer the uncertainty goes on, the more impact it will have on the morale of the workforce in Merthyr Tydfil.

Finally, while I appreciate that the Minister is responding on behalf of the MOD, in the Chamber last month, I asked the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry if he would meet staff and trade unions at General Dynamics as soon as possible to provide them with as much reassurance as possible, something he committed to doing. Today I ask the Minister if he will undertake to raise with the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry the importance of that visit taking place at the earliest opportunity. In the event that the investigations take longer than expected, will he commit in the meantime to asking the MOD to find a way to provide regular updates to the staff and workforce until more certainty can be provided?

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I will be bringing in the Front Bench speakers at 10.28 am.

10.4 am

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this debate today.

As has already been laid out, the Ajax programme has been a disaster. It has been repeatedly delayed and enormously expensive. We have known for years about problems with noise and vibration. It is mystifying how these vehicles were signed off as safe, despite so obviously not being so. British soldiers have been permanently injured as a result. Clearly the problems with Ajax did not begin under this Government; the vehicles were expected to be combat ready by mid-2019. However, the decision about what to do with the programme now does fall to this Government. Whatever they decide, this debacle cannot be allowed to continue.

The programme's consistent failure sends a clear signal to those who have committed their lives to serving our country that, while they may be doing their duty to this country, the British Government are not performing their duty to them. How else are our armed forces personnel supposed to interpret a programme that has been repeatedly delayed, has racked up enormous costs and, as we heard last year, poses a direct risk to soldiers? When we ask people to put their lives on the line to protect our freedoms, the very least we can do is provide them with functional equipment, on time, that does more harm to the enemy than to our own troops.

The Ajax programme does an appalling disservice, not just to Britain's armed forces—although that is awful—but for British taxpayers. The programme has a budget of £6.3 billion, enough to pay for the running of every court in England and Wales for two years. It is £6.3 billion of people's hard-earned money. These vehicles do not work, and I would like my money back.

If Ajax was the only failure, that would still not be acceptable, but it might at least be written off as an aberration. However, the pattern of the British Government failing their duty to the armed forces is, sadly, far more widespread. In March 2024, a former armed forces Minister told the House of Commons that the British Army's ammunition stockpile would be exhausted in just 10 days of warfare. The Ministry of Defence has said it believes we will need to spend an additional £28 billion to meet its costs over the next four years—yet at the Budget just two months ago, defence spending rose by £500 million less than was projected in the summer.

The Government have not just failed in supplying our armed forces with the tools they need to keep us safe. In repealing the protections put in place by the previous Government's Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, for example, they are opening the door to another wave of prosecutions against those who have previously served. How can all of that be the right way to treat those who have risked their lives to keep us safe? What message does it send to those who might consider enlisting in the future? What other country would treat its former service personnel with such disregard?

Ajax does not tell the whole story, but it is one recent and important example. How the Government choose to proceed from here will send a signal to those who are serving, and those who might serve in the future, about whether their Government intend to uphold their side of the bargain. Regardless of political party, we should all want our armed forces to know that we support them, not just with words, but materially. I hope the Minister will provide some clarity on when we can expect a final verdict on Ajax, and what steps the Government are taking to ensure that future procurement is faster, more cost-effective and safer for those who are serving. That is the very least that our armed forces deserve.

10.7 am

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on introducing the debate, and thank him for his service in the Royal Yorkshire Regiment. May I take the House back to a visit I made to the NATO Forward Land Forces contribution as part of Operation Cabrit? I spent time in a Challenger 2 tank, and what was most impressive was not the size, the armour or the firepower, but the complete confidence that its crew had in the vehicle. Ajax was meant to deserve and earn the same trust. Before I come on to the failures in the programme, however, I want to say something about the workers in south Wales: they deserve credit for their graft and determination, not blame.

[Mr Luke Charters]

The Public Accounts Committee, of which I was previously a member, has made it clear what went wrong. It found that the programme was over-specified from the outset, with about 1,200 individual requirements imposed on what was supposedly an adapted off-the-shelf design. In reality, Ajax was neither off-the-shelf nor fully bespoke, and what was in between was far riskier. Never again must defence procurements over-specify requirements; that should be a red flag right from the start. Computer models were relied upon to assess vibration and noise rather than vigorous early testing. The Public Accounts Committee found that that approach had failed, and that the Department at the time did not fully understand the vehicle's characteristics before subjecting soldiers to trials. Our armed forces should never have been used as human guinea pigs.

The independent Sheldon review is more damning: it found a culture in which bad news was softened as it travelled up the management chain. Senior leaders were left without a clear, honest picture of what was really happening. I thank all the soldiers who stepped forward to raise safety concerns. Despite the warnings that were given, the safety notices that were issued and the whistleblowers who came forward, GD repeatedly underplayed the scale of those issues, so it is reasonable to ask a simple question: if the design ultimately lay with the contractor, would the chief executive officer of GD be happy to have their son or daughter sent on to a battlefield in an Ajax? If those design failures did rest with GD, the taxpayer should not be left carrying the cost of retrofit.

I will touch briefly on defence exports. We must learn lessons from those abroad, particularly Leopard, which is a main battle tank. That platform was modular, upgradeable and interoperable, which meant it was a much stronger prospect for our defence export. When it comes to procurement, we should always bear defence exports in mind.

There are wider lessons too for the forthcoming defence investment plan, which must make a decisive break. We need a system that is capable of designing and testing earlier on, rather than one that rushes into production in the hopes that problems can be fixed later on. Ajax must be a turning point, not just for this vehicle, but for how we procure defence capability in this country in the future.

My hon. Friend the Minister is one of the most impressive forces in British politics; if he can climb Mount Everest in just five days—to raise money for our veterans, no less—I have no doubt about his ability to get to grips with one of the most challenging problems facing defence procurement today.

10.10 am

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this important debate.

I want to briefly link the lessons of Ajax to wider concerns in MOD procurement. My hon. Friend has frequently mentioned the Boxer; having met with a key local manufacturer in my constituency, I have been made aware of the potential implication of issues with the UK Boxer mechanised infantry vehicles and Project Hunter, the procurement of laser protection and signature reduction systems under the alternative individual weapon programme. It is essential that we are agile and apply the lessons of Ajax to other such procurements. That is important locally in my constituency, since Royal Marines 42 Commando are based there and are potential customers of some of the equipment, and it is important nationally to make sure we ensure value for money, national security and operational capability.

The business in my constituency has raised issues with the Boxer, such as the procurement and performance of the periscopes, the driver's modules and the mission module. These have been raised with Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land, the prime contractor; with GuS Periscopes UK, the supplier; with the relevant defence equipment and support teams; with UTAC; with local MPs, one of whom is the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry and another of whom serves on the Defence Committee, and with the Secretary of State for Defence. To date, no response has been received. I raised a question in the recent Ajax statement and the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry was interested I am waiting for a response from him to agree a meeting. Ultimately, we need to ensure that we take lessons from Ajax and speed up talking about the potential issues with Boxer as well.

Project Hunter was designed to procure up to 10,000 KS-1 rifles for our military over a 10-year period. Included was an optical scope with a laser protection system, and a noise and muzzle flash suppression system. To date, of the significant number of rifles procured, zero have been equipped with that system. We have heard from Ukrainian veterans' charities that up to 360 snipers have been blinded as a result of using that equipment—something we should be taking very seriously. The implication, if funding is not allocated for this promised addition to the weapons, is that we will not have the laser protection system. That would leave our soldiers vulnerable to offensive countermeasures and risk significant injurie; due to the reflective nature of unprotected sighting systems, the threat of counter-detection would also be significantly higher as it would allow opposing forces to target our soldiers.

There is also a significant reputational risk for our Government if we deploy those systems without adequate protection, especially given those reported threats. I thank you, Mr Stuart, for allowing me to mention that within this wider debate. Could the Minister use his powers to speed up the conversation that my local constituency business is hoping to have with senior figures, including the Minister for procurement, to ensure that we, at speed, learn from the lessons of Ajax and apply them as we are spending multimillions of pounds of our money at a considerably risky time in the international landscape. We may not be able to change the direction of a tanker—I appreciate it is a big job—but if we do not take this new information seriously we risk having another debate like this one, but on a different topic, in the future.

10.14 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this important debate.

I pay tribute to our armed forces and those who put their lives on the line to keep our country safe. We ask a great deal of our servicemen and women, so the least we can do as parliamentarians is ensure that our armed forces have the equipment they need. Like other Members, I was extremely concerned to hear of soldiers reporting noise and vibration symptoms during a training exercise on 22 November last year. I pay tribute to the Ministry of Defence for moving swiftly to respond to those concerns; the safety of armed service personnel must remain paramount.

Given the importance of the Ajax programme, I welcome the Government's focus on ensuring that the ongoing investigations are concluded swiftly—the facts must be identified urgently. I remind the Minister that any delay will come at a cost: it will mean workers being concerned about their futures, ongoing confusion about the safety of the rigorously tested Ajax, and opportunities to export Ajax to our allies being put at risk.

The Ajax programme is a welcome product of a deliberate choice by successive Governments to develop our sovereign capability to design and manufacture Britain's next generation of armoured fighting vehicles. Ajax is not only built in Britain; it is, more importantly, built in Wales. The General Dynamics UK facilities in south Wales are a critical part of the Welsh manufacturing landscape, supporting 680 employees across sites in Merthyr Tydfil and Oakdale in my constituency. I was delighted to visit the General Dynamics Oakdale facility just before Christmas to meet some of the 200-plus staff. I saw the wide range of skills employed on site, and especially the integration of the advanced digital technologies that make Ajax such a pioneering vehicle.

As the world's first fully digitalised armoured fighting vehicle, Ajax is well positioned in the international market as allied countries seek to update their armoured forces. Many of their procurement cycles are expected to conclude in the next 12 to 18 months, making the timing of the MOD's review of Ajax critical. Successful export of the Ajax could be worth up to £20 billion in the future and is essential to sustaining and growing sovereign AFV manufacturing facilities in south Wales. In learning the lessons of the Challenger programme, we cannot allow the British Army to be loaded with the lifetime costs of a unique vehicle.

In responding to current threats, the latest strategic defence review highlighted the need to expand the capabilities of armoured platforms and integrate them with evolving digital technologies. Ajax will play a vital role in delivering on those aims and the wider objective of digitising the British Army. The technical functionality and pioneering nature of Ajax also mean it is unique and cannot easily be replaced by an alternative.

In closing, I would reinforce to the Minister the importance of the ongoing reviews to not only the welfare of our soldiers, but wider supply chains and our sovereign manufacturing and defence capabilities. I urge him to ensure that the reviews are completed as quickly as possible so that we can have certainty for everyone involved.

10.17 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I want to say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for setting the scene incredibly well and providing lots of detailed information that is beyond my knowledge; hopefully he helped to set the scene for the Minister's answers.

Ajax was, and is, intended to be a cornerstone of the British Army's future capacity, providing modern awareness while protecting the soldiers who operate it. Getting it right is therefore essential, not only for military effectiveness, but to ensure the safety of those who operate it. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I know we will not be disappointed.

There have been issues surrounding Ajax, and it is of major importance that they are resolved. For example, some service personnel experienced injuries from excessive noise and vibration, which resulted in manufacturing being paused and major safety investigations being launched; those issues were put down to design integration issues rather than error. There have also been major delays, with full operational capability delayed by many years. The programme is valued at some £5.5 billion—with billions spent before vehicles are even usable—and there are major concerns regarding value for money.

The Ministry of Defence is responsible for keeping personnel safe and ensuring that the programme delivers value and capability. Ajax must meet the Army's operational needs and fit into wider defence plans, and we should not persist with a system that cannot be safely or effectively used. Hon Members have concerns regarding the use of Ajax—the hon. Member for Huntingdon told us what they are—so I was pleased that the Minister committed after the last debate on this topic in Parliament in December to resolve the issues. That is why his reply today is important.

Mr Francois: The hon. Member may know that the previous National Armaments Director, Andy Start, was paid a performance bonus in 2023-24 of £165,000, and another one in 2024-25 of £160,000, while this was going wrong on his watch. Does the hon. Member agree that if Ajax is, unfortunately, finally scrapped, Mr Start should pay that money back?

Jim Shannon: If he has not done the job, there should be no bonus. That would be the same for anybody, no matter who they are—you get a bonus because you do it right. But the Minister can perhaps answer that question better.

It is important that these issues have no knock-on effects on essential supplies getting to the battle zone. These delays have left the Army without a modern tracked reconnaissance vehicle, forcing reliance on ageing platforms that are not up to speed for the modern world of today. Full operating capability is now expected for 2028-29—years later than originally planned. It is down to the MOD to ensure that our Army does not suffer as a result.

To conclude, resolving the issues with the Ajax programme is vital for the safety of personnel, the effectiveness of the British Army and the credibility of the MOD's procurement process. I look forward to hearing from the Minister and the Government how they can address these issues and restore confidence in what should have been a successful programme for the United Kingdom.

10.21 am

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The Minister will be fully aware that an enormous amount of expertise, investment and effort has gone into the development of the Ajax vehicle, producing a vehicle of significant and unique capabilities. I absolutely understand that we want to ensure high-quality performance and safety, and there has been extensive testing of the vehicle over thousands of kilometres, with noise and vibration limits well within acceptable levels.

I understand that the latest testing will be completed shortly, so my ask of the Minister is simple: once the latest testing results are available for ministerial consideration, we need Ministers to give absolute priority to the analysis and consideration of those results and to ensure that decisions on next steps are made without delay. Time is of the essence, and we need clarity on Ajax as soon as possible. It would be unforgivable if the latest tests vindicated the quality and viability of the Ajax project, but ministerial schedules and the machinery of government then caused delays, compounding the problems and losing us valuable opportunities.

Uncertainty is a pervasive killer. Any delay will sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of potential customers. There has been huge investment in Ajax, and if it is to pay its way and justify the investment in such an advanced capability, we need to attract orders from abroad. There is an important opportunity to showcase Ajax in early February, and it would be crazy if that opportunity is lost through poor prioritisation of the Procurement Minister's priorities.

Then there is the workforce. For them, uncertainty—the fear of losing their job—is devastating. We have a very loyal workforce in Merthyr, who have gone above and beyond to deliver on Ajax. They not only want jobs now, but to see a future for young people, and that is dependent on securing orders for Ajax. There are also all those who work in the supply chain.

Ministers may decide that further work is needed. If so, I again stress that it needs to be done as nimbly as it can be. Decisions on Ajax will have a ripple effect on wider industry. I support our industrial strategy and our determination to rebuild our industrial base to make sure we have the capabilities to develop the likes of Ajax. For too long, procurement procedures have looked only at headline price and failed to give due consideration to the huge benefits of securing jobs here in the UK—good jobs, tax revenue, social cohesion and, as brought home more vividly through covid and the Ukraine conflict, our resilience and security.

When we look at the current Ajax situation, we can see why some might ask, "Why invest? Why bother with the risk? Wouldn't it just be easier to buy off the peg and let another nation take the risk?" Apart from the fact that we may end up with a substandard product, with the problems emerging only after purchase, what happens when, as we saw in covid, other nations prioritise their own needs or supply routes are otherwise sabotaged?

No one factory exists in isolation, and if we need further proof of our interdependence, the Jaguar Land Rover cyber-attack brought it home starkly. If the JLR crisis had led to one local company—for example, a supplier of a specific part for JLR—going bust, there would have been contagion, because that would have had an immediate effect on the other car companies it supplied. Conversely, if we implement our industrial strategy by supporting foundation industries such as steel and developing advanced technologies such as semiconductors, and we make the UK a vibrant hub of new high-tech industries, they will feed off each other. That creates an attractive environment for investment and aspirational workers. Ajax is an important part of this ecosystem.

To sum up, I urge the Minister and his colleagues to ensure that the necessary analysis is undertaken as soon as they are provided with the testing information and data, and that they make their decision without delay. Any delay would undermine confidence among potential purchasers of Ajax, lead to us missing vital opportunities in the purchasing timetables of key potential customers, further demoralise the workforce and undermine broader investor confidence in our industrial strategy. A lot depends on how the Minister handles this issue.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I thank colleagues and congratulate them on their discipline. Last but not least, Chris Evans.

10.25 am

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. It would be easy to blame the last Conservative Government for the operational difficulties burdening the Ministry of Defence, General Dynamics and the British Army from the outset of the Ajax programme, but I could not do that with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) sitting in front of me. He was often a critic when he sat on the Government Benches, and I have lost count of the number of times he said that heads should roll at Abbey Wood—it is a shame nobody listened to him at the time.

When we stood here three years ago, 37 of 39 projects were marked as either red or amber by the National Audit Office. That is unacceptable. Criticisms of the Ajax project included realistic targets not being set for the vehicle's bespoke capability, and its complex requirements being largely ignored. As we have heard, whistleblowers were not listened to, resulting in the Ajax demonstration and manufacturing phases overlapping, which posed acute technical safety risks.

Progress reports were also often vague or overly optimistic, as we experienced in November. Ministers were assured that Ajax had achieved initial operating capability and was prepared for the Salisbury exercise. We have to ask why that was the case. A gross overestimation put the health of 30 soldiers at risk, and that is the nub of the problem. This is not simply economics; as the Minister knows, when we send someone into theatres with obsolete equipment, we are putting their lives at risk. If they lose their life, it is their family we have to be accountable to. That is what we have to remember. It is not about the defence companies or the equipment; it is about the soldier we are sending into theatre, and we should never lose sight of that.

We also have to look at the cultural issue at the MOD, which the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford constantly spoke about. Between 2011 and 2023, the Ministry of Defence welcomed five project managers, and each served for approximately two to three years. The job was unsustainable due to the complexity and breadth of its portfolio, which did not allow for effective oversight.

I will now turn to the Morpheus project, which was unfortunately delivered by General Dynamics land division. It was intended to supply the computing system for Ajax, but the system fell short of its requirements, even though the same company developed it. Ajax was expected to be the Army's first set of vehicles based on one fully digitised platform, which was to include advanced sensors and enhanced communication systems, allowing vehicles to gather and immediately share information with other units. In stark contrast, Morpheus incurred significant costs and a delay of three years, during which time Ajax's ability to exchange information was severely limited. The platform had the potential to significantly improve the British Army's digital capabilities, and this country could have been a world leader in that sector. Its failure was nothing short of unacceptable.

There is no doubt that the MOD has been and is a uniquely failing Department. In opposition, Labour called for the MOD to be the first Department subject to the new Office for Value for Money, with a commitment to commission the NAO to conduct an across-the-board survey of the MOD's wants and needs.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. I call James MacCleary, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

10.28 am

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on securing this timely and important debate.

Ajax takes its name from the "Iliad". In that great epic, there are in fact two Ajaxes—Ajax the Great, the famous hero of Greek mythology, and Ajax the Lesser. I think it is pretty clear, from what we have heard today, which of them this project most resembles. Ajax stands as perhaps the starkest illustration of everything that has gone wrong with defence procurement in this country.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): The new medium helicopter contract has reportedly been delayed. We now risk losing the site at Yeovil if the contract is not awarded by March. Does my hon. Friend agree that such delays to contracting are undermining our national and economic security, and that the new medium helicopter contract must be awarded as soon as possible?

James MacCleary: My hon. Friend is a committed advocate for his constituents in Yeovil and has raised this on a number of occasions. I absolutely agree: we run a real risk of not only losing the ability to build our own—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. We will stay focused Ajax, notwithstanding the intervention.

James MacCleary: Indeed.

Let me be clear from the outset: the possible collapse of this multi-decade, £6.2 billion programme is deeply alarming. It demands answers, it demands accountability and, most importantly, it demands urgent action. The facts are stark and troubling. Just weeks ago on Salisbury plain, during what should have been a routine training exercise, more than 30 of our soldiers fell ill. They were not injured in combat or facing down an enemy on some distant battlefield; they were training on British soil in British vehicles built with British taxpayers' money. They were vomiting, and they were shaking uncontrollably. Some spent 10 to 15 hours in these vehicles and emerged requiring urgent medical care.

That is not the first time we have heard such reports. Indeed, the Ajax programme has been plagued by issues of noise and vibration since mid-2020. A stop notice was issued in June 2021 and all dynamic movement was halted. The programme underwent what was termed "a significant reset". Training resumed in 2023, only to be paused again in 2025. Astonishingly, this programme has been on pause for 20% of its entire life—20%.

What was the response from those in charge? In November, just before the latest incident, we were told that Ajax had achieved "Initial Operating Capability". The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry visited the General Dynamics factory in south Wales and declared that the issues were "firmly in the past." He told us that he had been

"reassured from the top of the Army"

that the vehicle was safe. Indeed, the programme was apparently so successful that the MOD announced in November that it had just won an international award for mega-project of the year.

Three weeks later, the Minister had to return to the House to confess that he had been misled—misled by the Chief of the General Staff and the then acting National Armaments Director. These are not junior officials; they are the most senior figures in our defence establishment providing assurances about safety that have proven to be utterly unfounded.

I must ask, what kind of system allows this to happen? What kind of institutional culture permits such a fundamental failure of honesty and accountability? What does it say about the state of our armed forces that senior officials and officers declared initial operating capability when long-standing problems had merely been mitigated with new seats and earplugs in some cases, rather than actually fixed?

The Minister must now be absolutely clear about what the Government's contingency plans are if Ajax is deemed unsafe. Moreover, he must explain what the impact will be on our NATO commitments if Ajax is further delayed due to required upgrades or scrapped altogether. Our allies are watching, and our adversaries are watching, and what they see is chaos.

This is not simply about one troubled programme, catastrophic though Ajax's failures have been; this programme illustrates the deep-seated problems with defence procurement that have plagued our armed forces for years. They deserve better than the endless delays, cost overruns and capability gaps that have become the hallmark of how we equip those who defend us.

