

Thursday
15 January 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 15 January 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Thursday 15 January 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Order, 12 January, and Standing Order No. 3).

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ANSWER TO ADDRESSES

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That His Majesty, having been attended with its Addresses, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should re-appoint Dr Katy Radford MBE as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 September 2025 for the period ending 31 August 2029. I will comply with your request.

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Sir Charles Walker KBE to the office of Ordinary Member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 1 January 2026. I will comply with your request.

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Mr Manbhinder Rana to the office of Ordinary Member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 11 January 2026. I will comply with your request.

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Ms Beverley Smith as chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England with effect from 1 January 2026 for the period ending on 31 December 2030. I will comply with your request.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector

1. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector has access to adequate funding. [907272]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The last Government created a perfect storm for our charitable organisations, cutting their funding and attacking their right to speak, all while demand soared. This Government have reset that relationship through the civil society covenant, and we are currently working on ways to leverage more investment into local organisations.

Harpreet Uppal: In recent months, I have met and heard from local charities that are doing incredible work in our communities, including S2R, Huddersfield Mission and Headway Huddersfield. Many of those charities have told me of the challenges they currently face as demand increases and the cost of their services rise and funding opportunities decrease, so what steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure charities in Huddersfield are given the funding they need to deliver vital services?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and for being such a sterling champion of the amazing grassroots organisations in her constituency, some of which I had the privilege of meeting when I visited. We recognise the need to protect the smallest charities in particular; that is why we more than doubled the employment allowance, meaning that more than half of charities with national insurance contributions liabilities will either gain or see no change in 2025-26. We are looking at how we can use the national youth strategy to pilot a new way of working, to make sure the action we take to support young people is genuinely driven by those amazing organisations at a local level in communities, which will help them to become much more sustainable and to do more.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): To obtain funding, most small organisations require a bank account. Is the Secretary of State aware that many organisations are struggling to get a bank account? Some banks do not offer those services to small and voluntary organisations, or a huge amount of bureaucracy needs to be entered into in order to get an account. Will the Secretary of State speak with her colleagues in the Treasury to get to the bottom of why it is so difficult for small and voluntary organisations to get a bank account?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much for his question, and I will certainly make sure that I and the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), take that matter up with colleagues in the Treasury to resolve it.

Town of Culture and City of Culture Competitions

2. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that the new town of culture and UK city of culture 2029 competitions support communities. [907273]

4. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that the new town of culture and UK city of culture 2029 competitions support communities. [907275]

11. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that the new town of culture and UK city of culture 2029 competitions support communities. [907284]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I am really proud that this Government have launched the UK's first ever town of culture competition. I hope Members from across the whole House can get behind this incredible competition, which

will bring back into focus parts of our country that have been ignored, disrespected and not celebrated for far too long.

Katrina Murray: I am seeking advice from the Secretary of State. What advice would she give to my local cultural organisations in Cumbernauld, including new and emerging arts and music spaces and the local theatre, which are excited by the prospect of the town of culture competition? How can they engage with and benefit from the competition and ensure that community-led culture is at the heart of any bid?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for championing those incredible organisations in her constituency. Applications open this week for the town of culture competition. We have deliberately designed this contest so that it will benefit everybody who takes part, helping them to promote what happens in their local areas, with the least bureaucracy possible. We want local organisations to be heard loud and clear as part of the bids. The judging panel will be chaired by the incredible Phil Redmond, and he is designing the competition to ensure that organisations the length and breadth of this country are heard loud and clear.

Anna Dixon: I hope that the Secretary of State enjoyed her visit to Bradford during our fantastic time as city of culture 2025. It was a roaring success, with more than 5,000 events across the whole district, audiences in excess of 3 million and some 650 local artists and organisations involved. Does she share my ambition to make sure that the legacy of Bradford 2025 is both impactful and long lasting? Will she meet me, leaders of the council and representatives of Bradford 2025 to see how she can support that legacy?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend will know that I have visited Bradford several times since becoming Secretary of State, and we love it so much that you cannot keep us away—the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), will be in Bradford this afternoon. Bradford city of culture has been a runaway success in increasing the amount of local pride that people feel in their communities. Four out of five people in Bradford say that the year of culture has had a lasting impact on them and their city, but that is not all: it has managed to attract record visitor numbers, showing exactly what Bradford can do. We want that for our towns across the country, and we are using Bradford as a template for how to do it.

Luke Murphy: Basingstoke has a rich cultural heritage, from world-class venues such as the Anvil and the Haymarket, to creative spaces such as Proteus Creation Space, heritage sites such as Basing House and wonderful museums such as Milestones and the Willis Museum. It has also been the home and shaped the lives of Jane Austen and Thomas Burberry. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that Basingstoke would be a highly deserving winner of the town of culture 2029 competition? If she cannot endorse that, will she at least join me in calling on Basingstoke council to work with me in submitting a bid?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend has just laid down the gauntlet for everyone else in this Chamber—I look forward to hearing their pitches too. He is absolutely

right to say that Basingstoke has an amazing and rich culture. In advance of today, I was looking at some of the things that Basingstoke has to offer. As well as the Willis Museum and being the birthplace and home of Jane Austen, it also appears to be home to the world's oldest wedding cake, which was news to me. I am looking forward to seeing his bid. I admire his competitive spirit, and I am sure that he will put up a staunch challenge that others will want to meet.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on getting the town of culture competition to happen. I was briefly Arts Minister nine years ago, and Sir Phil Redmond did an amazing job then of setting out the distinction between city of culture and town of culture. I seek the Secretary of State's advice about Salisbury. As it is really a town with a cathedral, should it bid for town of culture or the city of culture competition, as it celebrates its 800th year since its charter?

Lisa Nandy: I imagine that the right hon. Gentleman is anticipating that Salisbury would be a worthy winner of both, and I look forward to seeing whichever bid he submits. There is a distinction between city of culture and town of culture. He will know that larger towns were eligible under the last Government to apply for the city of culture competition, but we have designed this contest so that small and medium-sized towns can also get a hearing. We would be delighted to see a bid in whichever part of the contest he believes is most fitting.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): As well as putting in an early bid for my town of Woking—the home of H.G. Wells and the birthplace of science fiction—to be our new town of culture, I want to ask the Secretary of State a slightly more serious question. The previous Government's towns fund was widely criticised for channelling money to their political priorities and heartlands. Will she ensure that the city of culture and town of culture awards are never made for political decisions?

Lisa Nandy: I absolutely agree. I think it incenses people when they see our communities being used as political playthings. That is why we have set up a judging panel, which is chaired by Sir Phil Redmond and has independent members, to award the £3 million prize money to the winner. It is also why we have left behind the failed approach of the last Government. Although this is a competition and I am already enjoying the banter in the Chamber about the respective merits of different towns, we have deliberately designed it so that there will be many winners. Every single one of the shortlisted towns will receive money to develop their bids. The three finalists will all receive prize money, and we will make sure that we find ways to amplify the unique stories of all those that take part in the competition.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Plymouth Culture has launched its bid for Plymouth to be the city of culture 2029, and I wonder if the Secretary of State realises that there has never been a southern city of culture, let alone a south-western city of culture. Does she agree that the city of culture 2029 would be the perfect opportunity to rectify this?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Lady makes a powerful case, and I look forward to hearing more.

Gambling Advertising

5. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of trends in the level of spending on gambling advertising. [907276]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): We monitor a wide range of evidence to aid our assessment of gambling advertising and its impacts, including spend data provided by the industry and independent sources. We will continue to keep our policies under review in this serious context. There is a Westminster Hall debate on gambling harms later today, where hon. Members will get the chance to unpack these issues in more detail.

Alex Ballinger: This week FIFA announced a four-year partnership so that gambling platforms can stream world cup games on UK websites for the first time. Football fans are already heavily exposed to gambling advertising, and the Government have confirmed that there is clear evidence linking gambling advertising to harm. As the Premier League has agreed to remove gambling adverts from the front of shirts this year, does the Minister share my concern that the livestreaming of world cup games on gambling sites is a step in the wrong direction and can perpetuate further gambling harm?

Ian Murray: There are two ways to answer that question. The first is with regard to exposure to the world cup itself, and I want as many world cup games as possible to be on free-to-air television. When Scotland qualified for the world cup, it was on the BBC and brought the whole nation together, which is what the world cup should do for every nation that has qualified.

Secondly, on exposure to gambling, we are committed to strengthening measures to protect those at risk, including the gambling levy. Twenty per cent of that £120 million will go towards making sure that we have the proper research to build on. I appreciate my hon. Friend's raising this point. I will consider the issue with the Sport Minister, and I will write to my hon. Friend with an update in due course.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Sitting down to watch a football game with my young friend the other day, my wife commented, "Are you watching football, or are you watching a gambling show?" She had a point. Last October, a match between Man City and Wolves had over 5,000 visible gambling ads during the game. Gambling destroys lives and is responsible for close to 500 suicides a year. What consideration is the Department giving to addressing this pressing and devastating issue?

Ian Murray: It is a pressing issue that has been recognised, particularly by the Premier League, which has banned shirt sponsorship from next season. A number of robust rules are already in place to ensure that adverts are not targeted at, and do not strongly appeal to, children and those at risk of harm. The Government are looking at this issue very seriously, and I hope the hon. Gentleman comes to the Westminster Hall debate this afternoon.

Creative Industries: AI

6. **Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help protect the creative industries in the context of AI. [907277]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): On 15 December we published a progress statement on copyright and artificial intelligence, as required by the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025. By law, we have to publish an independent impact assessment before 18 March. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology recently held a round of successful technical working groups on copyright and AI, and I am engaging with the creative and tech industries to ensure that our copyright regime values and protects human creativity while unlocking innovation across our creative sector and the wider economy.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: The Minister will know that big tech companies want to use songs, recordings and other creative work to train their AI models, without asking or paying the original creators. Does he agree with my union, the Musicians' Union, that those working in our creative sector should be asked for consent to use their work, get credit for use of their work and be fairly compensated when their work is used in this way?

Ian Murray: This is one of the most serious issues we have to deal with in this space. As a joint Minister in DSIT and the DCMS, I know this is something we are looking at, and we are very aware of all the concerns raised by creatives. We want to support rights holders in licensing their work in the digital age and to allow AI developers to benefit from access to creative material. In the UK, that will require a landing zone for both industries, and engagement, such as technical working groups, will be key in finding a solution that works for both sides. We will continue to engage with stakeholders in both sectors to further develop that approach, and that is the commitment from both Secretaries of State.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): When it comes to AI, as with so many other things, this Government are all smoke and mirrors. In response to the Grok AI outrage this week, the Secretary of State for Science and Tech announced with a flourish that she would be banning intimate image abuse with immediate effect. In reality, this meant triggering legislation that had to be forced through by Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge against the Government's will and that received Royal Assent last summer. Imagine how many women could have had their trauma prevented if the Government had just got a grip. Every day, our creative industries are having their work scraped. Intellectual property is being stolen every day, and still the Government sit on their hands, promising the world and delivering nothing. When will we see the AI Bill promised in the last King's Speech, and when is that legislation likely to be brought forward?

Ian Murray: As I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), there will be an update to Parliament on 18 March, as provided for by the Data (Use and Access) Act. This is an incredibly serious issue, but what we really need to do is

make sure that the Online Safety Act 2023 is completely implemented. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology made it very clear from the Dispatch Box this week that the Government will have an absolutely no-tolerance approach to what has been happening with AI and Grok. Ofcom must do its job. It must do it quickly, it must do it soon, and it must take the greatest possible action it can against the perpetrators of the disgusting and abhorrent ways in which AI is operating on some platforms.

Access to Sports Facilities

7. Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase access to sports facilities. [907278]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Lady is testing the Chair by sitting in a part of the Chamber where she does not normally sit.

Mary Kelly Foy: I thought I would sit where the Chamber looks really packed. [*Laughter.*]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government understand the importance of high-quality grassroots sports facilities in helping people to be active, which is why we are committing £400 million to improving facilities over the next four years. We are investing £98 million this year through the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, which includes removing barriers to participation for women and girls, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority communities.

Mary Kelly Foy: Durham United football club kicked off this season in the northern league. It is the first time in decades that the city has had a men's team playing at this level, yet they do not have a permanent ground. At the same time, local authorities are finding it harder and harder to maintain their playing pitch stock to a reasonable standard, meaning that high-quality pitches are harder to access despite more football being played than ever. What can the Minister do to encourage local authorities to transfer these assets into the hands of well-established grassroots clubs, such as Durham United, to give them security and access to larger grants, thereby improving the maintenance of these vital community assets?

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. Sport England invests over £250 million of Exchequer and lottery funding each year, and offers guidance and support to grassroots clubs looking to take control of their local sports pitches through its community asset transfer toolkit, which it is currently updating. I would be very happy to set up a meeting for my hon. Friend with Sport England, which can offer further advice if that is helpful.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I recently met Abbas and Templecombe parish councillors to discuss their exciting plans to add a 400-metre running track, a multi-use games area and an outdoor adult gym to the local recreation ground. Given that physical inactivity costs the UK over £7 billion a year, such improvements are welcome, particularly in rural areas.

However, despite securing some of the funding, the parish council is struggling to find the additional funds it needs to get the project off the ground. What steps is the Minister taking to help rural, parish and town councils improve their sports and leisure facilities?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Lady is a strong advocate for her constituency, and she makes a very important argument. As I have outlined, the Government are investing £400 million in grassroots facilities. We are also working with the sports sector and local leaders to understand the demands of each community, and I would be happy to discuss that further with her.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): This Labour Government have announced that they intend to remove Sport England—alongside the Gardens Trust and the Theatres Trust—as a statutory consultee in planning decisions, putting playing fields across the country at risk. The Conservatives oppose this move. Can the Minister explain how first scrapping the £57 million opening school facilities fund and now allowing developers to concrete over playing fields will increase access to sports facilities?

Stephanie Peacock: As I outlined, this Government are putting their money where their mouth is. We have announced £400 million investment in grassroots sport. I have discussed this issue with the Planning Minister and I have heard the points he has made.

Mr French: Not much of an answer there, but hopefully another U-turn will be coming soon. Over the previous Parliament, the Conservative Government invested more than £1 billion in grassroots and school sports. On this side of the House, we are also absolutely clear that girls' and women's sports must be protected to ensure fairness, competition and safety. Will the Sport Minister confirm today what action she is taking to ensure the Supreme Court's ruling on biological sex is applied in leisure and sports facilities across the UK?

Stephanie Peacock: We are working with sporting bodies to make sure they get this right.

Improving Outcomes for Young People

8. Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help improve outcomes for young people. [907279]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Last month, we published our ground-breaking youth strategy, "Youth Matters", the first cross-Government strategy for young people in England for over 15 years, to ensure that every young person has somewhere to go, someone who cares and something to do. We are determined, as we breathe life into that strategy, to ensure it continues to be driven by young people across the country. I look forward to working with him to ensure that becomes a reality.

Chris Vince: I am in my usual place, you may notice, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Secretary of State for her work on this really important youth strategy. How can young people in my constituency of Harlow be empowered to take part in the youth strategy? She will be aware that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for young carers and young adult carers. Specifically, how has she worked to engage hard-to-reach groups, such as young carers, to be part of the strategy?

Lisa Nandy: From the outset, we were absolutely determined that the strategy would reflect all young people. It was a delight to do a workshop with young carers as part of the development of the youth strategy to ensure that their needs and concerns were met. I really do look forward to working with my hon. Friend to help ensure we empower young people. The key way in which we are doing that as a Department, as we roll out the national youth strategy, is to ensure we only fund organisations that put young people in the driving seat of decisions about how that money is spent.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The best thing the Government can do to support young people is to ensure they have jobs, but in the three months to October last year, unemployment for 18 to 24-year-olds rose by 85,000. What does the Secretary of State have to say to the Chancellor, who is over-taxing jobs, including for young people?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is not just a supply issue. There is a demand issue, but there is a supply issue as well. The Chancellor is very focused on ensuring that we create good jobs in every part of the country. He will know that as well as the national youth strategy which we have just published, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Pat McFadden) recently announced a new programme to ensure we specifically target 18 to 21-year-olds to help them get back into work and do not write them off at a very young age. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman's party voted against the investment that was needed to make that happen. I hope he will reflect on that and get his side to change course.

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

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Data suggests around 50,000 children are not getting the music education they deserve and the cuts to music PGCE—postgraduate certificate in education—bursaries will exacerbate the problem. While £25 million of new musical instruments announced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will be left to collect dust in storage cupboards, what discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Department for Education to ensure we have the teachers to teach the musicians of the future?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Lady for that question and assure her that there will be no musical instruments collecting dust in storage cupboards. As well as announcing a broader, richer curriculum alongside the Education Secretary at the end of last year, which will put music education once again at the heart of the offer for young people, we are rebuilding access to it in communities.

I will have something more to say about the programme she describes very shortly, but as a Government we are determined to ensure that every child has the chance to find their spark and develop their interest, not just children whose parents can pay.

Youth Activities

9. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to youth activities for young people. [907280]

14. **Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to youth activities for young people. [907288]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Our national youth strategy was co-produced with young people and has committed to investing over £500 million to ensure young people have somewhere to go, something to do and someone who cares. Access to youth activities is a key part of that.

Jim Dickson: In Swanscombe and in much of my constituency, less than 50% of young people are physically active. That is only slightly lower than the national average, which is highly alarming. Under the previous Government, community sports facilities such as Swanscombe Pavilion in my constituency crumbled, with no resources to bring them back to life, reducing the available space for young people to be active. That is why I am particularly pleased to hear about the £400 million, which has been mentioned today, that the Government committed to grassroots sport facilities last June. Will the Minister provide an update on how that vital funding will be allocated, and will she agree to meet me to discuss this further?

Stephanie Peacock: The Government recognise that grassroots facilities are at the heart of communities up and down the country, which is why we have committed £400 million to transform grassroots facilities across the UK. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we will be rolling that out. We recognise that too many children and young people are less active than they should be, which is why we have campaigns such as “Let's Move!”, which aims to support children to enjoy being active in sport, play and everyday movement. I was pleased to see one of those sessions in action myself before Christmas.

Will Stone: This week I met Paul Skivington from the UK Para jiu-jitsu team. Paul, who lost his leg in a motorbike accident, has been very active in inspiring the country by competing on the world stage of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Paul wants to get more disabled children involved in sports. What are the Government doing to incentivise more young disabled people to take part in sports, especially Brazilian jiu-jitsu?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important point. Everyone should have the opportunity to play sport and be physically active. We are committed to tackling persistent inequalities, especially for disabled people, an aim that is reinforced by Uniting the Movement, the 10-year strategy of our

arm's length body, Sport England. It ensures that its programmes directly impact disabled people through partnerships with a range of both disability and martial arts organisations and initiatives such as We Are Undefeatable, a campaign that supports the 15 million people who live with one or more long-term health condition in England to get active. I met Activity Alliance to discuss this issue a few months ago, and would be delighted to discuss it with my hon. Friend.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Last July, I wrote jointly with other Members to the Government to seek support for Gympanzees to open the UK's first fully accessible exercise, play and social centre for disabled children and young people. I have had no response. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of the charity to discuss how her Department can support this innovative project?

Stephanie Peacock: I will get to the bottom of why the hon. Lady has not had a reply—I apologise for that. I would be delighted to meet her to discuss the matter further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is important that we improve access to youth activities for young people, particularly because of the rise in their anxiety, depression and mental health—important issues. The rise in suicides among our young people worries me greatly, too, as I know it worries the Minister, and indeed us all. What is the Department doing in conjunction with the Department of Health to address young people's mental health issues and get them access to support?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It was a pleasure to meet him yesterday to discuss a different issue. This is exactly why we have launched our national youth strategy—supporting young people with their mental health is an absolutely key part of that. I know how important that is, both as a former teacher and from my constituency.

Co-operative Live Music Venues

10. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support co-operative live music venues. [907281]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): Co-operative live music venues have benefited from the Government's community ownership fund, which enables communities to take ownership of valued local cultural assets. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does to champion the arts and music in his constituency. Building on the community ownership fund, the new Pride in Place programme will support 244 neighbourhoods with up to £20 million each over the next 10 years, which can support local music venues, while our new music growth package of up to £30 million, which we will launch in the spring, will help to strengthen grassroots music infrastructure, including venues themselves.

Patrick Hurley: Southport does not need to apply to be the UK town of culture because we have a fantastic year of culture coming up this year anyway—Members should check out southport2026.com for more details. As part of building a legacy off our year of culture,

I am meeting music industry professionals next week to discuss the live music scene. Grassroots music venues are vital to nurturing new talent, but too many venues in this country are closing because of soaring costs. Can the Minister outline whether music venues should have their own sector-specific support package so that we can protect live music for the future?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend is correct: Southport is already a town of culture. He has been championing southport2026.com, which everyone should go and look at. In addition to the £30 million music growth package, the Government are encouraging the live music venue to go further to deliver widespread adoption of the voluntary £1 levy on tickets for stadium and arena shows in order to help to safeguard the future of grassroots music. I re-emphasise that we are encouraging the industry to go much further; we want as much take-up as possible and to see the levy in place for as many concerts as possible. We want the music industry to continue to drive progress with this, as all that money will go into grassroots live music.

Topical Questions

T1. [907291] **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The Government are determined to fight for all the British people. Since we last met, my Department has been delighted to introduce the first national youth strategy in a generation, ending the violent indifference we saw under the last Government, and to launch the town of culture competition, because culture is everywhere, not just in our big cities. While Reform trashes one of our most important national institutions, we have kick-started the BBC charter review to ensure that we protect a BBC that belongs to everybody. Our message to the British people is clear: "We will always fight for you."

Catherine Atkinson: In October, I shared that the Stockbrook Colts, a local grassroots football club for over 250 children, had to stop play because its pitch was unusable. I am pleased to report that Stockbrook Park now has planning permission for a new play zone, with a football pitch and floodlighting. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the Colts, the local councillors and the whole community? Will she set out what steps are being taken to improve grassroots football facilities in Derby and across the country?

Lisa Nandy: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her role in securing planning permission for those new facilities. Those places stand in the centre of our communities as a shining symbol of how much we value our young people and the communities in which they serve. I would be delighted to work with her to make sure that we continue to roll out those facilities in her constituency and across the country.

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

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of concerns across the culture, media and sport sectors about the 14-day

cooling-off period in the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024. It could be exploited to allow people to sign up for an annual membership of a heritage, arts or cultural institution, visit the sites for free for two weeks, then cancel their membership and get a refund, causing considerable financial distress—on top of the recent national insurance increases, of course. There is cross-party support to close that loophole, so can the Secretary of State confirm the timeline for further action?

Lisa Nandy: The shadow Secretary of State will be aware that the Department for Business and Trade has been consulting on this issue, which is significant for many organisations, and the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts held a roundtable about it recently. The Minister for Sport, Tourism, Civil Society and Youth is meeting the relevant DBT Minister shortly to discuss it, and the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), will also be joining that meeting. We would be delighted to extend an invitation to the shadow Secretary of State so that we can resolve this serious issue together.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Secretary of State for that response and I appreciate the tone that she has adopted.

We all know, especially after yesterday's announcement, that the decision to ban Maccabi Tel Aviv fans from the game with Aston Villa was not only wrong, but based on fabricated police intelligence. From the answers to my recent written parliamentary questions, we also know that the possibility of banning Israeli fans was communicated to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on 9 October and to the Home Office on 2 October—two weeks before the ban was publicly announced. In that two-week period, what conversations took place between DCMS, the Home Office, the police, the safety advisory group and others, given that a hugely controversial decision was potentially about to be made? What action was taken to try to stop it?

Lisa Nandy: Given the chilling effect that this has had on the Jewish community in particular, and on everybody who needs to have trust in our police services across the country, I want to be crystal clear on this point. I have looked into the concerns that the shadow Secretary of State has raised about whether DMCS officials were aware of the decision in advance. We were working on the instruction that the match was still supposed to go ahead. That was on the basis of advice from the SAG. I would be happy to outline that in further detail to him. It is absolutely not correct to say that DCMS officials were made aware that a ban was going to take place. I have to say to him, on a personal level, that if that had been the case, I would make sure that people were held accountable for it.

On the wider issue of what has unfolded over recent days, I want to reiterate that having watched West Midlands police contradict me, the Government and its own evidence in public over recent months, and having seen all that laid bare in a report that the Home Secretary brought to the House yesterday, I believe it is astonishing that the chief constable remains in post. I hope that he will seriously reflect on his position.

T2. [907292] **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras ha myttin da, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the consultation on the renewal of the BBC's royal

charter, the Government will consider how the BBC provides a range of content and services that represents all audiences and brings communities together. Does the Secretary of State agree that Cornish language and media content should be specifically included in the new charter? Will she meet me to discuss how the renewed charter can support the case for a Kernow public service media platform?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Shorter questions and answers please. I call the Secretary of State.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. The Government are very committed to protecting and supporting our minority languages, which are a vital part of the cultural fabric of our country. When we launched the charter review, it was intended to give space to consider how the BBC can best support minority language broadcasting, including Cornish, and I would be delighted to arrange a meeting for him.

T4. [907295] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): My local county football association has contacted me, deeply concerned about plans to remove Sport England as a statutory consultee on planning, a point raised earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston). I am not entirely sure that he got a full response, so in the spirit of charity may I ask once again what protections will be put in place to ensure that we do not lose our sports facilities?

Lisa Nandy: I point the hon. Gentleman to the fact that the Government have just announced £400 million for grassroots sporting facilities across the country. We are keen to make sure that we can build the homes that we need, and that those homes have good facilities, whether that is sporting facilities or cultural facilities, which people want, and I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that happens.

T3. [907293] **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Wealdstone FC is a fantastic, fan-led club in my constituency, but it is again facing an uncertain future because of protracted negotiations over the lease of their current ground. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that the landowner engages in good faith with the club, and will she meet me to discuss how we can give the club the stability and security off the pitch that they need to succeed on it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I recognise the vital role that football clubs like Wealdstone FC play in the community. While stadium negotiations are primarily a matter for clubs and local authorities, I understand the importance of securing a future at Grosvenor Vale, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can best support the club for the future.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Over the last 24 years, 174 grassroots rugby clubs have disappeared. Such clubs are vital and feed our professional teams with talent and fans. While attendance and broadcast figures are improving at the top level, Premiership clubs

still owe the Government massive amounts of money in covid loans and carry £340 million in debt. What assessment has the Department made of the long-term financial stability of both grassroots and premiership rugby?

Stephanie Peacock: The governance of rugby union is a matter for the Rugby Football Union, which is independent of Government, but the Government monitor the financial situation of rugby union closely. The DCMS continues to work with the RFU and I am happy to discuss that further with the hon. Gentleman.

T5. [907296] **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): AFC Bournemouth has just said goodbye to Antoine Semenyo. He has been a superstar on the pitch and a gentleman off it, taking out a full-page ad in the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* to thank fans for the memories as, sadly, he left for Manchester City. Bournemouth need more players like him, and that means getting kids off their phones and outdoors, which is why I back raising the minimum social media age to 16. It also means supporting play spaces, youth centres and grassroots football facilities for clubs like Boscombe Albion, Kings Park Dynamos, Queens Park Ladies and Generation Elite. What are the Department doing to support our young kids?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for that moving tribute and I think the whole House will support those words. He is right to underline the importance of that support, and that is why we are working across Government, using the national youth strategy, the Pride in Place impact funds and other funds that are designed to be led and driven from the grassroots up to ensure that every community gets the facilities that they need.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State support Conservative calls for funding for the listed places of worship scheme to be restored? That would give places of worship such as All Saints in Shillington in Mid Bedfordshire the certainty they need to protect our heritage and continue serving all our communities.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which I know is of considerable interest to many Members. As he knows, the current scheme will end on 31 March. The Minister for Museums, Heritage and Gambling, Baroness Twycross, has met key stakeholders, including the National Churches Trust and the Church of England, to ensure that they are up to date. We will be in a position to make an announcement in due course, and we are listening carefully to Members across the House.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In a response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), the Minister was full-throated in his support for music venues. What conversations has the Department had with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about planning for music venues? The Moth club in Hackney is potentially under threat from a planning issue, and it is vital that the Departments work together to preserve our music venues.