Let us consider the litany of failures. Ajax was ordered in 2014. It was supposed to be fully in service by 2019. Here we are in 2026, and not only is it not in service, but we are now investigating whether it is fundamentally unsafe. The vehicle was originally designed for weights of up to 26 tonnes. Through what defence analysts politely call "scope creep"—the Army loading the programme with 1,200 separate capability requirements—the weight ballooned to over 43 tonnes.

A single vehicle can now cost well over £10 million in its most expensive form, and what have we got for this money? We have vehicles that make our soldiers sick. We have a programme that has consumed vast resources

[James MacCleary]

and delivered nothing but embarrassment. We have General Dynamics winning awards for project controls while producing vehicles that cannot be safely operated. I note with interest that when asked whether performance bonuses relating to Ajax had been paid to officials over the last three years, the Ministry responded:

"This information is not held centrally and therefore can not be provided without incurring disproportionate costs."

Mr Francois: Does the hon. Member agree that the Ministry could tell us the bonuses of the head of Defence Equipment and Support, so the idea that it does not know who else got a bonus is totally and utterly laughable?

James MacCleary: I do; it is an extraordinary response. All we can conclude is that the Ministry means, "Yes, bonuses have been awarded—some of them quite substantial—but we would rather not tell you exactly how much people have been rewarded for presiding over this disaster." The senior responsible officer for Ajax earns a salary in excess of £160,000—nearly as much as the Prime Minister—with the potential for bonuses of 25% to 30% on top, so we have people earning £200,000 or more while delivering a programme that has been stopped for a fifth of its existence and is now under multiple safety investigations.

This is not merely incompetence; it is systemic failure. The 2023 review of the programme exposed precisely that—systemic and institutional problems. We need to know what progress has been made in fixing these issues, and we need to know what safeguards are in place to prevent further delays, cost overruns and, most importantly, threats to our soldiers' safety. I ask the Minister directly: is the Ministry of Defence considering an internal investigation into how the programme could have progressed so far without those major issues being identified? Someone, somewhere, has been signing off on milestones and accepting deliverables when the fundamental problems are still unresolved.

The Liberal Democrats have long argued for a fundamental reform of defence procurement, and Ajax demonstrates precisely why such reform is so desperately needed. We would tackle these long-standing problems by replacing the current system of defence reviews with a more flexible system of continuous review of security threats and evolution of defence plans. As has been dramatically demonstrated in recent weeks, the world does not wait for our periodic review cycles, and neither should our procurement system.

We would ensure that defence procurement is part of a comprehensive industrial strategy, securing a reliable long-term pipeline of equipment procurement. Industry needs certainty, as do our armed forces, but the current approach provides certainty for neither, especially with the continued delay in releasing the defence investment plan. We would collaborate properly with our European and NATO partners on the development of new defence technologies, equipment, systems and training. We would make capital spending allocations more flexible to reduce what is called annuality, and focus instead on meeting the required in-service dates. We would invest properly in recruiting, retaining and training staff with specialist skills at the Ministry of Defence, reducing its dependency and expenditure on external consultants.

The concerns about Ajax should raise alarm bells about the continuing poor state of procurement at a time when Britian must be rearming rapidly. The geopolitical situation demands that we get this right, and Ukraine has shown us what modern warfare requires. Our adversaries are not standing still, and we simply cannot afford these failures.

The fact that the Army has paused the use of Ajax vehicles raises serious questions about the operational readiness of the units that rely on them. How does this disruption affect deployment plans at a time when our armed forces need to be fully prepared? What is the impact on training schedules? What message does it send to our personnel about how we value their safety?

The Ministry of Defence has launched a safety investigation, citing an "abundance of caution", but the public and this House deserve clarity. What exactly is being investigated, who is involved, and when will the inquiry conclude? The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry said:

"It will be conducted at pace, but it will not be rushed."

Which is it? The armed forces deserve transparency and reassurance, and they deserve it now. This all sends a worrying signal to our adversaries, which is why it is vital that the Government outline how they will move quickly to resolve the issues and adopt our proposals for a wider overhaul of the procurement system. We cannot afford to lumber on with a broken system while the world around us becomes more dangerous.

Difficult decisions lie ahead. The Defence Secretary has indicated that scrapping the programme in its entirety is possible. Given what we know—given the years of delays and billions spent, and given that soldiers are still falling ill in these vehicles—it is right to seriously consider that option. The mythological Ajax died of shame; one hopes that those responsible for this modern Ajax programme might feel at least some measure of that emotion. More than shame, we need action. The Ajax programme must not be allowed to fail in silence—too much is at stake. The most important thing of all is the safety and wellbeing of those who serve and being able to depend on them absolutely.

10.38 am

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on very ably introducing this debate. I should begin by declaring an interest—as consistently being one of the greatest critics of the Ajax programme in the House of Commons for around a decade. Indeed, being very much an Ajax sceptic, I once described it to the Defence Committee as a reconnaissance vehicle that is

"about as stealthy as a Ford Transit van full of spanners!".

My real epiphany, however, came when I visited the Ajax factory with that Committee in March 2022, when even the shop floor staff, for whom I had much sympathy in this situation—it was not their fault—were telling us that the vehicle was deeply flawed.

Stuart Anderson: I do not want to steal my right hon. Friend's thunder, but when we were on that visit, I was absolutely shocked that the team building Ajax said that no two hulls had ever left the factory that were the same. They were all slightly different, and that was a flaw in the whole building project.

Mr Francois: I have with me the actual minute of the Committee's 2022 visit, which confirms exactly what my hon. Friend said.

Ajax's genesis goes back several decades, under Governments of multiple colours. It effectively began life in the 1980s under the Conservatives as an Anglo-American reconnaissance vehicle programme called TRACER—the tactical reconnaissance armoured combat equipment requirement. Eventually that programme broke down, and the United States continued to develop the Bradley family unilaterally. Back in Britain, under Tony Blair's Labour Government, the programme evolved into the future rapid effect system—FRES—which itself ran into considerable trouble. As the Defence Committee report of February 2007—I have it here—brutally concluded:

> "This is a sorry story of indecision, constantly changing requirements and delay...It is high time the MoD decided where its priorities lay."

That was 19 years ago.

Following much criticism, FRES was abandoned and eventually re-emerged as the Ajax family of armoured vehicles, with six variants. In March 2010, during the dying months of the Brown Government, the decision was taken to meet the requirement by purchasing the vehicle known as ASCOD, which was also being procured by the Spanish army, in Spain, from US contractor General Dynamics. Crucially, this was originally intended to be an off-the-shelf procurement, with minimal design modification, to enter service in 2017.

The coalition Government, at the Cardiff NATO summit in 2014, announced that Ajax would be manufactured in Merthyr Tydfil, using hulls imported from Spain. In short, Labour originally ordered Ajax, but the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats decided where it would be built. Unusually, this was to encompass both a development and production contract running simultaneously. Moreover, an early decision was taken to up-gun Ajax from a 30 mm to a 40 mm weapon, involving a major redesign of the turret. In all, the Army eventually insisted on an incredible 1,200 additional requirements, totally contrary to the off-the-shelf principle.

Concerns regarding vibration and noise-related injuries to crews were first flagged by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory as far back as 2014, but it was not until November 2020—six years later—that Ministers were first informed that trials had been suspended over safety concerns. Defence Equipment and Support, after much internal angst, then issued a formal stop notice in June 2021. Ajax trials were eventually restarted in 2022, but not before the programme had been subject to trenchant criticism from the Defence Committee, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, the National Audit Office—which famously concluded that Ajax was "flawed from the start"—and the Public Accounts Committee to boot.

In 2022, Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, rightfully exasperated by the endless delays and the quality of advice being given to Ministers, commissioned the wholly independent Clive Sheldon KC to undertake a detailed review of Ajax. Sheldon's 172-page review—I have it here—was excoriating. To summarise it in one sentence, it painted a picture of a completely dysfunctional UK procurement system, in which serious concerns articulated at junior level were routinely ignored or explained away by senior managers. Nevertheless, the Army began preparing to bring Ajax into operational service.

On 5 November last year, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry headed up a major media event at General Dynamics' Ajax production facility in Merthyr Tydfil to declare that Ajax had successfully achieved "Initial Operating Capability". Given the controversial history of the programme, the Minister—who cannot be here today, but who is no fool—did exactly what I would have done, which was to ask for written assurances that the programme was safe, including from the Chief of the General Staff and the National Armaments Director. One key question, incidentally, is: who told both of them that it was safe?

Armed with letters from both of those very senior gentlemen confirming that Ajax was indeed ready to enter service safely, the Minister went ahead—we believe in good faith—and declared to the media that Ajax is

> "a vehicle that is safe, effective and truly cutting-edge."

I can therefore only imagine his horror when, on 22 November, a major regimental exercise on Salisbury plain to test Ajax's battle-worthiness—involving two squadrons of Ajax vehicles, along with command and support variants, some 60 vehicles in all—had to be rapidly abandoned after 23 crew members reported serious vibration and noise-related injuries. Subsequently, the Minister even halted trials on individual Ajax test vehicles, after further injuries to test crews were discovered.

The response of GD UK, in the form of Mr Robert Skivington, one of its then managers, was—disgustingly—to blame the Army's crews and their commanders in an expletive-ridden social media post. In my sorry, decade-long experience of General Dynamics, that just about sums up their management—not their workers. Moreover, I had a chance encounter with the Ajax senior responsible owner, Mr Chris Bowbrick, at the Defence and Security Equipment International exhibition last September, during which he categorically assured me that Ajax was now safe—and he even shook my hand on it. If the Minister feels angry that he was misinformed, I feel exactly the same way.

Everyone agrees we simply cannot go on with this endless stop-start cycle regarding Ajax, not least as it represents the Army's largest procurement programme at £5.5 billion for acquisition, or £6.3 billion including life-cycle costs. It is also the Army's biggest chunk of the long-delayed defence investment plan. In short, as safety is paramount, Ministers now have one of two stark options over Ajax: either they must fix it or fail it once and for all. Let us look at both.

Ajax has always been too big to fail. Many senior generals, senior civil servants and GD directors have their careers effectively invested in the programme. Indeed, Sheldon relates in some detail the reluctance over a long period of DE&S senior management to even admit that there were serious failings with the vehicle. I am not a qualified engineer, so I cannot pronounce on whether the problem is fixable. Some analysts argue that the vehicle is now so heavy—at up to 43 tonnes it is just two tonnes lighter than a world war two Panther main battle tank—and flawed that it cannot be saved, short of a fundamental redesign which would cost billions of pounds.

However, if this really can be sorted by technical means, then conceptually we surely need a deep fix which effectively puts the problems to bed definitively. If that can somehow be achieved at GD's expense, then all well and good. Nevertheless, the risk is that the

[Mr Francois]

MOD and GD merely tweak the vehicle yet again and then rerun that exercise—perhaps six months from now—with almost exactly the same outcome. In that context, I would humbly remind the Minister of Einstein's definition of madness, which is doing the same thing over and over again and somehow expecting a different result.

Conversely, if it emerges that Ajax is somehow fundamentally flawed and cannot be fixed, then the other option is to end the cycle of denial, rip off the plaster and fail it. That would then involve the Ministry of Defence in potentially tortuous negotiations with General Dynamics, in essence, to get its money back so that it could spend it on something else, such as the BAE CV90, which now successfully serves in many NATO countries—and which lost out to Ajax in the first place. If GD was not willing to accept liability, although many think it should, the MOD would probably have no recourse other than to sue it for liquidated damages for delivering a vehicle that was demonstrably not fit for purpose. To conclude, that could involve the Department in a highly aggressive court case potentially lasting years, but which would no doubt also be highly injurious to the reputation of General Dynamics as a global defence manufacturer. This cannot go on; Ministers must fix it or fail it once and for all.

10.48 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I am grateful to the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this debate.

It will not be lost on the audience that I am not the Minister of State for Defence Readiness and Industry, but I am a former Royal Marine with 24 years of service and now also the Minister responsible for the armed forces. I can assure hon. Members of this Government's commitment to the safety of our service personnel. That is absolutely paramount. It underpins a bond of trust between all MOD activity and the Government, and it is a vital strand of our responsibility to ensure that our service personnel are provided with the correct equipment that is safe, but also reliable and effective.

That is why Ministers were so alarmed by the symptoms reported by 35 soldiers who operated Ajax vehicles during November's exercise Titan Storm. I can update Members that of those 35 people, nine are now back to normal duties, two were found to be suffering from symptoms unrelated to Ajax and the remaining 24 continue to be monitored by our medical services, primarily for hearing and vibration. We will ensure that they receive all necessary support as they progress. I can also confirm that the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), alongside the Chief of the General Staff, will visit affected units and speak to affected soldiers later this week, having written to them at the end of the year.

Exercise Titan Storm represented the latest chapter in a programme that has been well documented by parliamentary Committees and independent MOD reports. Ajax was approved in 2014 with a date for initial operating capability of 2020. Today, after significant delays, just over 180 vehicles have been delivered. The symptoms reported by some of our soldiers operating Ajax during Exercise Titan Storm have led to four separate, rigorous investigations. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry plans to further update the House on this matter next week, so hon. Members will understand that I may leave some of the specific questions—including the 37 from the hon. Member for Huntingdon; on average, one a minute—for that Minister to answer in detail.

Along with the investigations into the vehicles by the Defence Accident Investigation Branch and the Army safety investigation team, which were set out to Parliament by the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry on 8 December, a ministerial-led review into the implementation of previous recommendations has also been commissioned. It focuses on the basis of written assurances given to Ministers ahead of the announcement of initial operating capability in November. As set out in his written ministerial statement on 18 December, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry subsequently also directed a pause on all Ajax trials to allow for an investigation into a second safety incident reported during a trial at Bovington on 12 December.

Each of the 23 affected vehicles have now undergone 45-point inspections, with further instrumental testing, including for noise and vibration, taking place literally as we speak. In that incident, the affected soldier received medical support and did not require hospitalisation. The vehicle involved was not one of the 23 from Exercise Titan Storm; it was a separate vehicle being used to establish a safety baseline for comparison. I can confirm that that soldier has now returned to duty with no issues whatsoever, and that discussions are ongoing between the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry and officials within the Department on appropriate next steps regarding the potential restart of those trials.

As many of my Welsh colleagues have pointed out, the Ajax vehicles are built in Merthyr Tydfil to support a UK-wide supply chain of more than 230 companies and over 4,100 jobs. Because of the importance of the programme to south Wales, Ministers have been in close contact with the Welsh Government; the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry met the Welsh Economy Minister, Rebecca Evans on 15 December.

As I mentioned earlier, because previous investigations and adjustments should have fixed the recent challenges to the programme, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry has put in place a ministerial-led review that will assess how the Department has implemented the recommendations of previous reviews, and suggest improvements to the process of providing timely and accurate information to Ministers. To ensure the independence and rigour of that process, that review is conducted by experts who are not part of the Ajax programme. Ministers, the Chief of the General Staff and officials are also working closely with General Dynamics to resolve the issues, and will continue to do so. Most recently, at ministerial level, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry met senior managers from General Dynamics on 9 December. He plans to meet them again next week, and has future plans that are in train to meet the workforce again.

It is important that each of the investigation teams are given the time and space required to get to the bottom of the recent incidents, and past failures, so that we can take the most appropriate and accountable next steps. I want to be clear that there is no predetermined

outcome. Ministers will be led by the facts and all options are absolutely on the table. As the Defence Secretary has said of this programme, we must either back it or indeed scrap it.

Stuart Anderson: When or if trials resume, what assurances will we get that no future British troops will be put in harm's way by testing Ajax?

Al Carns: I can assure the hon. Member—and I note his background—that the safety of our armed forces will be the No. 1 priority when we commence those trials. That has to be the baseline common denominator as we move forward. I reiterate that the Defence Secretary said that we must back it or scrap it; the evidence will allow us to make that decision.

I will cover off some of the 37 questions that were asked earlier. When we talk about initial operating capability, there is a slight dichotomy. We mentioned a perceived rush to IOC for Ajax on the one hand; on the other hand, collectively hon. Members are asking why Boxer's IOC is moving. It cannot be one or t'other. We have got to allow the teams and experts to ensure that IOC is met in the safest possible manner and that any lessons from Ajax are pulled across into the Boxer programme and other big capability programmes, as has been mentioned by some hon. Members, so that we can understand and learn from them.

We are also, in some cases, our own worst enemy—we have had over 1,000 capability requirement changes throughout the programme. As we change the capability, the platform changes, the cost changes and the time-trialling system changes, and we need to reduce that as we move forward with major capabilities. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry will update the House in due course, covering things such as capability changes and requirements and how many noise vibration issues there were in Titan Storm, and he will answer the rest of the multitude of very detailed questions that were asked earlier today.

On British military doctrine, it is really important to recognise that Ukraine is changing the whole character of conflict and how we fight. Terms such as armoured recce, ranges of gun systems and the reason why we built the tank in the first place—to carry a gun and to deliver firepower at pace—are changing because of the development of technology. We are wrestling with a whole set of capability changes, which are changing the character of conflict. We must not learn false lessons from Ukraine but pull the most effective ones and draw them into our capability programmes that in some cases were set in place 10 to 15 years ago. It is a very complex system of moving forward, but I can assure Members that we are learning those lessons from Ukraine and trying to incorporate them as best we can into the current programmes. What I would say is that Ajax started in 2014, and we have had 10 years of progress, but also a huge amount of mistakes. Those lessons will be pulled across into Boxer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones) outlined the invaluable skills and capability of the staff that have actually created these systems, and some of the capabilities that they have brough to bear are absolutely second to none. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry will report next week, and he is more than happy to meet both union and industry visitors in due course.

The hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) highlighted some issues with the direct threat to our armed forces that the capability may present. What I would say is: allow the facts to do the talking, allow the review to come out next week, allow the report to be presented to the House, and then let us work out whether this capability can actually add value, whether it is in the armoured recce space or armoured infantry roles and so on. From my perspective, it is important to allow the facts and the honesty of the review to pull through.

I express my gratitude once again to the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon for introducing the debate and to all Members for their continued attention to Ajax programme. I trust that we have collectively been clear about where we stand on this. Multiple investigations are under way. All Ajax activity—training, exercise and trials—has been paused until these investigations are complete. Ministers will receive findings in the coming weeks, and all options remain on the table.

Importantly—it has been mentioned multiple times, and I have been at the bottom of the food chain in the military as well—I thank Alfie and Fill Your Boots; I thank the men and the officers for highlighting these concerns and speaking truth to power; and I thank the armed forces collectively for working collaboratively with us to come to an amenable solution that gives them the capability that they deserve.

10.58 am

Ben Obese-Jecty: I thank everybody who participated in this very detailed debate. The Welsh Members who spoke represented the workers at the factory in Merthyr Tydfil extremely well; it is important that their voices are also heard in this debate. From my perspective, it is very important that we focus on how to deliver Ajax as a capability. I appreciate everything that the Minister said about the changing character of conflict and the changing nature of warfare. Ukraine has certainly moved the dial, particularly on armoured warfare and the survivability and lethality of armour going forward, and I know that the Chief of the General Staff has a very detailed view on how he wants to progress our lethality across the Army, particularly with regard to what that looks like going forward.

Ajax is in danger of being superseded by events; indeed, there is a potential that it is almost out of date. It is important that we consider how to make it relevant for the future, given that it has had a significant investment. Yes, it is late, but we can still utilise it, if we can harness its capability. I spoke to soldiers who have used the platform successfully—there are some—and they were positive about the capability of the vehicle. The wider issue is that we do not have an armoured capability that backs that up. It is the tip of the spear, but the handle of the spear is not up to standard. There are some serious concerns around how we maintain the capability of Challenger and what the armoured infantry looks like in the future. I would like to thank everybody for participating in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the Ajax Programme.

Factored Energy Arrangements: Pricing

11 am

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I will call Graham Leadbitter to move the motion, and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister—you need both. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. We are trying to bring this debate swiftly to a close in order to allow the proposer to reach Scottish questions.

11.1 am

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy pricing for consumers with factored energy arrangements.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I am pleased to have secured this debate on a systemic regulatory failure that is quietly draining the bank accounts of residents across Scotland and the wider UK. We are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, yet large numbers of domestic residents are being charged inflated business electricity tariffs for the essential communal services that keep their buildings safe and functional.

In a nutshell, the issue is that in many residential developments, services such as stairwell lighting, fire alarms, lifts and door entry systems are powered via shared electricity meters. Despite that electricity being used entirely for domestic living, residents are routinely charged business energy rates. It is not a niche issue; it is a systemic failure driven by outdated rules and weak enforcement.

The financial harm to our constituents is stark. A typical communal supply, using around 1,000 kWh per year, would cost roughly £380 on a fixed domestic tariff. Under the frequently used standard variable business tariffs, that same usage can rise to around £1,465, an excess cost of approximately £1,100 per meter every year. Across a modest development of 75 flats, it can add around £12,000 annually to residents' collective bills.

What makes that particularly galling is that many residents are entirely unaware of how their communal electricity is billed. They may not know whether it is on a separate meter, how many accounts are involved, or whether it is charged at domestic or business rates. The costs are simply absorbed into factoring charges, leaving consumers unaware of both the issue and their rights—unaware when they are being roundly fleeced for someone else's failure to either act properly or correctly inform them. The root cause of the issue is simple: it is a regulatory mismatch. The problem sits at the intersection of Ofgem regulation, supplier interpretation and third party management structures.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. He and I spoke beforehand, but he might not be aware that consumers with factored arrangements in Northern Ireland were historically vulnerable to high, unregulated prices, similar to consumers in GB, but the Northern Ireland Assembly moved to correct that vulnerability. Does he agree that, UK-wide, those in communal schemes must have protection from gouging and be able to access better priced energy?

Graham Leadbitter: That is absolutely the case. To take Scotland as an example, consumers have a route to address complaints about this issue through the regulation of factors, but it is complex and cumbersome. There should be a simpler way to do it through the energy regulator, as I will touch on later in my speech.