Lisa Nandy: This is a significant issue for many music venues around the country, in addition to the funding challenges that they face, which we are trying to address,

and we know that they would welcome more Government support with it. I am due to discuss this shortly with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I commend the Football Foundation for its brilliant work with grassroots sport and its help to develop the brilliant facilities at the New Croft at Haverhill. As Newmarket football club looks to get a new pitch, will the Secretary of State join me in sending the message to the foundation's chief executive, Robert Sullivan, that we endorse that bid?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Member tempts me, but I am sure he is a powerful enough advocate for the bid on his own. I will say to him, though, that the Government have been working with the Football Foundation to make sure that communities that most need facilities but often struggle to navigate the process find it easier and less bureaucratic to manage. The foundation has been very open to those conversations, and I am delighted to hear that things are progressing in his constituency.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Next year, the Tour de France will return to the UK for the first time since 2014, starting in Edinburgh. The route through northern England has yet to be determined, but does the Minister agree that there could be no finer starting point than my constituency of Carlisle and Cumbria, and will she ensure that the excitement that the tour engenders translates into support for cycling right across our country?

Stephanie Peacock: We are all very excited that the Tour de France is coming to this country. I am really excited to be going to Leeds later today for the route announcement, and I am pleased that the Government have invested over £30 million. It is really important that the tournament inspires the next generation.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Persecuted Christians Abroad

1. **Matt Turmaine** (Watford) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to help support persecuted Christians in other countries. [907298]

3. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians in other countries. [907300]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): It is a pleasure to see you at Church Commissioners questions this morning, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for stepping in to cover questions last month, when I was unwell.

The Church of England remains deeply concerned about the rising persecution on grounds of faith and belief worldwide, including recent cases in Iran, Sudan, India and Palestine. Christian communities remain the

most targeted. The Church is working closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to improve the faith literacy of its officials; supporting the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief; regularly providing resources to bishops to raise cases in the other place; and developing resources for use across the global Anglican communion.

Matt Turmaine: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. I received many Christmas cards from residents in my Watford constituency who support the Open Doors campaign and are concerned about the persecution of Christians around the world. I have also met representatives of congregations in my constituency. Does she agree that the world watch list, which was published here in Parliament yesterday, is an important project to identify the locations of persecuted Christians around the world and encourage those countries to promote tolerance?

Marsha De Cordova: Yes, I do. I was pleased to attend the launch of the Open Doors world watch list here in Parliament yesterday, and to hear the powerful testimonies of those who have fled persecution. An estimated 338 million Christians are facing persecution across 50 countries, including Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Iran, Nigeria, India, Myanmar, Iraq and Egypt. Organisations such as Open Doors do vital work in raising awareness and highlighting the persecution of people of faith, and its report is a stark reminder of why global norms matter.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the hon. Member for her answer, but she will be aware that in past decades over 50,000 Christians have been inhumanely slaughtered in Nigeria by murderous Islamist groups, namely Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen. These attacks have only intensified in recent months, targeting vulnerable groups such as Christian schools and missionaries. This is a tragedy of mammoth proportions. What action is the Church of England taking to prioritise the issue of Christian persecution and support the Anglican Church in Nigeria?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Member has been a strong voice on this issue, and I welcome that. He rightly highlights that thousands of Christians are being killed because of their faith, and that persecution comes in many forms; he has mentioned schools and so forth. That is why we are so grateful for the work of organisations such as Open Doors, Aid to the Church in Need and others for shining a light on what is happening globally. The bishops in the other place continue to raise these cases, and it is something that remains a priority for the Church.

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

2. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on the future of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [907299]

4. **Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): What discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on when the evaluation report of the listed places of worship grant scheme will be published. [907301]

Marsha De Cordova: The future of the listed places of worship scheme continues to feature heavily during Question Time, and over 200 Members have raised this issue. Faith communities with listed buildings are waiting for clarity on the future of the scheme, which is due to end in March. The uncertainty is delaying repairs and the implementation of community projects nationwide. I met the Minister for Heritage just before Christmas and was assured that the Government would be updating the House soon.

Catherine Fookes: I have had the privilege over the last 18 months of visiting many beautiful historic places of worship in Monmouthshire, including St James's, Llangua; Bettws Newydd church; St Mary's priory; and St Tewdric's, which dates back to 600 AD. The listed places scheme is a lifeline for volunteers and charities, such as the amazing Friends of Friendless Churches, that look after buildings like Llanddewi Rhydderch Baptist chapel, which needs the scheme to fix its roof. Can my hon. Friend please update me on any discussions the Church Commissioners have recently had with the Government on this issue?

Marsha De Cordova: It is good to hear how the scheme has benefited churches in my hon. Friend's constituency. While I am not responsible for the Church in Wales, I can inform her that Wales has a significantly higher proportion of listed places of worship than England, and most buildings are in areas of low economic activity and there are fewer opportunities for philanthropy. I would be happy to put her in touch with the relevant people in Wales, so she can continue to engage with them. As I have highlighted, I met the Minister recently and was assured that the Government would bring forward plans soon.

Chris Hinchliff: Whatever one's faith, the historic churches in North East Hertfordshire are an incredible part of our local heritage. They are places of peace and beauty, ever-present reminders of centuries of our history and a focal point for village life, providing space for social activities and community life in what feels like an increasingly fragmented society. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must do everything they can to support parishes with the huge challenge of maintaining our historic churches so that they can continue to enrich our lives for generations to come?

Marsha De Cordova: I agree with my hon. Friend that historic churches are often cornerstones of our local communities. Even if members of a community are not regular churchgoers, they also see those churches as places they can call their own and identify with. People gather in those spaces for different events, whether that is for concerts or major life events like weddings, and all candidates have to attend them for election hustings. We all know how important our historical buildings are, and their estimated social value is £55 billion. With every investment of £1 in the Church, a return of £16 goes into the local community through outreach and community support. I am pleased that the Government will be publishing the evaluation report of the listed places of worship scheme soon.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that there are practical consequences flowing from the failure of the—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. When entering the Chamber, hon. Members must be aware that there is a debate taking place.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does the hon. Lady accept that there are practical consequences flowing from the intolerable delay in the Government making an announcement about the scheme? For example, repairs are under way at All Saints church in Mudeford and at Christchurch priory, and the consequence of the Government not doing anything about this scheme will be hundreds of thousands of pounds of extra costs for those churches.

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Member is right that any further delay will continue to bring uncertainty to many churches across the country, so this is really important. I am reassured that the Government will come forward with plans soon, as the Secretary of State said during Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions prior to Church Commissioners questions.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): In Rutland, Stamford and the Harborough villages, we are fortunate to have one of the highest numbers of listed places of worship in the country, from Teigh to Tixover to All Saints' in Stamford. Does the Church Commissioner agree that we cannot allow these amazing places to fall into collapse or to lose them? Once they are lost to our communities, our communities really are the ones who lose out.

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that, of course, I agree with her.

Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

5. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What support the Church of England is providing to Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [907302]

Marsha De Cordova: The situation in Palestine is beyond devastating. The Church continues to support the Anglican province of Jerusalem. During advent last year, the Archbishop of York visited the west bank and met Christian Palestinian families affected by settler violence and witnessed tensions at first hand. The Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church are also working with the Palestinian community's senior clergy and visited the Tent of Nations to promote peace and justice.

Douglas McAllister: Caritas Internationalis is just one of the 37 international aid organisations that Israel has sought to ban or deregister. This will have a severe impact on humanitarian aid delivery in Gaza. At midnight mass, Christ the Redeemer church in the west bank adorned its Christmas tree not with baubles, but with the names of the lands expected to be occupied or already stolen by illegal settlers. What support can the Church provide to these brave Christians in Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that the issue of what is happening in Palestine has featured heavily during Question Time for the past year. Israel revoking the licences of dozens of aid agencies in Gaza and the west bank will only worsen

the situation. As I have outlined, during his recent visit, the Archbishop of York met Christian families affected by settler violence and faced with tense stand-offs with settlers, as well as challenges around displacement and damage to their land. I am pleased to say that bishops will be making another pilgrimage to Palestine in the very near future. I urge hon. Members to keep raising this issue. The sooner we get peace, the sooner we can see that people are being taken care of across Palestine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is important that worship is retained, but one of the reasons that people will stay is that they have jobs and opportunities. When I met some Church representatives last year, they said that people were leaving not just because of persecution, but because they had nothing to do work-wise. What is the Church doing to ensure that there are work opportunities so that people will stay and worship God in their church?

Marsha De Cordova: As the hon. Member knows, the Church is rightly playing a role in the province in Jerusalem. I would be happy to write to him to set out further actions that the Church is taking in relation to work and other projects.

End-of-life Ministry

6. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What assessment the Church of England has made of the potential impact of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill on end-of-life ministry. [907303]

10. **Emma Lewell** (South Shields) (Lab): What assessment the Church of England has made of the potential impact of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill on end-of-life ministry. [907308]

Marsha De Cordova: The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill is still being debated in the other place. What it will look like is yet to be decided. The Church anticipates that there will be considerable impact on the end-of-life ministry, pastoral support and bereavement counselling offered by its chaplains and clergy.

Anna Dixon: Chaplains work in various settings, including care homes, hospitals and hospices. If the Bill were to pass unamended, they may be required to provide assisted dying services to people who are terminally ill, as there is currently no organisational opt-out. Would the Church support an amendment in the other place to allow chaplains to conscientiously object, and an option for hospices and other organisations that have religious foundations to opt out of providing support to those who wish to end their life with assistance under the legislation if it is passed?

Marsha De Cordova: The Church supports the need for an institutional and individual opt-out, as many hospices have highlighted their concerns about the Bill's impact on their operations if there continues to be no option to opt out. It is crucial that hospices can offer their vital services without being compelled to offer assisted dying if they hold a conscientious objection.

Emma Lewell: Where assisted dying is being legalised with opt-outs for faith-based hospices, it is now being challenged in the courts. Opt-outs and faith-based

conscientious objections are unworkable and will be subject to constant legal wrangling. That is just one of the very many serious concerns associated with assisted dying. Does my hon. Friend agree that the assisted dying Bill is dangerous and the other place is right to give it thorough scrutiny?

Marsha De Cordova: It is right that all legislation is scrutinised, and the assisted dying Bill is no different. I commend the bishops in the other place for their diligent work on the Bill right now. My hon. Friend will probably not be surprised to learn that she and I share the same view on the Bill. In my view, we need to focus on end-of-life palliative care; we should be giving people assistance to live.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

New Palace Yard Project

7. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment the Commission has made of whether the New Palace Yard project will be completed within its budget. [907304]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): The New Palace Yard project will be completed this month, at an expected cost of £62 million, within the latest approved business case. The project included important security works and significant ground and heritage works.

John Lamont: Frankly, a cost of £62 million for the New Palace Yard project is eye-watering. Most of our constituents will find that outrageous, particularly given that it is not fit for purpose—staff are having to queue for long times when leaving Parliament at the end of the day. What was the original budget for the project, who approved it and who designed it? Does the hon. Member think that there has been sufficient political oversight of that project and similar work in Parliament?

Nick Smith: There have been different estimates for the stages of the project, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out. The costs have evolved since 2017. I will send him the recent Finance Committee report, which was published just before Christmas and goes into detail on this matter. Delays have occurred, particularly at peak times, and it has taken too long for vehicles to leave, but steps are being taken to speed up exit times.

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent, representing the Restoration and Renewal Client Board, was asked—

Restoration and Renewal: Member Consultation

8. Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What recent progress the client board has made on consulting hon. Members on the restoration and renewal programme. [907305]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): The restoration and renewal programme has engaged extensively with Members of both Houses. In this Parliament, there have been 380 interactions with MPs and peers through briefings, tours and events. The number of interactions over the past three years, since January 2023, is about 980. The client board will shortly publish a report to help us all decide on the preferred way forward.

Josh Dean: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer and for the board's engagement with parliamentary colleagues. A full decant from Parliament is among the options for colleagues to consider as we restore this place—it is an option that I support—but will he set out what engagement the board has had on any plans to ensure that, if we do decant, Parliament remains in London to ensure that the jobs of the hundreds of people who keep this place running, including our catering and cleaning staff, are protected?

Nick Smith: After ramping up engagement on the cost information, and once the House has provided direction on the R and R programme, if we do go to full decant, the Lords will likely go to the Queen Elizabeth II centre and MPs to the northern estate. There will be ongoing work on temporary accommodation, and the related impact on jobs is for us all to consider in future.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

British Manufacturers

9. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Commission is taking to increase the proportion of House of Commons purchasing from British manufacturers. [907307]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): My hon. Friend always takes an interest in ceramics and parliamentary procurement. He will remember that approximately 85% of ceramic items purchased in our gift shops are either fully or partially made in the UK. More widely, Parliament endeavours to purchase British goods, in compliance with the procurement legislation. If he would like further information, I would be very happy to help him.

Gareth Snell: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued engagement with me on this important matter. The ceramic commemorative tankard on sale in the gift shop over Christmas was marked up as being decorated in Stoke-on-Trent, but what that means is that it was formed and fired overseas, imported into the UK, decorated and then sold. Under the rules of the House, that would be considered a British product, because it is based on where the last substantial transformation took place. May I encourage my hon. Friend to take back to the Commission the view that when we are buying things in this place and we want to label them as British—whether it be the food, the plates, the cutlery or any products we use here—they must be British from start to finish, so that we can showcase the best of British talent?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for ceramics and Stoke. The limited edition House of Commons Christmas mugs are a popular product in our gift shop. Those products are sourced as unfinished products from overseas and then hand-finished in the UK. This approach ensures that the product is commercially viable to purchase and that the retail team can sell it while maintaining high standards, but I would be happy to meet him again to discuss this further.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Safeguarding

11. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to establish an independent safeguarding system. [907309]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): Last year, the General Synod voted to reform safeguarding structures. Those reforms intend to ensure greater safeguarding, independent scrutiny

and consistency of delivery across the Church and will come to Parliament for final approval in due course. Other progress made since the vote in February 2025 has been the appointment of Dame Christine Ryan as the independent executive chair of the safeguarding structures programme board, who brings significant senior experience in safeguarding regulation, policy and delivery. She will provide an update on her plans and proposals to the General Synod when it meets next month.

Richard Baker: I thank my hon. Friend for that update. Does she agree that there should be no further delay in the Church adopting a fully independent model for safeguarding and that it is vital that Church authorities and our new Archbishop of Canterbury act to restore confidence in safeguarding in the Church?

Marsha De Cordova: No one will be surprised to hear that I agree with my hon. Friend; it is vital to restore confidence and trust. Work is being done across the country by local safeguarding officers—often volunteers—and I thank them for all their hard work. The archbishop-elect has repeatedly stated that safeguarding will be a significant priority for her as she takes up her role, and I look forward to working with her on this.

Digital ID

10.37 am

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on mandatory digital ID.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons): Following my appointment as a joint Minister across the Cabinet Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, I would like to respond to Members' concerns about the digital ID policy. The programme has two core objectives. The first is to transform the state and make it work better for ordinary working people. Too often, accessing public services is harder than it should be. Digital ID will change that, providing the foundation of how we transform public services for everyone.

The new digital ID will be a modern, secure and trusted way for people to prove who they are and to access services across both the public and private sectors. It will be inclusive. We will issue the new digital ID to everyone who wants one and has the right to be in the UK, including the around 10% of UK citizens without traditional forms of ID. That will be transformational for how they access services, and it will unlock Government services that work better for people, saving people time, hassle and money. It will reduce fraud, enable new possibilities for integrated services and make interacting with Government easier for everyone. That is why, by the end of this Parliament, we will design and roll out a digital credential to every eligible UK citizen who wants one—one that is easy to use and unlocks improved public services.

Secondly, we are committed to reducing illegal migration and will be mandating that right-to-work checks are conducted digitally. Currently, employers can carry out checks of over a dozen different forms of ID. For British and Irish citizens, many of those checks are currently paper based. That is confusing, vulnerable to fraud and does not always create a clear record of when and where checks have been carried out.

As the Prime Minister clearly said yesterday, there will be checks, they will be digital and they will be mandatory. Those seeking to work illegally in the United Kingdom will no longer be able to provide fraudulent papers. Information obtained from digital right-to-work checks will be available to help crack down on unscrupulous employers who are undercutting British workers and hiring people without the legal right to work. This is about fairness and ensuring that only those with a genuine right to work in the United Kingdom are able to work in the United Kingdom.

We will be consulting imminently, in a range of ways, on how we design this scheme. We want to hear from people, businesses and stakeholder groups across the United Kingdom about what approach works for them. A new digital ID will put power back in people's hands, helping to make services more personal, joined up and effective, and ensuring that everyone can access the support that they need, when they need it. It will be—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I assume that the Minister is about to come to a conclusion as he has overrun his two minutes.

Josh Simons: I am, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am proud that this Labour Government are building this vital public infrastructure to make Government work better for everyone.

Mike Wood: The Minister read his speech beautifully, and with a straight face. In September, the Prime Minister tossed this mandatory digital ID on to the table as a classic dead cat distraction, purely to keep Andy Burnham off the front pages as the Labour party conference started. Now it is left to a junior Minister to come to Parliament to explain why the policy that the Prime Minister spent months saying was absolutely vital is being hollowed out.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment to his new position last Friday, but I suspect he is quickly learning that the price of his red box is to have to go out on a very thin limb and put his own credibility on the line, only for those higher up in Government to rev the chainsaw, leaving him exposed, with only the flimsiest of pretences to protect his dignity—the pretence that this policy is still a going concern. In less than four months, the policy has gone from dead cat to dead parrot. Like Monty Python's pet shop owner, the Minister is asking us all to deny what we can see clearly with our own eyes. He does everything short of inviting us to admire its beautiful plumage, but this policy has passed on.

My questions for the Minister are: do the Government still expect digital ID, in this new form, to cost £1.8 billion? Is it going to be mandatory or not? What on earth does the taxpayer get for that money if people do not even have to have it? Above all, when is he going to finally face facts, stop spending billions on this zombie boondoggle that is wandering aimlessly in search of a problem to solve, and save taxpayers' money? This is a dead policy.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Someone's had their Weetabix.

Josh Simons: Let me answer the hon. Gentleman by stepping back for a moment and stating clearly what British citizens and taxpayers will get. Digital IDs will be rolled out for free to everyone who wants one. If anyone does not want one, they do not have to have one. People will be able to use that credential to prove their right to work digitally by the end of this Parliament, which will make it easier for businesses to check people's right to work and enable tougher enforcement against illegal working. We will harness the potential of this credential to deliver a transformation in digital government and public services.

I, for one, am tired of constituents being frustrated by basic problems caused by a lack of joined-up government that we should have fixed decades ago, and by not having control of their public services at their fingertips. This is free, voluntary digital infrastructure, and a foundation for public service improvement and private sector innovation, that we should have built years ago, as the hon. Gentleman's predecessors in the last Conservative Government recognised, but of course we did not do it. As the British people know very well, given the way that they passed judgment at the last election, the Conservatives gave up governing this country properly. They gave up on reforming the state and they gave up making government work better for ordinary people. This Government will not do so.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my hon. Friend's explanation from the Dispatch Box of the change. We have been

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

here before; we issued identity cards, as they were, when the technology was much older, so I welcome the new approach. We already do many things online that involve the Government and our proving who we are, including tax and the renewal of driving licences. Can he confirm these three points? For this scheme to work, it must not be mandatory; the digital ID must not be a requirement to access a public service; and for those who choose not to, or cannot, have one—including some of the 10% that he mentioned—there need to be really clear and established workarounds, so that they do not see a diminished service.

Josh Simons: I thank my hon. Friend for her constructive question. I will cover each of those three points. First, the digital ID will be free for everyone who wants one. Secondly, access to public services will not be conditional on having one. The Prime Minister has been clear on that, and I can underscore that commitment. Thirdly, it will be rolled out with one of the largest digital inclusion programmes that the UK Government have ever undertaken.

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

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Another day, another U-turn. Have you ever seen a new Government so lacking in conviction? When they announced their plan for change, I do not think anybody in this place realised that it was a plan to change every single one of their policies. This is becoming a shambles.

The Liberal Democrats lack no conviction on this issue—we have been opposed to ID cards for over 20 years. The Minister said repeatedly that digital ID will save people money, but this is a multibillion-pound project, and taxpayers' money is being spent on it. Will he confirm how much has been spent on the scheme so far, and how much the Government intend to spend on it?

Josh Simons: As I have mentioned before to the hon. Gentleman and in the House, the design and delivery of the scheme will be subject to the consultation that we will launch in a few weeks. Choices will be made about the scheme in that consultation. After those choices are made, we will have much more detailed costings available to the House. The crucial thing is this: nations all over the world that have already developed digital ID programmes have realised massive, significant and quantified savings. Let me give an example: India's digital ID programme has saved an estimated \$10 billion per year by ensuring that public resources are accurately targeted at those who are eligible to receive them. That is what this Government will be doing, too.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is really interesting to see the response from Opposition Members. Obviously they never have to wrestle with interacting with the state; perhaps they have people to do that for them.

The Minister will remember that back in October, I asked the Secretary of State to consider making every single element of the digital credential voluntary, so I am glad to see the Government's position now. I am

excited about the potential benefits for those interacting with the state. Will the Minister outline for my constituents some examples of how it could make their life easier?

Josh Simons: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. To confirm, the digital ID will be free and available to every eligible UK citizen who wants one. The consultation will invite people all over the country to tell us how it could be useful in dealing with the daily struggles that they face. We have a range of use cases available to us. In the decades ahead, every time there is an information boundary problem, every time public services are not properly joined up, and every time citizens of this country are frustrated by the need to chase Government Departments to get them to share information properly, a digital credential that is free for everyone will help to solve that problem.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his new position, or poisoned chalice, whatever the case may be. Given that the Government have now realised that mandatory ID cards were never going to stop small boat crossings, as they claimed, will the Minister confirm when the Prime Minister will complete his U-turn and abandon this pointless and costly project that the British people do not want?

Josh Simons: Digital ID cards will be rolled out by the end of this Parliament, and will be free to everyone who wants one. The Prime Minister was clear that this is a basis for transforming public services, joining up government and making government work better. That is exactly what we are about—building public services that ordinary working people benefit from—and that is what the programme will help us to do.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Young people in my constituency have long wanted some form of digital ID that allows them to prove their age in a club, pub or shop; it will make their life a lot easier. They are used to using smartphones. I am delighted that the Government have made it clear that the scheme will be voluntary, not mandatory. However, many older people in my constituency do not have a smartphone, and a significant number of them will need to know the Government's plans, so that they can make sure that they do not lose out.

Josh Simons: I thank my fellow Greater Manchester MP for that question. My constituents also want easier access to public services, and they are fed up with having to fight a system that should be working harder for them. That is what this scheme is about—making Government work better for ordinary people.

I can confirm that the roll-out of the digital ID will involve one of the largest digital inclusion drives ever. We will not accept the status quo, in which millions of people in this country are digitally excluded and ID excluded. We will ensure that we go to physical spaces, such as public libraries and post offices, so that everyone can access the benefits of this scheme, if they want to.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Minister may be aware that there is already a thing called gov.uk. Just last night, I was delighted with the ID check; it connected with my phone digitally, and took a picture of my face beautifully. How will the new,

voluntary, dead parrot digital ID scheme differ from what already exists? How will it supersede the wonderful things called national insurance numbers?

Josh Simons: I am delighted that the hon. Member is so pleased with gov.uk. I am sure that he will be equally delighted when we roll out the simple, easy-to-use and effective digital ID, which will help him to access a whole range of public services through gov.uk that he cannot currently access. In the coming weeks, we will show him more about how we might do that, and I am sure that he will be thrilled.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): This is a mess. Increasing surveillance, Department for Work and Pensions powers to snoop on bank accounts, the removal of trials by jury, postponing elections and clamping down on peaceful protest—the public are starting to become very angry about these encroachments on our fundamental freedoms and creeping state control. It is all inherently un-British. I know that this is not my hon. Friend's fault, but can he convey to whoever is behind this farce that they are doing this Government no favours at all? It is time to scrap this costly project altogether.

Josh Simons: I too believe in freedom. Any good digital system must be trusted; if it is not trusted, it does not work. That point will be at the heart of the consultation that we will publish in a few weeks. The system that we build will give citizens more control and information about how their data is used and who accesses it. It will be decentralised, with strong firewalls between data sets, so that there is no central data storage, beyond data that the Government already hold. It will hold the minimum possible data needed to serve ordinary people better.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I must congratulate the Minister on doing an excellent job as a human shield for the Prime Minister. He says that this scheme will bring down the number of people crossing the channel on boats, but that is clearly a farce. You have just said that you will be able to access—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I have not just said anything.

Charlie Dewhirst: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister has just said that once he has rolled out this digital ID scheme, we will be able to access certain things that we cannot currently access. Can he list exactly what services we will be able to access?

Josh Simons: Let me restate for the hon. Gentleman the argument that connects digital ID to small boat crossings. We are using digital right-to-work checks, which will enable an audit of where those checks have happened, so that we can toughen up our enforcement against illegal working. That will bring this country in line with international peers, such as France and Germany, and reduce the pull factors. The use cases for this system, and how it will join up Government, are matters that will be subject to the consultation, so I invite him to make a submission to the consultation and tell us where exactly it can be useful.

Let me give one example. When somebody has a baby, they have to apply for childcare repeatedly, and have to remind the Government of what they are doing.

The Government already know that information, so people should not have to do that. Tired working parents should not have to fight the Government to get things that they are entitled to, and we will ensure that they do not have to.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this revision to the Government's policy—the removal of the mandatory element of this scheme. There is some benefit in looking at more advanced digital public services, but that is not the same as ID. When we came to government, the Prime Minister gave a speech outside Downing Street, in which he promised two things; the first was to “tread more lightly” on people's lives, and the second was to be a Government of service. On a range of issues, including checking bank accounts to see what people are selling on eBay or Etsy, the Government appear to be intruding on people's everyday lives in a way that is overbearing, so I ask that this be the moment when we go back to those founding principles that the Prime Minister set out on coming into government, and make sure that those principles cut across all Government policy.

Josh Simons: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is vital that people trust any digital product and system that this Government build. Trust has to be at the heart of everything we do. We will put trust at the heart of the consultation that will be published in a few weeks, and we will explain more about how we will do that. To be really clear, though, the reason why the digital ID connects public services is that at the moment, there is no mechanism for the Government to join up public services based on what an individual wants. If somebody wants to share information across Government services to get something—their childcare, for instance—they should be able to do so, having given consent. That is what this digital ID will unlock.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am struggling to get too excited about the change from mandatory to voluntary, because we all know that a voluntary scheme is just a mandatory scheme for slow learners, which is possibly what commends it to the Government. The Minister has said that he cannot yet tell us the cost of the scheme because he has not done the design work, but it is a matter of record that the Government have had a write-round, asking Departments to offer up savings to pay for it. Would it not have made sense to do the design work, have a budget, and then ask for the savings?

Josh Simons: I, for one, want to hear from people before key digital products are designed. Good product design is based on what is useful for people, which is why we will have a major consultation in coming weeks, in which we will get out across the country, engage with people, and get them engaging with digital government. That way, we can learn exactly how to build this system in a way that ensures that it is trusted, useful and secure.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Given that we are all employers, I am slightly surprised that some people think that all you need to do to employ someone is know their national insurance number; that seems a little bit odd. I have been there, checking people's passports to onboard them, and as a relatively

[Dr Scott Arthur]

new Member of Parliament, I do not really know what a fake or tampered-with passport looks like. Also, asking people whose families have lived in this country for many generations for their passport can lead to them feeling insulted and undervalued, so I welcome the fact that ID is moving online. I welcome the Minister's commitment to outlining the cost of this scheme in due course, but when he does so, will he also outline the benefits, in terms of both value and the provision of slicker Government services to our residents?

Josh Simons: We absolutely will outline those benefits. I would just underscore that countries all over the world have introduced a digital ID scheme to better join up public services. In India, that has saved an estimated \$10 billion every single year; those are savings that this country deserves and wants, and that is what we will deliver.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): One of the reasons for the massive public opposition to mandatory ID is that it is seen to be an infringement of civil liberties and individual freedom. Will the Minister give an assurance that the digital ID database will not be made available to the police for the use of live facial recognition?

Josh Simons: The digital ID database will be based on the principle of data minimisation. The minimum possible data that the Government already have will be stored about every individual citizen, so that we can do what we need to do, which is join up public services better.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government have dropped the plans for mandatory digital ID; it was always clear that the British public would heavily reject that idea, and it is our duty as Members to jealously guard our constituents' civil liberties. Will the Minister convey the lessons learned from this decision to his colleagues across Government, and persuade them to drop proposals to erode the right to a jury trial and restrict the right to protest against animal testing?

Josh Simons: I will feed those comments back to the relevant Secretary of State.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Many of my constituents will be watching these proceedings agog, because this is just another example of the chaotic approach to policymaking by this Government. Given the contentious nature of this issue, why did the Government not consult before announcing the proposals, and why did they not consult before then reversing on the policy in the next instance?

Josh Simons: We announced the intention to roll out digital ID cards, and I have clarified today that those will be free for anyone who wants one. We will consult on how to make that maximally useful for every British person who wants a Government who work better for them. That is what we will do.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the Minister that where we can digitise processes, it can release huge savings to the public purse

—he has cited India's £10 billion a year. The Government are now moving from a mandatory process to a voluntary process on the right to work, and everything was voluntary beforehand. Does the Department have any modelling that it can share—perhaps he can announce it today—on what the voluntary uptake will need to be in order to release the savings he cited against the projected cost of the service that he is putting together? He also says that although there will not be a mandatory element on digital ID for right-to-work checks, there will be a new digital right-to-work check. Can he say more about what that will be? Will that system be developed alongside the digital ID system or after it, once he is aware of the size of the market?

Josh Simons: I thank my hon. Friend for what I think were three questions, all of which I will try to answer. Our job in building this voluntary scheme, where people can get an ID if they want one, is to make it useful and effective. It is on us to figure out how to do that, and that is what we will be doing. The consultation will have more information about the modelling that he is after, and that will be published in the coming weeks. Once we have made the design choices about how to make the system maximally useful for people, further costs will then be published for the House. On the third question, the digital right-to-work checking system will be developed alongside the digital ID programme.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I feel for colleagues on the Labour Benches, forced to defend U-turn after U-turn on their own Prime Minister's policies. Ministers were reportedly told to find savings in their Departments to fund the £1.8 billion scheme. Will the Minister confirm that, as the scheme will no longer be mandatory, Departments will no longer have to make these cuts and public services will be ringfenced?

Josh Simons: The digital ID scheme will be funded within existing settlements and conversations about that are ongoing.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for coming here today to talk to us about the revised policy.

Mike Wood: He didn't come here voluntarily!

Paulette Hamilton: Well, okay; I apologise. But the Minister is here today and he has given us the revised policy, with which I am delighted. I am so pleased that the Minister and the Government have decided not to make it a mandatory scheme. I have had an overwhelming number of complaints in my constituency. Going forward, areas like mine have a very high level of digital exclusion. Can the Minister assure me that the Government will ensure that they bring constituents and residents along with them in this consultation phase, so that people do not feel they have been left behind and then start to object because they feel it will go from voluntary back to mandatory?

Josh Simons: I can assure my hon. Friend that the consultation will involve going right across the country to the places where people live, to listen, to engage and to build a consensus on the scheme's design. I should also underscore that the status quo is that we are not making enough effort to reach people who are digitally

excluded and ID-excluded. This programme will involve one of the biggest digital inclusion drives in the history of the Government, to reach those people so that they can access services. I, for one, am proud of that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I wanted to come here today and say that I was delighted to hear that this scheme will now be voluntary, not mandatory. Frankly, I am completely confused by the farce that we have got here today. The scheme will not be free, because we know it will cost the taxpayer. I do not think we should be saying it is free. We are told it will now be voluntary, but the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions that we will have a mandatory digital scheme. May I just point out to the Minister that no constituent has ever come to me and said, "Our public services are poor quality; it would be so much better if we had a mandatory digital scheme that would improve them"? Can he please make it clear? The Prime Minister says that digital checks will be mandatory. While the digital scheme might be voluntary, if the checks are mandatory, is that not just a mandatory scheme by the back door?

Josh Simons: I think I understood the hon. Member's question, so let me have a crack at answering it. I will address the second part of her question first. The constituents who email her, who will find this scheme useful, are asking for more joined-up public services. They are asking not to have to fight the Government to get things that they are entitled to, which is what this scheme will deliver. On the first part of her question, there is a distinction between digitising the right-to-work checks so that we can toughen up illegal labour market enforcement, which is what the Prime Minister underscored yesterday, and the digital ID, which will be free and voluntary for anyone who wants it.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): As someone who supports modernising and digitising the state, but who spoke against mandatory digital ID, I welcome the Minister's sensible approach and his engagement over recent months. My constituents are really concerned about illegal working. Does he agree that the current and largely paper-based system of right-to-work checks is totally unfit for purpose and open to fraud, and will he outline how this scheme will help crack down on illegal working in a way that the Conservative party totally failed to do over 14 years in power?

Josh Simons: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who has been a powerful advocate on this issue. The purposes of the scheme are twofold. First, digitising right-to-work checks will help us toughen up illegal labour market enforcement, making it easier for businesses to check people's right to work and for individuals to prove their right to work. Secondly, this is about the future of digital government; it is about making our Government work better for ordinary people, and the digital ID scheme is a foundational piece of infrastructure that will help us do that in the decades ahead. The Labour party has a long history of building public goods and public infrastructure, and I am proud that we are doing that for the future.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This Government seem intent on fundamentally changing the relationship between the state and its citizens without

our consent, from jury trials to digital ID. Although there was some relief at first, I fear that once it is introduced the Labour Government will make it mandatory at a later stage or do so surreptitiously. I gently point out to the Minister that there is no such thing as "free". Taxpayers are already paying for this policy; indeed, they are also paying for a new Minister to deliver it. Can he please confirm that no foreign companies, particularly Chinese companies, will have any access to our data and that this will involve British companies delivering a so-called digital card for British people? When will his constituents and mine have a chance to tell the British Government that they do not want this?

Josh Simons: I can confirm three things in response to the different elements of the hon. Lady's question. First, she mentions consent. The system itself will be based on consent; it will ask people for their consent in how their data is shared and used, and she will see more about that in the coming weeks. Secondly, there will be strong safeguards on how data is used in the future implementation of the scheme in the legislation that we will bring forward. Thirdly, she may know that I believe strongly in this country's sovereignty. British sovereignty will be at the heart of the scheme, and British tech companies will be supported by it, so foreign companies will not be subject to procurement in the usual way.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Nail bars, car washes and barbers are all business types that are known to have higher than average numbers of illegal workers, and for which right-to-work checks are variable. The 83% increase in illegal working arrests that was announced this week is welcome, but can the Minister please outline how digital ID will make right-to-work checks more robust?

Josh Simons: Digitising right-to-work checks means two things. First, it will be easier for businesses to check people's right to work and for citizens to prove their right to work, adding simplicity to the system and taking away the paper-based documents that can often open the way for fraud. Secondly, and crucially, it will allow a record of businesses that have conducted checks. That is the basis of tougher enforcement, which is the ultimate goal: tougher enforcement against those who hire people illegally, which undermines British workers and produces a pull factor that keeps illegal migration coming. That is what we are committed to solving, and why digitising right-to-work checks matters.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): This has been a costly shambles, and my constituents see it as an attack on their fundamental freedoms and privacy, so I am glad that the Government have done another U-turn. Will the Minister guarantee, however, that this so-called voluntary scheme is not suddenly going to turn into a mandatory scheme at a later date? Will he absolutely guarantee the British people that that will not happen in the future?

Josh Simons: As I said to the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), there will be strong safeguards in the legislation about how the scheme is used over time, and the hon. Member will be able to scrutinise them. He should feed in his thoughts about how that legislation should be structured to the consultation, which will open in a few weeks' time.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): When we look at the popular things that this Labour Government have done since coming to power—and I am talking about raising the minimum wage, raising the living wage and abolishing the two-child cap—we see that these decisions are rooted in Labour party values. Eroding civil liberties, as seen in the proposals for jury trials and for digital ID, is not in keeping with Labour party values, and nor is it necessary or, indeed, popular. Will the Minister feed my thoughts back to the leadership at Cabinet level?

Josh Simons: Of course.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): My constituents are opposed to digital ID, and I welcome the Minister's U-turn—I look forward to him being given responsibility for jury trials as well. The problem is that digital ID will have no effect on illegal working or illegal migration, because employers that ignore the system at the moment will continue to ignore the new system. The real problem is that the Government are not deporting those illegal migrants they catch.

Josh Simons: The digital ID scheme and toughening up illegal labour market enforcement are part of a suite of measures that this Government are delivering to crack down on illegal migration. Other measures include, for example, extending right-to-work checks to cover businesses hiring in the gig economy and zero-hours workers in construction, food delivery, beauty salons and so on. This is all about reducing incentives for illegal migration, and it will change irregular migrants' perceptions of the toughness of the UK labour market enforcement regime, which the hon. Member's party failed to do for 14 years.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his announcement about the changes to digital ID. As a neighbouring MP, he will know that I recently held a public meeting in Leigh and Atherton, and there was overwhelming agreement that this should not be mandatory, so the decision will be welcomed by many. However, can he set out how the wider digitisation of public services will benefit my constituents, particularly in streamlining support for parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities?

Josh Simons: I commend my hon. Friend for the public meeting she held—my constituents reported back that it was a robust but constructive conversation, which, as she knows, conversations always are in Wigan—and I can set out the wider benefits. When someone has a baby, they should be able to access the childcare they need without having to tell the Government repeatedly the same information that we already know about them. When we tell our constituents that that does not already happen, they think it probably should already happen. We will make sure that it does happen so that people are saved time, money and hassle.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): We know that the Prime Minister was warned many times that voters would not believe the claim that introducing mandatory digital ID was about stopping illegal immigration, but he decided to push on regardless. Does the Minister think it was credible to argue that 67 million people—law-abiding citizens who already have passports, national insurance

numbers and driving licences—should be placed into a brand-new compulsory database to stop illegal immigration, or does he accept that this is just another example of the Prime Minister treating the public as fools?

Josh Simons: About 25% of UK citizens do not have a passport, and 15% of people have never had a passport. There are millions of people right across this country who are currently digitally excluded, which affects their capacity to access vital services in the public sector and the private sector. I want those people to be part of our public services and our economy just like everyone else, and we will make every effort to reach them.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): My constituents are sick to the back teeth of people getting away with working illegally while they play by the rules. The previous Government, despite the incredible hindsight the Conservatives now seem to have about their time in office, utterly failed to put in place a robust system of right-to-work checks, which was a gift to rogue employers and criminal gangs. Does the Minister agree that it is high time we brought in digital right-to-work checks to crack down on the scourge of illegal working that the Conservative party left to fester?

Josh Simons: I wholeheartedly agree. Toughening up our illegal labour market enforcement regime, and using digital right-to-work checks to do that, is a vital part of delivering this Government's central priority to crack down on illegal migration.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): When the Prime Minister first announced digital ID, it was to stop illegal working. It took most of us about a minute to work out that that was total nonsense. Flapping in the wind, the Government are now desperately trying to sell the benefits of limiting liberty and freedom for all our constituents. One thing the Government have failed to tell us is how much this will cost. Nothing in life is free; there is a cost to this. Do the Government dispute the £1.8 billion estimate that has been provided by the Office for Budget Responsibility?

Josh Simons: The hon. Gentleman talks about flapping in the wind. He might have noticed that one person will be flapping in the wind: the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who I believe has just been sacked by the Leader of the Opposition for secret plots to defect to another Opposition party. I wonder if the hon. Gentleman wants to ask him whether he is flapping in the wind.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Constituents who write to me about their battles with Government Departments overwhelmingly complain about delays, such as the typical 15-week wait for mandatory reconsideration. In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the Minister spoke of talking to people first. Does the Minister not think that if the Government really believed in that, he would not be standing there defending their 13th U-turn?

Josh Simons: Talking and listening to people is what I believe in. That is why we will be launching a major public consultation and will be out across the country

talking to people about their frustrations with the public services that the Conservative party left to rot for 14 years. We will build the public goods and the digital infrastructure we need to fix them.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister talks about mandatory right-to-work checks in a way that implies it is always the worker who is the bad faith actor in the relationship. Will he explain how mandatory right-to-work checks will be used to check employers, who are often the guilty party for employing people illegally? Will he outline what other agencies will have access to the database in a passive way—that is, without having been asked to provide an individual's ID—to work out what is going on?

Josh Simons: There was quite a lot in the hon. Gentleman's question, but I will do my level best to answer it. Digital right-to-work checks will make it easier for those who have a digital ID to prove their right to work. Crucially, it will make it easier for employers to check people's right to work. That will benefit our economy. When a digital right-to-work check is done, it creates a record. That is a key piece of information that this Government will use, alongside the other ways we are toughening up our illegal working regime, to ensure we are enforcing against employers who are undercutting British workers by hiring people illegally.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call John Lamont. *[Interruption.]*

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Oh! Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. We do not want digital ID. It will cost billions of pounds and it should be scrapped completely. Despite what the Minister said, I am concerned that digital ID will not be technically compulsory, but people will be blocked from accessing services if they do not have it. In response to other questions, the Minister alluded to childcare. Can he confirm whether accessing childcare will be dependent on having a digital ID card?

Josh Simons: I think the hon. Gentleman was lost for a moment there as he was contemplating the implosion of his shadow Cabinet once again, which I can wholly understand. Details of how the scheme will be used will come after the consultation. I invite him to tell us, in the consultation, how he thinks it could be useful for him to access childcare if he so needs and chooses.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Does the Minister accept that announcing mandatory digital ID, only to then retreat to voluntary digital ID, has merely

created an expensive and chaotic shambles? Will he rule out unequivocally that this retreat is not a trojan horse for compulsory digital ID being imposed on the public at a later date—yes or no?

Josh Simons: I am glad the hon. Member is smiling about the potential new colleague she may obtain in the coming days. We on the Labour Benches have a proud history of building public goods that help us to serve people better: the NHS, social housing, the welfare state. This piece of digital infrastructure will serve working people across the country for decades to come and make government work better for them. I am proud that we are building digital public goods.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Minister has been consistent this morning both in his defence of the indefensible and in avoiding putting a price on this scheme. He did not answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), who asked whether the Government dispute the £1.8 billion figure from the OBR. If he will not give an overall ballpark figure of what the Treasury has sanctioned for this scheme, will he at least tell us what the consultation he is hiding behind will cost?

Josh Simons: Members will see more details about the costings in a very few weeks in the consultation. To be very clear: no, this Government do not recognise the figures in the OBR's estimate, because the crucial design choices about how to make the scheme work for ordinary people will be made after the consultation and after we have talked to the public.

Madam Deputy Speaker: For the final question, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Hopefully there will be easier questions for the Minister to answer in the time to come. This issue is very important to my constituents; I get hundreds of emails about it. The response to the proposal of digital ID has been swift and intense, and the feelings on all sides of the community have not diminished in any way. The general public seek assurance that their autonomy, in so far as it does not harm anyone else, is a foundational principle in our democracy. How do the Government intend to rebuild the trust that has quite clearly been lost?

Josh Simons: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Trust is vital—digital tools work only when they are trusted. In the consultation that we will publish in the coming weeks, Members will see that trust is at the heart of how we build the system for working people.

Business of the House

11.21 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 19 January will include:

MONDAY 19 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

TUESDAY 20 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Sentencing Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Holocaust Memorial Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill.

WEDNESDAY 21 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill, followed by motion to approve the draft Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 (Remedial) Order 2025.

THURSDAY 22 JANUARY—General debate on Government support for the fishing industry, followed by a general debate on the impact of import standards on the agricultural sector. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 23 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 26 January includes:

MONDAY 26 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Armed Forces Bill.

TUESDAY 27 JANUARY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 28 JANUARY—Opposition day (16th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 29 JANUARY—General debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 30 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House for the clarity he has given us on the business of the House, and in particular for the rescheduling of the Diego Garcia Bill immediately after it was going to be debated, following the changes made to the Hillsborough law.

I know the whole House will want to join me in expressing our continuing concern for the people of Iran in the face of the vicious repression that they have faced and apparently may continue to face.

If I may, I want to raise two issues: one that is big and one that is small but, in its own way, also big. First, on defence and security, the Chief of the Defence Staff was in front of the Defence Committee this week. He revealed that the strategic defence review was not fully costed, despite all the assurances that were given to the Committee and to Parliament at the time.

As a result, the defence investment plan has been repeatedly delayed—until March, as it appears—because the Treasury is apparently seeking to come to terms

with the fact that we are in a pre-war situation and that the actual cash spending power of many of our armed forces will barely grow over the next two years. This is an enormously important topic for the whole House. I would be grateful for the assurance of the Leader of the House that he will speak to No. 10 and the Cabinet Office to ensure that my shadow Cabinet colleagues continue to receive the appropriate security briefings that they require to do their job.

Secondly, the issue of pubs and hospitality has consumed so much of the power, concern and interest of the House. We are always apt to get lost in generalities. In a way, that is a condition of politics: we debate the laws and the general issues of the country. It is also important, however, to zero in on a particular factual situation from time to time and use that to get a wider sense of what is happening.

I will put before the House the facts of a specific case relating to hospitality. In my constituency, the Bay Horse Inn is a great country pub that sits on the outskirts of Hereford. It supports local people and serves my constituents. From April, its business rates are scheduled to rise from £31,000 to over £51,000 a year—a 67% increase. The landlord Neil tells me that energy costs have also risen to £5,500 a month. Unlike households, there is no price cap for commercial energy. Indeed, pubs are charged risk premiums and are locked into prices of nearly 40p a unit, while domestic customers pay around 28p.

The pub already pays above the minimum wage. Neil estimates that the rise in the national living wage will add £18,000 a year to his costs. Meanwhile, monthly national insurance contributions have risen by nearly 170%, and that is made worse because the higher employer contributions now exhaust the employment allowance more quickly. That is a direct tax on employing people, especially young people, and it lands hardest on small, labour-intensive businesses such as pubs. Neil has a few guest rooms at the Bay Horse, so he does not even know if he will be helped by the latest rumoured U-turn on rates support.

That is the reality of the Government's unwillingness or inability to join up policy in relation to a key set of sectors in the economy that affect hospitality. All those increases are the result of current ministerial decisions. Every Member of the House—including every Government Member—will have pubs and hospitality businesses in their constituency in the same situation.

The Bay Horse is not just a business: it has raised over £60,000 for the Hereford Lions club; it installed a defibrillator at the landlord's expense; it provides a place for supervised, responsible drinking; and it supports schools, the hospice and local causes year after year, yet Government policy treats it as expendable. When will Ministers start talking to each other? When will they put away the rhetoric of helping and actually get on with assisting small businesses? Can we have a debate in the House that goes into not just the specific issue of hospitality, but the generality of all the different Government policies across different Departments that make life so difficult for these hard-working, struggling local businesses?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the shadow Leader of the House in sending our thoughts to the people of Iran and the region at this very difficult time.

I also send our congratulations to Lord Forsyth, who was announced as the new Lord Speaker earlier this week, and I pay tribute to Lord McFall, the outgoing Lord Speaker, for his service and commitment.

I am glad to welcome the shadow Leader of the House back to his place. Last week he was on a shadow Cabinet awayday. I thought that he might want to give us a read-out on that and whether a place was set at the top table for the Leader of the Opposition's new adviser, Nadhim Zahawi, who shortly afterwards had his own awayday when he defected to Reform. I understand from breaking news that things have got worse for the Leader of the Opposition, who has just sacked her rival and shadow Justice Secretary amid rumours that he was about to join Reform too. We watch developments with interest.

The shadow Leader of the House raised the issue of defence. As a member of the Defence Committee who takes a keen interest in these matters, he will know how difficult these decisions are, but the Government are committed to increasing defence expenditure and to taking whatever decisions are necessary to defend our country. As far as briefings are concerned, he raises an important matter about access to the information that the official Opposition require. He knows that I am a strong advocate of the role of the official Opposition—I spent quite a long time in opposition myself. It is important that the Opposition get access and I will take back to No. 10 and others his request and ensure that that happens.

The right hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to raise the issue of pubs, and there are some fantastic pubs in his constituency and that part of the country. I would gently remind him that 7,000 pubs closed under the Conservatives, and in the Budget we put in £4.3 billion of support over three years to help pubs deal with the transition from the support that they previously received. On top of that, other measures that we have taken include easing licensing to help pubs offer drinks more flexibly, maintaining our cut to draught alcohol duty and capping corporation tax. We do recognise that pubs are still worried and many of them are in a difficult situation, and that is why the Chancellor has commissioned work examining a pub support package. That is not just words, as the shadow Leader of the House suggested: it is action.

In terms of joined-up policy across Government, of course the Government are joining up our approach, especially on the economy. The House may have noticed this morning that performance statistics show that waiting lists are down by 312,000, and more people are being treated within 18 weeks. November saw the second biggest monthly drop in waiting lists in 15 years. The Government also announced this week that we will deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail, a multibillion pound investment that will create a turn-up-and-go railway across the northern growth corridor of Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and York. We have also launched the first ever town of culture competition, which will boost local pride and celebrate the unique stories of our towns, not just in urban areas but in rural areas. Today is national pothole day—although the Leader of the Opposition may think it is national dig-yourself-into-a-hole day—and the Government have provided a record £7.3 billion of funding for local roads, announced in the Budget, allowing councils to get on and fix our roads. That demonstrates that this Government are getting on with the job.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that, like me and others, the Leader of the House will be pleased to learn that NHS waiting lists continue to drop. I am also sure he will agree that Homerton hospital, which has seen productivity on operations increase by more than 11% year on year, is a beacon of what can be done. I hope he will join me in congratulating Hackney council, which has facilitated the provision of two new general practices and 50,000 extra appointments, because we need to ensure people get decent primary care so that they stop going into hospital.

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely applaud Hackney council for the work that it is doing. My hon. Friend identifies exactly the approach that needs to be taken, and that is the approach that the Government will take. Hospital trusts and local authorities need to work closely together, and I am delighted that in her part of the country we can demonstrate that that is the case.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There are rumours circulating around Westminster of a Bobby about to join the Reform party. I just want to clarify that it is not me. I am staying put. I quite enjoy watching the numbers to the right of me dwindle.

We talk a lot in this place about the Home Office, immigration and asylum. Mostly, we talk about people's right to come here and the shameful asylum backlog. We talk much less about the people who are already here—the ones who have built their lives, held down jobs, paid taxes, raised a family and contributed. I think the story of immigration in this country is largely a positive one, and it is sad that that is not said enough in this place. If you have worked hard and played by the rules, you deserve to be treated with respect.

Unfortunately, the Home Office is treating many visa holders seeking to settle here with disrespect. People who have lived here for years—sometimes over a decade—are being made to wait years, sometimes subject to indefinite service standards, for answers about their future in this country. Recently, the Home Office has even taken to lecturing people with the line that citizenship is a privilege and not a right, as if to say how dare they ask about remaining in a country they have contributed to for so long. Will the Leader of the House bring this to the attention of Home Office Ministers and urge them to review their service standards and treat these people with a bit more respect?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the positive impact of immigration, but he also has to be cognisant of the concern about levels of immigration, which the Government are taking seriously. We have made it absolutely clear that no one should have to wait a long time to hear about a decision, and the Home Office is implementing reforms. However, there was a considerable backlog when we came into office, and that extends not only to making decisions but to making sure that people hear about them in a reasonable timeframe. Significant progress has been made in reducing the decision backlog, with the number of people awaiting an initial decision down by more than half from the June 2023 peak, but if the hon.

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Gentleman has specific cases that he wishes me to raise, I will certainly raise them with the relevant Minister, as I will his general concern.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): It is not possible to get in a taxi at the moment without the driver rightly raising concerns about cross-border hiring. When the Tories deregulated the taxi licensing laws in 2013 in response to lobbying from Uber, they undermined safeguarding—in particular for children and women—undercut local markets and undermined the standards of service that taxi drivers want to provide to their customers. I know that the Government are introducing national minimum standards for taxis, but that does not go the whole way to tackling this really important issue. Will the Leader of the House ensure that there is time in the second Session of this Parliament to legislate on cross-border hiring and put proper safety, safeguarding and service standards back at the heart of our taxi industry?

Sir Alan Campbell: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. She is a strong campaigner on these matters and I welcome her contribution. We tabled amendments to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill as a first step, but, as she acknowledges, we are also committed to delivering robust national minimum standards so that passengers can travel with confidence. She would not expect me to comment on what might or might not happen in the second Session, but we continue to consider future legislative options on these matters, because there is further work to be done.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I join the Leader of the House in congratulating Lord Forsyth on his election in the other place.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, next Thursday there will be a Select Committee statement from the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee on its report, “Tackling the energy cost crisis.” On Thursday 29 January, there will be a Select Committee statement from the Health and Social Care Committee on the first 1,000 days of life.

In Westminster Hall next Tuesday, there will be a debate on the role of the NHS in preventing domestic homicides and domestic abuse-related deaths. On Thursday 22 January, there will be a debate on transport connectivity in the midlands and north Wales, followed by a debate on the International Day of Education. On 27 January, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on UK bus manufacturing. On 29 January, there will be a debate on non-recognition of Russian occupied territories of Ukraine, followed by a debate on protecting and restoring river habitats. I advise the Leader of the House that a large number of time-sensitive debates have been requested for both February and March, so early warning of what dates we will get would be helpful for us to allocate those debates accordingly.

At the pre-recess Adjournment debate, I raised the situation in Bangladesh, and the Leader of the House quite rightly wrote to the Foreign Secretary about the

disastrous situation there. Hindu men are being murdered on the streets; their houses are being burned; the temples are being burned; and other religious minorities are suffering similar fates. Next month, there are due to be so-called free and fair elections. The Awami League, which is a major political party in Bangladesh, is banned from competing in those elections, despite its commanding about 30% in the opinion polls. Equally, the Islamic extremists have called for a referendum which would change the constitution of Bangladesh forever. Could we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary next week on what action the Government will take to ensure that there are free, fair and inclusive elections and that minorities are protected?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for not just his work, but that of his Committee and for his ever-thorough updates. On times and future business, I have heard very much what he said. I understand that some of these matters can be time sensitive. I will do everything I can to give him the early warning he asks for, but I also make him the offer, in the times that we do meet, that perhaps we could look at other opportunities for some of these topics to be discussed, outside of Backbench Business.

The hon. Gentleman raises Bangladesh. We actively engage with the humanitarian situation and support the interim Government on peaceful and credible elections. We have a long-standing commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, and we continue to stress that to the interim Government of Bangladesh. We condemn all acts of violence, whether they are religious or ethnic-based, and welcome the commitments of the head of the interim Government to the safety of minorities, including where arrests are made. But I will draw the hon. Gentleman's comments to the attention of the Foreign Secretary and, of course, I am sure that the Department will want to bring forward a statement when it is appropriate.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I will not be the only Member dealing with a large number of child maintenance issues that have been ongoing for years and years. It is frankly intolerable. Could the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what further steps he is taking to prevent an appeal process being repeatedly used as a delaying tactic, particularly by high-income parents who are non-residents and are under-reporting their incomes?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises concerns that I am sure are felt by Members across the House. I will raise her concerns with the Secretary of State, but I also point out that Work and Pensions questions are later this month.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Ofwat has thankfully moved from being “concerned” about repeated and widespread water outages in Sussex and Kent to taking action. Once again, this has significantly affected my constituents for the last five days in East Grinstead, Ashurst Wood and many Wealden villages. My constituents have seen this repeated failing, shambolic performance from South East Water previously. They want action and accountability. I respectfully ask the Leader of the House to make Government time available to discuss the impacts on the community, business, vulnerable people and livestock, as well as the challenges

around compensation and performance for those affected. Some 2.3 million customers are “served” by this atrocious organisation.

Sir Alan Campbell: The water supply shortages are an unacceptable failure by South East Water in every regard. We are holding the company to account and being clear with it that restoring supply must be its priority and that those affected must receive compensation. This is further evidence that the water system is broken. I could go on to talk about other companies, not least Thames Water. The hon. Lady may wish to table an urgent question, if appropriate, or apply for an Adjournment debate to raise these matters further. She rightly alluded to the fact that there needs to be a longer-term response, which is why we already have the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which includes the toughest enforcement powers in a decade. Those powers must be used.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Reports that the Government might be looking to bring forward a support package for our pubs are very welcome—we know just how important pubs are for our communities and for bringing people together—but the pressures being felt by pubs are also being felt across hospitality in our restaurants, bars, cinemas and nightclubs. Will the Leader of the House use his good office to impress on His Majesty’s Treasury that if a package comes forward, it should be a whole-of-hospitality package?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this point on behalf of hospitality in his constituency. I gave a fuller answer on this matter previously. The Government are actively looking at how best we can help pubs and, more widely, at what further support we can provide.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Yesterday, Open Doors held its annual event here in Westminster and published its world watch list. Thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in particular, we have often had debates about religious persecution, but can the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time in the Chamber to consider the latest Open Doors list and the persecution that exists across the world?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise these matters, which are of huge concern. I pay tribute to him and to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for doing so consistently and continually. I cannot promise him a debate in Government time, but should he seek an Adjournment debate, or indeed a Backbench Business debate, I am sure he will find support across the House.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Residents across Telford and wider Shropshire are reporting long delays for Royal Mail delivery, including my constituent Ed Pritchard, who is waiting for urgent information from the NHS. Posties have contacted me privately to tell me that they have been ordered not to deliver post and to prioritise parcels. Will the Leader of the House ask the Minister responsible to give an urgent statement to the House so that we can get Royal Mail to deliver to Telford, Shropshire and other affected areas of the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these matters. I have heard similar rumours as a constituency MP. The reliable delivery of post, particularly for urgent health information, is essential, and constituents are absolutely right to expect a well-run postal service. I know that Royal Mail pays close attention to issues raised at business questions, but I will ensure that the Minister responsible is made aware of my hon. Friend’s concerns.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The upcoming national cancer plan is a vital opportunity to resolve chronic issues in cancer care and to improve survival outcomes after 10 years of neglect from the Conservatives. With the plan’s announcement likely to be just a few weeks away, can the Leader of the House confirm what time will be allocated for its full debate and scrutiny by the House?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that the Health Secretary will want to make a statement to the House when we bring forward proposals. We will certainly look at other opportunities to debate this matter because, as the hon. Gentleman says, it is of huge concern to Members across the House.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): Sick cell anaemia is the UK’s fastest growing genetic condition, with nearly 300 babies born with it every year. Instead of specialist capacity increasing, we are seeing the sickle cell day unit at the Royal London hospital facing a questionable six-month trial closure. This will put significant pressure on neighbouring services, extend emergency travel time by up to two hours, and place patients at serious and potentially fatal risk during a crisis. Five years after the sickle cell and thalassaemia all-party parliamentary group’s report, “No One’s Listening”, will the Government do what the last Government failed to and make a statement on their plans to deliver a national strategy for specific and specialised sickle cell treatment?