Many communal meters are correctly classed as profile class 01, a domestic designation based on usage. However, where a property factor, managing agent or company holds the contract, suppliers often automatically apply the business tariff.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. Business owner Gary Helliar, from Yeovil, signed an energy contract through a broker who convinced him that energy prices were going to rise to 35p per kilowatt and that the 15p kilowatt was a great deal. Energy prices have fallen below that, but Gary has been stuck in that contract and is facing bills of about £390,000. Does the hon. Member agree that we need greater oversight of energy brokers, so that local businesses are not pushed into rip-off contracts?

Graham Leadbitter: I certainly agree on that point. It is not entirely the purpose of my debate to address that issue today, but it one that I recognise. I think there has to be a route for people to challenge the advice they are given and to take to task those who have given incorrect advice, and that has to be reasonably simple. In many cases currently, it is not.

Ofgem's guidance on domestic communal supplies, which suppliers ought to follow, is very clear: where the non-commercial collective purchase of energy is for mainly domestic use, that should be treated as a domestic supply, provided that the arrangement is not commercial in nature. That guidance makes it clear that classification should be based on how the energy is used, not on the legal entity holding the contract, yet in practice it is inconsistently applied and weakly enforced.

Inconsistent supplier behaviour has created staggering inconsistency across the energy market. Some suppliers, including Ecotricity, Octopus and OVO, correctly apply domestic rates based on usage and do not override domestic classifications simply because a factor is involved. However, others, including EDF, British Gas, E.ON and SSE, often default to business rates, based solely on the identity of the contract holder. Indeed, in research carried out by my office, representatives of EDF have explicitly stated that they

"override the domestic classification if the usage is for a communal area managed by a business entity".

That is in clear contradiction to Ofgem's advice. The result is a supplier lottery. Two identical buildings on the same street can pay vastly different amounts for the same stairwell lighting, purely because of which supplier the managing agent selected.

The lack of regulatory oversight is deeply frustrating for our constituents. No meaningful reform has followed the 2023 call for evidence and multiple parliamentary questions. The current Government have carried out some further consultation, but have not yet moved things on, either. When I come to my conclusion, I will have specific asks for the Minister in that regard.

In April 2024, the Minister's Department suggested that, due to physical set-ups, these consumers would continue to receive energy via non-domestic contracts. I have additionally met Ofgem on this issue. It recognises the problem, but consistent standards have not been enforced. Residents who do not choose their supplier are excluded from key domestic protections, including price cap coverage and Energy Ombudsman access. They are effectively trapped. More worryingly, when debts arise, suppliers may pursue residents directly as the "end users", despite residents having no control over the contract. It is a Catch-22, where responsibility exists without authority, leaving residents unable to discuss the debts they are being chased for, because they do not hold the contract. If residents wish to complain, they often find the ombudsman route unavailable to them because the contract is held by a third party, leaving courts or tribunals as the only effective route for redress.

I therefore have six targeted and practical policy asks of the Minister. No. 1 is to reform standard licence condition 6 in order to prioritise actual usage over contract structure. No. 2 is to mandate a standardised appeal process for tariff classification across suppliers. No. 3 is to enforce profile class integrity, so that domestic or PC 01 meters are not billed at business rates. No. 4 is to strengthen Ofgem's enforcement powers, so that protections are enforceable and not just advisory. No. 5 is to reopen the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero call for evidence and commit to legislative change. No. 6 is to ensure that residents under third party communal contracts can access the Energy Ombudsman.

The current system is a failure of logic and protection and a further cost of living blow to the people who can least afford it. We are effectively telling residents that, because they live in a flat with a shared hallway, rather than in a semi-detached house, they must pay business prices to power their light bulbs and fire alarms. To put it simply, the current situation is like someone being charged a commercial freight rate for a first-class stamp simply because the person posting the letter for them happens to be a professional administrator. It is time that the Government and Ofgem ensured that domestic use always equals a domestic price, and that residents are made fully aware of their rights when communal energy arrangements are put in place.

11.10 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) on securing this debate and giving Members across the House a rare and, I am sure, welcome opportunity to discuss factoring arrangements in Scotland.

The Government recognise that households in factored buildings and their equivalents face more complexity in securing the energy they need than typical households. I hope to address the six points that the hon. Member made at the end of his speech, but if there are any that he would like to discuss further with me, I will be more than happy to do so after the debate.

Factors and other property managers have an important role to play in ensuring that they secure the best-value energy contract for their building. When looking to renew their energy contracts, they should be actively comparing quotes across the non-domestic market and considering available customer service data such as Citizens Advice's energy supplier performance league table.

Small tenements have different needs for communal area pricing from those of a large council complex, for example. Although the existing approach has generally benefited households and offered protection from unfair reselling, some households can be exposed to high prices, as we have heard from the hon. Member and others. The Government are committed to ensuring that our approach to these issues delivers the best outcomes for our citizens as our energy system evolves.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I welcome this debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) on securing it. I am grateful that the Minister recently took the time to visit my constituency and meet residents who had been battling with their factors. They manage a heat network but are all too often left without heat and hot water, which happened again over the Christmas period. My constituents were very grateful to hear the pace at which the Minister is working to put in place regulations and projects that will protect residents like them. Does he agree that we need to see action from the Scottish Government to redress the balance of power between factors, companies and residents?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work to advocate on behalf of her constituents—I think it was at Saltire Square in Granton, and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) is doing the same with a heat network in Greendykes. At that meeting, we heard how important it is that we get on top of this. The Ofgem regulation kicks in on 27 January, and we will be looking to Ofgem to implement it as quickly as possible. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) that there are more actions that other Governments across the UK can take in this space. I will turn to that point in a moment.

As I say, the Government are committed to ensuring that our approach to these issues delivers the best outcomes for our citizens as our energy system evolves. Ofgem keeps all the standard licence conditions under review to make sure that they are working in the best interests of consumers. As part of that, Ofgem will look again at standard licence condition 6 to ensure that the definitions continue to meet the needs of consumers and the evolving energy market.

Before I turn in detail to other energy policy issues, let me briefly say something about factoring as a whole. It is a devolved responsibility, and it is for the Scottish Government to make decisions relating to it. However, there is widespread interest in factoring reform in Scotland, and there is clearly an interaction between the effectiveness of the factor and our ability to provide the best deal in energy, and many other areas, for the consumer.

There is clearly a need, and there are widespread calls, for factoring reform in Scotland. There have been no major reforms to factoring since 2011, when my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), in her time as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, took a Member's Bill through Holyrood. The Scottish

[Martin McCluskey]

Government have recently rejected amendments to housing legislation that would have increased transparency in charging and made it far easier for homeowners to take action against factors. I believe that further work in the area would be welcomed by many across this Chamber and by tenants and homeowners in Scotland.

As we have heard from the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey, when residents do not have direct control over their energy supply, access to the Energy Ombudsman depends on the specific arrangements between them and the intermediary contracting with the supplier. If residents do not have control over the party that contracts with the supplier, allowing them access to the ombudsman fundamentally changes the role and purpose of the Energy Ombudsman as a service between the supplier and the contracted customer. Ofgem is always happy to clarify where consumers are currently able to access the ombudsman, to make sure that customers are not missing out on any avenues of redress to which they are entitled, but I am happy to take away the hon. Member's point and raise it when I next meet the Energy Ombudsman in person.

Meter profile classes, which the hon. Member also raised, are the responsibility of Elexon. Ofgem has previously clarified that, for communal supply arrangements, profile classes should not be the final determining factor in the supply type offered by suppliers. If further clarification is needed in that area, it can be explored by Ofgem and Elexon. I encourage the hon. Member to write to both of them on that point.

We are aware that not having direct control over all aspects of the supply can create difficulties for households. Where households do not have direct control over their individual supply arrangements, Ofgem's maximum resale price rules protect them from being overcharged by limiting the price of energy charged to consumers to the price paid by those procuring the energy. The principle is that profit should not be made when reselling energy in those kinds of arrangements. The Government are very clear that resellers such as factors or landlords should not profit from the resale of energy. The maximum resale price is set at cost pass-through, meaning that the maximum price at which energy can be resold is the same as the price that the reseller paid. Many who are resold energy have limited choice over who supplies them. The maximum resale price is important, as it is the main protection against resellers exploiting their position.

The energy system has evolved significantly since the last substantive review of maximum resale price. The transition to an increasingly decentralised, digitalised and decarbonised system, driven by net zero ambitions and technological innovation, has seen new challenges and opportunities emerge. Ofgem has begun a review of the maximum resale price to determine whether it delivers fair, transparent pricing and adequate consumer protection and whether it enables investment in the low-carbon infrastructure and services necessary to deliver net zero at the lowest cost.

Ofgem has identified that enforcement mechanisms for the current maximum resale price rules are failing to protect some consumers. That is a key area of its current review, and decisions on any further action that may be needed will be made on the basis of those findings. The review started with a call for input in autumn 2025 to gather evidence, and Ofgem aims to publish a policy consultation in summer 2026. The MRP has an important role across the energy industry: as well as improving the situation for households, changes to the MRP have a potential positive impact on other areas of the energy industry.

I will like to touch briefly on the point that the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) raised about his constituent. He may already know that we have announced regulation of third-party intermediaries. We will take that forward through upcoming legislation—this is an important point—to give people more power in brokered energy deals.

Ultimately, households in factored properties feel that their energy costs, for communal areas and otherwise, are too high—because fundamentally they are too high. As hon. Members will know, international gas prices are still 40% higher than in 2021. Permanently reducing energy prices can be achieved only by moving to home-grown, clean power that we control. That is why my Department's central mission is to deliver a clean power system by 2030 through renewables and through new nuclear power. This is the way to break our dependence on global fossil fuel markets and permanently protect bill payers from higher prices.

The Government are determined to deliver on that mission, and my Department is leading an ambitious programme of work that will make it happen. For example, the creation of GB Energy will help us to harness clean energy; contracts for difference will continue to drive clean power investment, as we have seen from today's announcement of allocation round 7; the results of AR7 improvements to the capacity market will ensure security of supply while maximising bill payer value for money; and network improvements, with network providers finally making significant investment after years of under-investment, will reduce the costs of operating the energy system for decades to come.

Across all fronts, the Government are taking action to drive down energy bills. Many households in factored properties will also benefit from the announcements that the Chancellor made in the autumn Budget, with action to take an average of £150 off the cost of domestic energy bills by closing the energy company obligation scheme, and providing Exchequer funding to reduce the cost of the renewables obligation for domestic energy suppliers from 1 April. Those measures are designed to provide immediate relief for people across the country and set the foundation for sustained long-term reductions in energy bills through a transition to clean home-grown power. That support, as many hon. Members will know, comes on top of the £150 off energy bills, a measure that was provided by the Government for about 6 million families and was extended—almost doubled—under the warm home discount this winter. It is cutting fuel poverty right now for those consumers who are in receipt of it.

In addition to our work on reducing energy prices, the Government are delivering record investment in upgrading our housing stock through the warm homes plan. We have committed £15 billion to making the biggest ever public investment in home upgrades, upgrading up to 5 million homes by accelerating the installation of heat pumps, solar panels, batteries and insulation. When it is announced, it will come with Barnett consequentials

for the devolved Governments, including the Scottish Government, to develop their own schemes under the funding. Alongside our action to make electricity cheaper and more flexible, that is how we are delivering warmer, more affordable homes and repairing a broken energy system.

I thank hon. Members again for being present at the debate, for raising these issues and for all their contributions, which I assure them will be taken into consideration by the Government and by Ofgem as we move forward.

Question put and agreed to.

11.20 am

Sitting suspended.

Science and Discovery Centres

[Carolyn Harris *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of Science and Discovery Centres on national science and technology priorities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I am pleased to have secured this debate and look forward to contributions from hon. Members representing some of the 28 science and discovery centres, or SDCs, across the UK. My connection with science centres, and in particular Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr's own Centre for Alternative Technology, commonly known as the CAT, is deeply personal. It is, in fact, the reason I am here today representing my constituency.

Representing a rural Welsh constituency might seem unusual for someone with a father from Surrey and a mother from Camberwell. My father was the first in his family to go to university, where he studied agricultural economics. After graduating, my parents moved to Montgomeryshire in the 1970s and settled in Machynlleth. They were among the founding members of the CAT, one of the oldest science centres in the UK. My father went on to create the agricultural section at the CAT, introduce livestock to the site, and even welcome the King—then Prince Charles—on his first visit.

My family then moved to Glyndŵr. Since they left, the CAT no longer has livestock, but it now has hot water—a luxury that the founding members of the CAT could only have dreamed of. In the intervening decades, the centre has grown from strength to strength, and now welcomes learners of all ages on visits, from schoolchildren to its own postgraduate students, as well as businesses and local authorities that want to explore the solutions that we know are possible to combat the climate and biodiversity crisis. I am immensely proud that my constituency is home to the CAT, but although Members might expect me to be partisan, it is just one of many brilliant science centres across the UK.

SDCs are a unique national asset and a proud legacy of the last Labour Government. They exist to make science open, accessible and aspirational for everyone. Their mission is to ignite curiosity and nurture a lifelong interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, driven by the principle that access to science is a fundamental right. Broadening participation from diverse regions and backgrounds is good not only for individuals, but for UK society and for science itself.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on leading this debate and on finding a Government Department to respond to it; until now, a number have eschewed any responsibility. He is right about the world of opportunity that is open to our young people. I am privileged to have in my constituency Northern Ireland's only SDC, the Odyssey, and particularly W5 within it. He is right to credit the last Labour Government for bringing those forward as part of their millennium investments. Does he recognise that, 25 years on, there is a challenge around capital investment, and that it would be wonderful if this Labour Government could invest again in SDCs?

Steve Witherden: I am in full agreement. As the hon. Member will see, one of my key asks is that we look at the funding for SDCs moving forward.

As a teacher, nothing matters more to me than ensuring that people have access to opportunity. As a drama teacher, STEM was never my strongest suit, but the importance of fostering curiosity—and, most importantly, ensuring that everyone can access it—has always been central to why I became a teacher and an MP.

SDCs operate in all four nations of the UK, reaching more than 5.2 million schoolchildren, families and communities through science and technology in the last year alone. Over the past two years, these organisations have worked with more than 37% of all UK schools. Fifty-five per cent of all visitors identify as women and girls, and many centres provide visits completely free of charge, enabling over 450,000 people from communities traditionally under-represented in STEM to participate in science, research and innovation each year. They are among the few places where broad and inclusive community engagement, the development of essential STEM skills among future generations, and cutting-edge scientific research all come together under one roof.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate, and on his excellent and inspirational speech. The Centre for Life in Newcastle celebrated its 25th birthday last year. I have been inspired by its openness and how it supports young people from all backgrounds and different areas of the north-east to engage with life sciences. As an engineer from an impoverished background, knowing that the Centre for Life in Newcastle is opening up the huge universe of science and scientific curiosity is so reassuring.

Steve Witherden: It is lovely to hear that my hon. Friend is just as passionate about the SDC in her patch as I am about the one in mine.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for giving so much time for interventions. He will not be surprised to hear that I represent one of four science centres in Scotland. Over the last 25 years, Dundee Science Centre has given STEM experiences to more than 2.5 million people, and we look forward to enhancing that through the Eden Project at the city's former gasworks. He mentioned climate change and environmental degradation, and these things need to be challenged. I am happy to hear that the hon. Member agrees that public funding should be committed to this area. Will he go further and suggest to the Minister that there be a timetable for that funding, so that both the Eden Project and our science centres across Scotland and the rest of the UK can be supported?

Steve Witherden: I am happy to convey that ask.

Through their role as trusted anchor institutions with strong civic ties to schools, teachers, industry and research partners, SDCs have an important role to play in a number of areas. The UK faces a serious STEM skills shortage. Nearly half of engineering and technology businesses report recruitment difficulties, and these shortages are estimated to cost our economy £1.5 billion a year. The centres can help to harness the skills needed for future growth in key industrial sectors. They are also essential for building public understanding and trust around new technologies, including artificial intelligence. They can help to deliver the Government's TechFirst programme, providing digital skills and AI learning opportunities for 1 million secondary school students and 7.5 million workers, ensuring that innovation is not only technology-led but user-centric. They can even serve as national testbeds for ethical reflection and citizen co-design in research and innovation.

The Centre for Alternative Technology is truly the jewel in the crown of Montgomeryshire. It has always been ahead of its time in pioneering a more sustainable and environmentally friendly world. For over half a century, the CAT has combined cutting-edge research with world-class education to accelerate the transition to a zero-carbon future. Its history is remarkable: it installed the first hydroelectric turbine on site in 1974, followed by the first wind turbine and the UK's first completely solar-heated building in 1975. In 2003, it installed the first community-owned wind turbine in Wales, on the hills above the CAT. From installing the first photovoltaic roof to building eco-cabins and a water-balanced cliff railway, it truly has provided a blueprint for change. In 2023, the centre celebrated 50 years of ecological innovation.

The CAT is a major employer in mid-Wales and currently supports 78 staff, with an extensive reach. It has trained over half of all UK councils in carbon literacy and hosted STEM Learning's POP25—Protecting our Planet Day 2025—broadcasting live to more than 200,000 schoolchildren. These initiatives spark curiosity in young minds, open pathways into STEM subjects and inspire green careers. A visit to the CAT as a child can have a lifelong impact.

Andrew Ranger (Wrexham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this excellent debate and on his excellent speech. One of the most important and exciting aspects of SDCs, such as the excellent Xplore! Science Discovery Centre in my constituency of Wrexham, which neighbours his constituency, is their ability to reach those from disadvantaged and lower-income backgrounds, and to let them see the possibilities of a career in science and where that can lead. Does he agree that it is time for the Government to recognise these SDCs, so that they can build on that?

Steve Witherden: I have a confession to make: after CAT, Xplore!, in my hon. Friend's constituency, is my second favourite SDC—I have visited it many times. I am in full agreement with him, as the House would expect.

Solefield school has brought pupils to the CAT for 40 years. Its head of science, Kevin Farmery, said:

> "I can teach them all this in the science lab, but here they see it come to life. That makes a real impact."

Dr Dai Morgan, who is now at the University of Cambridge, first visited the CAT as a child. That experience inspired him to study sustainable engineering, and he brings postgraduate students from Cambridge to the centre annually to encourage global action.

Our constituency may lack a university, but we have something better in the CAT. With its unique history, it continues to offer outstanding degree and postgraduate courses in partnership with Liverpool John Moores University and the University of East London. Currently,

700 postgraduate students are enrolled in programmes covering renewable energy, sustainable food and land use, sustainable architecture, green building, ecology and behaviour change.

The CAT's influence extends beyond education. Its legacy includes the growth of over 50 sustainable businesses and organisations via its postgraduate students, inspired volunteers or research experiments that take place directly on site. Such organisations include Dulas, Aber Instruments, Adaptavate and IndiNature. Dulas, established at the CAT in 1982, invented a solar fridge that preserves vaccines and saves lives worldwide. IndiNature, founded by the CAT graduate Scott Simpson, was named manufacturer of the year by the UK Green Business Awards in 2025. The CAT is not just a centre; it is a catalyst for change locally, nationally and globally.

However, like many SDCs across the UK, the CAT is facing significant challenges. Unlike museums, art galleries, theatres and libraries, which can access Government and national lottery funding for their infrastructure needs, SDCs have historically been excluded from public funding. Like other publicly accessible cultural spaces, SDCs' costs have risen significantly in recent years due to factors such as the cost of living crisis and energy prices. Unfortunately, these centres' ability to grow revenues from their core audience to offset the increased costs is limited. They need to keep entry prices low and offer subsidised or free access to deliver their charitable mission and maintain access for underserved groups and communities.

As we have heard, most SDCs were built 25 years ago or more. Their buildings are reaching the end of their design life and need urgent repairs. Roofs are leaking, heating and cooling systems are outdated, and glazing no longer meets modern standards. At the same time, rising sustainability and health and safety requirements mean that repairs are far more expensive. These challenges are compounded by the fact that no central Government Department takes responsibility for the sector. Recent parliamentary questions have confirmed that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education do not see SDCs as falling within their remits, leaving these centres at a loss.

The Association for Science and Discovery Centres has identified urgent infrastructure projects across its member organisations. Nearly £20 million is required to deliver these works, many of which must be completed within the next 12 to 18 months. Importantly, these projects would be match funded by the centres themselves, demonstrating both commitment and value for money. A December 2025 report made it clear that without that investment, many centres will be forced to close or to operate more commercially, scaling back STEM learning, outreach, and free or subsidised access for marginalised and minority groups. That would be a real loss, not only to communities but to the UK's future skills pipeline.

The CAT faces similar pressures. Although it continues to welcome school groups, such as those from Solefield, it had to close its visitor centre to day visitors, and future Dai Morgans currently are not able to visit with their families. The visitor centre has seen no significant capital investment for over 25 years and is in desperate need of redevelopment. Unlike universities and many charities in Wales, the CAT receives no statutory core revenue funding.

An urgent example of the work that needs to be done is the "leaky roof" project. As anyone who has visited the area knows, it rains a lot in mid-Wales. The CAT requires £500,000 to keep open the Wales Institute for Sustainable Education building—an education centre that has grown graduate courses and the innovation lab, supporting councils, communities and other organisations to take action on the climate and nature emergencies. If it is forced to close, the CAT's entire operating model would be undermined, threatening its unique hands-on climate and sustainability education programmes.

The project is not about patching roofs simply to keep buildings open; it is about preserving the science, engagement and learning that happens beneath those roofs. SDCs are powerful but undervalued. They are beacons of sustainability, education and innovation. With recognition and investment, they can flourish, supporting national climate goals, inspiring future scientists and engineers, and ensuring that science remains accessible to all.