Sir Alan Campbell: Given the importance of this matter, I am sorry to hear of the concerns that my hon. Friend raises and the fact that things are taking time. I would go further than simply raising it with Ministers; I think she should seek a meeting with Health Ministers so that she can raise those concerns with them directly.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Scottish Borders are being inundated with new energy infrastructure projects. SNP Ministers in Edinburgh blame the Labour Government here, and the Labour Government here blame the SNP Government in Scotland—frankly, it has become ridiculous. Ultimately, responsibility rests with the Scottish Government’s planning framework, which allows those energy projects to be imposed on local communities, even if there are concerns about grid capacity or the local council strongly objects. I would be very grateful to the Leader of the House if he facilitated a meeting between the UK Government Energy Minister, the Scottish Government and me, so that we can provide local communities and the environment the protection that they deserve.

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that planning is a devolved matter. I remind the House—it would not be business questions without my doing so—that we have provided the Scottish Government

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with more than £50 billion a year, which is the biggest funding settlement since devolution began. I would be happy to facilitate the meeting that he requests.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): In communities such as Netherfield and Daybrook in my constituency, there has been an unchecked rise in the number of houses in multiple occupation, which is undermining community cohesion and local services, and affecting housing availability. Will the Leader of the House urge the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to reverse the last Conservative Government's change to legislation that allowed HMOs to be established without any local planning process and control?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand that my hon. Friend has been working closely with his local council on this matter, and I pay tribute to him for his diligence in that work. Local authorities have planning powers to limit the proliferation of HMOs in their areas. We keep the regulation of HMOs under review. I will ensure that the Secretary of State hears his words and that he gets a response.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Duncan Grocock, a frequent commuter from Salisbury to London, came to see me about the short-forming of South Western Railway trains along the line through Andover and Basingstoke. Passengers can be compensated when trains are late, but not when they must stand for commutes of an hour and a half. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement from one of his Department for Transport colleagues on whether compensation can be paid to commuters on that line who have to stand on three-carriage trains into London?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will start gently by saying that we are freezing rail fares for the first time in 30 years. Great British Rail will bring train operators back into public ownership from next spring, reducing bureaucracy and increasing accountability. That will not necessarily satisfy the commuters that the right hon. Gentleman mentions, however. I will arrange a meeting with the Rail Minister so that the right hon. Gentleman can make those points directly.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): After 14 years of Conservative austerity, councils like Knowsley have been left on the bones, with deep cuts and rising demand. I know that this Labour Government are committed to fixing a broken system and to funding councils based on their need. However, in Knowsley, where deprivation is driven by low incomes, the provisional local government settlement does not meet the real pressures that we face, so will the Leader of the House ensure that the concerns of Liverpool city region MPs, the mayor and council leaders are given serious consideration and lead to action so that the final settlement benefits constituencies like mine?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter not just on behalf of her constituency but for her region, championing the concerns of councils as well as of her constituents. The Government are making good on a long-overdue promise to update the way in which we fund local authorities. I can give her my assurance

that Ministers are working very hard indeed to ensure that—within the limits of what we can do—councils get the resources that they require. I will ensure that the relevant Minister is made aware of her concerns.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my long-time Scottish Conservative and Unionist colleague, Lord Forsyth, on his election as Lord Speaker?

In the pre-recess debate, I highlighted the exciting prospects for the redevelopment of the Chapelcross nuclear power station site in my constituency. For that redevelopment to go ahead, it will require an additional extensive connection to the grid, but at the moment the National Energy System Operator, which is in charge of managing the electricity network, is conducting a review, and no large-scale connections are going ahead. Could the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to make a statement on when NESO's review will be concluded and these important connections can proceed?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the House. I know he is a strong advocate on this issue, and I recall him raising it before the recess. I will raise his concerns with the responsible Minister and his reasonable request to see what further progress can be made, to give some certainty. It goes back to what the shadow Leader of the House said; it is about literally joining things up—that is crucial, so I will draw this to the attention of the Minister.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): A constituent of mine requires to renew his driving licence annually because of his age. He applied for a renewal in September 2025 and has now been told that his hospital consultant was asked for verification of his ability to drive in January 2026. Unfortunately, his consultant has not yet received such a request. Meanwhile, my constituent has lost three job offers because he does not have a valid driving licence. The Leader of the House is not unfamiliar with the issue of delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. Given this particular case and what we have heard in previous weeks, I wonder whether a debate about the problem of delays at the DVLA is now appropriate.

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. As she alludes to, it is not new; delays are affecting the lives of constituents right across our country. The DVLA is currently rolling out a new casework system, which is expected to deliver significant improvements to the services provided to drivers with medical conditions, but as I have said before, that is small beer to people who are sitting at home waiting or are unable to take job opportunities. If she gives me the details of the case, I will raise it with Ministers to see what further action we can take.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): One of the greatest privileges I have had in this place so far was sitting on the assisted dying Bill Committee. We have seen in the press today rumours that No. 10 thinks the Bill will not return before the King's Speech and subsequently would fall. Could the Leader of the House enlighten us on what conversations he is having with his counterpart in the other place and whether the Government

will ensure there is adequate time for the Bill to pass, given that the public perception and polling is in support of the Bill, and many people I speak to already think it will come into force? Given that the Prime Minister made a personal promise to Esther Rantzen, will the Leader of the House gently nudge him in the right direction?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have always said that this is for Parliament to decide. I would say to those in the other place that they should respect the will of this elected House, which did support the Bill. However, their job of scrutiny is up to them. I urge them to get on with it, so that we can make every effort. I am a supporter of the Bill, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that he is too, but I know there are real concerns about it. I have also made it clear that, should the Bill come back to this place, presumably with amendments made, we will facilitate time here to make that happen. We have to be clear about this: the Lords have a job to do, and they are getting on with it in a particular way. We might not like it, but it is their job to get the Bill into shape. If it does come back here, we will do everything we can to get it on to the statute book, but it is not a Government Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Members should be aware that I am seeking to finish business questions by around 12.30 pm, so please keep questions short and succinct.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I want to take this opportunity to publicly praise Luton Town football club for calling out racist online comments directed at several of its black players and, earlier this week, at its assistant manager, Chris Powell, following Luton's great win over Stevenage. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those who express these racist and prejudicial views online, and will he make time for a statement on the progress of the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 in this regard?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in condemning the views that she described. There is absolutely no place for hatred of any kind in our society. Real progress has been made in football in general and at many football grounds, and it is a pity that she has to continue to raise these matters. I join her in praising Luton Town football club for doing its part in fighting racism, along with all the other football clubs that take the matter extremely seriously. She may wish to raise her concerns directly with Ministers at the next Department for Science, Innovation and Technology questions, which are on 4 February.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In Ilkley, Labour-run Bradford council is shockingly set to remove the town's free one hour of on-street parking, despite over 4,000 residents objecting to the proposals. That follows a local referendum in the town, in which 90% of residents rejected a blanket 20 mile per hour zone and speed humps, only for the results of that poll to be ignored by the Labour mayor, who used his casting vote to push the vote through and, outrageously, said to residents that they should save their votes for "Strictly", then went on to bill taxpayers £190,000 for the privilege. Ministers often say that decisions are for local leaders,

but what happens when local leaders are outright ignoring the views of the public? Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on the role of central Government in areas where local democracy is clearly failing?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise these concerns. There is clearly real concern in his constituency, but he will not be surprised if I say that parking is a matter for local authorities. It is a matter for local leaders and it is not for the Government to tell them how to manage things at that level. If local people are unhappy with their local representatives, they have the power to do something about that.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I encourage the Leader of the House, in his roles on the restoration and renewal board and the House of Commons Commission, to ensure that when the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster takes place and there is a multibillion pound investment in the building, every penny and every pound is, wherever possible, put into a British industry, manufacturer, artisan or craftsman, starting with ensuring that we are using Stoke-on-Trent ceramics?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend and I have discussed this matter at length. We intend to publish a report from the client board. Once that has been fully considered by both Houses, I stick to my commitment that MPs will have a final say on the subject. My view is that renewal and restoration presents a great opportunity to do something on a huge scale that will give a big boost to the economy. It is not just about London, but about all parts of the country. A lot of the stone used to build this place comes from Yorkshire, the steelwork comes from Sheffield and, as he pointed out, many of the tiles come from his part of the country. Should the House decide to take these matters forward, I would expect that people in every part of the country would feel the benefit. After all, this House belongs to them.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): People in West Suffolk are furious at the prospect of the county council elections being cancelled yet again, and I reiterate my opposition to that decision. This morning, the BBC reported that Suffolk county council had requested that the elections be cancelled. That is completely untrue, as the county council leader, Matthew Hicks, has made clear, and the BBC has corrected the record. The BBC got that story from somewhere, and everyone suspects that Government officials or advisers briefed the media accordingly because the Government want to cancel the elections and blame somebody else. The elections are now only four months away, so can a decision and a statement be made as soon as possible?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government cannot be held accountable for a misspeak by the BBC on these matters. The hon. Gentleman is going a bit far to find a conspiracy behind everything. I gently point out that the record has been corrected in relation to that council. The reality is that various requests have been made not to bring forward elections, not least because in some areas councillors would be elected for a very short period of time, some of which have been made by Labour-led authorities, some by Lib Dem-led authorities and others by Conservative-led authorities.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Next Monday is Brew Monday, which Samaritans has reclaimed from the marketing myth that is blue Monday, when we are all miserable. May I invite the Leader of the House, all hon. Members and of course you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to join me and Samaritans in the Jubilee Room for a chat, a cuppa and to meet Samaritans and learn about their work? May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of talking with and listening to other people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work on the incredibly serious issue of suicide prevention and for championing the fantastic work of Samaritans and the Brew Monday campaign. The Government are fully committed to delivering the suicide prevention strategy for England. We have listened to what she and others have said on these matters and are investing a significant £3.6 million specifically in suicide prevention, with a particular focus on middle-aged men.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Last week, Consumer Energy Solutions went into administration, costing nearly 300 jobs and leaving Welsh households stuck waiting for repairs after faulty energy company obligation 4 work. There are two parts to my question, if the Leader of the House and Madam Deputy Speaker will allow it. What immediate support are the Government offering to those impacted by the closure of CES? While I am fully aware of the Public Accounts Committee's work following that of the National Audit Office, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate in Government time on all aspects of ECO4—not just insulation—given its abject failure to deliver for so many of the people of Caerfyrddin and Wales?

Sir Alan Campbell: I must confess that I am not fully across the matter, so my reaction is this. If the hon. Lady wishes to expand a little on what she has said, she may seek an Adjournment debate or even a Backbench Business debate; otherwise, I will facilitate a meeting with the relevant Minister so that she can explain her concerns and the Minister can explain, if the Government are able to do anything about it, what we are able to do.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): It is an indisputable fact that Amber Valley has the best pubs in the country. [*Interruption.*] It is true: they include the Moot Bar in Alfreton, Tom Said in Ripley and the Tip Inn in Loscoe, near Heanor. I welcome the Government support announced for pubs, including the £4.3 billion for businesses as covid-era business rates relief is phased out. However, increases in valuations mean that many pubs still face sharp increases. What assurance can the Leader of the House give directly to publicans, including those in Amber Valley, that there will still be support for the great British pub and that it will be protected as a community hub?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for championing local pubs. Like her, we hugely value the role they play in our communities, which is why in the Budget we put in £4.3 billion of support over three years to help pubs. We recognise, as I said previously, that some pubs are still worried, which is why the Chancellor has commissioned work to examine a pub support package; that work is ongoing. I also note that Alter Ego beer is on the waiting list for Strangers Bar, so perhaps we can all try it sooner rather than later.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Last year, 1,600 people were killed on our roads. May we have a debate on the Government's road safety strategy and toughening driving offence sentences, including steps to protect horses and riders such as my constituent Emma and many others in North West Norfolk and across the country who feel increasingly frightened and unsafe due to dangerous and abusive driving on our rural roads?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman implied, it is really important that the Government have brought forward a road safety strategy, which is the first in over a decade. We have an ambition to reduce deaths and serious injuries on Britain's roads by almost two thirds by 2035. As he knows, there are a number of measures in that strategy. I will consider his request for a debate on these matters, because road safety has been raised by many hon. Members in business questions over the last few weeks and months.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, in his statement to the House on 11 November, advised that he would "retake" the earlier decision of the Government on the question of how 1950s-born women were affected by the maladministration of pension age changes communication. I have almost 6,000 WASPI women in my constituency, and they are rightfully impatient for this matter finally to be resolved. Does the Leader of the House expect the Secretary of State to update the House soon? If so, when is that expected?

Sir Alan Campbell: As my hon. Friend said, we are looking again at the decision regarding WASPI women. I know that this is an issue of serious concern to many of our constituents, and we want to resolve the matter as soon as we can. The Secretary of State is absolutely committed to updating the House on this decision. I cannot give a date for that, but as soon as a conclusion is reached, I expect that he will want to inform the House.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Local rugby clubs such as Bridlington, Driffield and Hornsea do an enormous amount to engage young men and women in sport, and 2026 is Driffield rugby club's centenary. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Driffield on its first 100 years? Can I tempt him to don his kit when the Commons and Lords rugby team play Driffield in a charity match for the Injured Players Foundation at Twickenham in March?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the importance of rugby clubs in our communities; they do a fantastic job. Driffield rugby club's centenary is absolutely fantastic news. He will see that I am not desperately keen to take up his offer. Should I join the parliamentary team, I would be in danger of dangerous tackles not only from the other side, but probably from our side.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): City of Durham is home to fantastic hospitality businesses. I have had the pleasure of visiting some of them recently, such as the Station pub in Langley Moor, as well as Notch and Kitt's Pool Room and Bar in the city. We are aware that the hospitality sector faces an existential

crisis, with many much-loved cafés, pubs, restaurants and hotels struggling to survive. Will the Leader of the House urge his colleagues in the Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade to listen to the calls of campaigners and Back-Bench MPs and address the House urgently to commit to a sector-wide business rates solution?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. I can assure her that the Government are listening on these matters. We are introducing new, permanently lower tax rates for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties, and we are also introducing a hospitality support scheme. As I said in a previous answer, the Chancellor has commissioned work to examine a specific pub support package.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Dairy farmers across Glastonbury and Somerton are competing against imports of cheaper cheese from New Zealand and butter from the USA, but there is no obligation for those products to be labelled with a point of origin. The result is a dramatic collapse in milk prices at the farm gate, and many farmers are now producing milk for less than the cost of production. We hear of farmers throwing milk down the drain in utter desperation. Can the Leader of the House advise me on how I may secure a meeting with a Minister to discuss fairness in the supply chain not only to give farmers confidence, but to give our consumers the confidence that they can back British farming?

Sir Alan Campbell: Ensuring fairness in supply chains is key for UK dairy farmers, and the Government recognise that. The Fair Dealing Obligations (Milk) Regulations 2024 improve fairness and transparency, and require dairy contracts to include clear terms on pricing termination and prohibiting unilateral changes. Through our new deal for farmers, we are supporting growth and making the supply chain fairer. My colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have heard the hon. Lady's remarks. If she writes to me, I will ensure that she gets the meeting that she seeks.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): Sue and Dave Cook from St Helens have been awarded MBEs for their services to fostering. They have helped to take care of children for over 20 years. In Sue's words:

"To be able to give back to these children from St Helens who need us—it is an honour. It is a privilege to have them in our home."

Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Sue and Dave Cook and to foster carers everywhere? Will he also join me in encouraging anyone in St Helens North who wants to make a difference to a child's life to get in touch with the council's fostering team for more information?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend and others for raising the work of Sue and Dave Cook, and I join him in paying tribute to them. They may talk about the remarkable people who they look after, but they are truly remarkable people in the care that they give. We depend on foster carers providing an important role, because they literally change the lives of many children for the better. We want to ensure that carers can provide their vital services, which is why we are

putting money behind that, with £44 million to support kinship and foster carers and £25 million to recruit more foster families and support carers. I hope that the calls of my hon. Friend have been heard outside this House and that more people will come forward to do what is such an important job.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Leader of the House needs to be aware that London Councils is considering scrapping the older persons' freedom pass, which has left my constituents shocked, angry and dismayed. The freedom pass is a lifeline for many, providing access to free transport and enabling older people to live active lives. He will be aware that I recently presented the Transport for London (Extension of Concessions) Bill to the House, which would protect the freedom pass for all areas served by Transport for London, including Havering and beyond. That is clearly more important than ever. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for the Second Reading of my Bill, so that we can protect, defend and extend the freedom pass for our senior citizens across the entire Transport for London region?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am not able to offer more time. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is quite a queue for time for any private Members' Bills that we need to take forward. We have had the 13 sitting Fridays, and we are not in a situation to provide more Government time. I am reliably informed that what he claims is the case is not necessarily true. I am also informed that it is Labour councillors across London who have risen to this challenge, and that the decision is not going ahead. I am sorry if that is not an accurate account, but it is the latest account that I have. If that is the case, it is good news for the hon. Gentleman, who has also put forward a petition on these matters. I am sure that gives him ample opportunity to claim credit for this, if what I have said is the correct analysis.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents across Cities of London and Westminster have raised concerns with me about managing agents, such as FirstPort and Freshwater, using in-house insurance brokers that are related to them to procure buildings insurance. That has an impact on rising service charges, which are rising above the level of inflation. Will the Leader of the House support me in seeking parliamentary time to debate this important issue and solutions that this House can bring forward?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important question, and I thank her for her work in advocating on this important matter. We are implementing the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 to strengthen protections over charges and services, and we will publish the draft leasehold and commonhold reform Bill as soon as possible. These concerns are shared by many colleagues from across the House, so I am sure that she would find support if she sought an Adjournment debate on the subject, or even a Backbench Business debate. When we bring forward further measures, she will have time to amplify the concerns that she has raised.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): May I agree with the point raised by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake)? In the village of Cossington, there is a small housing estate that had

[*Sir Ashley Fox*]

the misfortune to be managed by FirstPort. My residents had to put up with unexplained charges, poor service and a complete lack of transparency. While my residents have wisely changed to a new management company, the incompetence of FirstPort continues to afflict them. Despite repeated requests, including from my office, FirstPort has failed to provide the financial information required to allow my residents to complete their statutory accounts. May I ask the Leader of the House for an urgent statement on how the Government will enable residents to hold failing management companies to account?

Sir Alan Campbell: I hope that FirstPort hears what the hon. Gentleman has said, but my understanding, which I hope is correct, is that Ministers have brought in FirstPort to discuss these matters and get its game in order. If he wishes to seek a meeting with a Minister, I will try to facilitate that.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Audiology services in Doncaster have faced huge problems for some time, and while the trust is working hard to improve the service, it is unacceptable that some of my constituents have been waiting years for basic hearing tests, and to have their hearing aid needs met. I pay tribute to Maggie and Paul from the Audiology Action Group, who have done a huge amount of work to raise this issue. Does the Leader of the House agree that this service is unacceptable for my constituents, and will he perhaps make time for a debate in this House to raise awareness of how important audiology is, both in Doncaster and across the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to her constituents, and thank her for raising this important matter. Audiology is a vital part of healthcare in our country. She may wish to apply for a Westminster Hall debate to go into this matter more fully, or raise it at Health oral questions, which will take place on 24 February.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for this opportunity to ask a question about Bangladesh. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), has already referred to some of the issues. In the weeks leading up to the February 2026 parliamentary elections, there have been reports of a deterioration in the security situation for religious minorities, and the accuracy of those reports is very clear. Since December last year, at least 51 serious incidents have reportedly been recorded, including murders, arson attacks on homes and places of worship, looting of businesses and cases of torture. The Leader of the House has been very kind in reassuring me, but it is important that those in Bangladesh and those who have asked me about this issue are also reassured, so will he ask the Foreign Secretary what steps the Government will take to raise these concerns with the Bangladeshi authorities, and to ensure that all civilians are protected, regardless of their religious belief?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. I thank him for raising these important

matters, as he invariably does. We condemn all acts of violence targeting religious or ethnic minorities in Bangladesh, and have repeatedly raised the importance of protecting minorities in that country. I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary hears the hon. Gentleman's concerns and looks at what further steps may be taken.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Following the truly devastating impact of Storm Goretti, one of the lessons that must be learned is that parts of Cornwall should never again be completely cut off, with no way in or out, no power, no water, and no means of communicating with the outside world. My constituency is 624th out of 650 constituencies for mobile connectivity. With Cornwall on the frontline of increasingly frequent Atlantic storms, will the Leader of the House help me arrange to discuss Cornish communications resilience with Department for Science, Innovation and Technology Ministers as a matter of urgency?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. I want to associate myself with the words of the Security Minister on Tuesday, and provide absolute assurance about the seriousness with which the Government take these matters. There are statutory obligations on telecom providers to maintain the availability of services, and we will ensure that we draw the right lessons from the response. I will certainly ask Ministers to meet my hon. Friend as a matter of urgency.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I have been working with local people living in Places for People properties at Kirkwood in Burradon, Hadrian Court in Killingworth and Beaconhill in Cramlington. We have had significant problems with repairs in those properties, and we are not talking about minor inconveniences. In one case, a property had a missing window for four months; in another, water was coming in from the ceiling for more than a year; and in another, a bathroom leak was unresolved after five years. Can we please have a debate on social housing repairs and oversight of housing providers?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to hear about the issues that my hon. Friend raises, and I hope that Places for People has heard her comments and raises its game. No resident should be left waiting a long time for repairs to their home, and I think this matter in general would be a popular topic for a Westminster Hall debate, should she wish to apply for one.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): In the village of Overseal in my constituency, retrospective planning permission has been submitted for a Traveller site, where unauthorised work was carried out over a bank holiday weekend, making it less likely that authorities would be made aware. They were made aware, though, and a stop notice was issued and subsequently ignored. As a country, we might need more authorised Traveller sites, but granting retrospective planning permission in such circumstances—denying residents the opportunity to challenge, and effectively presenting them with a fait accompli—is not acceptable. Such sites should not be approved through underhand tactics, when people have played the system. Can the Leader of the House help me to secure a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss underhand use of the planning system?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. She is a fierce advocate for her constituents. I share her concerns about the use and abuse of the planning system that she described. Local authorities and the police have a range of powers to manage unauthorised encampments, and I understand from my hon. Friend the Planning Minister that we are tightening up the rules on these matters, but I am more than happy to facilitate the meeting that she requests.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Last summer, my constituency suffered the devastating Langdale moor wildfire. The local community, including farmers and businesses, stepped in to help firefighters battle the enormous blaze, which at its height covered 10 square miles. Unlike in the case of flooding, though, there is no clear route to Government grants for wildfire events. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to look urgently at widening the farming recovery fund and flood recovery framework to cover wildfires?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and thank her local community for their work in tackling that devastating fire. We are funding a national resilience wildfire adviser so that we can increase resilience, and I will draw this matter to the attention of the relevant Minister. If my hon. Friend wishes to meet the relevant Minister and raise this example, I will try to facilitate that.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The British Bangladeshi community in Rochdale, across the whole north-west, and stretching as far as Scotland and the midlands rely on Biman Bangladesh Airlines' direct flight from Manchester to Sylhet. However, Biman has suddenly announced the suspension of that route, cutting off a lifeline for families and businesses who travel and trade between our two countries, and leaving many facing the huge cost of travelling directly through London instead. Will the Leader of the House join me and every other MP across the north in urging the airline to think again, listen to our constituents, and restore that flight as soon as possible?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful case for the restoration of that flight link. These links are vital for family travel, when there are bereavements, and for business, and I am sure that the airline has today heard from my hon. Friend about the strength of feeling about this subject in the Bangladeshi community in Rochdale and across the region. I certainly hope that it is listening to what he has said.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): The temporary bridge at Darley Abbey Mills was forced to close before Christmas due to sudden riverbank deterioration. No one is legally liable for the old bridge, and despite not owning it, the council built a temporary one in 2022 and is assessing whether it can be safely reopened. Our East Midlands Mayor has funded work to explore plans for a new bridge, but in the meantime, businesses have lost vital footfall and residents are worried about being cut off entirely if there is flooding. I have had many local meetings, but could the Leader of the House advise me on the best way to seek additional Government support when no one is liable for essential infrastructure, such as Darley Abbey bridge?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the situation at Darley Abbey. The disruption to local businesses and the wider community is of great concern. I will make sure that the relevant Minister has heard her remarks, and if she seeks a meeting with a Minister, I will seek to facilitate that.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Told mistakenly that he was £472 in arrears for child support, my constituent Daniel White was then told that his situation was resolved, only to hear months later that he was in fact £1,800 in arrears. Diagnosed with leukaemia and unable to work, my constituent Nader Nouripanah found out months after applying for employment and support allowance, while recovering from a bone marrow transport, that he had to reapply, without explanation. Daniel and Nader have been left dangling for an answer, and both are chasing a fix. How can I work with the Department for Work and Pensions to get the right solution for my constituents? I will keep fighting on their behalf, and the DWP needs to do better.

Sir Alan Campbell: I never underestimate my hon. Friend when he says that he is fighting on his constituents' behalf, because he is a fearless advocate for his constituents. I am grateful to him for raising these matters; he has raised them before, and they are now on record. He asked what more he can do; there will be DWP questions shortly, which will be another opportunity for him to raise his concerns.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Worcestershire county council has repeatedly failed children and families with special educational needs and disabilities. Many parents report persistent failures to meet statutory duties and experiences of being dismissed or gaslit, causing prolonged distress to families already under extreme pressure. Against that background, will the Leader of the House permit a debate in Government time on the effectiveness of the powers available to intervene where local authorities are failing to meet their statutory SEND duties?

Sir Alan Campbell: As we have said many times before, the SEND system is broken. It does not work for children or their parents. Our schools White Paper will deliver the reform that children desperately need and deserve. As that progresses, I am sure there will be many opportunities to debate these matters. On my hon. Friend's constituency concern, an improvement notice was issued to Worcestershire county council in 2024, and the Department for Education continues to monitor progress. If he would like an update, he can make his case directly to the Minister at Education questions next Monday.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): For the final question, I call Jo Platt.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last week I visited Howe Bridge leisure centre to meet sensei Billy Higgins and watch one of his much-loved karate sessions. There are too many accolades to list today, but as a founder, international champion and dedicated instructor, Billy has transformed young people's confidence, resilience

[Jo Platt]

and sense of belonging. Will the Leader of the House acknowledge the significance of Billy's work and celebrate people like Billy and their important contribution to our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the House's attention the truly inspiring work of Billy Higgins at the Howe Bridge leisure centre. I wholeheartedly agree that this kind of work deserves to be celebrated. I think she used the words "life-changing", and she is absolutely correct. She has played her part by raising this matter today. We thank people not just across our own communities, but across the country for their dedication to such important matters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): That concludes business questions. I reassure Members that we have a list of those who did not manage to get in today.

Prisons: Illegal Drugs

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not speeches. I emphasise that the questions should be directed to the Committee Chair and not to the relevant Government Minister.

12.32 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for me to make a statement on behalf of the Justice Committee on the Government's response to the Committee's sixth report in this Parliament, "Tackling the drugs crisis in our prisons". The report was published on 31 October 2025, and the Government response was received on 29 December 2025 and published on 9 January 2026.

Our inquiry was launched because the Committee was concerned by the growing level of drug use in prisons in England and Wales, and the profound damage that is doing to both the criminal justice system and individual prisoners. Our findings were bleak. The trade in and use of illicit drugs has reached endemic levels, creating a culture of acceptance where just shy of 40% of prisoners said they find it easy to acquire illicit substances.

We found a system struggling to keep pace with changing drug use, where established substances are being replaced by highly potent synthetic opioids and cannabinoids, often sourced by organised criminal gangs. The crisis is not merely institutional; it is a human tragedy. Between December 2022 and December 2024, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigated 833 deaths, of which 136 were classified as drug-related.

Although the Government have acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, we are disappointed by their response to our report, which accepts only eight of our 29 recommendations, while partially accepting 19 and rejecting two. We feel that the Government's response fails to match the urgency or degree of the drugs crisis in our prisons. We asked for mandatory drug testing to return at least to pre-pandemic levels, and for waste water testing to be rolled out faster. Those are essential steps just to identify the source, scale and nature of the drug problem. We called for more drug-free wings and for full body scanners to be provided in all prisons. Those are essential steps to controlling drug ingress. However, these recommendations were not agreed.

The chief inspector of prisons, Charlie Taylor, has described a "menu of drugs" entering our prisons through a variety of methods. Traditional routes, such as social visits and post, continue to be significant channels for smuggling in drugs, as do throw-overs—packages thrown over prison walls. We heard of drugs being concealed in babies' nappies or new psychoactive substances being sprayed on to fake legal correspondence and children's drawings.

A major failure of security is disrepair in the prison estate, which allows access through broken windows and collapsed netting. We recommended that prison governors be able to procure critical security repairs within 72 hours. The Government have rejected that in favour of existing facilities management contracts. When we visited HMP Brixton, we heard that it took one year to repair netting that had collapsed due to snowfall.

Although most prison staff are dedicated professionals, a small minority are manipulated by organised criminal gangs into smuggling drugs into prison. We recommend that all frontline staff undergo a mandatory face-to-face interview, led by governors, to improve screening. The Government have only partially accepted that. We believe that bypassing governor scrutiny in the hiring process facilitates criminal activity.

During our inquiry, we took evidence from the Prisons Minister and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service officials. We were provided with what we believe to be a clear and ambitious vision for vetting reform. We heard that HMPPS was moving towards a lifelong vetting model, ensuring that security assessments are not just a one-off event at entry, but a continuous process throughout an employee's career. We were told that the organisational position was to align the standards of HMPPS vetting with other tier 1 agencies, such as the police. Our Committee recommended that the Government commit to this lifelong vetting model as the minimum operational standard. In their response, the Government stated that they "do not accept the need for a lifelong vetting model as the minimum operational standard".

Instead of the continuous lifelong assessment described to the Committee in the ministerial session, the Government have opted to re-vet staff only once every three to five years.

We are alarmed by the paradigm shift caused by drones, which now deliver bespoke packages of drugs and other contraband, such as phones, directly to cell windows. There was a 770% increase in drone sightings between 2019 and 2023. An official at the Ministry of Justice told us that they had seen drones that could lift a moderate-sized person. One of the most concerning findings of our report is the dominant role that organised criminal gangs now play in the prison drugs trade. We have moved away from what was described as a cottage industry of small-scale smuggling towards a sophisticated, gang-led structure. These gangs monopolise the lucrative prison market, where drugs can sell for up to 100 times their street value, fuelling debt, intimidation and violence.

Debt incurred by drug users is often collected from family members who, if they cannot pay inflated bills, are coerced into cuckooing or criminal activity. Prisoners in debt are also used as guinea pigs to test the potency of new, untested drugs. We called for systems capable of tracking the electronic financial transactions that underpin organised crime operations within prison walls. As long as these criminal networks can communicate reliably through illicit smartphones to co-ordinate debt and supply, the crisis will only deepen.

We acknowledge the £40 million investment in security infrastructure. However, the Government's commitment to the Committee's specific recommendations for disruption remains limited. While partially accepting our calls for better security, the Government have yet to commit to the rapid, estate-wide development of a SkyFence system, which is working well in Guernsey.

We also addressed the drivers of demand. Our report found that 49% of prisoners enter the system with an identified drug need, yet the environment they find themselves in—routinely locked in cells for up to 22 hours a day—drives them further towards drugs as a form of escapism. Without access to work, education or therapeutic programmes, prisoners are left in a state of idleness, where drugs become a primary coping mechanism to get through their sentence. The Government have accepted our recommendation to expand access to purposeful activities, but that will be contradicted by rumoured cuts in prison education.

The physical and operational toll of drug use is catastrophic and is characterised by a surge in medical emergencies, known as code blues. These incidents divert essential healthcare resources and force regime restrictions, further reducing access to the purposeful activities that might steer prisoners away from drugs. This environment has left frontline staff desensitised to the daily suffering and at risk of illness themselves due to secondary exposure to drugs. We called for substance misuse treatment to be commissioned separately from general healthcare contracts—a move supported by evidence from Dame Carol Black. The Government's plan to transition responsibility to NHS integrated care boards falls short of that.

The period immediately following release is a time of vulnerability, but the Government have rejected our recommendation to introduce a universal roll-out of take-home naloxone kits for those leaving custody, citing concerns over value for money. Given that 61% of post-release deaths are drug related, we believe that saving lives must be the priority.

The Government response lacks the comprehensive plan needed to gain control over this crisis. Without reform and investment, we are unlikely to tackle sophisticated supply networks, deficiencies in treatment, the lack of purposeful activity, the poor condition of the prison estate and serious capacity pressures. Prisons will remain unstable, unsafe and incapable of gaining control over the drugs crisis. We know that the Prison Service and the ministerial team are committed to taking tangible and practical steps to control the prevalence of drugs in prison. Failure to do so undermines the Government's whole programme of prison reform and their sincere intent to tackle the crisis in our prisons, which they inherited.

This is a problem for the current Government to solve. I hope they will look again at some of the recommendations that we have made, and increase the intensity with which we drive down the drug culture in prisons. It is the first step towards ensuring that prisons are not only a place of safety, but a place of rehabilitation and reform.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share my deep disappointment and concern about the position that the Ministry of Justice finds itself in? The research and development phase for counter-drone activity has not been strengthened, and we have frequent episodes of drones bypassing prison security.

Andy Slaughter: I think it is particularly demoralising for prison staff and governors to see drones coming and going almost casually. The point I often make is that if this was happening around civil airports or military

[*Andy Slaughter*]

facilities, it would be stopped immediately. The problem, which is not unique to this Government and is in some way dictated by public mood, is that prisons take a lower priority, but we have heard that drones can now bring in bespoke packages and lift considerable weight—perhaps even the weight of a person. This has become an immediate crisis, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I remember walking around Featherstone and Oakwood prisons, near my constituency of Wolverhampton West, and seeing how well the incentivised substance-free living units appeared to be working. The Government's own data suggests that prisoners on such units are 30% less likely to be involved in violence or self-harm. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's decision to consolidate these living units, instead of expanding them, is a missed opportunity to improve safety and rehabilitation?

Andy Slaughter: Like the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst), my hon. Friend is a very active member of the Committee, and I thank him for making that point. A lot of people would say, "Why do you have drug-free wings? Shouldn't prisons be drug free per se?" However, that ignores the reality of the situation. Providing more drug-free wings, as he suggests, gives an opportunity to prisoners who wish to come off drugs, but who find it difficult to do so if they are surrounded by a drug culture. That is one of the recommendations that I ask the Government to look at again.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Committee for its investigation into this important topic. The Chair spoke a bit about the shocking developments in the supply of drugs into prisons, but can he expand on the demand for drugs, and on the availability of rehabilitation services and other forms of support for addicts in prisons?

Andy Slaughter: Where prisoners are caught taking drugs through testing—we have said that we want testing increased—they need to be punished, but they also need to be offered treatment. We called for a dual approach in relation to that, and the Committee is undertaking a major inquiry into rehabilitation at the moment. We wanted to do the drugs inquiry as a preliminary to that, because without controlling the worst effects of drugs, rehabilitation is extremely difficult in prisons.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Coincidentally, I visited HMP Wandsworth yesterday and was impressed by the progress that it has made in staff retention over the last year or so. The prison has a new unit with support for prisoners with autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and addiction issues, and it seems to be working very well. My hon. Friend mentioned the lack of staff, which means that prison officers cannot get a grip of what is happening on the wings, because there are not enough of them. On the central recruitment of staff and vetting, I understand that prison officers are not interviewed face to face by the governor or the prisons where they will work. My hon. Friend also made a point about

continued vetting. Does he agree that having face-to-face interviews in the prisons where officers are going to work is very important?

Andy Slaughter: I am glad that my hon. Friend has seen some progress being made at HMP Wandsworth, and today we have the publication of the independent investigation there. Staff are working incredibly hard, and prison officers do a dangerous and difficult job—we cannot say that enough. After the disastrous actions of the previous Government, who reduced the number of prison officers to below safety levels, there has been a big recruitment campaign. The problem is that new officers do not have the experience, and we have lost a lot of experienced prison officers. It is a difficult and dangerous job to do, and we need not only to support those officers, but to provide them with the correct training.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair and his Committee for all their hard work. Back home in Northern Ireland, 41% of prisoners surveyed said it was easy to acquire illicit drugs and, worryingly, 28% reported developing a drug problem while in prison. I think those figures are replicated in the report that the hon. Gentleman has presented. Drugs are a UK-wide problem. Has the Committee had an opportunity to make the report available to the Justice Minister in Northern Ireland, and to exchange ideas on how to combat growing drug use in prisons?

Andy Slaughter: As always, the hon. Gentleman gets to the heart of the matter. That statistic he quoted for the number of people who develop a drug habit in prison—they go in there clean, and come out with an addiction problem—says all we need to know about the endemic nature of the problem that I described. We will of course share the report, and I hope it will be useful in Northern Ireland.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and his Committee for their work on this really important matter. I would like to ask about the recommendations regarding substance misuse treatment commissioning. Does he agree with me and Collective Voice, the umbrella organisation for drug treatment providers, that drug treatment services are entirely different from general health services and need to be commissioned separately? There is no Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care present today, but will he join me in calling on the Department to think again about transferring commissioning responsibilities to ICBs, particularly given the changes going on? Does this not reiterate the need for a joined-up drugs strategy across Government, with the Home Office, Health Department and Ministry of Justice working together on this issue as a priority?

Andy Slaughter: This is my hon. Friend's area of expertise. I mentioned the recommendations of Dame Carol Black, who is widely recognised as one of the best experts in this area; successive Governments have turned to her. She is very clear about the need to improve treatment. I have seen the correspondence from Collective Voice, which bears the authority of many organisations that engage with this issue across the country. This is a distinct problem that needs a bespoke remedy, and I hope the Government will hear that.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Chair and his Committee for their report, and I am grateful to the staff at HMP Hewell on the edge of my constituency for all the work they are doing to support prisoners. I would be interested to know what metrics he will use to measure progress on meeting his report's recommendations by the end of this Parliament. What should we be asking him in 12 or 24 months' time to see if the Government have truly met the recommendations in this report?

Andy Slaughter: First, I am pleased that my hon. Friends are making links with their prisons. I hope all Members who have a prison will visit it regularly; I had the Scrubs in my patch for 20 years. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend wants to set targets for the Committee, rather than leave that for the Committee to deal with. We will monitor this and follow it up on a regular basis because, as I have said, without control of the drugs problem in prisons, so many other things become impossible to do. If he wants to set some benchmarks, I will ensure that we try to keep to them.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for speaking so powerfully about our Committee's report. He knows that I am a huge supporter of policies that seek to maximise opportunities to rehabilitate offenders and prisoners, so I welcome the Government's positive response to recommendation 6 on purposeful activity. We know that purposeful activity or access to it is a huge benefit in rehabilitating offenders and stopping them taking drugs while in prison through boredom. The recommendation requested that the Government provide an update to the Committee by April 2026 on the progress that has been made on purposeful activity. Could he outline what he would hope to see in that update to allow the Committee to properly scrutinise progress?

Andy Slaughter: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is also a very assiduous member of the Committee, and I want to finish on a positive note. In this report, we inevitably concentrated on the problems and issues on which we do not feel the Government are acting. However, I am fully appreciative that the ministerial team—and particularly the noble Lord Timpson—are keen to resolve the issues of not just prison overcrowding and conditions, but of criminal activity involving drugs in prison. The objective is to get prison numbers down not by early releases, but by rehabilitation and cutting reoffending, and I see this as a series of stepping stones along that route. Much of the work we do as a Committee is linked together to that end, and I know my hon. Friend will be part of that process.

Point of Order

12.52 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This week, in response to an intervention, I misspoke and I mistakenly attributed comments to James Dyson that he had not made. While he has been a prominent voice in the debate on agricultural property relief, as the owner of a large amount of land in England, he did not make the comments I attributed to him. For this error, I apologise in full to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the House and to Mr Dyson. It is very important to me that, when anyone makes a mistake of this sort, they correct their error quickly and in full. I hope that this point of order corrects the record and shows the House my commitment to the principle of openness, transparency and accountability. —[*Official Report*, 12 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 693.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice that she wished to raise this matter. Her correction is now on the record.

BILL PRESENTED

ARMED FORCES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary John Healey, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary David Lammy, Secretary Steve Reed, Secretary Yvette Cooper, Secretary Douglas Alexander, Secretary Jo Stevens, Secretary Hilary Benn, Secretary James Murray, Nick Thomas-Symonds, Jess Phillips and Louise Sandher-Jones, presented a Bill to continue the Armed Forces Act 2006; to amend that Act and other enactments relating to the armed forces; to make provision about the reserve forces; to make provision about visiting forces; to make provision about the Ministry of Defence Police; to make provision about the defence functions of the Oil and Pipelines Agency; to make provision about the protection of military remains; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Monday 19 January, and to be printed (Bill 367) with explanatory notes (Bill 367-EN).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): In the absence of the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who was going to present a Bill, we will move on to the next business.

Backbench Business

New Towns

[Relevant documents: Sixth Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Environmental sustainability and housing growth, HC 439; Third Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Delivering 1.5 million new homes: Land Value Capture, HC 672.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Katrina Murray, who will speak for about 15 minutes.

12.54 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered new towns.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for this important debate. As we reach the 80th anniversary of the New Towns Act 1946, it feels like exactly the right moment for the House to pause and reflect on what was, at the time, a bold and radical idea, and one that sought not just to build houses, but to shape communities. Eight decades on, as we again face the challenge of large-scale house building and the prospect of a new generation of new towns, it is right that we reflect honestly on both the shortcomings and the successes of that legacy.

This debate has a personal resonance for me. I was brought up in Markinch, on the edge of the new town of Glenrothes. I went to school there, and like many people growing up in and around a new town, it simply felt like home. It was a place shaped by decisions taken long before I was born, but that defined everyday life. It feels like a fitting symmetry that, years after leaving school in 1989 and embarking on my own career journey, I now have the privilege of representing another new town in this House. Cumbernauld has just marked its 70th anniversary, and its story of ambition, achievement, challenge and renewal mirrors the experience of so many new towns across the country, which is why I am so pleased that Members from across the House are taking part today. This debate gives us the opportunity to reflect not only on what new towns have delivered, but on what they can still teach us.

To understand new towns we have to remember why they were created in the first place. Post-war Britain faced severe housing shortages, overcrowding and poor living conditions, and there was a clear recognition that simply expanding existing towns and cities would not be enough. For many families, that was not abstract policy, but daily life. One local resident, who is now a close friend, described moving from a top-floor slum with damp walls, no hot water and a shared toilet on a stair landing to a three-bedroom home with a bathroom, her own bedroom, a garden and space to live. That move was life changing.

The new towns programme was a deliberate choice to do things differently. It was not just about building houses quickly; it was about planning whole communities, with homes alongside jobs, schools, services and green space, so people could build decent lives. For those of us who grew up in or around new towns, there were some very familiar signs. You know you live in a new town when your second driving lesson is entirely about

roundabouts—not because your instructor has it in for you, but because there are so many of them. Let us be honest: the only traffic lights in a new town are generally on a roundabout. You also know you live in a new town when housing numbers make no sense to anybody arriving by car, because No. 1 is across from No. 25 and can be seen from No. 43, while the next street starts at No. 420. It looks a bit like next week's lottery numbers, but residents know—and delivery drivers very quickly discover—that it is designed to make sense on foot, as it works by paths and walkways through neighbourhoods. It may confuse the satnav, but it has been the postal worker's friend for decades.

Behind those quirks, however, there was a serious purpose. Cumbernauld, which was designated in 1955, was built to meet urgent housing needs and offer better living conditions, access to work and a strong sense of community. It was part of a wider post-war belief that planning done properly could improve people's lives, and for some families it changed the course of those lives entirely. Another resident told me that they do not believe they would ever have gone to university if they had not escaped Glasgow and attended a Cumbernauld school that treated children with dignity and ambition.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech about the importance of new towns. I was brought up just outside Kilwinning, which is part of the Irvine new town in Ayrshire. She and I are probably of a similar age, so does she remember the campaign—the iconic campaign—in the 1980s: “What’s it called? Cumbernauld”? In her view, how successful was that campaign in bringing people to the town and new employers to the area?

Katrina Murray: The fact that you could not go anywhere in the '80s without seeing that statement meant that people across the country knew about Cumbernauld. I remember seeing that wording on the tube on my first trips to London. Other new towns tried to get in on the act. “Living in Livingston” did not quite hit as well, but those ideas showed the beauty of development corporations shining a light on design more widely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Katrina Murray: I am very aware of the time, but on you go.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch—I hope I have pronounced that correctly; apologies if my Ulster accent has destroyed that word. The last new town we had in Northern Ireland was Craigavon back in 1965, some 60 years ago, when I was a 10-year-old starting secondary school. Does she agree that, with a growing population across the United Kingdom, new towns should be established in areas that have the space? Does she also agree that a working group must look at this issue UK-wide to provide people with communities, not just simply houses? It is not just about a house; it is about a community.

Katrina Murray: The hon. Gentleman must have read the other parts of my speech, as I will come to that point. As I was about to say, new towns were never meant to just be housing schemes. They were meant to be places: planned communities, where jobs, homes and

services developed together, so people could build stable lives close to where they worked. That vision is clear in how Cumbernauld was developed. It brought together families moving out of overcrowded parts of Glasgow, alongside others, often younger people and professionals, who moved there specifically to work. Employment was central, not an afterthought. Major employers, including Burroughs, played a central role in the town's early growth. It provided skilled employment at scale, initially manufacturing mechanical adding machines—remember those?—and later moving into computers and printers.

People moved to Cumbernauld for work and opportunity, and to put down roots. As industries changed, the site evolved into what is now the Wardpark industrial area, which continues to support employment in different forms. Around that, neighbourhoods were designed to function as real communities. Social housing was central, not marginal, and each area had its own shops, post office, parking, garages and public transport, with regular bus services connecting people into Glasgow and beyond. When new towns are discussed now, the focus is often on buildings or concrete. What often gets overlooked is the thought given to how people would actually live—how housing, employment, transport and green space all fit together. Cumbernauld is sometimes judged by its built form, but it is also defined by its green space deliberately woven into daily life. That is the new town model at its best.

It is impossible to talk about Cumbernauld without mentioning the town centre. In the 1960s it was genuinely celebrated: award-winning, internationally recognised, and seen as a confident expression of modernist and brutalist design. It was officially opened by Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon. For families arriving at that time, that optimism was real: with the modern buildings, light, space and public services, they felt like stepping out of the 19th-century conditions they were used to and into the modern world.

Decades later, that same town centre went on to win awards of a very different kind, including the Carbuncle awards and the Plook on the Plinth in the early noughties. That contrast tells its own story. It is about not a lack of ambition, but what happens when bold design is left without sustained investment, renewal and long-term stewardship. Today, the town centre is undergoing long-term regeneration, made possible with the investment of the UK Government focused on making the centre work for modern life, rather than erasing what came before.

The same issues can be seen in parts of the housing stock. Houses that were built quickly, using methods that were innovative at the time, did not always stand the test of time. In Cumbernauld, areas such as Ainslie Road were affected by concrete deterioration, leading to homes having to be demolished, while flat-roofed housing—very much of its era—proved less suited to Scotland's climate as buildings aged. But that experience has also supported local expertise, including firms like BriggsAmasco—a Cumbernauld-based flat roofing specialist investing highly in skills and apprenticeships.

These challenges were not unique to my town. Across the new towns, infrastructure and housing aged at the same time, without the funding or the governance structures to renew them properly. When development corporations were wound up and assets sold off, responsibility became fragmented. In many cases, ownership passed from hedge fund to hedge fund, with no real long-term stake in the place beyond what appeared on a balance sheet.

What went wrong was not the new town concept itself, but the failure to plan properly for what came next. That is the lesson we cannot afford to ignore. If we are serious about learning from new towns, and about building new ones, the ambition at the start has to be matched by responsibility over the long term.

When we talk about new towns, it is easy to focus on plans and buildings. What really made places like Cumbernauld work were the people who stepped up, saw what was missing, and got things done; that early generation who made sure that this was their community. One of those people was Sheena Walker, a true pioneer in disability care. When she moved to Cumbernauld in the late 1960s, there was no local support for children with learning disabilities. She refused to accept that. Through sheer determination and tenacity, she brought parents together and worked across the development corporation, the council and social work to create community housing, day centres and respite care. Her drive was the difference, and the services she helped to build became so strong that families later moved to Cumbernauld specifically because of them.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on housing and care for older people, we are about to complete an inquiry into intergenerational communities. Will she join me in calling for the new new towns to be built and designed for all ages and all abilities as inclusive communities?

Katrina Murray: I very much commend my hon. Friend's suggestion. What is clear is how important it is to have intergenerational towns and accessible housing.

Another local legend was Danny McGowan, who taught generations of Cumbernauld's children to swim. He founded Cumbernauld swimming club and built it into a competitive force, driven by his passion for the sport and for giving young people confidence in the water, all despite the small challenge that the council had built the swimming pool to the wrong size for it to be a competitive pool. Rather than being put off, he worked around it, and thousands—probably hundreds of thousands—of children benefited as a result. Both those stories matter because they show that new towns were never just about infrastructure, but about people with commitment and imagination shaping communities from the inside and making places work for those who lived there.

So what does all of this tell us not just about Cumbernauld, but about new towns more broadly? One clear lesson is that long-term responsibility matters. Building homes and infrastructure is only the beginning. Without clarity about stewardship, places struggle to thrive decades later. Another lesson is that homes and jobs must be planned together. New towns worked best when people could live close to where they worked, and not allowed to become purely commuter settlements. Renewal has to start with people. Regeneration is not just about buildings and masterplans. It has to involve communities and to respect the identity of places that people care deeply about. This feels particularly relevant as the Government look to build a new generation of new towns in England. If we are serious about doing that well, we have to learn from the first generation: planning for stewardship from day one and giving communities a real voice as places grow and change.

[Katrina Murray]

Our first generation of new towns are no longer new towns in any meaningful sense; they are simply towns with families, histories, challenges and pride built up over generations. People were born there, raised there, worked there, stayed there, left there and came home—that is what matters when we talk about the future. I hope this debate will help to ensure that as we build again at scale, we are not simply creating new places, but committing to them for the long term. I look forward to hearing the contributions from across the House.

1.10 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I would like to make it clear that I am speaking in an individual capacity as the Member of Parliament for North Bedfordshire. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on her speech and on the extraordinarily human way in which she described her life in a new town. For people in North Bedfordshire, the hon. Lady's testimony may be a timely one. I would like to draw the focus of the debate to the proposals for new new towns that are recommended by the Government's new towns taskforce.

Tempsford is a historic village in North Bedfordshire. It was the site of a decisive battle in 917 AD when the forces of King Edward the Elder stormed a Danish stronghold, killing the Danish King and effectively breaking Danish power in the region. It includes the former RAF Tempsford airfield, from which multiple special operations were flown to send people to help resistance movements in Nazi-occupied countries. It is a village of 234 households, comprising fewer than 500 people, and one that has been in two parts since the dualling of the A1 in 1962. It is also a village that, according to the report by the new towns taskforce, presents

“a unique opportunity with potential to provide over 40,000 homes in a standalone greenfield settlement”.

Tempsford is the largest of the proposed new towns and would turn this village of 500 people into a new town of at least 40,000 homes—that is 100,000-plus people.

I want to take a few minutes, speaking in this individual capacity, to raise points that have been voiced by my constituents in recent meetings with residents, the parish council and local councillor, Adam Zerny. One of the questions, of course, is, “Why Tempsford? It's not what we want—we don't want this change,” and so on. That is an important issue for consideration, and we await the final decision of the Government on it.

If that decision is made, the No. 1 source of scepticism is that much of Tempsford is a floodplain. There is a legitimate question about how the flood risk will be managed in any new town. Tempsford is a floodplain for both the River Ouse and the River Ivel. Sticking on the theme, local residents have for years dealt with a range of sewage overflow issues; I myself have been witness to a number of these incidents and have helped residents with them. This is important because the water company will obviously wish to improve this issue if we have a new town, so adequate funding must be available both to provide the necessary waste water and sewage water infrastructure and to solve the existing problems.

As the Minister will be aware, the pressure on water resources in Bedfordshire is extensive. We are also the site of Universal Studios' new theme park, which will

attract between 8 million and 10 million people a year—the equivalent of an additional population of 50,000 in terms of water usage. The site is being developed over the next five years. The River Ouse is the one source of water running through this area, which contains both the theme park and the new town, so we need to make sure there is a plan for this river. Bedford borough council has set up the North Bedfordshire water management group, run by Paul Leinster, formerly of the Environment Agency. I encourage the Minister to meet him to discuss the issues of both Universal Studios and Tempsford.

The Minister should also recognise that the proposal for this new town fits into a context of very rapid housing growth. Hon. Members should be aware that the number of households in Bedfordshire has been growing at two and a half times the national average for the past decade or more, meaning that we have already had a build-up of additional pressures on local services over the past 15 to 20 years. At the meeting held last week with the parish council and residents, the main issue other than the floodplain was the provision of local services, as people already do not have sufficient access to GP and transport services. Just a few miles away is the village of Northstowe, which is sort of the poster child for getting it wrong with local service provision. All the things the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said should already be there were not there in Northstowe—there were no shops and no GPs for a number of years while residents were moving in. Obviously residents do not want to see that happen with Tempsford new town, if it comes forward.

Tempsford is a village that still runs on oil heating—there is no other power supply. A number of residents were keen to understand whether solar and ground source heat pumps would be a prerequisite for housing in the new town.

A key point for a village with a proposal for a new town of up to 100,000 people is, of course, its village identity and heritage, in particular around RAF Tempsford, and there is a lot of concern about one of the most important buildings there, Gibraltar Barn. Any plans must take account of that.

My residents are also connected to nature and wildlife. They chose to live in a rural area, and they are proud of their rural environment—the head office of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is just 5 miles away from Tempsford. It is crucial, if the Government move ahead with this proposal, that we do whatever we can to maintain the nature and wildlife of the area. There are also questions about the adequacy of road networks and the type of employment.

I will briefly cover a couple more areas. Professor Doug Clelland and Dr Nigel Moor, two independent planning experts, have completed research on Tempsford in the past two years and provided evidence to the House of Lords Built Environment Committee for its report “New Towns: Laying the Foundations”, relating to the footprint, scale and timeline. In the evidence, Professor Clelland and Dr Moor present a “compact centre” of 25,000 homes over 4.5 square miles with a footprint connecting St Neots to Sandy in an area between the A1 and the Great Northern rail line—an extensive area. There is also a wider footprint that could accommodate the building of an additional 15,000 homes in satellite developments stretching south from Tempsford

to the village of Blunham and on to Great Barford, Wilden and Little Staughton then across to Hail Weston, including the villages of Staploe, Honeydon, Roxton, Potton, Everton and others, with a similar impact on the Cambridgeshire side of Tempsford.

I do not expect Members to know all those villages, beautiful though they are; they are well worth visiting, and Members should do so. I simply want to ensure that local residents are aware of the scale of what might take place if this proposal goes ahead in North Bedfordshire and in parts of Cambridgeshire. I am not sure that local residents have internalised that. If the Government decided to move forward with these plans, there is a lot of work they would have to do, in particular with regard to the use of farmland, as this is a primary agricultural area.

If I may, I will leave some questions with the Minister. First, the Government have a housing target of 1.5 million—personally, I am not sure they have got off to a particularly good start on that. That target may have an impact on the type of housing being built, so I would be interested to hear the Minister comment on that with regard to Tempsford.

Secondly, I have mentioned that the housing growth in North Bedfordshire is two and a half times the national average. It is the Government's position that new towns should not count in that total, but come on—we are already struggling to keep up. There is no way we can plop this additional amount of housing on top of that pace of growth and expect things not to break.