Given that SDCs are uniquely positioned to help unlock the full potential of UK science and technology, in order to drive growth, create jobs and ensure that all citizens live healthy, secure and sustainable lives, thereby delivering on DSIT's science and technology framework, does the Minister accept that, although the work of the centres touches on the agendas of DSIT, DCMS and the DFE, DSIT should become the lead Department responsible for this area? That is not to suggest that all funding should come from DSIT, or that cross-departmental responsibilities should be relinquished; rather, it is to suggest that his Department should take the lead in developing shared solutions.

Dame Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for the passionate points that he is making. I want to support him by pointing out that the answer to a parliamentary question of mine in October stated that the Minister for Science, Lord Vallance, was following up

"with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to explore a coordinated approach to supporting these centres."

Just before Christmas, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology wrote to me to say that

"officials from across departments with an interest in SDCs are meeting to discuss options for sustainable support."

Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time we had an answer to the question of where sustainable support—which, as he said, DSIT should lead—would come from?

Steve Witherden: Yes, I do. I do not think that DCMS and DFE should be completely absent from the equation, but I agree that DSIT should lead.

What meaningful action does the Minister intend to take to address the funding and infrastructure challenges currently faced by science centres? Will he respond to the request from the Association for Science and Discovery Centres, supported by more than 3,100 leading scientists, academics, business leaders and educators in an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Department late last year, for £19.5 million of public funding, match funded by £19.5 million from the centres themselves, which is essential to address immediate infrastructure risks?

Does the Minister also agree that it is essential to formally recognise science centres as part of the UK's scientific and cultural ecosystem, whether by expanding

[Steve Witherden]

eligibility for existing funding streams or by creating a dedicated science engagement fund? Does he agree that it is unfair for SDCs to be excluded from public infrastructure funds that are available to comparable organisations, including museums and libraries?

I urge the Minister to meet the Association for Science and Discovery Centres and its members, and work with them and MPs representing science centres to find a solution to these issues. Will he collaborate with colleagues in DCMS, the DFE, English mayoral combined authorities and the devolved Governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to ensure that SDCs and their work are adequately recognised and supported? Solutions must work across all four nations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise for not being here at the very beginning of the debate; as I explained to you, Mrs Harris, I was running late because I had a meeting with a Minister beforehand.

The hon. Gentleman is right to underline these issues, which affect not just England, but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—all of us. At the W5 in east Belfast, science is to the fore. It has exhibits on science, technology, maths and innovation, but they are always educational, and schools by their thousands attend it. But it is not just that: we have the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium, the Ulster Folk Museum, the Ulster Museum and Exploris in my constituency. I support the hon. Gentleman's request for a meeting, but will he ask for those in Northern Ireland to be part of that process? Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and I could also be invited.

Steve Witherden: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made that intervention. I am an MP from a devolved nation, too. There are few of us here, and it is fundamentally important that we recognise that this is a four-nation issue. It is complicated by the fact that education is devolved, which is the main reason that I think science centres should sit with DSIT so that all four home nations can be encompassed more easily.

Finally, I request a meeting with the Minister on additional support for Welsh science centres. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given our size, Wales has only a handful of science centres: the CAT in my constituency, Xplore! in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) and Techniquest in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I am eager to ascertain how we as Welsh MPs can best support our science centres, not only to ensure their continued survival but to create a climate in which they grow, flourish and thrive. I would therefore greatly appreciate a meeting with the Minister to address that issue.

I thank the Association for Science and Discovery Centres, Eileen and all those who work tirelessly at the CAT, and every dedicated individual across the 28 SDCs nationwide. Their contributions inspire curiosity, advance STEM engagement and create truly invaluable climate solutions. SDCs are not optional extras, but vital national assets. The UK-wide network of 28 centres is a cornerstone of our broader science and research ecosystem. That is a key legacy of the last Labour Government. With proper recognition, urgent investment in infrastructure and long-term capital renewal funds, the CAT and the other outstanding centres across the UK can continue to ignite curiosity, expand green skills and unlock the full potential of UK science and technology for a healthy, secure and sustainable future. I am confident that today's debate will demonstrate the strength of cross-party support for this cause.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I will start the Front-Bench contributions at 3.28 pm, and I will impose an unofficial five-minute limit to start.

2.54 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) on securing the debate. His absolutely fantastic speech got everyone really enthusiastic, riled up and excited about supporting science.

One reason I am here is that the Winchester Science Centre is not just the biggest indoor attraction in Hampshire, but the UK's largest stand-alone planetarium, and it has 185,000 visitors a year. I am so pleased to have it in my constituency, because science has given me the most wonderful career. I look back on the amazing things I have done because I studied science at school and took science A-levels. I have worked in Africa studying how to improve cattle production by making them more resistant to a protozoan parasite spread by the tsetse fly called trypanosomiasis, trying to create more cattle genetically resistant to that disease. I have worked in Iraq, India, all over the UK and New Zealand, simply because I studied science at school. It is the most exciting, enabling subject to study.

Growing up on a farm, loving animals and loving science at school, I naturally went down the veterinary route, but my first love in science was astronomy. On the farm in Devon where I grew up there was little light pollution and the stars were incredible. I could name every constellation from the age of eight. The reason I am so moved to speak about this subject today is that the single most exciting trip we made when I was at primary school was to a planetarium. That fired up my love of science, and then watching "Star Trek" and nature documentaries while growing up on a farm shaped my world view and career trajectory.

When I was a teenager, I had a favourite magazine. *[Laughter.]* I should probably clarify that it was *New Scientist*. To be asked a few years ago to write a few articles from a veterinary perspective for *New Scientist* was an ambition fulfilled. When I look back on those visits to science centres and planetariums, I wonder how many people got into science because of stars and dinosaurs. It sounds like a cliché, but they bring science to life for everyone, especially children. They help them realise what an exciting subject science can be, opening their eyes not only to studying science for a career, but to better understanding our place in the world and the importance of conservation.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is right to recall his youth and how his love of the countryside energised him to seek the job and life he wanted. Marine biology and local sea life can do something similar. In my earlier

intervention on the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), I mentioned the Exploris Aquarium in Portaferry in my constituency. Thousands of children and adults attend every year to learn about marine biology. Young people are stimulated by the project to rescue seals and invigorate them prior to return to Strangford lough, as part of the ecosystem. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is the sort of programme our children should be chasing every day?

Dr Chambers: I completely agree with the hon. Member. We are not here to support science centres just for themselves, just for the tourist industry or just for the economy. Some of the biggest challenges facing civilisation at the moment—global challenges such as climate change, antimicrobial resistance, risk of pandemics, biodiversity collapse, and even how to feed and provide energy sustainably for 8 billion people—are also science challenges. We need to inspire the next generation of children to recognise those as urgent problems that need to be solved. They are not hypothetical challenges; they are current challenges.

Science centres are vital to inspire children to create the next generation of scientists who will help solve all those problems. We are in an era of rampant misinformation, with geopolitical turbulence and global health challenges. Places such as the Winchester Science Centre inspire collaboration, learning and the sharing of information. In a world of falling vaccine uptake, climate change denial and precarious geopolitical frameworks, it is the scientists who will do the heavy lifting to keep us all safe, and yet they are probably the most overlooked.

Museums have the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to back and champion them; science centres do not have a Government Department specifically to do that. I urge the Minister to consider getting a Department such as DSIT to really champion them.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. If Members continue to exceed five minutes, I will have to impose a formal time limit.

3 pm

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) on securing the debate and on making such a brilliant case for science and discovery centres. I am not sure many of us could add much more to the core case he made, other than to talk about our own areas.

I am very pleased to speak about this issue today and its importance to our communities and, more widely, to the UK's proud history as a world-leading pioneer in science and technology, which we should not forget. My hometown of Widnes is somewhat different from Devon; it was a very industrialised area in the '60s and '70s, when I was growing up, and it was dominated by the chemical industry.

It was once a rural village on the northern banks of the River Mersey, and in 1801 it had a population of just 1,063, most of whom were engaged in farming and fishing. By the end of the 19th century, it had become a town of more than 28,000 people. The cause of that remarkable transformation was the creation of the chemical works on the banks of the Mersey. Progress was made possible thanks to the superb infrastructure, with the likes of the Sankey navigation canal, railway links from the river to St Helens and a dock created at the southern end of the town.

Immigration from Ireland and eastern Europe brought workers, while industrial entrepreneurs such as John Hutchinson, Sir John Brunner, Henry Deacon and Holbrook Gaskell helped to turn Widnes into the heart of the modern chemical industry. There were not many people without a family member who worked in the chemical industry when I was growing up, not least in Imperial Chemical Industries, which also dominated the town.

The legacy is reflected in the prosperity of many local businesses. That chemical industry is now gone, but we still have many really good prosperous, local businesses—a fact reflected recently when the Prime Minister came to Hutchinson Engineering in my constituency to launch GB Energy, heralding a new chapter in our national industrial history. That rich, local legacy leads me on to today's debate.

John Hutchinson's original administrative building is now the grade II listed Catalyst Science Discovery Centre. It is situated on the River Mersey, with amazing views, including of three huge bridges—the Railway bridge, the Silver Jubilee road bridge and the huge new billion-pound Mersey Gateway bridge, and looking across to Runcorn. That brilliant institution is a hub for research, development and learning. Generations of people from our region have benefited from the pioneering work done at the centre and its outstanding STEM education. It is a point of pride that my constituency serves as its home.

The centre plays a very important role generally in bringing science, technology and engineering to young people, including in disadvantaged areas such as mine in Widnes and Halewood. We cannot overestimate the importance of these science and discovery centres in doing that and enthusing young people to want to get involved. I am very grateful that Catalyst continues to raise awareness and belief among the local population, making them aware that science is relevant to them, their lives and their future careers.

Other Members today, as we have heard already, will have similar appreciation for the science and discovery centres in their own communities. We therefore share the same concerns that the hubs are now at real risk. Financial pressures threaten not just individual centres, but a network of technological heritage, research and development that has made an important contribution to our national development.

The Government are well aware of a petition signed by more than 3,000 scientists and leading figures urging us to work with the sector to find an urgent solution. As we have already heard, increased financial costs are having a major impact, so I ask the Minister to consider carefully every feasible option to support these centres. The Government are right to take such an ambitious approach to their green energy plan, but without the skills pipeline and a framework to help young people—our future scientists and engineers—to engage with that future, our targets will be far more difficult to meet.

[Derek Twigg]

The Catalyst centre receives no public funding of any kind and operates as an independent charity. Its trustees tell me that they spend a huge amount of time fundraising because of the rising operational and salary costs and the ageing capital and building, as we have heard from previous speakers. The catalyst building, I must add, is stunning. It dates back to the beginnings of the chemical industry and overlooks the Mersey but, again, it is an old building that needs a lot of maintenance and support.

Centres including Catalyst do truly remarkable work every day to preserve our heritage and work towards a better, greener future. I pay tribute to all those who contribute to this vital sector, and I hope we can demonstrate that we recognise their support and invaluable work. There are a lot of people who work very hard at Catalyst, but I want to point to a couple of people: Dr Diana Leitch MBE, who is a trustee director of Catalyst, and Chris Lewis, who has been involved in Friends of Catalyst for as long as I can remember. They keep these centres going. I do not believe that anyone who has ever visited the Catalyst has gone away disappointed; I urge the Minister to come and visit the as soon as he possibly can.

3.5 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for keeping us all in line today, Mrs Harris—although I think this is a fairly good-tempered debate, because we are all in favour of our local science centres. I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) on introducing the debate. It was really cool to hear about the CAT; it is one of those science centres that has been around a bit longer than the others, but it sounds as though it is doing absolutely amazing work.

That is one of the things I wanted to touch on: although this is a network of science centres, they are all different. They all work for the benefit of their local communities, looking at the innovation, technology and science that makes the most sense for those, rather than the Government's priorities, because that is how it should be. They should be capturing the imagination of the people in the local area, and they can do that only if it is relevant and if they are able to keep moving with the times and catching that imagination.

In Aberdeen we have the Aberdeen Science Centre, which was in my constituency until the boundaries changed. It was refurbished in 2020 and is in a stunning building—it was an old tram shed, so it looks really cool—but it was first opened in 1990 on a different site, and next month it will be 36 years old. I think I first visited the Aberdeen Science Centre, which was originally called Satrosphere, before I even went to school. It has always been part of the fabric of our city. Everybody goes there as a schoolchild; it is a place that everybody goes along to and visits, and that everybody knows about.

When the centre moved to the new premises, it suggested getting rid of one of the exhibits, which is a sheep: visitors press the button and the sheep eats the food, and it goes around the sheep and then something comes out the other end. There was uproar from the parents of the children who currently go to the centre, saying, "How dare you get rid this exhibit that we loved when we were children?" The comment that the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr made—that a visit as a child can have a lifelong impact—absolutely resonates. Everyone who has had those science centres in their life for as long as I have will remember those visits when they were a child.

I sometimes find it difficult in debates when we talk about the economic impact of these things or the innovation they drive. We could also just talk about the fact that they are joyful places to be. We do not have to justify an art gallery on the basis of its economic impact; we can justify these science centres on the fact that they create curiosity and joy in children—and adults. I love going to science centre; it is very difficult to get me out of Aberdeen. I come to London for work, but I do not like leaving my city; it is the best place on earth. However, I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee Central (Chris Law) that the Dundee Science Centre is one of the few places that I would trail to with my children when they were little, because it is absolutely excellent. It had diggers that they could play with, and my little boy, who was tractor-obsessed, completely loved going to visit.

As the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) was saying, in this time when people are willingly denying facts and we are fed up of experts, having that hands-on experience of science and actually talking about how the earth moves and the way that climate change is changing our society and creating extreme weather events, or about the industries in the local areas and the science that fuels them, gets the next generation of people excited about those things. It gets them thinking about how those things work in a way that the school classroom cannot always manage. Sometimes it does—sometimes we are lucky enough to have an inspiring teacher who can make us think and consider the future; there are many of them out there—but going and getting hands-on in a science centre is something really special.

Lastly, on the differences that there are, our science centre in Aberdeen has, in recent times, covered climate change and has had a link with NASA when it had a spacecraft made in the science centre. It is currently running a Demystifying AI programme and there are some ridiculous photos of me in the science centre trying out virtual reality, because I always get super excited by it. Given the importance of these centres to us and all our constituents, the changes they make in people's lives and their lifelong impact, it is reasonable for us to ask two things: please look at funding, and please choose a Government Department. It does not cost the Government anything to do that. Just choose one—and champion these centres.

3.10 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) on securing this important debate. Seeing the passion and excitement among the speakers, I have found my people—let us go with that.

It is also wonderful to meet another trypanosomiasis person, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers). I also studied that in Dundee, so I thought, "Amazing—where have you been?"—and there is our love for Dundee and the amazing science centre there. My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr made many incredible points in this debate, so I will skip to the fun bits.

I am a research scientist and a science teacher. My real love of science was fostered when we were able to visit places in London, because we lived nearby. Learning about Alexander Fleming—about antibiotics and the impact they have had on our world, which we now take for granted—was amazing. The challenges we have coming forward in the next few years, if not longer, are those big questions that the hon. Member for Winchester spoke about: how we feed 8 billion people, and how we power the nation. We have the talent in this country, and that is what these science centres really represent.

Obviously, 25 years ago there was a slew of new centres off the back of Aberdeen and other places, and they have been inspiring youngsters and adults throughout that time. I made one quick visit to the Dundee Science Centre last summer, where they have a water drop machine. Someone can watch the water drop and then, as it makes impact, have a photo taken of them going, "Oh!" It is quite cool. It also has volcanoes, and the brainwave machine, which is also quite cool, where someone has to calm their brain so the ball moves along. I nearly had it—then I saw I was winning, and the ball came back to me.

That centre is so much fun and bring so much curiosity and excitement. I think the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) made the point that we sometimes get bogged down in the economic and inspiration arguments, and they are incredibly valid, but fun and memories are also incredibly important.

My asks are that SDCs have a home and a Department that champions them. From meeting with and speaking to representatives from science and discovery centres, there is currently a revolving door, and they need a home. I raised this with the Secretary of State fairly recently, and she is looking at it. I hope the Minister can provide an update today on where that home might be. More than 3,000 scientists, academics, business leaders and educators have signed an open letter on this issue. It is something that is desperately needed.

We live in a world challenged by misinformation and disinformation about what is fact, what is not fact, and how we consider evidence: these are places where we can prod that evidence and gather understanding. I will conclude by saying that I hope the Minister has heard all these things loud and clear, and will have many stories of his own to draw on, and thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr again for securing this debate.

3.14 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. It is a shame that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) has departed, because I remember spending much of my time as a child in the Centre for Life, and to hear it was 25 years since it opened has made me realise that I have aged quite a bit in the meantime.

I want to speak primarily about the Kielder Observatory, and I am delighted to see so many scientists observing our proceedings; but first I want to take a brief moment, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) did, to reflect on the worrying attacks on scientists, on the truth and on the concept of science itself that are taking place not just in this country but globally. I take note that no Reform MPs have come to discuss the importance of the sciences to our national life; I think that tells its own story quite powerfully.

Kielder's dark skies observatory is a world-leading facility. It marks the rural west of Northumberland as a real gem, not just for the amazing landscapes it offers and the fantastic contribution it makes to our national life through our hospitality and our tourism, but also for our ability to understand space and the stars and to see them. There is a moment of tranquility that you get when you go into Kielder forest and into the communities around it, and you see how special it is to be able to look up and see the darkness and the stars within it.

I will not repeat the points that my more eloquent, better qualified colleagues have made about the importance of investment in the sciences, but I know the Minister is an incredibly capable and dynamic individual, and I hope that he will cut through the siloing that Whitehall sometimes brings and take responsibility for SDCs and ensure that Kielder receives some of the attention that it needs in order to continue its function. It provides an incredible function in opening up space to schoolchildren. It has reached about 10,000 pupils and engaged about 50 schools, while also getting 15,000 visitors. Those who have come to rural Northumberland know that it is not the easiest place to get around, often involving long drives. People who visit my constituency often get to the Tyne valley and then realise there is another significant drive up the smaller roads from the A69 to get to Kielder forest.

I want to touch on the work that Kielder does with the tourism sector, which is a major employer in my constituency. It is not simply promoting the sciences; it is also promoting local establishments like the Twice Brewed inn and the Battlesteads hotel. If I can depart from the subject of the debate slightly, the tourism industry in Otterburn is also well supported by visitors to Kielder; I would like to thank the staff at Le Petit Château there for hosting my wedding reception on new year's eve, which remains one of the greatest days of my life.

I also want to speak about the importance of the wider science sector in the north-east. I am privileged to represent many scientists studying and working at both Newcastle and Northumbria universities, making incredible contributions not just to academia but to industry. When I meet them, a lot of it goes well above my head. I emphasise that I got a 2:1 in history, and therefore I can read the history of the subject without necessarily understanding the particulars of it.

In my remaining time, I would like to echo a plea not only for those silos to be cut through, but for the infrastructure around the SDCs to be considered. I often joust with my local Conservative council, as Members would expect, but unfortunately, rural west Northumberland does not have world-leading infrastructure—it deserves it, but it does not have it. I would like the Minister to go away and make the case that access to these centres is incredibly important, and although it is not his Department's responsibility, it is essential that the roads leading to these centres are properly repaired and that opportunities to access them are properly promoted. He is more than welcome to visit Kielder with me at any point, to sample some of the local hospitality that I praised and see the dark skies for himself.

3.19 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) for securing this very important and enlightening debate. Science and discovery centres have a crucial part to play in nurturing and developing curiosity and scientific endeavour for thousands of young people across the country, including in my Bracknell constituency.

The Look Out discovery centre in my constituency played a defining role in my childhood, and fostered in me a lifelong love of science, and I know that many constituents will have similarly fond memories of visiting the Look Out as children. I have been delighted to return there not only last year as Bracknell's MP, but with my nieces, to introduce the next generation of Swallows to everything that this remarkable place has to offer. The Look Out offers more than 90 interactive exhibits: visitors are invited to touch, pull, push, launch flying machines, play with circuits and explore their senses. That is all designed to spark curiosity in children aged three to 12, as well as in the adults who accompany them.

This Government have been clear that they want the UK to take a leading role in the development of new technologies, and that that will accelerate development not only across our economy, but in our health system, our universities and our national security. I welcome that ambition, but it will not be possible to achieve those aspirations without a strong foundation on which to build. Whether it is AI, semiconductors, lifesaving research or cutting-edge innovations, bringing up a young generation with a love of learning and a passion for the pursuit of the new—in our ever more complex world—is a fundamental prerequisite for the pioneering role that this Government want the UK to take.

This year, I have heard about how the outdoor learning programmes and discovery shows at the Look Out have taken young people who did not believe that STEM could be for them, and transformed their attitude and perceptions to such an extent that the same young people are inspired to enter STEM-based careers. Discovery centres provide a vital space for exploration outside the pressures of school. At the Look Out, young people are given the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills in a relaxed and fun extracurricular environment—as a former teacher, I say that learning should be fun, and it should be fun to learn.

For those who alight on a newly discovered passion, the Look Out also takes on work experience students to support and provide a step up in their STEM-related career ambitions. Colleagues may know that the opportunity to engage and measure skills-based learning both in and outside of schools is a particular passion of mine, and I am pleased that a renewed recognition of the importance of skills-based learning is driving much of this Government's approach to education. It is critical that we recognise that centres such as the Look Out have a fundamental role to play in inspiring and developing the workforce of the future and equipping them with the skills that matter.

The Look Out is also an important place for our community to meet. It hosts live family-friendly science discovery shows such as the "Superhero Science show", birthday parties, school group visits, home educator days and toddler days, as well as offering inclusive facilities such as wheelchair-accessible play. It is also a place for many members of the community, including those with toddlers and those supporting adults with special educational needs and disabilities, to meet. Overall, science centres across the country welcome more than 5.2 million people every year. This Government are firm in their belief that educational opportunity must be accessible to everyone, whatever their needs or background, and science and discovery centres play a huge part in delivering that commitment in communities.

The Look Out is special not only for what the centre itself offers, but for its location—situated, as it is, in the heart of Swinley forest. I know that many families use the Look Out as a launch pad to explore nature. The land is actually owned by the Crown Estate, which I thank for its ongoing support for the centre.

The misinformation and disinformation that are spread, particularly online, about lifesaving innovations such as vaccinations do nothing for our unity and prosperity as a nation; they serve only to erode trust in expertise, science and, ultimately, democracy itself. That is why it is so important that we support science and discovery centres, which have a role in building public trust, understanding and dialogue about new technologies. That has to come alongside making sure that we have the right support for capital funding. As other Members have mentioned, discovery centres do struggle to access some of those grants.

I am committed to working with Bracknell Forest council and other partners to ensure the long-term future of the Look Out, so that not only this generation of Bracknell Forest children can access it, but many generations to come can continue to visit and enjoy the centre. I know that you are keen for me to wrap up, Mrs Harris, so I will just finish by saying a huge thank you to everyone who works at the Look Out for all that they do to make science accessible and exciting for young people in Bracknell Forest and across the country.

3.25 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) on securing the debate and on his excellent opening speech. Indeed, his speech and all the speeches we have heard today have been really enthusiastic, and that is the whole point of these science centres: to generate enthusiasm. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) about how his enthusiasm for astronomy ended up with his becoming a vet, so we do not know precisely where that young person will end up, but giving them that enthusiasm gets them exploring and thinking about STEM and maybe, ultimately, what career they might do. The Liberal Democrats believe that curiosity and engagement in STEM subjects should be encouraged from a very early age.

We all know that science, technology and engineering will forge the future of this country, by generating advanced technologies, rethinking national infrastructure and making strides in new medical treatments, yet we face a serious shortage in STEM skills. Science and discovery centres play a central role in engaging millions of young people around the country every year, and lighting that spark of enthusiasm could hopefully form

the foundation of their future careers. I agree that the Centre for Alternative Technology is a fantastic place, and it gives many examples of how we can all live more sustainably through things we can easily do in our own homes.

As we heard earlier, it is very good that this debate has found a Minister to respond, because, like many people, I was shocked that there does not appear to be a Department wanting responsibility for these wonderful places. I suggest that DSIT grabs it with both hands, before somebody else does.

I am proud to host, within my constituency of Ely and East Cambridgeshire, Cambridge Regional College, Cambridge science park and the Cambridge science centre. Like the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr, I do not have a university in my constituency, but I have three around it; the science park hosts many of their spin-outs, and the science centre is what is encouraging young people to study STEM subjects, either into apprenticeships or through to university.

Cambridge science centre will soon begin its "building a better future" programme, which will engage young people in STEM by considering real-world problems that our communities face into the future—things such as house building, energy, transport and green technologies. They are all critical to the lives of young people, and it is exciting to consider the potential of science centres in building local skills to tackle issues within our area. However, Cambridge science centre told me that it has serious concerns over, in its words,

"the growing chasm existing between innovation in STEM sectors and younger people".

It wants to play a key role in making sure that our young people know what is going on in STEM, with all the new developments—and there are some exciting, cutting-edge ones in my constituency—but it needs money and support to do that.

Science and discovery centres are clearly a national asset, with an important role to play in growing our STEM skills base, investing in national renewal and rebuilding our reputation as a leader in science and innovation. As we have heard, they are also important local assets, connected to the local industries and skills needs of the area, and able to mobilise the enthusiasm of local young people for STEM towards tackling the problems facing their communities into the future. I hope that the Minister can give us an update on which Department will be responsible for the science centres, and for developing a coherent strategy with funding. Will the Minister agree to fully engage with science centres across the country on a plan to ensure that the education and engagement of young people keeps up with the pace of change in science, technology and engineering?

3.30 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) on securing this debate and bringing parliamentary attention back to a subject that has not been properly considered for some years: the role of science and discovery centres within our tech and science ecosystem, the pressures they face, and the contribution they continue to make.

I enjoyed hearing about the hon. Member's connection to the Centre for Alternative Technology, which clearly has such personal resonance given his father's link, as a founding member in the 1970s. I knew the hon. Member was a teacher, but I did not realise he was a drama teacher, which perhaps explains why he is so fantastic at carrying his voice in this Chamber and speaking with such incredible passion.

I confess that I had not appreciated how extensive the network of SDCs is. The Eden Project, which I visited again last year, is just one of the 28 science and discovery centres spread across every part of the UK, and it is a perfect example of what these institutions do so well. It is a major visitor attraction, it is deeply rooted in its local economy, and it has scientific discovery and public engagement at the heart of its mission. These centres are not arms of the state; they are independent, agile and largely self-sustaining organisations, generating income through admissions, partnerships and commercial activity.

Many SDCs were established around the turn of the millennium. Indeed, my first visit to the Eden Project was back in 2000, on my very first girls' holiday. We did not, as Essex girls, choose Marbella; we chose Cornwall and Devon—very rock and roll. But the Eden Project really embodies the optimism of that moment. It is an old claypit, turned into a very future-focused and futuristic-looking plant wonderland with a scientific mission at its core.

While there were early Millennium Commission grants and support, that funding rightly came to an end, and these centres have now operated for many years without routine public subsidy. That independence has been a strength, allowing them to innovate and respond quickly to new scientific developments and to retain the trust of the communities they serve. But there was always an understanding that the materials in the buildings designed for the SDCs would require renewal after around 25 years, which is now. Many centres have now reached that point and face major capital projects at exactly the same time in a far more difficult operating environment.

SDCs are a distinctive part of our national infrastructure. They are the only places where cutting-edge science, public engagement and development of essential STEM skills come together under a single roof. Collectively, they reach more than 5 million people every year, and they have engaged with over a third of UK schools in the past two years alone.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) talked with beautiful passion about the role of science in his own life, having been fired up by an early visit to a planetarium. It was the same for the hon. Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan). We also heard from the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) about his connection to the Look Out; as he was speaking, I thought back to the time I was hit by a Segway in Bracknell forest, and I started to get PTSD.

As SDCs rely on their own income rather than public subsidy, they have been particularly exposed to recent shocks, such as the pandemic and the energy price surge after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although Government support schemes helped many organisations through that period, SDCs fell between several stools. They were not eligible for cultural recovery funding, and they did not have national lottery support either. They survived

[Julia Lopez]

those challenges, but they did not anticipate facing simultaneous capital renewal pressures alongside the impact of the 2024 Budget.

We have all spoken to hospitality businesses in our constituencies about the sharply rising costs, particularly when it comes to employing people, given the national insurance and business rates issues coming through. Those pressures are now pushing some of these science and discovery centres towards a tipping point. Two of the largest in the UK have announced significant redundancies. One set of accounts explicitly cites the inflationary impact of the Budget and increased national insurance costs, and 75 jobs have already gone at one centre. Some centres have warned that, without intervention, closures within the next 12 to 18 months are a real possibility.

All of this matters because the mission of science and discovery centres is to make science, technology, engineering and maths more accessible, engaging and relevant to people from all backgrounds. They provide trusted spaces where the public can explore new technologies to understand their applications and build confidence in engaging with them—a recent example is a project to demystify AI. The hon. Members for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg) mentioned how these centres play a critical role in the skills pipeline.

Glasgow Science Centre's learning labs programme has worked with thousands of teachers and reached over 100,000 pupils. That shows how these centres complement formal education and help young people to see themselves as future scientists, engineers and innovators. The hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) talked about the importance of SDCs in challenging anti-science narratives. I congratulate him on his recent nuptials—I am sure Le Petit Château had a very lively night over the new year.

Ministers have recognised all these strengths. The Secretary of State herself has spoken in this Chamber about the National Space Centre, which is in her own city of Leicester, and the role it plays in future jobs and prosperity. The constituency of the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who is one of her Ministers, neighbours the amazing Dynamic Earth SDC. I know his constituency is not close to Montgomeryshire, but I am sure he does not want to take on and disappoint the Welsh mafia, if I may say that, in this Chamber by not backing SDCs very fully.

That touches the heart of the problem. These centres need a Department to recognise them, engage with them and champion them, and DSIT is their obvious home. These centres were born of a Government-led vision to create trusted environments for public engagement with science and tech, and they have built strong partnerships with universities, industry and local communities. They are ready to support national missions, but they need the Government to show them that ownership.

I have a number of fairly straightforward questions for the Minister, which are reflective of the very disciplined briefing behind the scenes by the Association for Science and Discovery Centres. I would be grateful if he could let us know whether DSIT will formally accept responsibility for the sector and act as its champion across Government. Will Ministers meet SDC representatives as a matter of urgency? Will the Department consider whether underspends can be directed towards the £20 million that the SDCs believe is essential for capital upgrades, which they are confident they can match-fund through partnerships? Will Ministers engage directly with DCMS colleagues on opening up access to national lottery funding for science and discovery centres? Finally, will the Minister make representations to the Treasury about the wider impact of current tax and business rates policy on SDCs, which runs directly counter to what the Government say they wish to promote when it comes to science and technology?

SDCs are a quiet success story. They are independent, entrepreneurial and deeply embedded in communities. They support public understanding of science, they develop future skills and they are inspirational to future generations. They are not asking to be taken over or paid for, and they know what to do when it comes to continuing their great work long into the future, but they need help with short-term challenges that are not of their own making. They are asking to be recognised, engaged with and enabled to continue doing what they already do well for the benefit of science, society and the economy.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): As a senior member of the Welsh mafia, I am presumably the Godmother.

I now call the Minister, and I remind him to make sure he leaves time at the end for the Member in charge to wind up.

3.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): Thank you, Mrs Harris. I pay my due respects to you as the godmother of the Welsh mafia. It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, but particularly on this occasion. With my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) initiating his first Westminster Hall debate on this deeply important subject, you in the Chair and me responding on behalf of the Government, I am deeply proud that the Welsh enthusiasm for science and technology is right at the heart of the debate.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr for securing this important debate on the impact of science and discovery centres on national science and technology priorities. I am grateful to all Members who contributed to the debate. It has been a total delight to hear about the wonderfully distinct flavours of science and discovery centres across the country, and about the distinct stages of our lives at which they have touched us. As my hon. Friend said, they include the experiences of our parents, of our childhood, of our schooling, of our enlightened first girls' holidays, of our weddings and of our professional work too.

Growing the economy is the Government's No. 1 priority, and science and technology are central to achieving that ambition. That is why the Government have committed to an unprecedented £86 billion investment in UK research and development over the next five years—the largest ever by any Government. That investment is about driving innovation, creating jobs and securing long-term economic growth. It signals our determination to put science and technology at the heart of our national priorities.

Of that investment, £38 billion is allocated to UK Research and Innovation to deliver our core priorities across the research and innovation buckets. That includes £14 billion for advancing curiosity-driven research, £7 billion to support the formation and growth of innovative companies and £8 billion for funding research into the Government's priorities, including the industrial strategy priority areas. For the first time, UKRI will map its investments against priority sectors, with £9 billion of direct support for the industrial strategy across buckets 2 and 3. Those allocations reflect our national science and technology priorities, ensuring the UK leads in critical fields such as artificial intelligence, clean energy, advanced manufacturing and life sciences—areas that are essential to our future prosperity.

I am conscious that investment alone is not enough. To turn this unprecedented commitment into real-world impact, we need a world-class STEM workforce—a pipeline of talented individuals equipped to transform ideas into breakthroughs. That is why the Government believe in the value of a strong STEM workforce and have committed to ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, has the opportunity to pursue a rewarding career in science, technology, engineering and maths.

A strong, skilled STEM workforce is vital to delivering innovation, driving productivity and strengthening our country through our mission-led approach. That means inspiring the next generation, broadening participation and ensuring that science does not just happen behind closed doors but belongs to everyone. That is exactly the motivation behind our £187 million TechFirst programme, which will touch the lives of 1 million young people right across the UK.

The Government acknowledge that that is one of the key areas in which science and discovery centres play a deeply important role. Although some centres conduct research, their primary purpose is to serve as cultural institutions and visitor attractions that embed science within the UK's cultural fabric, making it open, inclusive and aspirational. They maintain strong civic links with schools, teachers, industry, businesses and research partners, and they meet the growing demand for STEM education and learning opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Through their engagement right across the UK, these centres enrich our cultural life, much like museums and galleries do for art and heritage. They deliver outstanding experiences that spark curiosity, foster critical thinking and build problem-solving skills, which are qualities that collectively drive innovation.

The Explore Your Universe: Valuing Inclusion programme has taken hands-on science into schools and communities that rarely have access to those opportunities, building confidence and inspiring future STEM careers. The Life Science Centre in Newcastle and Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh are active delivery partners in this national programme, bringing inclusive, practical physical science engagement to schools and families.

Through Next Gen Earth, centres are connecting young people with climate and environmental science, linking classroom concepts to real-world data and local action. The Centre for Alternative Technology in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr continues to play a leading role in this programme, helping young people to engage with climate science through hands-on workshops and youth-led projects. Mindsets + Missions has supported new ways for science and discovery centres and museums to co-create with local audiences, strengthening trust, inclusion and civic value, alongside scientific literacy. UKRI support, through its research councils, has been pivotal in enabling those programmes, aligning public investment with priority sectors and ensuring that research outcomes reach learners, teachers and under-represented communities nationwide.

The scale of these centres' reach is remarkable. In 2024 alone, they welcomed over 5.2 million visitors, including hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren and families. More than 450,000 people from disadvantaged or under-represented communities were able to access the centres free of charge. Over the past two years, science and discovery centres have worked with 37% of UK schools, supporting the science curriculum and STEM skills in 96% of parliamentary constituencies. Importantly, these centres help us to tackle one of the biggest challenges in science and technology: diversity. Last year, 55% of visitors were female, and targeted outreach programmes are bringing science to communities that have historically been excluded from STEM careers.

Close to my heart, I am particularly excited about the way in which the centres speak to diversity of place as well, ensuring an offer for rural places, such as those highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr and for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg). That is the case right across every part of our Union, as represented so ably by Members' contributions today from across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales—diversity not just in theory, but in practice.

I listened carefully to the concerns expressed by Members about the financial and operational challenges faced by the centres. As highlighted, many have ageing infrastructure, which needs replacement, and many operate as charities without a consistent funding stream. They often rely on low ticket prices to ensure that accessibility is a priority and to deliver on inclusive community engagement. I recognise those pressures, as we do right across Government, and we understand the difficult decisions that many centres face, but with limited income sources and major infrastructure needs, building financial resilience will be a key part of long-term success for the centres. I know that they will reflect on diversifying income and exploring innovative ways to strengthen sustainability as part of the solution.

I am also keen to highlight the available funding streams that UKRI will continue to provide, some of which may be of relevance and support to the centres. I am conscious of the focus on investment that delivers the greatest impact across the centres—working with centres to develop sustainable models and innovative partnerships will deliver on resilience and value for money.

Dr Sullivan: To clarify on UKRI, will the Government therefore allow it to distribute funds to the science centres? Will the Minister clarify the point that he made?

Kanishka Narayan: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her experience of science societies that she described so vividly. Historically, as I mentioned, UKRI has funded specific programmes. I am conscious that where there is available programme funding for eligible centres, they ought to ensure that they apply for it.

[Kanishka Narayan]

I am keen to make sure that UKRI is working keenly and engaging with the centres, flagging up such funds as relevant.

Looking ahead, we remain committed to strengthening the STEM pipeline in collaboration with science and discovery centres, UKRI and industry, so that together we can inspire the next generation and secure the UK's future as a science and technology leader. We will continue to champion programmes that broaden participation and that embed science in our culture, while exploring practical ways to support the infrastructure that enables the centres to thrive, always guided by the principle of long-term sustainability.

I am particularly conscious of the questions asked by Members from across the House. In response to the question about departmental engagement, I am keen—I have turned up here—that DSIT engages closely, but I am also conscious that the cultural contribution of discovery centres is a fundamental part of what motivates them and those who visit them. I am therefore keen to commit to close cross-Government working right across DCMS, DSIT and any other Departments.

I am keen not just to meet the low bar of having turned up to the debate as a Minister, but to take up the requests of hon. Members across the House to ensure that today is the start of the conversation, not the end of it. I am therefore delighted to commit to a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr and with the Association for Science and Discovery Centres to progress the conversation in a tangible way as well.

On the question of potential sources of funding, whether underspends or Treasury, I am afraid that I have neither the power, nor—on this occasion—the willingness to commit to particular sources of funding and to write a fiscal event live in this debate, but I have heard loud and clear the concerns expressed about the funding resilience of science and discovery centres.

It would be remiss of me not to pay a personal tribute to the science and discovery centres. As true as the preference for magazines of the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) is, it is also true that growing up faced with the choice between Techniquest in Cardiff Bay, and the cinema and bowling alley neighbouring it, I made a commitment to my parents—and I commit the same to the House—that my preference was always Techniquest.

On that note, I thank all Members who have spoken today. The debate has highlighted not only the extraordinary contribution of science and discovery centres, but the shared responsibility that we all have to ensure that they succeed in a sustainable way, and that the inclusive way in which they engage young people and families right across this country is maintained for as long as possible.

3.49 pm

Steve Witherden: I thank all the speakers in today's debate. There were some lovely speeches. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) speak about his work on tsetse flies in New Zealand, which emphasises the global contribution that our science centres make. I was extremely relieved to hear that his favourite magazine in his youth was the *New Scientist*.

My hon. Friend the Member for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg) spoke at length about the chemical industry. Our two constituencies have a very close link: Glyndŵr, the other half of my constituency, was home to the biggest chemical plant in the world in the 1920s and was the biggest producer of the chemical phenyl. Just as in the last two centuries science and technology were the driver of the industrial revolution and growth and development of this country, I hope that in this century it will be the cleaner science and technology that drives the green industrial revolution.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) spoke passionately about Aberdeen's science centre. I was very glad to hear that it had kept the defecating sheep. That is great news. Learning about the digestive system is incredibly important. Like her, I live in dread of boundary changes because the CAT sits very close to Ceredigion and Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) is another Member who has had a fantastic science career, with a great passion for the pedagogical aspect of science centres. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) was not the only Member to speak about the concerning rise in what we might call anti-science and anti-facts. One of the things that inspired me to get into politics was when the former Member for Surrey Heath famously said he thought people had "had enough of experts"—the antithesis of what I think. If I hurt my back, I want to speak to an expert in back injuries. I will take experts, thank you very much. I was glad to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) still regularly visits and supports his local science centre and never forgot visiting as a child.

Turning to the two Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) and for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), politics can be quite a cynical game, but it is so lovely when there is cross-party consensus on a topic, so I really enjoyed hearing both those speakers. I can reassure the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster that I am most certainly not a member of the Welsh mafia.

I thank the Minister for coming here today. He spoke very reassuringly, and I look forward to meeting him. For too long, the issue of science centres has been treated like a bride left at the altar by the groom. No one is representing it, and no Departments are taking it on, so I hope that DSIT does. I look forward to working with him on that in the near future.

Finally, as well as thanking all the visitors in the Gallery, some of whom have travelled a very long way to come here to be with us today, I also want to thank you, Mrs Harris, for your excellent work in the Chair. As always, it gives me great pleasure that this debate has been a very Wales-centric affair. Diolch.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): In the spirit of sharing and showing how shallow I am, my favourite magazine is *Vogue*.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of Science and Discovery Centres on national science and technology priorities.

3.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK-France Relations

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK relations with France.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I have called this debate because we are at an important and promising moment in the UK-France relationship. It has been a bumpy few years. Brexit and its fallout placed the relationship under real strain. A couple of years ago, we had a Prime Minister unclear on whether the French President was friend or foe. But those days are behind us, and six months on from an extremely successful state visit and UK-France summit, the relationship is back on track. This, therefore, is the right moment for Parliament to recognise that fact and to take stock of how the relationship can serve both countries better. This relationship matters, not just for diplomatic niceties, but because so many of this Government's core objectives depend on it: our security, our borders, our energy system, our economic growth and our standing in the world.

The UK-France relationship is not new; it is one of the longest continuous diplomatic relationships in the world. This year marks 1,000 years since the birth of William the Conqueror, and as a Scot I note with pride that last year was the 730th anniversary of the auld alliance, which Charles de Gaulle called

"the oldest alliance in the world",

and which I was pleased to celebrate at St Giles' cathedral in my constituency, along with the French community in Edinburgh. Seen from that perspective, the difficulties of the past decade are no more than bumps in the road, but they were real bumps, and it matters that we now mark their passing and recognise that the relationship is moving forward with purpose.

Let me begin with defence and security. The UK and France are Europe's two nuclear powers and its two permanent members of the UN Security Council. Together, we account for roughly 40% of Europe's defence spending and around half the continent's military research and technology investment. Six months on from the state visit, Lancaster House 2.0 and the entente industrielle, our defence sectors—both public and private—are more deeply intertwined than ever. Our armed forces, our intelligence services and our defence industries operate not just in parallel but in partnership.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He talks about the relationship between the UK and France, and we have fought many battles against each other. However, we always remember that the last two battles we fought, we fought together, and we took on fascism across the world.

Does he agree that although the historical connection with France has perhaps always been one of friction, a symbiotic relationship has always existed and it must be built on in terms of cross-channel trade and relationships, but also immigration crossings. We have to address that issue, and the French need to resolve it in co-ordination with our national security requirements—the very thing the hon. Gentleman reminded us of in his last few words.

Chris Murray: The hon. Gentleman is right that, strategically, our interests are aligned, even when there are key issues. I will come on to migration in just a second.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech that highlights his love for and expertise in this subject. One of the greatest threats to our shared security is from Russian sub-threshold activity, which could well escalate further later this year. Through the Franco-British Council—my hon. Friend and I both work with it—I have been working with the Royal United Services Institute and the Institut Montaigne on ways that the whole of both our Governments could work more effectively against that threat, including through joint National Security Council meetings—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but this is an intervention, not a short speech.