Thirdly, will the Government's specific social housing target apply in the context of these very large new towns? Fourthly, can I alert the Minister to the fact that the new town is potentially just one of six nationally significant infrastructure projects in Bedfordshire, two of which are directly within this footprint? One is the Black Cat roundabout, which is under way and will be completed, so that is fine. There is also a proposal for a large-scale solar farm of over 1,900 acres—that is the size of Gatwick airport and a bit more—within that satellite boundary. What on earth will happen with that? Clearly, it is a choice: we can do one or the other, but we cannot possibly do both.

Local residents are keen to make sure that their voice is heard. I had a meeting with the civil servant who is dealing with this issue, for which I prepared some documents, and she was 100% on board with that—I can see that the Minister is nodding. My residents are clear about that. Once the decision is made, if Tempsford is one of the new towns, I would strongly encourage the ministerial team to come and visit, have a conversation with the villagers and listen to them, because there is so much that can be done. As the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said, in the end this is about people. If the Government take people along with them at the start when they make that decision, they will set themselves up in a much better way.

1.21 pm

Ms Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing this important debate. As she said, her constituency is one of Britain's great post-war new towns, and she clearly knows a lot about the subject. It was evident from her speech that there are a lot of

opportunities and responsibilities to come, because we are shaping places for the long term—building not just homes, but communities. I congratulate Cumbernauld on its recent 70th anniversary and I pay tribute to the generations who have made it a place of identity, pride and resilience.

It is always an honour to follow the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and to hear about the proposals for the new town of Tempsford. I agree with him about the importance of bringing those communities that are likely to receive a new town along on the journey, so they do not feel divided as part of the process. I will talk about that as well.

I want to speak in this debate because my constituency of Erith and Thamesmead faces a similar moment of opportunity that will shape the lives of my constituents for decades to come. I was delighted when, last September, Thamesmead Waterfront was listed by the new towns taskforce as one of the 12 locations nationally in the next generation of new towns. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), and the Minister know the area quite well, and I am sure they will agree that there is an opportunity to have a new town there.

I welcome that huge opportunity to tackle London's housing crisis, boost economic growth and unlock long-overdue investment in transport and infrastructure for my constituents. Thamesmead Waterfront is a 100 hectare site that offers capacity for up to 15,000 new homes, alongside thousands of new jobs, an expanded new town centre and high-quality green spaces. It is one of the most deliverable, large-scale opportunities in the country. It will happen through a joint venture between Peabody and Lendlease that is already in place, with a vision for the area that is backed by the Government and my council, the Royal Borough of Greenwich, which is led by Councillor Anthony Okereke, as well as by the Greater London Authority and the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.

Central to the success of Thamesmead Waterfront is an extension of the docklands light railway, which I have campaigned on since I was first elected to the House in 2019. The proposed DLR extension is critical to unlocking those thousands of homes and jobs, with Transport for London estimating an economic boost of around £18 billion. It would finally connect SE28, which is the only London postcode without a rail or tube station, to the wider city. That is a question of fairness as much as growth. I hope that, once it is done, you will come on the DLR to visit my constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker. Local residents want the DLR extension as well: 85% of respondents to a TfL poll supported it, so it would be widely welcomed.

This is exactly the kind of infrastructure-led development that the new towns programme should champion—building homes in the right places and in the right order, with transport planned from the start. Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser), I was therefore delighted to hear the Chancellor's commitment in her November Budget to work with TfL and the GLA to support the DLR extension to our constituencies.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): The hon. Lady is correct that I am familiar with the site in her constituency that is proposed as one of the new towns. I acknowledge, accept and support her argument that the DLR

[Gareth Bacon]

infrastructure would stimulate the regeneration of Thamesmead. Is it therefore a cause of regret that that site is not included in the three new towns that are scheduled to begin work before 2029?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank the shadow Minister for recognising and supporting my work in Thamesmead. I feel very optimistic about the Government's proposal of Thamesmead as one of the new towns, and that is why we are collaborating with the Government on it. Part of the reason why we are having this debate, and why the Government have prioritised it, is that they recognise the issue, alongside the Chancellor's announcement in November, about the extension of the DLR to Thamesmead. I remain optimistic and I hope the shadow Minister can support me in that.

If we are serious about new towns, we must also be serious about learning the lessons of the past. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) has been highlighting the lessons from Milton Keynes, which is a new town from the '70s, so that when we look at the new towns of the future, we recognise the importance of not making the mistakes of the past. He has been working alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which has been looking at evidence about new towns.

To echo what other hon. Members have said, the new towns must be built with existing communities in mind. They should be designed to bring real opportunity, identity and community to the people who will live there. Engagement must go beyond consultation: young people, families and future residents should help to shape the identity of the place from the start. Stewardship must also be permanent, not temporary, and there must be clear accountability for maintenance, renewal and adaptation as the town evolves over decades.

One of the strong lessons from past new towns is that housing numbers alone are not enough; we need to treat schools, health services, cultural venues, transport links and public spaces as a priority, not as an afterthought. We also need to look at how well-designed streets and public spaces work, because they are important. Those aspects are not a luxury; they shape how people feel, how they live and where they want to live. It is vital to get the right housing mix. There are worrying examples from the past of a lack of provision for the elderly, for those of different income levels and, worryingly, for those of ethnic minority backgrounds.

New towns have a bright future, but only if we apply those lessons to ensure that they are inclusive, integrated and successful for the long term. Thamesmead Waterfront offers a unique opportunity. It can serve existing communities, future residents and the wider London and national economy. Backing it as a new town would provide additional momentum, and would help to align central Government, the local council, transport plans and delivery partners. With that ambition, leadership and long-term commitment, alongside lessons learned from the past, Thamesmead Waterfront can become a new town that genuinely improves lives. It can be not just a housing scheme, but a place that people are proud to call home.

I know that decisions are being made, especially on viability and delivery models. Can the Minister clarify how new towns will continue to receive the long-term stewardship they will need to remain inclusive and well-managed communities over the decades, and not just during the build-out phase? That will be important.

I welcome the new towns taskforce, and the Government's ambition to deliver new towns as part of our wider goals of delivering more homes and economic growth, and making Britain a better place to live. I urge Ministers to recognise the strength of the opportunity in Thamesmead as decisions are taken in the months ahead.

1.31 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing this debate, and I thank her for outlining her experience, and for her passion in representing a new town. When we talk about the next generation of new towns, it is important to listen to the experiences from new towns like Cumbernauld. I am pleased to see many other Members who represent new towns; I am sure that they will give us a flavour of what they have seen in their area. We must think about the challenges that those towns have faced, and what Members for those areas may say in this House in 70 years' time, when we have all left.

The Town and Country Planning Association's new towns network highlighted some of the common features of new towns in a 2021 report. It highlighted both the positive legacies, to do with innovation, accessibility and social housing, and some of the challenges to do with town centre renewal, and the need for whole estate regeneration, not rushed, poor-quality housing. If we want new towns to last, it is critical that the Government listen to the experiences of new towns today, so that we get the place-making element of the new towns programme right, and so that current and future new towns get the support that they need from Government, in recognition of the unique challenges that each location faces.

When the Government announced the new towns, they described the original new towns programme as "the most ambitious town-building effort ever undertaken in the UK",

saying that it

"transformed the lives of millions by providing affordable and well-designed homes"

in well-planned and beautiful surroundings.

The new towns taskforce made 44 recommendations; I am sure that hon. Members have read them all. They include making sure that new towns are built at a density sufficient to enable residents to walk to local amenities, and ensuring that they support public transport, unlock better social infrastructure, and create active and liveable neighbourhoods with clear minimum density thresholds. New towns should also provide a diverse range of high-quality housing, as Members have highlighted. This should include a minimum target of 40% affordable housing, with at least half of that being available for social rent. New towns should support thriving communities by ensuring access to schools; to cultural, sporting and healthcare facilities; and to other social infrastructure that meets new residents' needs from the outset.

Another recommendation was that the starting point for the delivery of all new towns should be the development corporation model. The Government must also be clear on the interactions between new towns and local housing need targets, which the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) highlighted. The taskforce found through its place investigations that there was strong support for homes delivered through new towns to count towards local housing targets.

It was good to see the Government and the Secretary of State welcome the taskforce's recommendations. The Government have announced the commencement of a strategic environment assessment to understand the environmental implications of new towns. This assessment is intended to support the final decisions on location.

I welcome the Minister to the House to discuss new towns for the second time this week, following our session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on Tuesday. I do not want to completely rehash that session, but I do want to follow up on a few things that were said, and I hope the Minister can give some answers today. In response to the taskforce report, the Government agreed that development corporations should be the primary delivery body for new towns. That is welcome, but on Tuesday the Minister acknowledged in answer to questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) that development corporations can take a long time to set up, and that may come after rounds of consultation. How soon after making a final decision on location will the Government seek to set up the first development corporations? I know we are all keen to see spades in the ground on at least three sites by the end of this Parliament. How many does the Minister expect will have development corporations in place?

Secondly, our Committee recommended, in our report last year on land value capture, that the Government should enable greater use of tax increment financing instruments to fund infrastructure in new towns. That model allows local authorities to borrow money against the anticipated tax receipts resulting from the future infrastructure. TfL used that system to finance London Underground's Northern line extension to Battersea and Nine Elms—I declare an interest, in that the lovely new Nine Elms station is in my constituency. Our committee heard that this method of financing could be used more widely across England. Are the Government considering that, and if not, why not?

The Minister told our Committee that funding for new towns will come from the Department's existing programmes, including the £39 billion social and affordable homes programme. That pot of funding is welcome, and it is the biggest investment we have seen in the affordable homes programme; it shows the Government's commitment to building those much-needed new homes. Bidding for the social and affordable homes programme opens next month, but answers to our Committee indicate that we will see significant building on the vast majority of the sites in only the early 2030s. That could mean that it is years before those homes come down the line; that will do little to address the acute homelessness crisis facing 300,000 people in the UK today. What discussions has the Minister had with Homes England on prioritising funding from that pot? Will any new weighting be given to social housing in the shorter term?

The Secretary of State told our Committee in November that he was committed to the new towns delivering a minimum 40% affordable housing, but the Minister told us on Tuesday that this was “an aspiration” and that “we cannot discount viability entirely”.

Affordable housing was at the centre of the taskforce's report, at the centre of the recommendations around place-making, and part of the Government's gold standard for new towns. Can the Minister confirm that, as the Secretary of State highlighted to us in November, he is committed to the recommendation that new towns should deliver a minimum of 40% affordable housing, at least half of which should be for social rent?

Finally, stakeholders, and Members this afternoon, have stressed the importance of local communities being involved in new towns from the beginning. Dr Victoria Hills, chief executive of the Royal Town Planning Institute, said:

“The first wave of new towns showed what can be achieved when government and planners work at scale, but they also highlight the importance of getting design, infrastructure, and community voice right from the very start. Public support for new towns will depend on learning those lessons and making sure they reflect the aspirations of the people who will live and work in them.”

I know that the Minister is committed to ensuring that the public are brought along, and to the important principles of community engagement and community leadership. It is important that the Government continue to listen, to provide opportunities for local communities to shape the infrastructure and the vision, and to make sure that everyone is committed to the end goal of new towns being built.

I hope that the Minister agrees with us, and shares our ambition that the new towns should offer the opportunity for economic growth, support communities and build the new homes that we desperately need. We cannot keep saying that we are in a housing crisis and not doing anything about it. They should secure those national objectives and make sure that we get good, honest infrastructure at scale and pace. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch for securing the debate, and I know that there will be many more discussions to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I will not introduce a formal time limit, but if Members keep their speeches to under eight minutes, that will help everybody else.

1.41 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): In Macclesfield, one topic has dominated conversation for several months: the proposed new town at Adlington. It has been talked about on every street corner, in every coffee shop and at every parish meeting. Well, almost—for one glorious weekend, Adlington was briefly knocked off the top spot by the small matter of Macclesfield beating Crystal Palace in the FA cup. I am on dangerous ground, because I think the Minister was brought up in south London, so I will leave the football at that.

Jokes aside, this is an important debate, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing it. I am not a nimby. I support house building and development, and I support the principle of new towns,

[Tim Roca]

done well, in the right places, with proper planning, and in the right manner with proper infrastructure. This country needs homes, especially genuinely affordable ones, and new towns have a proud history of delivering them, when they are carefully planned and sensibly located. I do not oppose that ambition; I welcome it. But supporting the principle of new towns does not mean signing a blank cheque for every proposed site, and it certainly does not mean abandoning the basics of good planning—which brings me to Adlington.

Adlington is not an empty space on the map. It is a small rural community of about 1,000 people, first recorded in the Domesday Book. It is a place shaped by continuity, with fields and farms; its working farmland is still producing food, supporting local jobs and sustaining wildlife. The proposal before Macclesfield would place up to 20,000 homes on 1,000 hectares of strategic green belt, wiping out 15 working farms, ancient hedgerows and bluebell woodlands, and fragmenting some of the most environmentally sensitive land in Cheshire. That matters, because the green belt is not an accident. It exists for a reason: to stop urban sprawl, protect countryside and make sure that we regenerate brownfield land. Once green belt on this scale is gone, it is gone forever.

I want to make a broader point about the new towns taskforce and its shortlist, because it is quite telling. Among all the sites recommended, Adlington stands out, not as the most suitable, but as the one that has faced the greatest opposition. That opposition has come not from one group, one parish or one campaign, but from across the community, across political lines and across civic society. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me before Christmas to discuss those concerns. It is particularly striking that the Campaign to Protect Rural England, which has not opposed a number of the other new town sites recommended by the taskforce, has taken a clear and firm position against Adlington. When it singles out one site among many, it is because something genuinely does not stack up.

If that were not enough, Cheshire East council has voted unanimously against the proposal. That almost never happens in local government, and that alone should tell us that this is not a narrow ideological objection, but a considered judgment by the democratically elected planning authority for the area.

I want to talk a little more about Cheshire East, because it really matters. It is not a council that avoids building homes. It has met its housing targets consistently in the past, it has adopted a sound local plan, and it has delivered thousands of homes and continues to do so. It is not a planning authority that is dragging its feet or shirking its responsibilities. It is now preparing a new local plan, which will set out how housing need will be met in years ahead—transparently, democratically and with proper public engagement. That is how planning should work. The council has delivered before, and with its new plan it will deliver again—but without dropping 20,000 homes into the open countryside, against the opposition of local communities. Opposing the Adlington site does not mean opposing housing; it means respecting the plan-led system rather than bypassing it.

I mentioned brownfield land, and there are brownfield sites across Cheshire, Greater Manchester and the wider region that are crying out for regeneration, many of

them close to jobs, transport, schools and services. Building there first is not anti-growth; it is sustainable planning. Indeed, there are alternative new town sites in the north-west that could be considered. Let us not jump straight into one of the most sensitive stretches of green belt in the region, next to a national park. Let us think again.

Powerful points have been made already this afternoon about infrastructure. Those concerns have not been convincingly addressed in the case of Adlington, which has limited rail services, constrained road capacity and utilities that were never designed to support a town 20 times its current size. Fixing that would take decades, not years, and there remains no clear answer about who would pay, who would deliver or when any of it would realistically be in place. That has been compounded by the way that we have gone about this. We need engagement with residents, but there has been only one engagement session with local residents by the company Belpart. Communities have been left scrambling for information about the proposal. That is not how to build confidence in a major national project.

Before I finish, I want to thank local campaigners and activists—people who never expected to become planning experts, transport analysts or ecology specialists, but who have given up their evenings, weekends, and indeed savings, to engage constructively, responsibly and in good faith. They have not shouted from the sidelines; they have done the hard work of evidence, scrutiny and civic engagement. That is democracy at its best. They deserve recognition.

Let me be absolutely clear once more that this is not about saying no to development; it is about saying, “Not like this, and not here.” We should be building homes where infrastructure already exists, where growth can be absorbed sustainably, where local authorities are partners rather than bystanders, and where the environmental cost is justified by an overwhelming and proven need. Adlington does not meet that test.

I will end with a bit of history, because this House likes its history. In the Minister’s office hangs a picture of Clement Attlee, who I think is a hero to both of us. It was Attlee’s Government that created the green belt, precisely to protect landscapes like this from unchecked development. It was not anti-housing; it was pro-planning. It is about balance, foresight and stewardship. We owe it to that legacy and to future generations to show the same care now, so let us support new towns, let us build the homes our country needs, but let us also say calmly and clearly, in the Attlee spirit, that Adlington is the wrong place.

1.48 pm

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca). Telford is a little further ahead than his and other proposed new towns, having been designated in the 1960s. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing the debate and on her powerful speech. Telford was in the second phase of new towns and learned from her community’s journey. It is a delight to see my hon. Friend the Housing Minister in his place. Unlike so many of his predecessors, he not only understands housing but has been in his position longer than a few minutes.

New towns such as Telford, Cwmbran and East Kilbride, and the hundreds of thousands of people who live there, are the physical embodiment of hope and opportunity. First made possible by the Attlee Government, new towns gave families like mine a chance for a new life. The increase in affordable, high-quality housing made home ownership and renting away from the big cities possible for people who had never dreamt that that could be their future or reality. It was life-changing not just for the newcomers, but for those who, like my family, were in the area before the new town designation. They saw opportunities for their children and grandchildren that they could not have dreamt of for themselves.

As the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), clearly outlined, these new new towns need to learn lessons from those that came before them. New towns are not only important as symbols of hope and aspiration; they are incredible achievements in their own right. Telford still grows at a rate unlike almost any other town in the country, with 1,800 new homes built last year alone. Despite being one of the biggest and most YIMBY towns in the country, Telford excels in access to nature. Thanks to the national authority, since its existence Telford has designated 10 local nature reserves covering 600 hectares, and has more than 300 protected green spaces and more Green Flag parks than ever before. These spaces are loved and cared for by volunteers, such as Richard Shaw of Rick's Environmental, and thousands of street champions and countless friend groups that have love, passion and pride for their communities.

New towns were built on the principle that people do not just live in houses; they live in homes in communities, and they need schools, jobs, healthcare, transport and green spaces. The community of Telford is thriving thanks to the dedication of groups, such as Telford Community Support and Telford Crisis Support. New towns continue to offer unique opportunities. Thanks to good transport links, Telford has become a hub of industry and manufacturing in particular for the defence sector, with Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land manufacturing tanks and employing over 1,500 people, but there are also major centres for Kraft Heinz, Besblock, Bridge Cheese and more.

Telford, though a new town, also has a history. It has a claim, with Ironbridge and Coalbrookdale, to be the birthplace of the industrial revolution. I pay tribute to Marcus Keane of Telford Memories and Steve Bowers of Telford Ultimate Guide for the work they do in promoting Telford's proud history and rich diversity. I also pay tribute to people like Dennis Athersmith of Dawley Memories, who celebrate what came before Telford's designation.

But we do need more. We need the M54-M6 link road, which was proposed at the same time as Telford's designation but has never come to fruition. It has thankfully been promised by this Government. The direct train link from Telford to London was scrapped under the last Conservative Government, but there are plans to reinstate it under this one. We need better buses. The town being designed for cars means that our bus transport system is limited, and perhaps we could dream of one day having a metro system.

For decades, Governments have failed to keep up with and support new towns. New towns have grown significantly above the regional and national averages.

Particularly at times when the rest of the national economy has stalled, new towns have continued to power on, but that has resulted in new towns not getting their fair share of enablement funding.

I refer to what other hon. Members have said about housing. Houses, in particular those around south Telford, were built with a life expectancy of 30 or 40 years. Now, 60 years later, they need regeneration, but for the past 14 years we have not had an ambitious programme of estate renewal. I ask the Minister to consider what this Government can do on that. We have an ageing population, with those people who came to Telford 60 years ago now in their 70s, 80s and 90s. We have the fourth highest growth in the elderly population in England.

Today I welcome the renewed interest in new towns thanks to this Government's agenda to build three new towns. I hope that the Minister and those new new towns will look to places such as Telford and other new towns for inspiration. But as Captain Matthew Webb, the first person to swim the English channel, said, "Nothing great is easy". We must measure the new new towns not in 10 years, but in 50, 60 and 100 years, so that they can realise their potential. As the new towns are built, the Government should also turn to the former new towns, experienced towns and, in some cases, the new cities to understand how the mistakes that were made, frankly, around town centre positioning can be avoided, and to invest and back them.

I have three specific asks of my hon. Friend the Minister. First, the Government should ask each existing new town with a record of delivery what it needs to do to break through the Whitehall machine to reach its next phase of opportunity. If the Government have an ambition to get the economy growing and to build those houses—and I genuinely believe they do—why not look to those areas that have already been doing it for decades and give them the opportunity to contribute to that national mission?

Secondly, as I have already mentioned, the Government should learn from those new towns. In Telford, it was the council, not Homes England, that delivered new homes. It remodelled town centres and converted a shopping centre into a place where universities were springing up and people are now living, and that new town centre identity will be so important to Telford's next story.

Thirdly, as the 1980s advert said, come to Telford. I would love to take the Minister on a tour of communities such as Lightmoor Bournville village, show him the history and beauty of the Ironbridge gorge, show him the future of Telford—whether that is the new theatre backed by Government funding or the new swimming pool in Dawley, home of the first person to swim the English channel—or take him to Southwater, our new town centre, where people like Dan Blaszczuk have continued to campaign to turn that place from a shopping centre into a town centre. The Minister could see the amazing Anstice hall in Madeley, a former working men's club that has now been regenerated with a fantastic all-female leadership team, as well as so much more.

If the Government back these new towns in the same way that Attlee and previous Labour Governments did, there is a moment in history for this Government and this Housing Minister, so that in 50, 60 and 70 years' time, they can look back and see the legacy of this Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With a speaking limit of seven minutes, I call Chris Curtis.

1.56 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) not just for securing this debate, but for her passionate and moving speech.

I will start by building on some of the comments made by the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) about his constituents' experiences of what is potentially the beginning of a new town process. It reminded me of a conversation I had after returning from the Labour party conference two and a half years ago, when we were in opposition. We had announced that if we won the election, we would move forward with the new towns programme. I got back to Milton Keynes—maybe slightly worse for wear—and popped into the family home to see my then 92-year-old grandmother with her friend Georgie in the living room.

My grandmother had grown up in a small farmhouse in Wollaston, a village of about 300 people. It has since been consumed into what is now Milton Keynes. They were talking, as they often did, about how things used to be: the roads they knew by name, the rivalry between the cricket teams, and the local pubs in that small village. They also spoke of their fears at the time—I am sure that similar conversations are happening now in Tempsford—about how the new towns programme would change the tight-knit community they had grown up in and were used to, and their many concerns about what it would mean for local culture and infrastructure. It is easy for us, as politicians, just to stop there in our conversations with local constituents, but this conversation went further. My grandmother talked about how she lived long enough to see what a difference the community built in Milton Keynes—my home town—made to the lives of her daughter and her grandchildren.

I am the first MP to have been born and to have grown up in the new town of Milton Keynes, and I owe almost everything to the fantastic start in life that Milton Keynes gave me. It meant that my parents could afford decent and affordable housing. It meant that there were good and decent jobs available because of what the development corporation did. It meant that public services were there when we needed them.

Just like Tempsford, Milton Keynes was built on a floodplain—the River Ouzel floodplain—which I know is often a concern for people. The development corporation solution for that was to build balancing lakes. My grandmother and Georgie were pretty opposed to the balancing lake at the time. It was fields next to the farm she grew up on. There were massive diggers and slurry everywhere coming in. She used to call it “that daft puddle”. Today, because of what the development corporation was able to achieve—it was a pretty significant infrastructure project—not only does the balancing lake provide flood protection and alleviation to tens of thousands of homes, which allowed the city I call home to be built; it also means that my city has 5,000 acres of beautiful blue and green spaces that are enjoyed by thousands of people.

The lake is also where my parents met, when my dad was teaching my mum—not particularly well—to sail. The city was determined to ensure that recreational

activities were available to people whatever their background. I lost my grandmother just before Labour party conference last year, and the hospice that looked after her in the last weeks of her life looked out over that very same lake.

I mention that because I owe so much to the vision, confidence and level of ambition that was shown to build somewhere truly special—Milton Keynes—in the 1960s and 1970s. It is the story of my life; it is the reason I am here. It is only with that same level of confidence and ambition that we can hope that people talk as positively about the work we are doing now as I can talk about the work that was done by the Milton Keynes development corporation in the 1960s and 1970s.

I will mention a few points with the potential to make me nervous about whether we will fulfil that ambition, some of which were mentioned by the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. These projects will not come cheap to the Government. We obviously need to maximise the financing options that we can use. We also need to look at maximising the amount of land value capture. Milton Keynes was given 700 million quid in the 1960s—about £14 billion in today's money—which came back to the Government multiple times over because of the economic value generated by building the city. I do not think anybody has that level of ambition for a new town project, but we are going to have to see money—not just capital money and direction to the pots of money available for capital, but revenue spending in order to set up the development corporation. We have not seen enough from the Department about that approach yet.

I also have a fear about death by consultation. The process to come up with a list of new towns was a very good piece of work by Sir Michael Lyons, and we should all pay tribute to him for it. However, the Government response is taking further months, and there will be a consultation on that. If development corporations are set up, there will be further consultation on that. We need to look at how we can streamline the process and get these projects going as quickly as possible.

I will raise one final concern now. Following conversations with local councils, it seems to me that the approach from the team working on this is to go back to that kind of begging-bowl culture: to go back to the sites that have been selected, of which Milton Keynes is one, and to convince them—even though Sir Michael Lyons did the work on why these 12 sites were the correct ones—that they should get the resources required to deliver what the Government are saying needs to be delivered. That will not lead to success.

A big part of the report talked about the importance of building communities that are not dependent on the car and that have good public transport options. My area is very car dependent, but if we are going to continue to grow, we cannot be; we will need support from the Department for Transport in order to do so. DFT's approach has been, “Why do you need this money? Your roads aren't congested yet.” That is completely out of line with the Government's ambition and the new towns approach. We need to change the culture of how the Government is approaching the new town programme so that, in decades to come, somebody can stand in this Chamber talking about being the first MP for the new town of Tempsford and about how much of a success this programme has been.

2.3 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Let me begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing this debate and on her tireless advocacy for her community.

Sixty-two years ago, Redditch was selected as the west midlands' second new town after somewhere called Telford—a deliberate policy decision to relieve the post-war housing crisis gripping Birmingham and the wider conurbation. Unlike the first generation of new towns, Redditch was not built on empty land. It had over 800 years of history and an existing population of around 32,000. Planners therefore faced a unique challenge: how to expand a living town, not replace it. That is why Redditch matters so much to this debate. It is a story of ambition, achievement and unfinished business that offers powerful lessons about what worked, what was not sustained and what we must do differently today.

Redditch was not simply given a population target and left to chance. The Redditch development corporation, led by chief architect Brian Bunch and his team, delivered an innovative masterplan, published in 1967, that was built around bead-like districts along key transport routes. Each neighbourhood was designed to be largely self-contained, with schools, shops, churches and green space, with the preservation of green corridors between communities and a plethora of roundabouts. The aim was to integrate old and new and bring together town and country. MPs in this place later praised the generous landscaping and planting of open areas—amenities far beyond what normal local authority budgets could have delivered.

Redditch also pioneered something radical for its time: a new town designed around public transport rather than the private car. Three million trees were planted, roads were banked to reduce noise and pedestrians were separated from fast-moving traffic. Those were not luxuries; they were choices about quality of life.

Within two decades, a town of 32,000 had grown into a community of more than 70,000, eventually reaching around 90,000 by the end of the century, with many families escaping overcrowded terraces and slums in Birmingham. The estates that emerged—Church Hill, Matchborough, Winyates, Greenlands and Woodrow—were planned communities where working families could own their own homes and raise children with access to schools, parks and services within walking distance. Arrow Valley country park remains one of the great successes of new town planning: 900 acres of protected green space at the heart of Redditch. Historic sites were preserved, too: the Forge Mill needle museum and Bordesley abbey anchor centuries of history within a modern town.

In 1983, Queen Elizabeth II opened the Kingfisher shopping centre and Forge Mill national needle museum. Thousands lined the streets in Milward Square as she unveiled Eduardo Paolozzi's mosaics celebrating Redditch's needle-making heritage. They show astronauts and needles side by side, symbolising past and future. The chair of the development corporation, Professor Denys Hinton, said at the time that it marked

“the completion of an enterprise of which everyone can be proud”.

Redditch was not just a new town; it had manufacturing at the heart of its DNA. In the early 20th century, it produced 19% of the world's needles—not cottage craft, but precision metalworking at scale. Those skills fed

into bicycle, motorcycle, spring and defence manufacturing. Royal Enfield, BSA, aerospace components—Redditch had industrial DNA. During the second world war, High Duty Alloys employed 13,000 people, producing aircraft for Rolls-Royce and others. Post war, those same skills flew in Concorde and British defence systems.