Chris Murray: I agree entirely with the point my hon. Friend makes. Like him, I have worked a lot with the Franco-British Council, and he is right that Europe's strategic autonomy and ability to act collectively and in coalitions of the willing—an issue I will come to in a second—is important, given the changing geopolitical situation we clearly face.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will be aware that both our nations are currently subject to disinformation online, and we also face the challenges of artificial intelligence, as well as its promise. Does he therefore agree that we need to continue the work from the Bletchley and Paris summits on AI, and to really intensify that work on technology in the future?

Chris Murray: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK and France have substantial military technology sectors, which are critical for not only our security but the rules-based international order that the relationship between the two countries props up. When it comes to new technologies, whether it is AI or military hardware and kit, the rules-based international order needs—the liberals in the world need—the UK and France at the forefront. They need our technology and defence industries to work with our political objectives to achieve that. I think that is the point my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) was about to make.

That takes me to exactly the point I was about to make in my speech. At the UK-France summit last year, the Prime Minister and President Macron reaffirmed in the Northwood declaration the declaration from 1995 about our nuclear posture and our shared nuclear weapons objectives. They said:

"we do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either France or the United Kingdom could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened."

There are not many countries in the world that we could say that so baldly and so clearly about. In other words, we are saying that British security is French security, and French security is British security. Despite all the bumps in the road, that strategic truth endures.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): My constituency was home to the Free French forces during the second world war, and that is representative of the kind of security relationship our countries have had in the past.

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

May I urge the Government, through the hon. Gentleman, and in the spirit of strategic futures, to get back round the table and to ensure that we have a safe and secure SAFE—Security Action for Europe—deal to allow the UK to take part in common European defence?

Chris Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing the history of his constituency on this important issue. SAFE is an issue that the Government and other actors in both France and the UK are working quite deeply on. Obviously, we are not in SAFE now, but we can still hope for the future.

The point about UK-France relations is not just that they are good for British or French security, but that they are good for world security, and nowhere is that clearer than in Ukraine. For example, the Storm Shadow long-range missile developed by MBDA, a joint Franco-British company, has been one of the most effective weapons supplied to Ukraine in terms of repelling Russia's invasion.

However, this is not just about kit; it is also about political leadership. The UK and France have been at the heart of the coalition of the willing, convening 35 countries to support Ukraine's security. That includes last week's incredibly significant announcement that both countries are prepared to contribute ground forces in support of a future peace settlement.

At a time when we are seeing a change in strategic posture in the United States—if I can put it like that—Russian aggression in Europe, the rise of China, and crises in the middle east and South America, it is no small thing that Britain and France stand shoulder to shoulder in defence of the rules-based international order.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): It is right that we recognise, despite the ups and downs in the relationship between our two countries, that the interaction of their histories and cultures has made them what they are today. However, relationships take work, so will the hon. Gentleman—I do not think he will have to declare an interest as a former distinguished diplomat in Paris—join me in paying tribute, as I hope the Minister will, to the fantastic diplomatic team that we have in our Paris embassy, and that the French Government have in their embassy here in London, both of which build and strengthen the relationship between our two countries, often behind the scenes?

Chris Murray: I will first declare an interest: I worked at the UK embassy in Paris—the quality has improved a lot since I left. I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman: the UK staff in France, both in Paris and in the consulates, and the French staff here in the UK, both in the embassy in London and in the consulates—including the consulate in Edinburgh, in my constituency—do fantastic work to smooth the relationship and stop crises erupting, which is so important. Of course, they also support nationals in the two countries, which is important, because tourism and business relationships, as well as political relationships, are what make this relationship so important to the country.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentioned tourism. Does he have any thoughts about the fantastic work that organisations such as Harrogate International Partnerships do in town twinning—a lot of which was set up off the back of world war two—and about how the educational, cultural and tourism exchange that such organisations provide can deepen the France-UK relationship?

Chris Murray: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Speaking as an MP whose constituency is a tourist centre—we welcome people from across the world, and particularly from France—I know that such organisations contribute so much. Many businesses in my constituency are dependent on tourism from France but find it difficult to navigate, so organisations that have helped to mitigate bumps in the road are the backbone of the economy in places such as Edinburgh and Harrogate, and I pay tribute to them.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. On cultural relations, he may not be aware that the Festival Interceltique de Lorient, which celebrates the Celtic identity that is so strongly felt in regions of the UK and in Brittany, will this year focus on Cornish identity. Does he agree that cultural enterprises play a vital role in strengthening the close relationships between the UK and France, alongside other fundamentals, such as youth engagement, particularly through the Erasmus+ scheme?

Chris Murray: I did not know that the Festival Interceltique de Lorient was focusing on Cornwall this year, but I have another interest to declare, because I remember going to that festival as a schoolboy; it is one of the things that inculcated in this Scottish person a love of French and Celtic culture. I absolutely know the importance of what my hon. Friend is talking about, and I thank him for raising it.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. We talk about smoothing the relationship, so will he join me in welcoming the new entente amicale between the UK and France? Will he also join me in recognising how that is strengthened by the 11 French-English bilingual schools in our country, such as the tremendous Fulham Bilingual in my constituency, which is a partnership between the French lycée and the local Holy Cross school? It is a living, breathing symbol of the entente amicale in action, so will my hon. Friend proclaim with me, "Vive l'école bilingue de Fulham!"?

Chris Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had the entente cordiale, the entente industrielle, which I referred to earlier, and the entente amicale. Bilingual schools have a huge role in allowing children not only to understand one another's cultures, but to live both sides of their identity. In the 21st century, that is really important. The French model is something we should be looking at to allow people in wider communities in the UK to be more comfortable in their identities. I will of course cry, "Vive les écoles bilingues de Fulham!"

If there are no further inventions on those issues, let me turn to how other components of the UK-France relationship are critical to the Government's objectives. The UK-France relationship is central not just culturally and to communities, as those interventions have suggested, or to security and geopolitics, as I outlined earlier, but to some of the Government's domestic political priorities, including restoring control to our migration system.

As we all know, illegal immigration is, by definition, a transnational problem, and thus requires a transnational solution and international co-operation. After Brexit, we left instruments such as the Dublin regulation, Schengen information system II, the Prüm treaty and others. That makes bilateral co-operation with the French so important.

When I visited northern France with the Home Affairs Committee last month, I saw the scale and seriousness of the effort underway by French police, soldiers and reservists in order to disrupt the organised crime gangs, work on maritime interceptions, work on the one in, one out pilot, reach out to migrants and change the calculus of their decision making, and create new safer routes for the future. None of those objectives can succeed without work with the French, and none would be sustained without a genuine partnership between our law enforcement agencies, border forces and political leaders.

Every Labour MP knows that we were elected on a promise to clean up the mess left on immigration. The public will not forgive us if we fail. The UK-France relationship is critical to meeting that public expectation, and woe betide us if we do not.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): We have a big, thriving French community in Hampstead and Highgate who have told me they are concerned that the UK is becoming a high-risk destination for French nationals who want to live and work here because of the issues around indefinite leave to remain.

Locally, French parents are particularly concerned about having different settlement timelines to their partners because of childcare responsibilities, as it reduces their salary threshold. Does my hon. Friend think the Government should consider childcare responsibility when they reform the ILR situation for French nationals in our country?

Chris Murray: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. The immigration system needs reform and needs to meet the public's expectations, but that must happen in a way that works for the economy and works for families and individuals, taking cognisance of the fact that these are people's lives. I believe that is possible within the parameters that the Home Secretary has set out, but we will need to see the detail of that policy. Like my hon. Friend, I will be watching closely to see whether it meets the objective she has just set.

Our relationship with France will be critical in managing the public's expectations on immigration, but it goes even further than that because, beyond the domestic political imperative of getting a grip on immigration, both our countries face a bigger challenge—a dysfunctional immigration system fuels anger and distrust, and that fuels the populist right, both in Britain and in France. As two countries facing that challenge, it is important that we work together to tackle it to make sure we deal with the rise of populism.

The French relationship is also critical in some of the Government's economic objectives, not just because France is our fifth biggest trading partner and our third largest services-sector market, or because more than £100 billion of trade is done with France every year or even because London is the fourth biggest French city—and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) must be one of the Frenchiest—but even thinking about just our energy sector illustrates a vignette of our relationship with France.

The transition to clean energy is the defining economic public policy challenge of our age. France is one of the biggest investors in Britain's nuclear sector. EDF Energy is central to the delivery of Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C. French engineering, finance and expertise will be indispensable to achieving this Government's clean energy mission, so the relationship is critical, but it actually goes further than that. It is not just commercial or economic; it is radical.

Britain and France were among the first countries to industrialise. We were also major colonial powers, and our global footprint still shapes the world today with the Francophonie and the Commonwealth. That gives us a shared responsibility to lead on climate change, not only to decarbonise our economies, but to show that a prosperous net-zero society is possible.

I have something else to say about the future of the relationship. There are those of us who will want to look back nostalgically to the days that we sat together in the European Union, and many people lament the Brexit vote. Some of them are outside singing in Parliament Square, but nostalgia is a poor basis for foreign policy. Hankering for a golden past that never really existed is not the way to move forward. I would argue that that was one of the fundamental problems behind Brexit. What matters is not the architecture of the institutions but the reality of the co-operation, so I strongly welcome the Government's progress in resetting relationships with the EU, particularly on dynamic alignment on food and energy; working together on shared objectives such as migration, Ukraine and the geopolitical challenges that we face; and building the relationships between people, which several Members have raised.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I am loath to interrupt such an excellent speech, but does the hon. Member agree that, as Members of Parliament, we all have a role to play in forging those relationships with our contemporaries in the Assemblée Nationale? I also congratulate him, in that vein, on becoming a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group.

Chris Murray: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that relationships between political leaders are critical to developing relationships between nations, and I look forward to the work we will be doing on the APPG in that regard.

I welcome the return of the Erasmus+ and youth experience schemes. I studied in France under Erasmus and it changed my life. It has been heartbreaking that my own young constituents have not had that opportunity, and I am really pleased that the Government are now restoring that. As my hon. Friends mentioned, programmes such as the Franco-British Young Leaders—whose cohort I am part of this year—do vital work in building networks of trust across politics, business and civil society. Later this year, as a result of the state visit, we will have a huge cultural Franco-British moment when the Bayeux tapestry comes to the British Museum—it will probably be its exhibition of the decade.

This relationship is not abstract; it is human, cultural, strategic and economic all at once. It is one of the country's closest relationships—

Mr Bailey: I will try and be sufficiently brief this time. The French have a very tight-knit strategic culture—something that we do not understand—that centres on European autonomy and being able to protect our interests as Europeans. Does my hon. Friend agree that that strategic culture is something we must relearn, post our Suez lessons, and that it should shape our outlook going forward?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that it is now 4.22 pm and the Minister has to speak, so I would be grateful if he could start to wind up.

Chris Murray: Thank you, Mr Dowd. I was on the point of winding up there, do not worry. My hon. Friend made an excellent point; he and I could spend hours discussing the Government architecture distinctions between the UK, France and, I would argue, Scotland—Scotland makes different mistakes in its Government structures in comparison with the French. The key point is that, given there are such similarities in our challenges and objectives, we can learn a lot from each other about the kind of architecture that does and does not work in each situation. The compare and contrast between cultures and structures is how we drive change forward; there are a lot of things that the UK could learn from France and vice versa.

I will sum up by saying that the UK's relationship with France is finally back on track. We are no longer indulging in symbolism but focusing on something fundamental: that, in an unstable world, we are closer together than we are separate, and our future security, prosperity and global influence depends on that.

4.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) for securing the debate. It is a particular pleasure, as always, to hear about different constituencies' histories; my own constituency's history with France involves fighting a moderately successful battle to prevent France's invasion of England—defended by the suspiciously French-named Nicola de la Haye, who was then the constable of Lincoln castle. It was a successful but bloody affair, so I am glad that my hon. Friend and so many others have carried off their commentary about their historical links with our neighbour over the channel with rather more élan than Lincoln can manage. I am grateful for the contributions of hon. Members and will endeavour to respond to the points they have raised. The Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), would have been very glad to be here, but he is conducting a general debate about Ukraine in the main Chamber today.

We have a deep shared history with France, not just in combat but in many other things: values, trade, cultural links and partnerships on the international stage—in NATO, the G7, the United Nations and beyond. Our relationship remains vibrant, ambitious and essential. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh said so graciously, since this Government came to power, we have prioritised resetting and deepening relations with our European partners to deliver tangible benefits for our security, people and economy. France is central to that—even in Lincoln.

As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Europe's leading defence and only nuclear powers, our countries share responsibility for international peace and security. We are at the forefront of efforts to support Ukraine and uphold European security. Our deep defence relationship under the Lancaster House treaties has enabled us to convene the coalition of the willing, sustaining long-term support for Ukraine and preparing conditions for a just and lasting peace.

Last week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister co-chaired a meeting of the coalition of the willing with President Macron in Paris. Alongside President Zelensky, they signed a declaration of intent on deploying forces to Ukraine in the event of a peace deal, paving the way for a legal framework of British, French and partner forces to operate on Ukrainian soil to secure Ukraine's skies and seas, and regenerate its armed forces. The Paris declaration, agreed with the US and others, sets out guarantees to be activated once the ceasefire comes into force.

My colleague the Minister for Europe is in regular contact with his counterpart: they met last month in Vienna, and in London last October ahead of the Berlin process summit. The Foreign Secretary visited her counterpart in Paris last October, and they are in regular touch. Last July's state visit by President Macron marked the renewal of our shared bonds at every level of Government. As part of that visit, at the 37th UK-France summit President Macron and the Prime Minister strengthened our partnership with groundbreaking agreements covering migration, defence, growth and culture.

The Lancaster House 2.0 declaration will accelerate our bilateral defence and security co-operation to new levels and strengthen Europe's contribution to NATO. We agreed to overhaul the combined joint expeditionary force to refocus it on the Euro-Atlantic area and to address evolving security threats. We reaffirmed our commitment to nuclear co-operation through the Northwood declaration, an important declaration that states that our nuclear forces are independent but can be co-ordinated. The new UK-France nuclear steering group met in December to co-ordinate work across nuclear policy, capabilities and operations. At the summit, the Prime Minster and the President also committed to strengthening co-operation on illegal migration, and tackling the criminal gangs responsible for the small boat crossings that have cost so many lives. This has been an important part of the activities of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh in Parliament.

France is also a key part of our growth and energy security. I will not dwell on the important and vital investments that EDF has made in Sizewell C; they were covered effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh—he is also a former colleague in the Foreign Office. He also covered the important cultural and educational co-operation opportunities between our two countries. The exchange of the Bayeux tapestry and the Sutton Hoo treasures is a real celebration of our joint history. Our re-association to Erasmus+ in 2027 will create new opportunities for young people in exactly the way my hon. Friend described.

Across Government, we will continue to strengthen the bonds between our countries and our people in our many areas of shared ambition and co-operation. Through our co-leadership of the coalition of the willing, the UK and France will continue to provide global leadership in an era of renewed instability.

Question put and agreed to.

Horse and Rider Road Safety

4.30 pm

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered horse and rider road safety.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am pleased to have secured this debate and grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue that has, for far too long, not received the attention it deserves. It is a timely debate as well, because just last week the Government published its new road safety strategy, stating that

"every individual deserves to feel safe and supported"

on our roads. Unfortunately, for many horse riders across the country, that aspiration does not reflect their lived reality. While the Government's strategy does reference horse riders in some places, alongside other vulnerable road users, this is not consistent, and there is no specific mention of their safety.

The issue goes far wider than a single document. Building a stronger foundation of road safety education, with clearer rules and guidance, is essential to ensure that all road users understand how to behave safely and responsibly when encountering horses on the road. According to data from the British Horse Society, in 2024 there were more than 3,000 road incidents that involved horses.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I was shocked to read those statistics, but in Devon since 2020, there have been 375 road incidents involving horses, with 19 horses injured and three killed, and 29 riders injured and one killed. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a strong case for asking riders across the country to use body cameras to record evidence of dangerous driving, as many motorists and cyclists do today?

Mr Dillon: I agree that body-worn cameras can help to produce evidence to bring drivers to account when they are causing horses or people to suffer injury or death.

Fifty-eight horses lost their lives in 2024 and a further 97 were injured.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I apologise for intervening so soon, but it is important to emphasise how significant this debate is. It is not a niche issue. During my career as a horse vet, I have stitched up and euthanised more horses that have been hit by cars than I can remember—they get broken legs and their owners are injured. This is a very regular occurrence for vets. Just this morning in Winchester, in Hambledon on the B3041, a horse was hit by a car and had to be euthanised. This is not a niche problem, nor is it an unusual occurrence, so I fully support the action that my hon. Friend has taken in securing this debate.

Mr Dillon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I ask him to pass on my best wishes to his constituent. That shows why the debate is so important, because this is a daily reality on our national highways.

Behind all the figures we talk about, there is a rider, a family and a community affected by trauma and loss. I was contacted by many people from across the country when they heard about this debate. Laura from Essex

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experienced a devastating accident while riding her horse, Angel. The pair were struck by a car travelling at 53 mph. Laura was extremely fortunate to survive, but tragically Angel, who was just three years old, did not. That incident starkly illustrates the life-threatening dangers that riders face when sharing the road with fast-moving vehicles, and the heartbreaking consequences that can follow.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Like the hon. Gentleman, a constituent contacted me ahead of this debate and told me that, although many motorists act responsibly, there is an increasing problem with drivers behaving more aggressively and passing horses at unsafe distances. Given that horses can react unpredictably when they think their lives are at risk, that puts everybody's lives at risk. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that teaching equestrian safety as part of driver training would be an important way of tackling this issue?

Mr Dillon: I absolutely do, and I will come to that later in my speech and also highlight some of the good work happening in police forces across the country on driver awareness, once drivers have been caught going too close to a horse.

Turning to my own constituency, in Lambourn the horseracing industry contributes over £22 million to the local economy each year and supports approximately one in three jobs in the area. It is not just an emotional issue; it is a financial one, too. That concentration of equestrian activity also means there is a higher number of horse-related incidents in my constituency.

Unfortunately, Laura from Essex's story is not an isolated one. Last May, I had the honour of joining the Project EDWARD—Every Day Without A Road Death—equestrian road safety awareness ride out from Lambourn to Windsor. It is held in memory of a racehorse named Knockalla, a two-year-old racehorse that was killed on a road in my constituency. Heavy rainfall caused flooding and standing water and a local driver who was familiar with the road was proceeding slowly down the centre of the carriageway to avoid aquaplaning. But horses are flight animals and as they approached from the opposite direction a splash of water startled Knockalla, causing her to move into the road. In that split second, Knockalla was struck and suffered injuries so severe that she had to be euthanised. Importantly, this case was not about speeding or reckless driving but was rather a tragic accident, and it demonstrates that even when motorists act cautiously, horses and riders remain extremely vulnerable, as horses are flight animals that can react unexpectedly.

Eighty-one per cent of incidents involving horses and vehicles occur because drivers pass too closely or too quickly. That is why I have consistently campaigned for stronger protections for horses and riders.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that clear rules on the speed and distance required when passing walkers, cyclists and horses on the road are needed, and that this should be included in driver theory tests and must be at the heart of driver education? Too many walkers, cyclists and horse riders have been hurt in our constituencies, including mine, and it must come to an end.

Mr Dillon: The hierarchy of vulnerability introduced in 2022 is important in establishing who are the most vulnerable on our roads, but the highway code could go further and say "must" go at 10 mph rather than "should".

Last September, I introduced the Road Traffic (Horse and Rider Safety) Bill. Through that presentation Bill, I called on the Government to strengthen the highway code guidance for passing horses and to improve driver education so that motorists better understand horses' behaviour and the potentially devastating consequences of their actions. Those changes would raise awareness among all road users and provide greater safety and reassurance when horses are ridden or are pulling horse-drawn vehicles or carriages.

As I have mentioned, last week the Government published the road safety strategy. Although I welcome many of its measures, it missed some relatively straightforward opportunities to better protect horses and riders. The strategy announced that the Ministry of Justice

"will consult on a new victims' code."

I welcome that, but it raises an important issue. Under current law, horses are classed as personal property, which means that when one is killed or fatally injured in a road traffic collision, compensation is largely limited to financial loss.

I have recently been contacted by Cathryn from Leeds, a long-standing horse rider and a solicitor who supports people who have suffered serious injuries from horse accidents. She highlights the psychological trauma experienced by injured riders as a recurring theme, which is often compounded by guilt, grief and gratitude that the horse took the main impact and saved the rider from even greater harm. The current legal framework significantly restricts recognition of that emotional distress. I urge the Government to use the consultation on the new victims' code to consider how horse riders and owners who lose horses can be properly recognised in that framework.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): As my hon. Friend knows, I strongly support his proposed legislation; indeed, I am a sponsor of it. Does he agree that, in order to advance new regulations, the Government need to review whether there is sufficient bridleway capacity across the countryside to avoid the necessity of using roads? It is clear that there are insufficient bridleways across much of the countryside, which is why riders end up having to use the roads to traverse.

Mr Dillon: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Councils are responsible for maintaining bridleways, but unfortunately their funding has been cut over numerous years and they do not have the money to do so. That forces more riders to use the roads because other routes are not available. Indeed, I was contacted this morning by a lady who said that they do not have any bridleways where she rides, only pavements, so she always has to be on the carriageway. She asked whether we would consider allowing horses to use public pavements in that instance.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing forward this debate and his Bill. Does he agree that it is not just about bridleways? Forestry England has recently introduced quite substantial fees for carriages, which are used by a

lot of disabled people, to use their paths, and complex paperwork more akin to that for people organising events. Does he agree that we should call on Forestry England to review that for individual carriage drivers?