The development corporation understood that. The new town was deliberately planned around a manufacturing-led economy. It was not a dormitory suburb, but a place with skilled local employment. For a time, that promise was kept. The landscaping and design principles established by Hugh Wilson, Lewis Womersley and their teams proved durable, but something fundamental changed when the housing corporation was wound up in 1985. Housing targets were met, but the commitment to self-sustaining local economy faded. Cheap imports hollowed out traditional industries. Over time, Redditch increasingly became a commuter town for Birmingham.

Between 2007 and 2017, the UK lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs. Redditch, with twice the national average employment in manufacturing, was hit harder than most. Today, manufacturing output has declined even more where employment remains. Skill pathways have narrowed. The defence and aerospace sector survived, but at a fraction of its former scale. Even core services have faced sustained pressure. The Alexandra hospital has lost services, including paediatric and maternity services, undermining public confidence and reminding us that infrastructure, once built, still requires long-term support.

Underpinning all that are social pressures: drugs, crime and child poverty. Over half of Redditch households experience at least one form of deprivation. Neighbourhoods built as modern housing for working families, like Greenlands and Woodrow, are now designated as areas of such concentrated deprivation that they qualify for £20 million of targeted regeneration funding. I welcome that investment, but it should give us pause. This was not the future the planners envisaged.

Redditch teaches us that new towns worked when they combined five key things: a clear social purpose, long-term institutions, integrated employment, infrastructure built up front, and community cohesion by design. Redditch achieved all those things between the 1960s and 1980s. We lost momentum when that comprehensive approach was abandoned. The lesson is not that new towns failed; it is that when we stopped thinking long term, stopped planning for jobs and stopped backing places with sustained investment, we broke that model.

As we debate new towns, we must ask: are we prepared to commit to the same level of ambition that created Redditch, or will we settle for piecemeal fixes to the decline that has already set in? My constituents are proud of Redditch's new town heritage, but pride alone will not secure its future. To honour that legacy, we must renew it with long-term investment, integrated planning and the political will to see that through. That is not nostalgia; it is hard-headed realism about what works and what my constituents deserve.

2.9 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing the debate—I am hugely passionate about this topic—and for giving me the opportunity to speak for seven minutes about Harlow.

[Chris Vince]

How do we begin to describe a new town like Harlow? Do we talk about the houses—the bricks and the mortar, the gardens and the trees? Or do we talk about the people—the young and the old, and everyone in between? I think we start with the people, but I am also going to start with the history. Harlow was designated a new town in 1947, as part of the post-war reconstruction. Many people moved to Harlow from London to start a family, giving Harlow its first nickname: Pram Town. The masterplan for Harlow was drawn up by Sir Frederick Gibberd, with the help of Dame Sylvia Crowe and others. It was designed to have a sense of community, with every neighbourhood having its own shopping “hatch”, play park and green spaces, and even its own public art. I do not think there are many places where you can walk down the street on your daily rounds, go into an estate and come across a Rodin, a Barbara Hepworth—or, in fact, the odd concrete donkey!

The sense of community still shines through today—every time I go and watch Harlow Town football club, pop in for a pint at the Hare, or visit the Parndon Mill art studios, the Gibberd garden, or our beautiful town park for the parkrun, which I am now doing slightly more often than usual. We see that sense of community in Harlow’s many incredible charities and community organisations, many of which I have had the pleasure of visiting during my 18 months as Harlow’s MP and two of which—the Youth Concern Trust and Razed Roof—I have the honour of being a trustee of. We also see that sense of community in the way our Harlow residents supported one another during the terrible pandemic—and, yes, in how people often support me too.

As to Gibberd’s design for the estate, I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said about housing numbers. I defy anyone to walk around Longbanks and explain the logic of that sort of numbering system. Harlow was designed to be a place in which managers and workers lived side by side, as part of the same community and with the same ambition to achieve. I think we have lost sight of that a little. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) mentioned the decline in manufacturing, which has had a huge impact on places like Harlow.

As I have said a number of times, Harlow might not be the oldest new town—

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend confirm which is the oldest new town?

Chris Vince: I think my hon. Friend knows fairly well! But Harlow is nearly the oldest new town.

Harlow might not be the best new town—well, I think it is, although probably not if you are a fan of being able to park your car anywhere near your house—but it absolutely is the new town with the biggest heart. I hope when the Government consider the creation of a new generation of new towns, they will look at the things that did work in Harlow. Creating a new town is not just about bricks and mortar, about trees and gardens; it is about people and communities too. I am proud to represent Harlow and its history, but I am determined for it to have a strong future.

The Government’s commitment last year to ensuring that Harlow is the permanent home of the UK Health Security Agency is huge. As I mentioned earlier, the

decline of the manufacturing industry has had an impact on Harlow. We still have some fantastic industry, including Raytheon and other important businesses, but the decline has affected us. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friends about the need for continual investment in our new towns, so that they survive and thrive, and for their long-term stewardship.

Let me give the House one interesting fact about Harlow before I wind up my remarks. Harlow has a fantastic cycle network—of course, it needs more investment, and I will always push Essex county council to continue investing in it—and thanks to that network, as well as to our green wedges and green fingers areas, which are hugely important to the sense of community, it is possible to get from one side of Harlow to the other without ever going on a main road.

Everybody deserves a place in the history of Harlow—even those who, like me, came to Harlow from afar. Together, we are the perfect blend.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That sounded more like a maiden speech.

2.15 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure to come second—on this occasion—to my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince). Stevenage may not have a concrete donkey, but we have Donkey park, as well as a concrete polar bear in Chells, of which we are very proud. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing this important debate on the 70th anniversary of her new town.

My new town of Stevenage celebrates its 80th anniversary as the UK’s first new town this year. It shares its birth year with my mum, whose 80th birthday is today. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] After celebrating my new town, I will celebrate with her later. My mum was born and grew up in Glasgow. Like many people who grew up in the ’50s and ’60s, she sought a new life. She did not end up in Cumbernauld; she took a bit of a circuitous route to London, via Malta. She had ambitions for her family—as did my dad John and my brother Gary. I ended up in Stevenage, and the town has really welcomed me, as somebody who wanted to start a new life there. That is the story of new towns. There are the people lucky enough to be born and to grow up there, but there are also those who choose to start a new life there. Their aspiration becomes the community’s aspiration.

As I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister is finding out, creating and developing new towns is not easy. One of his predecessors, Lewis Silkin—then the Minister of Town and Country Planning—came to the large village of Stevenage in the 1940s. He found that the sign at Stevenage station been replaced with one that said “Silkingrad”—he was not assured of a warm welcome. However, he showed determination and said, “We are going to build this town.” So we did, and it was a huge achievement. It showed the benefit of planning and thinking ahead—not just about the homes that people needed, but about the schools, jobs, parks and so on. To this day, people’s first impression of Stevenage is just how green it is.

If someone is lucky enough to work in Stevenage—whether they live there or come just for work—they will find how easy it is to get there. We have great companies,

developed over generations, such as MBDA and Airbus, in the defence and aerospace sectors. More than a quarter of the satellites in space were made in Stevenage. The Storm Shadow missiles that we send to Ukraine, to help in the defence against the horrific invasion by Putin's Russia, are made in Stevenage. New towns like Stevenage play their part.

This debate is important because, as Members have said, there are lessons to learn about what we can do to rejuvenate new towns.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning came to Stevenage weeks after the general election with Sir Michael Lyons. He was there with a fellow Minister, Baroness Sharon Taylor, who is Stevenage-grown; she has helped to shape Stevenage and is doing a great job of shaping homes across the country. They saw a new development in the town centre, with new affordable homes to deal with today's housing crisis. Stevenage was built in response to the housing crisis back then. The challenge now is even more immense. Stevenage once had 38,000 council homes. That is now down to 8,000. I have knocked on the doors of people living in private rented accommodation, and they feel that insecurity. This Government are working to fix that, but we need to get these new homes and rejuvenate our town centres, as Members have said, and that ain't easy.

The lesson from development corporations relates to what we do once they are up and running and have done their job. In Stevenage, the development corporation was transferred to hedge funds and pension companies in 1980, and it is now much harder to rejuvenate those town centres. One of the biggest concerns I hear on the doorstep is about homes and what is happening in the town centre. We have to not just learn the lessons for new new towns but make sure that we reshape our existing new towns.

Stevenage remains ambitious. We have a council and a council leader in Richard Henry who are leading the push for a £1 billion regeneration project in the town centre, including Stevenage Station Gateway, which will need Government support and will involve a new station, new homes and new education facilities right in the heart of our town. Stevenage is not just a commuter town, although many people do come and go from Stevenage for work; it is also a community with neighbourhoods and amazing individuals who I am very proud to cite time and again in this place. They did not just turn up there by luck; it is because of the foresight of people such as Lewis Silkin, Monica Felton and Eric Claxton, who were the pioneers of Stevenage. We now have the chance to learn from them as we build our new towns for the future.

2.21 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): The brilliant, transformative Labour Government of 1945 accepted and endorsed the idea of investing in the construction of new towns as a way of providing much improved living conditions for people throughout our nation. I am delighted that this Labour Government are doing that again today, and I am proud to be the MP for Glenrothes, which was the second post-war new town in Scotland following East Kilbride and was born on 13 June 1948, when the development corporation was set up under the New Towns Act 1946. We are proud to be the place where my hon. Friend the Member for

Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) grew up, and I congratulate her on securing this debate, which has been a really good discussion about the past of new towns and their future.

The purpose of the establishment of Glenrothes was to generate economic growth and renewal in central Fife, and the town has achieved that despite great setbacks, even at its foundation. The story of Glenrothes can inspire us to tackle the challenges that new towns face today. The reason Glenrothes was founded was to support the development of a newly established National Coal Board super-pit, the Rothes colliery, in 1958, which hardly ever worked at all because it had a plethora of problems—much like the Conservative party—such as flooding and geological faults. When the pit closed, further development of Glenrothes almost came to a halt, but the people of Glenrothes did not give up, and neither did Fife council. The development corporation targeted the growing electronics industry to attract it to the town, and Glenrothes became an important centre for light industry. The town played a significant role in establishing Scotland's silicon glen, with many high-tech companies investing in the area.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said, this shows how new towns have to reinvent themselves, because they are soon not new and have to look towards the future. That is what we are doing today in Glenrothes, where we are already the administrative centre of Fife, and we maintain a strong presence in the technology and manufacturing sectors. With a population of just under 40,000, Glenrothes is the third largest settlement in Fife after Dunfermline and Kirkcaldy. There will be investment in Methil and Buckhaven near Glenrothes in my constituency through the Pride in Place programme and in our regional growth zone, new funding for which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland last week.

While we cannot boast either concrete polar bears or concrete donkeys, we do have concrete hippos, which are greatly valued in the town and for which we are renowned. In terms of business, the reason that many companies continue to make Glenrothes their base is that the town has a great location in the centre of Scotland. We have much to be thankful for in terms of investment in our infrastructure. It is an attractive destination to invest, but the town does face significant challenges.

We have heard today about the challenges faced by many new towns. The Communities and Local Government Committee report of 2008 identified three particular infrastructure problems facing new towns throughout the UK: transport, town centre investment, and housing design and public space. We have heard throughout the debate that those issues still affect our new towns. Certainly in Glenrothes, the idea of a 20-minute neighbourhood is a distant prospect, and rail connectivity in particular is poor.

Chris Vince: I thank my hon. Friend for taking an intervention, particularly as I have already spoken. One of the issues in Harlow is that the M11 was built on the wrong side, so we have big lorries going all the way through Harlow to get to the industrial sites on the other side of the town. Does he agree that it is really important that we make sure we get transport infrastructure right when designing new towns?

Richard Baker: I could not agree more. In Scotland's new towns, railway stations are either not there at all or are a great distance away from the town centre. We have to learn those lessons for the future.

On issues in town centres, the Kingdom shopping centre in Glenrothes is the centre and the high street of the town, but it is ageing. It needs investment in its infrastructure, and it requires a collective approach to offering new retail and entertainment opportunities. We need more community facilities in our housing estates, and we have an ageing housing stock, with homes that are not energy-efficient and are expensive to heat, in a town where 20% of children are living in relative poverty. That is one of many strains on low-income households in the town struggling with the increasing costs of living. That is why it is so important that this Government took action on energy bills. The fact that housing stock in new towns is too often aged and needs to be improved is a key issue in that policy area.

The sad reality is that years of under-investment in local authorities under a Scottish National party Government have resulted in a housing crisis across Scotland. Glenrothes, which was established in the first place to address these challenges, is no exception. Fife council has a housing stock of around 30,000 properties but a waiting list of around 13,000 people, which is badly affecting so many of my constituents in Glenrothes, yet the Scottish Government's budget, announced on Tuesday, gave a rise of just 2% to local authorities. That is despite record-breaking block grants for the Scottish Government, with Labour delivering an additional £10.3 billion for public services in Scotland since the last election. A 2% increase for councils will not address the challenges faced by new towns in Scotland.

After all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said, these towns are not new any more—they are not preserved in aspic. They need investment. The establishment of new towns shows that change is inevitable but that the principles and values which inspired their creation remain constant. We need to hold on to the ideals that created Glenrothes and other new towns in the first place: we need to continue to strive for progress, growth and modernity in our built infrastructure, as well as in our transport connectivity and our public services—in education and health in our new towns. For that, we need leadership from Government at all levels. In Scotland, that means a Scottish Government with a vision to actively support local authorities that have responsibility for new towns, like Fife council, to achieve the positive change that our new towns are badly in need of. That means investment. That is why we need a Scottish Government capable of making new towns like Glenrothes feel new again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) mentioned that it is his mother's birthday. I have been given an update: she is called Yvonne Bonavia. Happy birthday, Yvonne.

2.29 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): The Government's determination to deliver a new generation of new towns, with everything residents will need for a thriving and fulfilling life, offers a much more hopeful solution to the housing crisis in this country

than the proliferation of overpriced and characterless bolt-on estates thrown up by profiteering developers in recent years. As Ministers press on with those plans, I would like to highlight some of what can be learned from the radical and transformative history of previous such projects.

The development of new towns in this country grew out of the garden city movement. The very first and best garden city in the world is Letchworth Garden City in my constituency—I will not take any interventions on that. The principles on which Letchworth was founded offer several lessons that I believe should inform the plans for future new towns.

First, the land on which those towns will be constructed, and the large rural green belt that the residents will need for healthy recreation and supply of food, should be brought into common ownership. That was always central to securing Ebenezer Howard's vision of the best of countryside and city life, and it means encouraging industry to access cheap sites, keeping housing affordable by capturing rising land values, and using ground rents to fund community assets. To this day, the fact that Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation continues to have a substantial property portfolio allows it to invest in and subsidise many facilities that enrich life in the town, including the Garden City Greenway, the Broadway cinema, and Standalone farm. So lesson No. 1 is that the development corporations for the next generation of new towns must be empowered to purchase all the land that they need at current use value, through compulsory purchase orders if necessary.

Secondly, we must always remember that garden cities were never just about the supply of housing. From the outset, Letchworth was always envisioned as a way of bringing employment and industry to a depressed rural economy. In short, new towns need a purpose, not just a housing target to hit. Communities thrive and grow around the industries that define them, and without that, new towns will never escape the dismal fate of becoming little more than a commuter dormitory. As we build the new towns of the future, we must be clear from the outset about what the economic anchor institutions of those communities will be. Whether they are new university towns, born, as Cambridge was, of the desire of scholars to set up a fresh seat of learning to rival those of the past, or new industrial sites for green technology, we must ensure that there is a clear economic identity defining future new towns.

Thirdly, in an era in which a tiny proportion of our homes are designed by architects—the Royal Institute of British Architects has estimated that just 6% of homes are—we should strive to match the optimism of the garden city movement, which sought to prove that beautiful, bright and well-built homes could be made affordable for ordinary people. To this day, the arts and crafts-inspired architecture of Letchworth makes it an incredibly special place. As we build the next new towns, we should suffuse them with the same values, and the same determination to provide genuinely affordable homes, alongside constant proof that life is beautiful. That means commissioning architects to shape unique and inspiring local vernaculars that create a special identity for each town. It means embracing aesthetics and ornamentation, as well as functionality, and it means patient public capital investment over the long term, above all in a high proportion of desperately needed council homes for social rent.

In the context of the Office for Environmental Protection's warning that we are largely off target for the UK's environmental commitments, it is absolutely crucial that future new towns follow the garden city model of development in harmony with nature. Letchworth was built without cutting down a single mature tree, and there is no reason why we cannot do the same now. Similarly, we must match the importance given, in garden city principles, to a well-protected green belt. Green belt secures permanent and easy access for the inhabitants of new towns to the peace and joy of the countryside next door that is teeming with wildlife.

Finally, while not all of Ebenezer Howard's vision ultimately came to fruition—like all towns, Letchworth faces its own challenges today—the strength of community that Letchworth continues to foster, nearly 125 years after it was founded, should shape the policies that we pursue as we support the new towns to come. From Decarbonise Letchworth to the Wilbury community café and the Friends of Norton Common, the ordinary residents of Letchworth are a constant source of energy, passion and determination to tackle the challenges that we face as a society, from environmental collapse to loneliness and the cost of living. The Labour Government should foster and embrace these grassroots movements by combining new towns with a new drive to put power back in the hands of ordinary people.

To give new communities the ability to shape their lives and their area in a way that meets their hopes for the future, we need a new charter of community rights. Fortunately, the amendment that I tabled to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill to do just that has recently been re-tabled in the other place, providing the Government with an excellent opportunity to rectify their oversight in failing to adopt the charter when I first brought the proposal to this House.

Designed to put power back in the hands of ordinary people, the charter for community rights offers a starting point for restoring popular agency in our democracy, which I believe is an essential ingredient to getting new towns right. We are talking about the right to a clean and healthy environment, to a healthy home, to play, to grow food on public sector land, to roam and swim, to participate in decisions shaping communities, and to challenge local decisions. Adopting the charter for community rights is the final ingredient in ensuring that this Government's new towns are genuine communities, capable of nurturing social life and cohesion from the outset. That should be an objective that we can all share.

2.36 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on her powerful and deeply personal speech. The theme of the debate has been the stories of sons and daughters of new towns, and of people who have gone to new towns to make their lives there. Each new town has its charms, its own history and its unique identity. They are home to 2.8 million people today. Just as the new towns programme was integral to rebuilding the country after the war, this Government's ambition for 12 new communities is one of the most important of this Parliament.

In my maiden speech, I celebrated the history of Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, but emphasised the importance of regeneration and investment. If places are to thrive, they cannot be static. Every town needs to

evolve and renew for the future. In that speech, I referenced the iconic Shredded Wheat silos that have sadly lain dormant next to Welwyn Garden City station for years. I am pleased to report to the House and to my community that since I made that speech, planning permission has been granted for a 578-home development. Crucially, the silos and their history will be maintained, and the developer, Treble Eight Group, proposes transforming them, and creating a sky bar and restaurant at the summit. That is precisely the type of imagination and investment that we need in our towns. Lots of people in the town are excited about the project. The sooner the building work begins, the better.

In Hatfield, a new public play area has opening in the market place in the town centre, and I continue to have conversations with the borough council about a much more ambitious regeneration programme for White Lion Square, which is at the heart of the town centre. That conversation cannot just be between politicians. As soon as I can, I will share more information with Hatfield residents and ask for their input, imagination and ideas.

Our next generation of new towns should take inspiration from the last, but should learn lessons as well. Many hon. Members have talked about those in depth. I particularly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) on his excellent and insightful speech. We want to design places that thrive in the 2040s, which is a very different challenge to building in the late 1940s. That said, there are some examples of best practice and timeless principles. I congratulate Sir Michael Lyons and his team on the new towns taskforce. They delivered a serious piece of work at pace, and were clear that there must be a long-term vision for each new place that we build, but there can be common elements to all. The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), talked about some of those common elements earlier, but it is worth returning to those points. There must be higher density in centres, so that residents can walk to local amenities, and so that the footfall created brings about the demand to support viable and vibrant high streets. We need dedicated space for business and commercial activity, so that the new communities sustain jobs and attract ongoing investment. There must be easy access to parks, green spaces and nature. Social infrastructure, including good schools, cultural and sporting facilities, healthcare and hospitals, must be in place from the outset, along with balanced communities, with a range of housing tenures.

The need for social and affordable housing has always been important to me and integral to the new towns project. Outside our largest cities, our existing new towns have the highest concentration of social homes in the country. We need to build social homes at scale again to meet the urgency of the housing crisis, but we must plan with consideration as well. In our existing towns, there is too often a visible divide between estates on the one hand, and roads full of private homes for the more affluent on the other. In our next generation of new towns, let us build tenure-blind communities. Our ambition should be to walk down a street and not be able to tell the difference between a private home, one for private rent, one in shared ownership, and one for social rent. As we walk down those streets of tomorrow, let us ensure that they are lined with electric car charging

[Andrew Lewin]

points, and that the homes have solar panels and heat pumps, and that they are never too far away from a green space and a community centre—and in my case, a cricket club.

I was born in Welwyn Garden City, and it is my privilege to represent two brilliant and unique places and new towns in Parliament; I will always be a champion for them. If we are to meet the moment and address the housing crisis, we need advocates for the next generation of these communities on both sides of the Chamber. Let us invest in renewing the new towns that have been with us since the 1940s; let us be bold in planning the communities of the future; and let us get building.

2.41 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray), in particular for her moving comments about community. While obviously community starts with the people, it does need a bit of a boost from the planners and developers from time to time.

Seeing is believing when it comes to delivering the homes that the country urgently needs, and I have seen and been inspired by things in Rugby. Just as we have heard from hon. Members about how the old new towns inform the new new towns, the urban extensions to old old towns such as Rugby can provide some guidance and inspiration. We have a fantastic Housing Minister who is totally committed—as are the Government—to delivering on the 1.5 million houses commitment. That is vital, and will avoid a return to an era in which successive Governments failed to build enough homes for our growing population.

Whether in old or new towns, what our constituents want are first-class links to essential facilities such as GP surgeries, schools, green spaces, libraries and transport. In October 2024, I spoke about what I called the moon landing paradox—about how human beings can land a man on the moon and create artificial intelligence, nuclear power stations and the rest, but seem incapable of providing sufficient homes of sufficient quality at an affordable price for sufficient numbers of our citizens.

A regular refrain in my inbox is concern about Rugby's expansion as a conurbation, which I appreciate stems from the fear that infrastructure and services have not kept pace with development. Like all MPs, I meet developers to ensure that the appropriate section 106 funding is used to alleviate these problems. In Rugby, we have a place called Houlton, an urban extension, and Urban&Civic is the master developer. In my view, it is a model of some success that deserves close attention because of key ways in which it has sought to overcome the stumbling blocks that often lead to public scepticism or opposition to new housing developments. That is clearly vital as the Government proceed with their plans.

Key to Houlton's success was early investment in amenities, working with local and national stakeholders, providing confidence and reassurance, and demonstrating the tangible benefits of large-scale developments. For example, the early delivery of a 5 km link road to Rugby immediately mitigated residents' concerns about congestion that could have occurred. It also enabled the accelerated development of St Gabriel's primary school ahead of the first residents even moving in, and

accelerated the development of Houlton school by seven years. I recently visited the primary school extension to that school.

Let us take that link road and imagine if instead it had been delivered in 2026, when the planning obligation required it. My inbox would quite rightly have been filled to the brim with complaints about lorries, road traffic, road safety and so on. Developers thought carefully about the amenities to put in place, which include a supermarket, cafés, restaurants, the Dollman Farm community hub, great pedestrian routes and more. I am assured that a parkway train station will also arrive, but like trains these days, it may take some time.

To replicate such developments and achieve this Government's goals, we must be clear-eyed in our focus, maintain our vision and invest significantly—something I know the Government are doing with their £39 billion affordable homes plan, which is a priority for my constituents. What is clearly needed now is a resolute focus by the Government, which I believe they have, on working in partnership with developers and investors, and on making sure that the master developers or corporations have the resources and backing needed to deliver on the promises they make to our communities.

Housing and planning are a terrain littered with broken promises and unintended consequences. We have constructed an edifice of often well-intentioned constraints on Government, which on the surface exist to protect the environment, archaeological sites, local political opinion, wildlife and so on, but which in reality make it harder for developments to be brought forward quickly. Although I did not coin the phrase, I was the first MP to say in the House—it was last January—that we should “build, baby, build.” I stand by that statement. I commend the Government for moving quickly and boldly in reforming our planning system, having an ambitious home building target and insisting—often against the will of some house builders—on affordability and the provision of social housing. What I would like to see is even more of an “action this day” approach, which I am confident Labour Members will support, using every power available to us as a Government to overcome any and all impediments to the delivery of these new towns across the country and to get them started pronto.

I will suggest some ideas to the Minister. For example, we could stipulate five areas across the country where there are large populations of young people and pass legislation to allow modular housing developments. We could ensure that they are of high quality by running a competition globally and nationally for the best architects and engineers in the world to design small modular homes with up to two bedrooms for substantially less than the cheapest site-built home. I spoke about the moon landing paradox, and this could be something of a moonshot: an effort to show those of lower incomes and people starting their careers or families that we have their backs. We could further use the “prisoners building homes” model to innovate, reduce costs and simultaneously reduce reoffending. I would be grateful for the Minister's comments on those moonshot-type suggestions.

Bold action is needed—it is essential if we are to truly make a difference for our communities—and that is exactly what we are seeing from the Government. More power to their elbow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Sam Rushworth.

2.47 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am often last with my contributions, but hopefully not least. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for an excellent opening speech, as well as other colleagues—in particular those from new towns—who have spoken. I represent a town that was founded in the seventh century, and I am really proud of our history and heritage, but something that has really struck me as many of my colleagues have spoken is the importance of neighbourhood and community in what makes a great town.

This Government's plan to build 12 new towns is a positive change from the short-termism, lack of ambition and decline that we have experienced over the past decade and a half. For too long, Britain's lack of affordable housing has been put in the "too difficult" box, where challenges are tinkered with but the big, difficult decisions are perpetually delayed and politicians do what is easy for now, rather than what is right for the future. I welcome this Government's decision to restore the dream of home ownership for the rising generation. We will have new towns, new transport infrastructure in the north, which was announced yesterday, and new, home-grown clean energy that will, over time, mean that energy bills make up a smaller share of household incomes—a new Britain.

Although we will get new homes, there will not be a new town in County Durham, as other areas need them more. However, the whole country will benefit from not just the economic growth, but their potential to modernise our country. As others have said, when these towns are built, I hope that they are truly 21st-century towns for a new era—beautiful, green and harnessing the best of British ingenuity. I was moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), who spoke eloquently about what those towns should look like.

I have come here today with one simple ask: that every new town be sustainably built, with a modern district heating network. That is not radical or a new or untested approach to providing cheaper and lower-carbon power. The Government announced last year six areas that will be put on to heating networks, but I have not heard them mentioned in conjunction with the new towns.

In Denmark, 70% of houses are already connected to district heating networks. Some 75% of those are already using fully renewable green energy sources, and they have a goal of increasing that to 100% by 2030. The average Danish home on a district heating network has an average energy bill of £835 a year, which is around £1,000 less than the energy bill of the average home in the UK. In Germany, about 15% of homes are on district heating networks, but in cities such as Munich, Hamburg and Berlin the figure is closer to a third, with an ambitious goal to bring it up to a half. The very fact is that being part of a heating network is more energy-efficient, but energy efficiency grows when the most sustainable energy sources are used for the network.

I encourage the Government to look seriously at the opportunities presented by geothermal energy so that we do not risk being left behind. Germany has a goal to

increase its geothermal energy tenfold by 2030. That can mean deep geothermal, where deep wells bring water to the surface at a very high temperature, such as at the Eden Project or United Downs in Cornwall. That is also used in Stoke-on-Trent's heating system and in Southampton, where a city heating network draws from deep geothermal wells—I believe that project was set up by the Minister for Energy Security when he led Southampton city council. We can also use shallow geothermal, where water is passed through a heat exchanger. That includes places using mine water, such as in Gateshead or Lanchester Wines in Durham.

Geothermal can be done anywhere, but three of the new towns—Victoria North in Manchester, Leeds South Bank and Adlington—lend themselves particularly well to it because of their geology. Having listened to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), though, I can suggest other alternatives where the geography is even more advantageous.

The use of geothermal and heating networks would be beneficial to the UK's just transition from oil and gas, since we have skilled workers in drilling and pipelines. The National Geothermal Centre and the Durham Energy Institute are world-leading in this area and on hand to work with the Government to develop the right solutions. Imagine moving into a new home in a new town, knowing that it has 100 years of free heating flowing through the pipes from under the ground.