Mr Dillon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The Forestry Commission looks after our forests. They should be open for us to be able to enjoy, and the Forestry Commission should work with all relevant groups to make open access as easy as possible.

The road safety strategy also announces the establishment of a new road safety board. Given that horses and riders are among the most vulnerable of road users, will the Minister commit to ensuring that an equestrian representative organisation, such as the British Horse Society, is included on that board? I know that horse-related bodies have been on previous safety advisory boards.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I support the hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of equestrian representation in these structures. In my constituency, there is a major equestrian centre at Somerford. We also have many horse riders throughout the area, and there have been multiple accidents. We really need to take action on this issue, and I know that the Minister will be listening carefully.

Mr Dillon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, which shows that this is not a party political issue; rather, it is about the safety of riders. I am sure that the Minister, too, will take the hon. Lady's views onboard.

I welcome the commitment to publish the national guidance on road safety education training and publicity, but I urge the Government to align that work with the measures in my Bill and in particular the need for stronger education in the driving test for new drivers.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Horse riders in my constituency are absolutely spoilt for hacking on Epsom downs, but there are lots of busy roads to navigate. Even at Pegasus crossings, drivers are jumping red lights as horses are approaching, which makes it incredibly dangerous. Many have reported near misses, and there have been instances of loose horses in Epsom as a consequence. Does my hon. Friend agree that better education on Pegasus crossings is vital to reducing the number of near misses and potential deaths of riders and horses?

Mr Dillon: My hon. Friend makes a key contribution with that intervention: it is that holistic approach to all road traffic management systems that people need to be aware of.

It is vital that young drivers understand how to drive safely on our rural roads and how to behave when encountering animals. Alongside that, I urge the Government to consider requiring companies that operate large vehicles, such as buses and delivery lorries, to include specific equine road safety training as part of their initial driver training. In 2019, a horse rider suffered serious injuries, including a fractured pelvis, after being thrown on to a pavement when her horse was spooked by a bus that passed too quickly and too closely. I think that shows why we need that initial driver training.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way; I will have to buy him a pint for making him wait.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is home to many rural communities where horse riding is a much-loved and much-enjoyed way to spend time. My constituent Carol Whitehouse took me out recently on her horse, and Sarah, who runs Horsleys in Audley, lent me her boots because I was wearing trainers. Both spoke of the fear and concern they feel as they ride their horses, particularly as a result of big lorries, so the points that the hon. Member has raised about Berkshire and other places across the country are felt strongly in Staffordshire, too.

Mr Dillon *rose—*

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I just want to bring it to Members' attention that we will get to the Opposition spokespersons and the Minister at 10 past. Lots of people wish to speak and we have had lots of interventions. I am going to be as flexible as I possibly can, but I am not quite sure that we are going to get through all the Members, so bear that in mind when you are bobbing, intervening, and so on.

Mr Dillon: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Dowd. I will move on.

I want to talk about some excellent examples of best practice that are already in place. In Leicestershire and Rutland, the rural policing team, alongside Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service, have been delivering the "Virtual Insanity Experience" through the Hazard Express van. That involves a mounted volunteer riding on a bike, and if drivers pass dangerously, they are invited to experience that situation through VR headsets. The scheme is focused on education, not punishment, and it could be rolled out nationally for people coming across horses so that motorists understand the experience of a horse rider when a vehicle passes too quickly or closely. I urge the Minister to look at the wider adoption of that scheme.

Before Christmas, the Minister raised the Government's desire to re-publicise the 2022 highway code changes. Despite £2.4 million being spent on advertising, a YouGov poll in January 2023 found that 25% of adults were unaware of those changes. Mary from south Derbyshire told me:

> "The Highway Code revisions made in January 2022 have not really enhanced our safety when using the roads."

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Given the lack of knowledge about the changes to the highway code, Somerset council has a road safety initiative that offers training to riders and drivers. Would my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Somerset council on its position and on the training it is providing to make our roads safer?

Mr Dillon: I do add my congratulations to the council. This debate pulls out the local innovations that are taking place, which the Government can hopefully consider rolling out to a national platform.

I am conscious of time and of other hon. Members who wish to contribute, but it is important to thank the BHS, the British Horseracing Authority, Project EDWARD, the Blue Cross, Brake and the hundreds of people from across the country who have written to me in support of

[Mr Dillon]

this debate. I urge the Minister to ensure that horses, riders, carriage drivers and all equestrian users are fully included in the Government's road safety ambitions, not just in principle, but in practice. I hope that the Minister will reflect carefully on the points raised, and commit to taking this work forward.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I was about to remind Members to bob if they wanted to speak, so thank you very much for doing so. Members will have only two minutes, so bear that in mind, especially when taking interventions, otherwise we will not get through everybody.

4.47 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon), who I spoke to beforehand about the issue. He is absolutely on the button with what he has requested.

I am the MP for a rural constituency, and I live on a farm in the midst of the unmatchable and beautiful countryside of Strangford, so the presence of horses on the country roads is not surprising. I see them all the time; my neighbours all have horses, and I know personally to slow down and give the horse a wide berth of 2 metres. There are riding schools and stables in the vicinity as well, so it is not simply the horse signage that tells people to be mindful in their road usage. For people who are not local, however, their knowledge is limited, and that is why it is essential that road users in the country are aware of the potential to come across a number of horses on the country roads.

I support the presentation Bill of the hon. Member for Newbury, and I hope that it can progress further. Some in the city may not be aware of the prevalence of horses on the roads, so their first trip to the country might bring about a whole new world. They might not understand that the need to slow down to pass a horse and give it a wide berth is not only useful—it is vital. Operation Gallop by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, NI Direct and the British Horse Society all promote shared responsibility, because horses are easily spooked. Instead of driving fast by a horse and rider, motorists must slow to 10 mph and pass 2 metres wide of the horse, avoiding noise and sudden movements. Riders should wear hi-vis clothes, use signals and follow road rules, keeping left and to single file if the road is busy. That can be the difference between life and death.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: Yes, but I will not give way again.

Mark Sewards: Very briefly, a young woman from my constituency described the scenario that the hon. Gentleman talks about. She is insured and wears hi-vis clothes, but now faces regular intimidation and abuse, so she has to go out with a camera. Despite that, she still faces those problems. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government's flagship road safety campaign is exactly the right way to go, but that we need to do more in this area to keep riders safe?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that.

I will be very brief. As of late 2025, the British Horse Society said that a significant majority of equestrians—78%—have experienced an incident while using the roads, which is what the hon. Gentleman was referring to. Nationally, 81% of incidents occur because a driver passed a horse too closely or quickly.

Knowledge and an understanding of the consequences can and will address these concerns. I support the drive of the hon. Member for Newbury to put safety first on our countryside roads for our horses and riders throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

4.49 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Much of today's discussion has focused, rightly, on vehicles, but I want to highlight another hazard that affects riders on roads, pavements and paths: uncontrolled dogs. My constituent Katie Smart tragically lost her horse, George, after he was chased on to the road by an out-of-control dog. The dangers that led to this tragedy are present when horses are ridden on roads, on pavements and in many other areas; riders are frequently confronted by dogs off the lead, which can cause horses to bolt, very often into roads, creating a real risk of collision.

I raised those concerns with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and I am grateful to Baroness Hayman for her engagement on the issues. She has since met my constituent to discuss them, and kindly agreed to meet her again to explore what further support can be provided to all riders who face this risk. Baroness Hayman's willingness to consider solutions to help people like Katie is very welcome and constructive. It demonstrates the kind of collaboration that is needed to resolve these issues.

Horse riders should be able to use roads, pavements and shared paths without risk or fear of injury. This is about protecting lives, preventing collisions and keeping our communities safe.

4.51 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Horse and rider safety is a matter of real importance to urban fringe communities like mine, and many of my constituents, both urban and rural dwellers, asked me to attend today. Whether it is the Dartmoor pony on Devon's coat of arms, Wembury bay riding school by Wembury beach, or Erme valley riding school for the disabled in South Hams, horses are central to urban fringe life, the local economy and our heritage in South West Devon.

In Devon, the issue is especially close to home. Dartmoor ponies, which are an iconic part of our landscape, have roamed freely across unfenced moorland since the bronze age, and they frequently cross roads in the national park —dealing with them is something that new drivers have to learn pretty early on. The ponies are a symbol of our heritage, yet they are regularly injured or killed in collisions. Devon and Cornwall police reports that 144 animals, including ponies, cattle and sheep, were killed on Dartmoor's roads in 2024. Local initiatives, such as improved signage and reflective collars, make a

difference and are welcome, but they are not a substitute for wider awareness and driving safely, as we have heard this afternoon.

We also need to look at localised speed limits. For example, in Ivybridge, the B3213 has a 60 mph limit until just after a road that is used by local riding schools. It becomes a 30 mph road at a certain point because of a new housing development, but the council has pushed back on all attempts to reduce the speed limit on the other part of the road that would be used by riders. I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on that. Is there anything we can do to incentivise local councils to think about roads used by riders when they set speed limits and road policies?

I thank all those who have written to me to raise this important issue. I continue to work to support them on it.

4.53 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd.

I want to share with hon. Members and the Minister the case of Susi Rogers-Hartley from Wiggenhall St Mary in my South West Norfolk constituency. Susi is an accomplished lady: she is a horse rider, military veteran and GB Paralympic athlete. She was the first horse rider to represent Great Britain at show jumping at the Paralympics. For Susi, horse riding gives her quality time out of her wheelchair and a sense of freedom that is difficult to replicate.

In 2021, Susi was hit by a car. The driver tried to pass her on a single-track road, and got so close that Susi's leg was trapped between the driver's car and her horse. The driver picked up speed and the horse bolted. Susi fell on to the vehicle and was subsequently dragged for 20 metres along the road, suffering a head injury and a cracked elbow. On another occasion, on Magdalen High Road in my constituency, a driver hit Susi and her horse from behind. Her horse, whom she loved very much, had to be put down because of the injuries it sustained. In Susi's words, the driver

"got an awareness course. I got a dead horse and thousands in vets bills".

Horse riders tell me there is often little to no enforcement in accidents involving horse riders.

Growing up in my constituency, I remember routinely seeing people out and about riding a horse, but as cars have got bigger and faster and as people have become less respectful of our country roads, other users have been pushed out, whether they are walkers, cyclists or horse riders. In addition to safety concerns, the years of austerity and the cuts to local council budgets have seen many bridleways fall into a state of disrepair, meaning there are fewer opportunities for horse riding as many bridleways are simply inaccessible.

I ask the Minister to ringfence support for horse rider safety campaigns, such as the Pass Wide and Slow campaign. I also ask what more can be done to ensure that local councils properly maintain bridleways, which are crucial for horse riding in rural areas.

4.55 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) for securing this important debate in support of the equestrian community. Stratford-on-Avon is a deeply rural constituency with fast-moving country roads and narrow lanes. For many riders, using public roads is not a choice but a necessity, and too often that comes with real and frightening risks. Per mile travelled, rural roads are the most dangerous in the country, accounting for well over half of all road deaths.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency we have Cornish hedges, which are made of stone, and they make it even more dangerous, particularly as a lot of drivers do not realise that they are stone. They make it even more important for drivers to give horses as much room as possible.

Manuela Perteghella: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that issue. I agree with her.

As we have heard, the figures are horrendous: thousands of incidents involving horses result in injury and death. These incidents are widely under-reported, but the harm they cause is very real. Most concerning of all is that more than four in five of these incidents are caused by drivers passing too fast or too close, and that is despite clear highway code guidance introduced in 2022 advising motorists to slow right down and give horses plenty of space. Too many drivers simply do not know about that guidance or do not understand the danger of ignoring it.

There is also the issue of loud engines, such as those in motorbikes, which can startle horses. That is why I strongly support the Liberal Democrats' Road Traffic (Horse and Rider Safety) Bill, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury. Clear rules, proper coverage in the driving theory test and better driver education will save lives. Where possible, horse riders should not have to rely on roads at all. The Liberal Democrats have set out plans to expand safe off-road routes through the countryside, giving riders the freedom to travel safely along bridleways.

Finally, I thank the Warwickshire road safety partnership and Warwickshire horse watch, which work to support the equestrian community and provide advice on safety. Horses are a vital part of rural life in constituencies like mine. Their safety, and the safety of those who ride them, deserves far greater priority than the Government are currently giving it.

4.58 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank all those who have written to me regarding this very important topic, particularly Sandra Downey at Talcarn Farm, who allowed me to have a ride in a horse-drawn carriage on a main road—believe me, that is really scary and it made me realise their vulnerability. Of course, we have the highway code and the guidance to pass wide and slow, but how do we get that message across more effectively? As our new road safety strategy says on horse rider safety,

"despite an investment of £2.4m in paid advertising raising road users' awareness of the changes to The Highway Code, it is clear from research by external road safety stakeholders that more work is needed to embed these changes."

Aspects of transport are devolved, and I am aware that the Welsh Government have taken action on this, including by incorporating key British Horse Society messages into the Pass Plus Cymru training for young drivers, but we all know that more is needed. Last week, on horse safety, the Minister said:

"We will look at what more we can do to strengthen the advice and guidance, and ensure that people are aware of those issues in the highway code."—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 478.]

[Dame Nia Griffith]

The question is: how aware are drivers of the dangers of rural roads? The speeds that we see drivers do are frightening, and drivers show no consideration for the lack of visibility on bends or at junctions where farm tracks come out on to roads. Could we put a greater emphasis on rural roads, and particularly horse rider safety, in driving tests? What other tools do we have? We can educate the willing and prosecute the transgressors, but that is likely to happen only when there has been a serious accident—when it is too late.

We absolutely cannot be complacent about this issue. I ask the Minister to use all the means at her disposal to identify the most effective ways of getting the message across; to implement a concerted, specific strategy on horse and rider safety; and to work collaboratively with the Welsh Government on any devolved aspects of such a strategy.

5 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I congratulate both the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) and the British Horse Society for their work on this hugely important issue. The demand to speak in the debate shows the importance of this issue to so many hon. Members and communities. It is especially important in rural constituencies such as mine, which has a very large number of riders and horses, and is home to the Defence Animal Training Regiment at Asfordby. It is rare to be out and about in the constituency and not see people out riding in the Vale of Belvoir or other places; it is an activity that appeals to people of all ages and backgrounds.

BHS stats suggest that there were only 21 incidents in the Melton area out of 234 in Leicestershire between March 2021 and the end of 2024. That is possibly because it is a very rural constituency, and many drivers are horse-aware and seek to pass sensibly—slowly and at the appropriate distance. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Newbury for rightly highlighting the work of Leicestershire police and Leicestershire fire and rescue service, but of course every incident is one too many, and we do not know how many incidents go unreported. There is a strong bond with horses in rural communities, as there is a strong bond between horse and rider.

I have been in the Minister's place, on the receiving end of campaigns by campaign groups, and I have to say that some are challenging to agree to, but the BHS is very measured and pragmatic. What consideration are the Government giving to clarifying highway code rule 215 on treating horse and rider as a single unit, rather than as a person and property? What more can be done to improve communications and awareness? I suspect that many incidents arise from ignorance, not intent. Will she take the opportunity offered by the road safety strategy to improve safety for riders and horses, and indeed improve access to safe routes?

5.2 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. In the interests of time, I shall ditch what I assure you would have been a fascinating speech and reflect on just a couple of areas.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) on securing this debate. I very much agree with and support the points he made. However, I slightly challenge the idea that because the road safety strategy does not mention horse riding specifically and repeatedly, it is not truly covered. The strategy is based on a safe system approach that recognises that all users are vulnerable, that human error is inevitable but deaths and serious injuries are not, and that the road and vehicle environment should be designed to protect all users as much as possible. In covering safe roads, roadsides, road users, speeds, vehicles and post-crash response, it is truly comprehensive. In that regard, it offers a huge number of opportunities to directly impact the safety of horse riders, such as opportunities for education, enforcement, better street design and technology that protects vulnerable road users from human error. I think the strategy is truly comprehensive and can address many of the areas that have been identified without necessarily needing to identify horse riders specifically.

Members have mentioned that the strategy recognises that more needs to be done to deliver on the intent of the 2022 highway code and its hierarchy of road users, in order to recognise the vulnerability of some of those users. Will the Minister reflect on what more can be done to deliver on that intent? Finally, I recognise that safe physical infrastructure and, ideally, getting horses off the road and on to good bridleways or greenways can make a massive difference. What more can be done to ensure that local authorities genuinely have the funding to deliver the safe infrastructure for which local partnerships, including users—horse riders and others—regularly identify a need?

5.4 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) for securing this important debate and for his wider efforts on this issue, including his private Member's Bill and his early-day motion, which 44 Members from right across the House supported. That is the gold standard for how to champion an issue in Parliament, and credit is due to him.

This campaign came across my desk for tragic reasons, as it will have for many Members here today. Last autumn, I met Maddy Tinton, the 15-year-old rider of Blaze, her mother, Jane, and Coral Sheldrake, the owner of Beaumont Stables in Old Windsor in my constituency. Last August, Maddy was riding Blaze on Priest Hill, a road that must be used to access Windsor Great Park from Beaumont Stables, when the pair were hit following a two-car collision. Disgracefully, the driver involved was travelling at 80 mph at 6 o'clock on a Wednesday morning. Thankfully, Maddy came out of the incident relatively unscathed, but we should be in no doubt that it could have been far more serious. Blaze was not so lucky and had to be put down.

So often, the horse comes off worse, suffering the full force of a collision and often saving their rider in the process. I know from speaking to Maddy, who absolutely loved Blaze, the emotional toll that Blaze's death has taken on her. It is clear to anyone who hears Maddy and many other riders talk about their beloved horses that we are dealing with a truly unique connection between human and sentient animal. That connection should be reflected in how horses are treated on our roads, in culture, in law and in practice. They are not inanimate objects; they are our friends.

I welcome some of the changes that the previous Conservative Government made on the hierarchy of road users, and I am grateful for the Minister's response

to my letter at the time of the incident. I wonder whether she could develop that in her response to the debate, especially given the wider objectives of the hon. Member for Newbury and the Government's recently published road safety strategy.

5.6 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Just last week, I had the pleasure of visiting Harry Zimman, a constituent who is a keen rider. He highlighted two significant issues. The first is access to bridleways. Even in areas with excellent riding routes, such as Cheshire, riders must often travel along narrow and winding lanes to reach them. Consequently, they can quickly find themselves in dangerous situations, because even the best-trained horses and most attentive riders cannot eliminate the fact that horses are living, thinking animals that may react suddenly to perceived danger.

Bridleways are too often overlooked in planning and infrastructure decisions. For example, in my constituency the Tarvin bypass cut across a bridleway and was replaced only by signage, effectively cutting off riders.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. I am getting an increasing amount of correspondence from Tatton constituents concerned about careless drivers on country roads and the dangers they pose to horses and riders. Does she share my concern about the changes to planning rules by this Labour Government—a Government who show so little regard for the countryside, as we saw with the family farm tax—under which green belt will disappear and cities will bleed into the countryside, making the roads even more dangerous, city dwellers not understanding the etiquette of country roads?

Aphra Brandreth: I thank my right hon. Friend for that really important intervention. We need to understand what the removal of our countryside and green belt will mean for people using rural roads, and the real impact that some of these developments will have.

For riders and their horses—I should add carriage drivers, who are also often overlooked—the most obvious dangers on the road are fast-moving vehicles, but less obvious hazards can be just as serious. A plastic bag in a ditch, or a cyclist passing too closely, might startle a horse. Harry described a cyclist squeezing between a rider and a car, badly startling the horse. Cyclists might not be aware of their impact, but such incidents can pose a danger to all road users.

As we have heard, many drivers remain unaware that the highway code requires them to pass a horse at no more than 10 mph and with at least 2 metres' clearance. We must do more to improve education and ensure that horse riders are properly reflected in road safety policy.

5.9 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) on securing this debate.

Per mile travelled, rural roads account for over 60% of all UK road deaths. Last year, I met a group of constituents who keep their horses in stables in the Forston area. They are experienced riders, and they described repeated near-misses caused by drivers going too fast or passing too close. In fact, there have been 15 motor vehicle incidents recorded in that small area alone.

My hon. Friend has already outlined the changes to the highway code in 2022, but I wonder how many of us here today could say that we have read the highway code since we passed our test. The reality is that on tight, winding rural roads, the guidance is widely ignored.

Dorset police and Dorset Road Safe Partnership do excellent work through schemes such as Horse Safe and Operation Close Pass. Such operations can change attitudes, but they need to happen more often in the places where the risks are highest. My constituents are asking for increased signage, more enforcement and clearer information on how police work with the British Horse Society to track and respond to incidents.

In 2024, the British Horse Society recorded more than 3,000 road incidents involving horses: 58 horses were killed and 80 riders injured. Four in five of those incidents were caused by drivers passing too fast or too close. We cannot continue to accept that as an inevitable toll. That is why I strongly support the Road Traffic (Horse and Rider Safety) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury. I hope the Minister will also take this opportunity to support it.

5.10 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Horse riders are not a marginal group on our roads and we should stop treating them like one. They are a vital part of rural life.

I want to thank Sophie from Billingshurst, a village in my constituency, who wrote to me ahead of the debate. She argues that we are facing a cultural problem. There is a fundamental lack of understanding about how to drive in close proximity to horses, whether they are being ridden or transported. She described being tailgated for miles while towing a horsebox. Eventually, the driver overtook and cut sharply in front of her, forcing an urgent and potentially dangerous stop. Anyone who understands the weight and stopping distance of a vehicle carrying live animals will recognise how serious that could have been. Thankfully, neither horse nor rider was hurt.

Riders are being pushed into using roads more extensively, often because there is no alternative. In Shipley, a bridleway bridge has been closed for more than two years with no clear repair timetable, forcing riders on to busy roads, simply to access legal routes. Horse riders seem to count as low priority when it comes to highways funding.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Just last month I presented a petition in this place about a greenway in my constituency between Radcliffe and Cotgrave, which has been closed for two years. That means that people such as Jacqui, who rides a horse, cannot use it. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to encourage the expansion of and investment in this type of infrastructure?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) not to take the opportunity of the extra minute he has just been given due to that intervention.

John Milne: I thank the hon. Member for the intervention.

We must also place this debate in the wider context of changing rural road use. In Cowfold parish, the accident rate has doubled in the past five years, with three fatalities and 20 serious injuries. Traffic volumes have increased but road infrastructure has not kept pace. Although stronger regulation on speed and passing distances is welcome and necessary, it is not sufficient on its own.

We need better driver education, clearer national messaging and a cultural shift in how horses are understood by other road users. We need to rethink rural road policy more broadly. Can we take action to stop HGV routeing systems sending unsuitable vehicles through villages and bridleway links? Can we look at weight limits and improved road services, and make it easier for communities to introduce lower speed limits, as has been done successfully in parts of Somerset, for example?

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury. I very much support the measures he suggests and I hope the Minister will listen.

5.13 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) on securing this debate and his long-running championship of the issue. He is a true champion of rider safety; the riding community could hope for no better advocate in this place.

Our transition to cars has hugely changed the role that horses play in human society, but they are still a treasured species. The pursuit of riding is beloved by many of my constituents. North Norfolk has a proud community of horse riders who enjoy riding through our beautiful countryside and rural landscapes. I have heard from a number of riders who have great concerns for their safety when riding on roads in rural North Norfolk. It is clear that the status quo does not do enough to protect those riders. The contributions by my hon. Friends the Members for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella), for Horsham (John Milne) and for West Dorset (Edward Morello), and others, are testimony to that.

Riders are vulnerable road users, just like cyclists and pedestrians. Many of them will have been understandably disappointed not to have received greater attention in the Government's recent road safety strategy. That strategy, however, is not the only thing that lets down riders. In Norfolk, our road safety policies are painfully unfit for purpose. We have seen this play out in all-too-serious reality with injuries and deaths along the A148 in my constituency. That road has a number of stables along it, meaning there is a high chance that riders find themselves on a stretch of road proven to be dangerous. We have to make sure that they are better protected, along with other vulnerable road users, to prevent future tragedies in our rural community. That is why the Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury is proposing is so important. It makes very modest changes to the current wording around horse riders in the highway code, but would kickstart a change in behaviours around riders and encourage far more responsible driving when sharing the roads. It would also ensure that education around equestrian safety is improved in driving tests, meaning that people will begin their lives as drivers with a stronger awareness of how to drive in a way that best supports riders and keeps drivers themselves safe.

Many riders would find it far preferable to be able to ride off the roads away from the level of risk that many have described in this debate today. Unfortunately for them, the lack of available bridleways and safe paths forces them on to the highway. This is an area on which we Liberal Democrats are pleased to propose solutions: we want communities to be better supported to turn abandoned rail links without the prospect of reopening into safe, active travel footpaths and bridleways, giving vulnerable road users more options to travel away from roads.

Furthermore, in rural Norfolk, aspects of our network are seriously outdated, and narrow and almost unsafe routes into villages have seen most of their traffic replaced by newer, larger roads. We can transform some of those into bridleways and active travel routes, reducing the burden on local authorities to keep almost abandoned roads to a drivable standard and widening opportunities and access.

We can do so much better for horse riders and for drivers, too. There are big opportunities to deliver brighter outcomes for the horse riding community and allow them to feel safe and seen while enjoying their pursuits. What helps them helps so many others: we can improve paths, bridleways and access to nature at the same time. In that spirit, I hope the Minister can reflect on the proposals we are making and fully engage with the riding community about their concerns. I hope that we can move forward with safer roads, happier riders and an end once and for all to the accidents, injuries and tragedies we have heard about today.

5.16 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Too often when we talk about rural activities, too many dismiss them as relics of a bygone age. Those of us who represent rural constituencies know that nothing could be further from the truth. Horse riding remains a vital living part of rural life, deeply embedded in the culture, economy and daily rhythms of our communities. That reality makes it all the more important that we take seriously the safety of the horses and riders on our roads.

My constituency is overwhelmingly rural—home to many stud farms, riding schools and equestrian centres that rely on local road networks as part of their everyday operation. Riders frequently use narrow country lanes, often with no pavements, limited passing places and little room for error. Such roads were not designed for modern traffic speeds or volumes, yet they are shared by horses, cyclists, pedestrians and vehicles. For less experienced riders, these interactions can be especially intimidating. Horses can be easily startled by sudden movement or noise, and situations can escalate quickly if drivers approach at speed or pass too closely.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. In Buckinghamshire there are many single-lane country roads, which is where many of the accidents occur. It would be wonderful to highlight that and how to address that moving forward.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. She is absolutely right and I wish her a speedy recovery from her own horse-related incident.

What might seem a minor lapse in judgment from behind the wheel has serious and sometimes devastating consequences for riders and horses, given that the rider has limited ability to control a frightened horse.

A further recurring challenge in rural areas is poor visibility. Constituents have contacted me about near misses on lanes with high grass verges and dense hedgerows, especially during the spring and summer. Such conditions can severely restrict sight lines, meaning that horses and vehicles may appear suddenly, giving drivers little opportunity to reduce speed or pass with the care that safety demands. I was pleased to see that Buckinghamshire council, a council I know the Government are keen to learn from, has worked constructively with the British Horse Society to introduce simple and effective measures in partnership.

Horse riding is far from a niche pursuit. The British Equestrian Trade Association estimates that more than 1.8 million people ride regularly, with around 3 million participating overall. For many rural communities, riding is a source of wellbeing, fitness, employment and social connection. Yet all that is undermined when riders and their horses feel unsafe simply travelling on the road. One death is always one too many, and although departmental data records a relatively small number of fatalities in recent years, there remain far too many serious incidents. The British Horse Society's "Horse i" app recorded that 58 horses were killed in equine road-related incidents, with more than 3,100 incidents in 2024 alone. Many of those involved drivers passing too closely, with devastating consequences.

It has been said in this debate that changes to the highway code under the previous Government significantly strengthened protections for horses and riders. The introduction of the hierarchy of road users was important, but the reforms went further, including clearer guidance on passing distances and how drivers should behave when encountering horses at junctions. Although the current Government have published their road safety strategy, it is difficult to see horse riding as a clear priority within it. Despite describing the strategy as being "for everyone", horses receive only limited mention and there were no references at all in the consultation to proposed changes to motoring-offence penalties. That raises fair questions about how the Government intend to strengthen protections for riders in practice. I would welcome greater clarity from the Minister on that point, as well as an explanation about why the THINK! road safety campaign budget was cut by £1.2 million last year.

Could the Minister set out what specific campaigns the Government intend to introduce to make sure that drivers are aware of their responsibilities when encountering horses—particularly in rural areas, where these interactions are most common? Ultimately, rules are meaningful only if they are understood and enforced. Dangerous driving that intimidates or endangers horses and riders must be taken seriously, and penalties should properly reflect the risk posed by such behaviour.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd; I know you have a deep personal commitment to road safety. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) on securing this debate and thank him for raising the vital issue of road safety and vulnerable users, specifically horse riders. It is clear that this concern is widely shared across the House. I do not know how I am going to do justice to it in the next eight minutes. This debate is aptly timed, as we published our new road safety strategy last week.

I stress the importance of road safety around animals. I know how vital horses are to rural areas, such as West Berkshire, and I have been very sorry to hear about collisions involving horses and riders. I pass on my condolences to all those who have been affected by these tragic incidents, including the death of the racehorse Knockalla in Lambourn. We also heard about Laura, who lost her horse Angel, Katie, who lost her horse George and Maddy, who lost her horse Blaze. We were all horrified to hear the description by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) of what happened to his constituent, Susi. I recognise how horrible it must be to lose an animal in that way, and stress the importance of keeping our roads safe for all road users.

As has been noted, the highway code was updated in 2022 to improve safety, particularly for the most vulnerable road users. The Department for Transport introduced the hierarchy of road users, which sets out that those who can cause the greatest harm in the event of a collision bear the greatest responsibility to reduce the potential threat that they pose to others. The highway code changes included strengthening the guidance on safe passing distances and speeds when overtaking horse riders. I encourage everyone in the country, especially drivers, to look at the "Rules about animals" section of the highway code.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The highway code needs proper signage to remind drivers of their obligations. Does the Minister agree that it is important the council maintains signage properly, warning users of where there are likely to be horses—such as in Heddon in my constituency, where unfortunately the county council is dragging its feet on getting appropriate signage in place?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I agree with him.

As has already been noted, despite the investment of £2.4 million in paid advertising raising road users' awareness of the changes to the code, it is clear that more action is needed. As set out in the strategy, we are considering options to improve the safety of both riders and their horses. We will work with stakeholders such as the British Horse Society as we undertake that work.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): What we have heard today is really the business case. We need horses in rural areas for businesses; if we lose a horse, we do not protect our local economy. Would the Minister agree and take that into account when thinking about the future?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend has made his point very well.

We will also continue to encourage safer road user behaviours in order to improve safety for all vulnerable road users, including horse riders, motorcyclists, cyclists, pedestrians and road workers. Our flagship road safety campaign, THINK!, will continue to do that, alongside the use of social media channels and other partner organisations.

[Lilian Greenwood]

The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency also does important work to promote awareness of horse and rider road safety. The DVSA publication, "The Official DVSA Guide to Driving: the essential skills", contains a section on horses, and horses also feature in the hazard perception tests that all drivers have to take to obtain their licence.

We have already dealt with a number of the statistics. In 2024, there were 63 collisions involving ridden horses, in which 71 people were seriously or slightly injured. That is according to STATS19 data, and it is completely unacceptable. We know that, through targeted action on speeding, drink and drug-driving, and mobile phone use, alongside the education piece we have already discussed, those tragedies can be prevented.

Experts and campaigners have long called for a comprehensive strategy that treats road safety as a priority. Our new road safety strategy shows that this Government are not only listening but leading to build a safer future for all road users, including horse riders. Hon. Members will know that the strategy sets an ambitious target to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on British roads by 65% by 2035. I think that the vital work we will do—and I take on board all the contributions that have been made—will save lives on Britain's roads and make them safer for absolutely everyone, including horse riders and their horses.

In the short time I have left, I turn to some of the questions that have been raised. The hon. Member for Newbury asked about equestrian representation on the national road safety board. That is yet to be considered; however, he makes the important point that we must ensure we hear the voices of all road users as we undertake that work. I will certainly take that point away.

There was a question about whether equine road safety is included in initial driver training for those who drive for work. I have already described how it is incorporated within the driving test, and I will consider what further work we can do to strengthen the guidance and advice that goes to those who employ drivers and riders. I was pleased to hear about the VR headsets in use in Leicestershire; I absolutely agree that understanding how frightening a close pass can be is really valuable. I saw a video produced by Cycling UK on close passes on social media just yesterday. Frankly, it sent a shiver down my spine. Vulnerable road users need that safe space.

The hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) asked about speed limits. They are obviously a matter for local councils, but we are updating our guidance on setting such speed limits. I will take account of the point she made.

A number of matters raised today fall outside my remit. However, I will ensure that my DEFRA colleagues are alerted to the concerns raised regarding the provision and management of bridleways, and indeed the issues my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) raised about uncontrolled dogs. I apologise if I have missed any of the questions raised; I will ensure that I work with my officials and write to Members if I feel that I have not provided them a sufficient answer in the time available.

As I conclude, I again pass on my condolences to all those who have been affected by this issue. Improving road safety is one of my highest priorities, and this Department will continue to work hard to bring down deaths and serious injuries on our roads. I again thank the hon. Member for Newbury for raising this vital issue and congratulate him on what has been a very fulsome debate.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I thank everyone for their flexibility; we managed to get everybody in.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered horse and rider road safety.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 14 January 2026

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

UK Town of Culture 2028

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I am pleased to open the UK town of culture 2028 to applications today in recognition of the vital role towns play in shaping our cultural life. Places across the UK are invited to submit expressions of interest to become the inaugural UK town of culture and deliver a six-month cultural programme in 2028. The competition will run over the next year, and we will announce the winner in the beginning of 2027.

Delivered across the UK and in collaboration with the devolved Governments, the UK town of culture builds on the UK city of culture, which was first launched in 2009 and is now in its fifth iteration. The UK city of culture has seen four winning places—Derry/Londonderry, Hull, Coventry, and now Bradford—deliver a year of rich cultural activity rooted in their unique identities, drawing on local strengths and stories.

However, for far too long, too many people have not seen themselves or their communities reflected in our national story. This competition shines a light on the places that have made an enormous contribution to our cultural life, but have not had the recognition they deserve.

I have previously announced that this competition comes with £3.5 million of prize money. I am pleased to confirm that this will see the winning town receiving £3 million while two finalists will receive £250,000 each. This is in addition to the bid development funds for each of the shortlisted places to support them in preparing their full bids. This funding package will help bidding places to get the most benefit out of taking part in the competition.

The competition criteria have been designed to focus on the unique story and important role that towns play in our national life, as well as delivering local impact where it is most needed and empowering communities to shape their bid and access the programme.

The competition is open to all towns—small, medium or large. Every town in the UK is unique and adds something different to our national story and I am keen for this competition to reflect the widest range of towns possible. I hope that as many places as possible from across the UK will consider bidding and celebrating the contribution they make to our rich and diverse culture. My officials have created a toolkit to aid MPs, supportive stakeholders and bidding towns in the application process. I will deposit a copy of the toolkit in the Library of each House for MPs and their offices to access.

[HCWS1240]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Contracts for Difference Allocation Round 7: Offshore Wind Projects

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The seventh contracts for difference auction results have been published today, unlocking a record 8.4 GW of offshore wind projects. We have taken a significant step forward in our mission, showing that clean power by 2030 is achievable and on track. Despite well-known global pressures facing the industry, we have delivered enough capacity to power the equivalent of over 12 million homes. This is a major result and means we can take back control of our energy, meet the growing demand of electricity and get bills down for good for working people.

For fixed-bottom offshore wind, this represents the single largest auction in European history. These projects will be built right across Great Britain, supporting skilled jobs and investment in coastal and industrial communities. The clearing price for offshore wind in this round was on average 90.91 per MWh, far below the auction's price cap and significantly cheaper than the 147 per MWh cost of building and operating new gas plants.

This proves that clean, home-grown power is the most affordable and secure choice for the country.

These results include Berwick Bank, which is the first new Scottish project to be procured through the CfD in three years, and Awel y Môr, the first Welsh project to win a contract in more than a decade. This will provide a boost to the Scottish and Welsh economies, underlining this Government's commitment to see all parts of the UK benefit from clean power.

These results also represent major progress in our efforts to lead the world in the emerging technologies of the future, securing 192.5 MW of floating offshore wind capacity. Winning projects include Erebus in the Celtic sea, and Pentland in Scotland, backed by pioneering investment from Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund. This success builds on last year's leasing round 5 auction of 4.5 GW of seabed. These additional projects will boost regional economies and ensure that Britain continues to reap the benefits of clean power.

This auction will unlock around £22 billion in private investment in every corner of the country, supporting at least 7,000 jobs in areas including Scotland, north Wales, Norfolk, and Yorkshire and the Humber—delivering a major boost for the economy.

In a world of increasing instability, this Government are determined to back secure, clean, home-grown power to drive down costs for families, and provide the energy security our country needs.

[HCWS1239]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Food Standards Agency: Scientific Advisory Committees

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): The Food Standard Agency's independent scientific advisory committees ensure that the agency's decisions and advice are grounded in the best scientific evidence. The SACs are essential for protecting public health, maintaining food safety standards, and ensuring consumer confidence by embedding science into every aspect of FSA decision making.

Earlier this year, the Cabinet Office undertook a review of arm's length bodies in line with the aims of the Government plan for change. As part of the recommendations

of this review, four of the FSA's SACs that were previously classified as advisory non-departmental public bodies will be reclassified as departmental expert committees.

The committee on toxicity of chemicals in food, consumer products and the environment advises the FSA, the Department of Health and Social Care, and other Government Departments and agencies on matters concerning the toxicity of chemicals.

The advisory committee on the microbiological safety of food advises Government on questions relating to microbiological issues and food.

The advisory committee on novel foods and processes advises the FSA on matters pertaining to novel foods, traditional novel foods, genetically modified foods and feed, and novel food processes including food irradiation.

The advisory committee on animal feeding stuffs advises on the safety and use of animal feeds and feeding practices, with particular emphasis on protecting human health, and with reference to new technical developments.

All four committees will continue to maintain their current remit, secretariat and membership to allow the continuity of their work and secure their critical functions, with no disruption to their operations or expert advice.

[HCWS1241]

Petitions

Wednesday 14 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Bromsgrove District Housing Targets

The petition of residents of Bromsgrove District,

Declares that it is wrong for rural Bromsgrove District's housing targets to be increased by 82% while neighbouring urban Birmingham's targets are reduced by 31%; while noting that Bromsgrove District is 89% green belt and 79% rural and that at least 140 hectares of brownfield land in the south of Birmingham are already available for development.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to justify the flawed formula used to calculate the local housing need for Bromsgrove District, reverse the planned reduction in Birmingham's housing target to ensure the burden is shared in a fair and proportionate way and only allow new houses to be built when the accompanying infrastructure is provided.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Bradley Thomas, Official Report,* 25 November 2025; Vol. 776, c. 353.*]*

[P003130]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

In December 2024, following extensive consultation, the Government implemented a new standard method for assessing housing needs that is aligned to our plan for change milestone of building 1.5 million new safe and decent homes in England by the end of this Parliament.

The new standard method is based on a more objective assessment of need. To identify the minimum number of homes expected to be planned for, the standard method uses a formula that incorporates a baseline of local housing stock, which is then adjusted upwards to reflect local affordability pressures. Areas where unaffordability is most acute see the largest adjustment. The new method strikes a balance between meeting the scale of need right across the country and focusing additional growth on those places facing the biggest affordability pressures, by more than doubling the affordability multiplier we apply in the method.

The new standard method does not include the 35% urban uplift which was applied under the previous standard method to the 20 most populated cities and urban areas, including Birmingham. That urban uplift was an arbitrary adjustment to housing need, which was not based on evidence and was disconnected from delivery realities.

Instead, the new standard method supports a more strategic approach to housing growth, distributing growth across wider city regions, and not just to the largest urban authority within our largest cities. The new method also seeks to direct housing growth to a wider range of urban areas across England and not just the 20 largest urban authorities—this will help stimulate growth across our smaller cities and urban areas as well as those larger cities areas and continue to direct growth to make the best use of brownfield land. Under the new standard method, housing need across metropolitan combined authority areas increases by over 20% compared to the previous method.

The Government recognise that urban areas should be the focus for growth and has been clear that brownfield land must, wherever possible, be prioritised for new development. Through the revisions made to the national planning policy framework in December 2024, we broadened the definition of brownfield land, set a strengthened expectation that applications on brownfield land will be approved, and made clear that plans should promote an uplift in density in urban areas. However, brownfield sites vary greatly, and local authorities are best placed to assess the suitability of each for redevelopment.

On 22 September 2024, the Government published a brownfield passport policy paper, inviting views on how we can further prioritise building on previously used urban land, and how we can make best use of land in accessible locations, such as around train stations.

The Government are currently consulting on a new national planning policy framework that draws on the proposals outlined in that policy paper and the feedback received on it. It includes proposals designed to further strengthen support for development on brownfield land, support the intensification of urban and suburban areas, and enable more development in sustainable locations.

The standard method is used by local authorities to inform the preparation of their local plans. Once local housing need has been assessed, authorities should then calculate the number of new homes that can be provided in their area. This should be justified by evidence on land availability and constraints on development (such as national landscapes and areas at risk of flooding) and any other relevant matters.

The national planning policy framework sets out that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of supporting infrastructure in a sustainable manner. Contributions from developers play an important role in delivering the infrastructure needed to support new development. The community infrastructure levy is a locally set charge on most new development to help address the cumulative impact of development by funding infrastructure anywhere across the charging authority's area.

Local authorities can also seek a section 106 planning obligation from a developer to mitigate the impact of a specific development, to make the development acceptable in planning terms. This might require the provision of, or a contribution towards, a new or improved school, health facility or open space needed because of the development. Alongside this, the Government provide financial support for essential infrastructure in areas of greatest housing demand through the housing infrastructure fund.

We expect local authorities to explore all options to deliver the homes their communities need—maximising brownfield land, working with neighbouring authorities, and, where necessary, reviewing green belt. Each authority should assess and plan how to meet its housing needs over the plan period.

Each local plan, including the local housing requirement, is subject to a public examination in front of an independent inspector, who examines plans impartially to ensure that they are legally compliant and sound. A sound plan should be consistent with national policy, positively prepared, effective, and based on proportionate evidence. Plans should also take the views of local people into account.

Through the Planning and Infrastructure Act, the Government are legislating to re-introduce a level of strategic plan making, by creating a duty to produce spatial development strategies. As these are produced over the next few years, they will have the ability to re-distribute housing needs between local planning authorities, in line with wider opportunities and the spatial strategy that the SDS is based on. The aggregate need across the SDS area will be based on the standard method for assessing local housing need.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Two-Child Benefit Cap

The petition of residents of the constituency of York Central,

Declares that the Two Child Benefit Cap results in parents of families with three or more children born after April 2017 can only claim benefit for the first two children, unless they prove that further children have been conceived by rape; and further that this is a major reason for child poverty, causing larger families hardship, and that this has impacted on 1.6 million children since its introduction.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the impact of the two-child benefit cap in developing a strategy to end child poverty.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Rachael Maskell, Official Report,* 25 November 2025; Vol. 776, c. 355.*]*

[P003137]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson):

As announced in the Budget on 26 November 2025, we will remove the two child limit from April 2026. Given the requirement for primary legislation, we are progressing this as quickly as possible within those legal and parliamentary constraints.

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