I gently ask that the Government seriously consider looking at how these new towns and their infrastructure draw their energy. Doing so will benefit the efforts that we are making in other parts of the country, including in Durham, to be part of this national story of renewal.

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

2.53 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for a really engaging speech about how it is the people who invest their lives in the community who make it what it is—a sentiment that I am sure we all share. I have learnt a great deal more about new towns from hon. Members across the House, and it has been a privilege to listen to the debate.

In our manifesto, the Liberal Democrats committed to 10 new garden cities, so we welcome this debate and the Government's ambitions for new towns—depending on how they are implemented, of course. It is vital to have a new generation of major communities, given the terrible state of affordability that the housing sector got into under the Conservative Government. That is why we have a big ambition of 150,000 social homes per year, which is above the Government's current target. However, new towns must not come at the expense of existing communities and towns. My hon. Friends on the Liberal Democrat Benches are engaging in a positive and constructive spirit with a range of new towns on their boundaries, alongside the Government and local communities.

New towns must deliver in social terms—the homes provided—but also environmentally and economically, as the mark 1, 2 and 3 new towns did so successfully. In our view, three critical principles need to be met: new towns must be environmentally ambitious, they must be

[Gideon Amos]

successful in social terms—that means infrastructure—and there must be long-term financial investment. That investment must be sufficient to ensure that housing is genuinely affordable and will offer a decent home in a good environment, in all senses of that word, as hon. Members have expressed it in many different ways throughout the debate.

On environmental ambition, I regret to say that garden cities seem to have been airbrushed out of this programme—unintentionally, I hope—in ways that are out of keeping with the post-war new towns programme. What was originally called the town garden in Stevenage was a great reflection of how the garden city principle informed and provided the basis for the new towns. The Garden City Association campaigned for a new towns programme before the war. Now it is the Town and Country Planning Association—I should probably declare an interest as an honorary, voluntary vice-president of that organisation.

Garden cities are not just words; as we have heard, they were the basis of the new towns of Letchworth and Welwyn, and of many others. “Let the countryside invade the town” was one of Ebenezer Howard’s cries. I often wonder whether he wrote those words at the very desk that is in front of me, because his day job was as a parliamentary Clerk. In his spare time, he wrote a radical piece called “To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform”. It did not sell very well, so a year later he renamed it “Garden Cities of To-morrow”, and that book laid the foundation for the garden cities and new towns that were to be built throughout the country. He was surely right to espouse a vision of how people and nature, town and country, and society and the environment can thrive together. He was right then, and surely that vision is right now.

These new towns must set the highest standards for nature protection. They need well-insulated homes that are cheap to run, with solar panels on the roof, as promoted by the sunshine Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson). They need district heating and cheap heat, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) pointed out—that is good for the planet, as is good public transport that does not pollute and jam up the roads.

Those ideas were pioneered by many of the garden cities. As the hon. Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) explained well, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation endowed the environment with assets and resources so that it would continue to be protected into the future. For over 100 years, as he said, that trust has been able to fund and care for the environment and put money back into Letchworth as a community. That provided a great model. In another reflection of how garden cities provided the basis for new towns, Milton Keynes’ Parks Trust does exactly the same thing. Where such estates have not been sold off, as has been described in relation to other new towns, that is an incredibly successful model. As Members have said, it is vital to endow the public realm and the environment with the resources and investment needed to sustain them for 100 years.

Turning to social impacts and infrastructure, we Liberal Democrats would like to ask the Minister how councils and communities are going to make decisions about the

impacts of the new towns. Any spatial development strategy is going to come after the event, as the new towns have already been designated. Parish councils such as Somerton in Oxfordshire, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) is working hard to advocate for, have pointed out a range of simultaneous proposals in Oxfordshire, including the Oxfordshire strategic rail freight interchange, 280,000 square metres of warehousing at Baynards Green—which, coincidentally, is being considered today by Cherwell district council—the Puy du Fou leisure park, and many other developments that will collectively generate 47 million additional trips per year. The Government are engaged in the ongoing strategic environmental assessment, which I welcome, and it may assess some of the impacts, but there is no plan that involves local authorities in resolving these decisions, in taking decisions about how the new towns, such as Heyford Park in Oxfordshire, will land in their midst, and in considering how such developments will affect the existing network and hierarchy of towns and communities. There is a missing link with strategic planning, and it needs to be put back. That would allow the community-led approach to these developments that we want to see and allow affected local authorities to have their say. After all, the location for Milton Keynes was negotiated between central and local government.

As the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said, it is vital to respect the identities of the places in which these new towns are located. Will the Minister commission a rapid sub-regional plan process for the councils in each of these locations so that they can resolve the issues? He has already indicated that he may, but will he visit in due course all these locations, so that he can engage with the local communities concerned? As other Members have asked, will he confirm—I think he said he said that he was thinking about it—that the planned housing numbers will indeed count towards local plan targets imposed by the Government’s standard method? It will be impossible for local leaders and local councils to develop these new towns at the same time as trying to deliver the impossible housing targets that many of them are facing. There is a 41% increase in local plan numbers in my Somerset council area alone, for example.

On social impacts within towns, the pre-war garden cities and post-war new towns were 90% social housing. In the Select Committee, the Minister indicated that the Government may be walking back from the 40% affordable housing target. What is the minimum that they will accept?

Infrastructure is needed by new and existing towns, particularly those affected by these plans. For example, Ardley station is needed to serve the Heyford Park new town and the existing community. Other forms of infrastructure also too often go missing, and that is true not just of new towns. For urban extensions, promised and needed GP surgeries have never come forward, including in Orchard Grove in my Taunton and Wellington constituency and in Bicester in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock. Will the Government ensure that existing communities will not lose out on GP surgeries as a result of new towns being given those facilities? These vital relationships with existing communities need to be resolved. Infrastructure for transport, water, energy, health and active travel must come first, and before the housing.

Let me turn to the financial support that these developments will need if they are to be successful. All these things cost money—we recognise that. We are therefore disappointed that the Minister, I think, said to the Select Committee that there is no pot for new town funding, and that poses a real risk that the £3.9 billion a year funding for the affordable housing programme will be used to fund the new towns programme, inevitably taking money away from other areas. Although the land value capture model that the Government are promoting is welcome and we support it, it will not be enough.

As many Government Members will know, the original post-war new towns had significant, 60-year Treasury loans. They were worth about £4.7 billion; that is about £140 billion today. Those loans were repaid—not just in full, but with a surplus coming back to the Treasury. The bulk of it was repaid in 1999. Since then, almost another £1 billion has been repaid from further land sales and receipts from that investment. It is a sound investment. No doubt the Treasury will say, “Don’t worry, the market can deal with this. We don’t need any public money.” But markets do not look 50, 60 or 100 years ahead. Markets do not know how to build communities with facilities for real people—the kind of people that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch spoke about. We need long-term financial investment from the Government so that these schemes will be successful. Without it, we risk repeating some of the failures of the past.

We stand ready to work with this Government in a constructive way on their new towns programme, but only if it provides the financial investment that is needed so that it is a success and, crucially, so that existing towns do not lose out. It must commit to long-term investment over and above land value capture, so that local councillors and mayors are not left out in the cold, trying to promote these projects with one arm tied behind their back. Finally, the programme must recognise that, in a society under threat from climate change, environmental ambition needs to be at the forefront, learning from the very best of the garden city ideals.

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

3.5 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate, and to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for bringing it forward. I have been rehearsing the name of her constituency in my head for quite some time, and I have made a mess of pronouncing it right from the outset, so I apologise to her. I also thank the 16 hon. Members who have spoken in the debate.

It seems that every time I return to this place, the Government have fallen further and further away from justifying their increasingly mistaken belief that they can deliver on their 1.5 million homes target. No one believes they are going to reach such a lofty, albeit much-needed, figure. We have pointed out that the Government’s efforts to reach that unrealistic target appear geared towards removing as much local input into decision making as possible, and towards shifting development from brownfield sites in cities and urban areas, where demand and infrastructure exists, to rural areas, where demand is often lower and infrastructure is far less well provided or even non-existent.

That brings me to the Government’s new towns policy, about which, as it is currently framed, we have significant concerns, which I will touch on shortly. At the Labour party conference at the end of September last year, the Secretary of State pledged that the Government would go ahead with work on new towns in at least 12 locations. Since then, it has emerged that only three of those new towns will begin before the end of this Parliament, with the rest to be built after 2029.

The three new towns that we will supposedly see begun before 2029 are Tempsford in Bedfordshire, Leeds South Bank, and Crews Hill and Chase Park in the London borough of Enfield. While His Majesty’s Opposition recognise the need to build new homes, we hope that the Government will work harder to listen to and address the concerns of local people living near these three sites than they have done with the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), whose constituency includes one of the other nine lower-priority new town sites. He highlighted some of the Opposition’s key concerns when he presented a petition to the House on 17 December last year about plans for the Adlington new town, and he did so again in his excellent speech earlier today. The concerns he outlined were about the adverse impact on the green belt and on agricultural land, strains on local infrastructure and services, and the adverse impact on local communities. We are sympathetic to those concerns, which are not restricted to Adlington.

One of the first new towns earmarked for building is in the London borough of Enfield, which has 37.3% green belt and 47.6% open space. According to the CPRE, the green space of Enfield, much of which is based on the borders of the Enfield Chase heritage area of special character, gives large parts of Enfield a rural character that is comparable to Richmond park or Hampstead heath, which are areas of significant local and historical value. The site of the proposed new town currently comprises commercial horticultural nurseries, garden centres, a golf course, working farms and greenfield land. The local businesses employ around 1,000 people, and all of this is threatened by the proposal. These are not vast swathes of undeveloped potential, but important green spaces that help as much as urban centres to define an area’s character and community.

Tempsford in Bedfordshire is much the same, and has been chosen as an area for a whole new stand-alone town. My hon. Friend the Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) highlighted, on behalf of his constituents, some of his concerns as the local Member of Parliament. It is vital that the Government work to fully and properly consult a local community like Tempsford—an area currently made up of small villages—rather than continue their top-down crusade against the countryside. That is why we Conservatives have repeatedly sought assurances from the Government about their plans for full and proper consultation with local people and communities. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

The impact of new towns does not stop at the boundaries of the local authority area in which they are developed. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) has highlighted that the proposed Crews Hill development in the London borough of Enfield will be closer to the village of Goffs Oak in his constituency than to Enfield town hall. The imposition of a new town of 21,000 properties on the border of his constituency cannot avoid having a direct impact on his constituents.

[Gareth Bacon]

Will the Minister therefore commit to proper consultation of communities and councils adjacent to the local authority in which the proposed new town may be built? He is a decent man, and I hope that he will.

The Opposition recognise that the country is in desperate need of not just more housing, but more housing in the right places with the right infrastructure to support it. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare) made precisely that point in her speech. Identifying where places have the right infrastructure, brownfield or urban capacity, and where new homes are most wanted, is a key factor. The Government must get serious about their failure to improve house building during their first 18 months in power. They must stop making excuses and blaming everybody else, and instead look at how to get the country building in the right places.

That is why the Opposition have called for a brownfield-first approach to be properly actioned, not just paid lip service to, as it is by the Government. According to the CPRE, in a large number of local authorities there is enough brownfield land with planning permission to meet the targets set by the Government's standard method for calculating housing need for at least the next five years. The same report shows that England's brownfield sites increased in number, land area and minimum net dwellings by up to 54%, 6% and 34%, respectively, between 2018 and 2024. The Government will no doubt point to their brownfield passport policy in response to that criticism, but it should be noted that this policy, if actioned, is not without risk. It could result in bypassing crucial local input, minimising local community power in their own local neighbourhoods and rushing through developments despite legitimate local objections, which will do nothing for people's faith in democracy.

Even if that proves to be a misplaced concern, brownfield passports do not deal with some of the deep-seated causes of brownfield delays. After all, we know that there are already hundreds of thousands of planning permissions on sites that have not yet been built, and it is a lazy generalisation and an inadequate explanation simply to blame all of that on the land banking of greedy developers, because the causes are more complex. Funding, complexity, increasing regulatory burdens, delays and other factors all play their part. If the Government do nothing to address those factors, all they will succeed in is achieving more undeveloped planning permissions. As we all know, people need real buildings to live in, not unexecuted planning permissions.

Richard Fuller: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making the point about making brownfield sites a priority, and I think he is giving the Minister some very good advice. The first question that will be asked by people in Tempsford and the villages, who may see so much more housing come upon them, is, "Well, why haven't you built in areas that are already developed? Have you maximised the potential in those areas?" It will be to the Government's benefit if they can demonstrate, as I am sure the Minister will from the Dispatch Box shortly, that they will push existing urban areas as hard as they can to maximise housing potential and avoid some of the artificial blockages to which my hon. Friend is referring.

Gareth Bacon: I agree. It would be a great tragedy if the Government push on with their new towns policy and simply think that their brownfield passport will solve everything, because by having fewer developments on brownfield sites and some developments on greenfield sites, we will end up losing the precious green belt and still not delivering the amount of housing we need. That would be an own goal from the Government, so I hope they will take this point away and do something about it.

The Government need to look further and faster at the proper development of brownfield land, rather than ripping up the green belt and steamrolling over local democracy, local voices and local communities. Recent history shows that this approach works. If the Government want to see urban regeneration or densification done right, they can follow Conservative examples and pursue brownfield first, not greenfield first, as the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), highlighted at the Conservative party conference. The Government need look no further than the Olympic Park in east London—a brownfield site transformed into a superbly connected hub of housing, business, retail and leisure that was completed under Boris Johnson as the Conservative Mayor of London. It was the same with Canary Wharf under Margaret Thatcher and Michael Heseltine, when the old, dilapidated docks were completely regenerated, revitalised and reborn.

Finally, as the Opposition mentioned in the final stages of the passage of the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, the Government should add to their growing pile of U-turns and reverse the damaging blows the Chancellor and the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), dealt to the housing market and the construction market through their unholy trinity of economic decline, tax hikes and cuts to demand-side housing policies. Only through a genuine brownfield-first approach and a reversal of the damage inflicted by No. 11 and the former Secretary of State will the Government succeed in protecting our countryside and get on to building real homes properly connected with the right facilities that people actually want.

3.15 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to close this debate for the Government. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) and thank her for securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the House an opportunity to debate this incredibly important matter. I was struck, in what was a strong opening speech by my hon. Friend, by her emphasis on people and the ability of "planning done properly" to change lives. That is a hugely important statement and a principle that guides the Government in all areas. I thank all hon. Members for contributing to the debate. We had a series of thoughtful, passionate and in many cases personal contributions, and I think the most references to concrete animals of any debate in my nearly 11 years in this place. It has been a thoughtful and important debate, rich with history.

The post-war new towns programme was the most ambitious town building effort ever undertaken in the UK. It transformed the lives of millions of working people by giving them affordable and well-designed

homes in well-planned and beautiful surroundings. The 32 communities it created are now home to millions of people, including a number of hon. Members who made contributions this afternoon. I stress that the Government will continue to invest in the regeneration of our existing new towns. My hon. Friend made reference to some of the investment currently being made in hers. My hon. Friends the Members for Telford (Shaun Davies), for Rugby (John Slinger), for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) and for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) all made the case for what is happening, and what they want to see happen in the years ahead, to further revitalise the places they represent.

Alongside those efforts, we are determined to bring forward the next generation of new towns, as per our manifesto commitment. In so doing, we have taken inspiration from the proud legacy of the 1945 Labour Government who, through the New Towns Act 1946, initiated the first post-war wave of new town building, as well as the subsequent waves in the 1960s. But we have also sought to learn crucial lessons from those previous efforts, for example—this was a point made by several hon. Members—the fact that previous new town initiatives did not always embed long-term stewardship into their development and the detrimental consequences that has had for those locations.

As the House will know, to progress the next generation of new towns, the Government established an independent new towns taskforce within months of taking office. That taskforce, chaired by Sir Michael Lyons, with Dame Kate Barker as his deputy and eight other highly regarded expert members drawn from across the built environment sector—I pay huge tribute to all their work in producing their final report—was given a clear mandate: to make recommendations to Ministers on the location and delivery of new towns, with the objective of supporting and unlocking economic growth, as well as making a significant contribution to meeting housing demand in England.

The Government made it clear that the taskforce should consider not only large-scale stand-alone new communities of the type Tempsford might be, but urban extensions and urban regeneration schemes that would work with the grain of development in a given area. We specified that each of the new settlements should contain at least 10,000 homes, but made clear that we expected a number to be far larger in size. We also commissioned the taskforce to ensure that any proposals would deliver “well-connected, well-designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live and have all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities.”

Let me be clear, and hon. Members are right to have raised this: success on those criteria will be integral to the success of the programme as a whole.

Last September, the Government published the final report of the taskforce, as well as their initial response to that report and immediate next steps. In that initial response, the Government warmly welcomed all 12 of the locations recommended by the taskforce on the basis that, *prima facie*, each has the clear potential to deliver on the Government’s objectives. We also made it clear that Tempsford, Crews Hill in Enfield and Leeds South Bank look particularly promising to us as sites that might make significant contributions to unlocking economic growth and accelerating housing delivery. We are determined to get spades in the ground on at least

three new towns in this Parliament—I stress the words “at least three”, because three is not the limit of our ambition. I think the shadow Minister incorrectly assumed that it will be just the three locations we have cited as promising. We are determined to deliver at least three, but we are prepared to progress work on a far larger range of locations if that proves possible.

As the House will be aware, we are now in the process of conducting a strategic environmental assessment to better understand the environmental impacts of new town developments in the locations recommended by the taskforce, as well as refining the scope of the programme more generally. Again, I want to stress that no final decisions on locations will be made until the SEA concludes and that the prioritised locations could change as a result of that process.

To respond directly to the shadow Minister’s point, we intend to consult on the programme alongside the completed SEA report in the coming weeks. The feedback to that consultation will inform final decisions on the locations we intend to adopt, as well as other matters such as how we allocate funding between sites and how we define and support new town locations in planning policy. When we are at the point of making decisions, we will publish a comprehensive response to the taskforce’s final report.

Hon. Members have raised a number of specific points in today’s debate, which I will respond to as fully as I can within the constraints of the ongoing SEA and programme scoping process. The hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), raised the matter of local housing need and how housing targets interact with our new towns programme. We have been clear that our starting assumption was that new towns should deliver over and above the targets produced by the standard method, not least because we expect construction of the new towns that move forward as a result of this programme to begin in earnest only towards the end of the Parliament. However, I have been reflecting on this matter—not least in response to representations made by hon. Members—and I want to ensure that when we come forward with our final position on LHN, it is fair and consistent across the country and provides the necessary incentives for communities to want to see new towns come forward.

The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), and other hon. Members raised the issue of affordable housing. I assure the House that we are not walking back or watering down our commitments on affordable housing. We have been very clear that new towns should have a range of housing types available, including adequate proportions of genuinely affordable homes.

It is worth stressing that the taskforce endorsed the Government’s commitment on affordable homes in its final report—it was a Government gold standard to aim for a target of 40% affordable housing. The taskforce was very clear in its final report that it endorsed that target and that it wanted to see 40% as a minimum, with half of those being social rented homes. We desperately need social rented homes, which is why that is such a priority for the Government.

[Matthew Pennycook]

The taskforce clearly said that where viability makes achieving that 40% target challenging, the Government should look to meet the requirement through grant funding, which is something the Government have to consider as we scope the programme, in particular in locations with low land values, where meeting that affordable number will be more challenging. Again, we will bring forward further detail on that and the other place-making principles in the taskforce's final report after the environmental assessment and consultation, when we can provide hon. Members and the public more widely with more detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green also referred to delivery models. The Government agree with the taskforce that the preferred model for new towns should be the development corporation model. I think the House well understands the benefits that come with that. There are, of course, a range of development corporation types, including centrally led, mayoral and even locally led development corporations—it all depends on the location of the town, its devolution settlement and the capacity and capability of the delivering authorities. Again, we are assessing which delivery vehicle options are most appropriate to individual locations and will come forward with further information on that point in due course.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of funding, challenging me to make it clear why there has not been more detail on funding and why there is not a dedicated pot of funding for new towns. It is because the funding required for new towns in this spending review period will vary according to the needs of the places that the taskforce has recommended and that we ultimately adopt through the scoping process.

I want to make it clear to hon. Members, however, that the delivery of new towns will be backed by funding across the Government's landmark housing programmes, such as the £39 billion social and affordable housing programme and the hundreds of millions of pounds of grants that are available through our national housing delivery fund for land and infrastructure investment; there is also the additional capital funding that will be managed by the new national housing bank, which will invest in house building across the country. Even though there was no specific new towns fund announced in the Budget, there are funding sources to draw upon.

Gideon Amos: The Minister is always very generous with his time. Can I press him a bit further on whether the Treasury has ruled out the long-term loans that were there for the post-war new towns programme?

Matthew Pennycook: I will come on to talk about financing in more detail, in particular the options that we are considering, but I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman will, again, have to wait for the publication of the SEA report and the programme that will go out to consultation. He and other hon. Members, as well as their communities and the neighbouring communities to the sites proposed for adoption, will then be able to feed into that process more widely. Long-term funding is available in this spending review period and going forward, because many of these propositions are for new, large-scale communities that will have to be built out over decades, in some cases.

I will touch on two or three other issues. Most importantly, several hon. Members raised the theme of public engagement. What the taskforce heard through its call for evidence and engagement with local leaders and local areas—the Government were kept up to date with that, as Sir Michael Lyons reported to me regularly on the taskforce's work, as the House would expect—was that there is a huge appetite for new new towns to come forward. There are lots of parts of the country that would desperately welcome a new town.

I recognise, however, that in other areas, particularly in small villages such as Tempsford, there is trepidation about what may come and there are questions that residents want answered. In some cases—my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) has been forthright and honest about this—there is outright hostility and objection to the proposed locations. We have met and had several conversations about his particular case, and I assure him that I recognise the strength of feeling in his community. His residents can be in no doubt that he has conveyed the strength of feeling about that location very forcefully to me.

The taskforce's report is clear that existing communities should be a key part of any new town development; community engagement is one of its core recommended place-making principles. The Government are working closely with local leaders as part of the scoping process of the programme and building our evidence base to understand the impacts of potential new town locations. As I have said, we will carry out the appropriate assessments and public consultations before any final decisions are made about locations. I must stress—we have been candid about this fact from the outset—that ultimately, decisions on new town locations will be made in the national interest.

Chris Curtis: I thank the Minister for being generous with his time and for reinforcing the Government's strategic direction, which I think most of us agree with. As we move on to the next stage, many of the local council leaders who he has spoken about feel like there is friction and frustration in the communication between them and the Department, with the Department making it feel like they are bidding for the money. Will he meet local council leaders to reset that relationship so that it can be more constructive in the next stage of the process?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend made the same points when I appeared before the Select Committee earlier this week. I have taken them on board and I am happy to look at what the Department can do to ensure that there is a constructive relationship in each instance where the Government are seeking to build the evidence base. I certainly do not recognise, however, that it is the Government's intention to go out to local areas and ask them to bid in to the programme. We want to work with local communities and local leaders to better understand and assess the proposition in each case.

I want to address two further issues. First, on financing, all the lessons suggest that once development is under way on new town sites, the long-term increase in the value of land can be captured and reinvested. Several hon. Members made that point forcefully, and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington is correct that the three waves of new towns programmes each repaid the investment that was ploughed into them up front. We know

that, and the taskforce recommended that we should explore a range of options, including taxation, in the financing model—for example, we are exploring the role that tax increment financing might play in the new towns programme, as was mentioned by the Select Committee Chair.

Lastly, I want to address the important theme of stewardship, which several hon. Members raised. We welcome all the taskforce's recommendations on place-making and other issues that will be pertinent in the years ahead as we take the programme forward. On stewardship, the taskforce recommended, rightly in my view, that a long-term stewardship model should be in place from the outset and that it should include clear governance and funding structures to manage and maintain communal assets. In that way, we can learn the lessons from the earlier waves of new towns and get things right for this new programme.

To conclude, the Government's new town programme, in the Government's view, provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fundamentally reshape the delivery of large-scale new communities and, by delivering them, to boost economic growth and productivity, and make a significant contribution to meeting housing need in England over the coming decades. The Government remain resolute in their determination to bring forward the next generation of new towns. We will work tirelessly across Government and with delivery partners and local communities to ensure that they are, in the words of the taskforce, not just places to live, but places to live well, and places for people.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch for securing and opening the debate, and to other hon. Members for taking part. I know that hon. Members will take me at my word when I say that I look forward to further engagement with Members across the House as we advance the programme in the months and years ahead.

3.30 pm

Katrina Murray: When I applied to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate, I said, with bravado, that there was a lot of interest, even though I had some concerns that the subject might be a little bit niche. I am therefore very glad to have seen the debate this afternoon. It has been a debate of the mothers and the grandmothers, and I wish Yvonne Bonavia a very happy birthday. It has been a wonderful opportunity to do what has been described to me as writing love letters to our towns, our garden cities and our villages, as they currently are—places that we love.

This has also been a debate about real concerns, and I hope that the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) have heard the experiences of my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia). If those are not enough, I will introduce them to my mother, whose village was subsumed into the Glenrothes new town, but she recognised that that was the only way she could stay in her area and raise a family; the jobs and her life were there.

I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Harlow (Chris Vince) and for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) for their references to town art. It does not matter if it is concrete cows, polar bears, hippos or elephants. In my case, it is totems. They were a strong part of the development corporations making ready use of the concrete at their disposal, and town artists provided beauty in the built environment. I encourage the next generation of development corporations to include town artists in the workforce. I thank everyone who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of new towns.

Covid-19: Financial Support

3.33 pm

[R] **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial support for small businesses and individuals during the covid-19 pandemic.

I would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us time to debate this important issue. I also thank colleagues across the House for their tremendous support when I applied for this debate and, in particular, my friend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on gaps in covid-19 financial support, of which I am an officer.

I place on record my thanks to Excluded UK for its tireless and formidable campaigning. Without its work, many of these stories would never have been heard, and many people would have been left to suffer in silence. Its staff have shown persistence, compassion, and a commitment to justice.

This debate is about a national scandal during the covid-19 pandemic, which impacted millions of individuals and families, including mine; my spouse could only apply for a bounce back loan when everything stopped. I want to speak about three things today: first, why I am campaigning on this issue; secondly, the people behind the statistics, including my constituents in Stratford-on-Avon who contacted me in desperation, and who still feel the horrendous impact of a policy decision by the then Government to exclude them from any kind of financial support; and thirdly, what needs to change.

When covid struck, the message from the Government was clear: "Help will be there, and no one will be left behind." The Chancellor at the time, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), vowed that

"no one will be left without hope."

For many, that was true, but for millions of others, the promise rang hollow. They paid in, they followed the rules, and when they needed support, they were told that they did not qualify. People lost their income overnight. They lost their savings and their home, and some lost their life.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I have a genuine question, because I have followed this campaign from afar. What were the reasons given by the Government at the time for these people being excluded in this way?

Manuela Perteghella: I thank the hon. Member, and I will get to that point. In Stratford-on-Avon and up and down the country, business owners ask a simple question: why were they excluded when they had paid tax for years? These were people running events businesses, training services or consultancies, freelancers in the arts, music or creative sectors, and small companies that formed the backbone of our local economy. That is the injustice that this debate seeks to address.

It is important to say at the outset that we do not deny the scale or urgency of the Government's response in March 2020. The coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme were

introduced at a speed and on a scale never seen before. According to the House of Commons Library, the overall cost of covid-19 business support ran into tens of billions of pounds, and for many people and businesses it prevented immediate hardship and business collapse. That context matters, because it shows that the Government were capable of acting decisively, and that the state was capable of dealing with a suite of diverse and complex scenarios. The question is why, alongside that intervention, millions of people were left with nothing at all and simply abandoned.

Around 3.8 million UK taxpayers were excluded from meaningful financial support during the pandemic—a figure supported by analysis from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the National Audit Office and research cited by the Library. They included company directors paid through dividends, newly self-employed people, new businesses, pay-as-you-earn freelancers, new starters, and those on maternity, adoption or parental leave or on carer's allowance, whose circumstances placed them just outside rigid eligibility rules. They were a substantial part of the British workforce. The Government support schemes worked well for many, but excluded millions by design.

The problem was not the absence of data, but the choice made about how that data would be used. Company directors paid through dividends were told that their income could not be verified, despite their submitting annual self-assessments, corporation tax returns and company accounts to Companies House. New businesses were excluded simply because they had not traded for long enough. Mixed-income workers were penalised for having diversified their earnings. These people were not invisible to the tax system, but they were invisible to the support schemes. The decision to exclude them was not an administrative necessity; it was a policy decision, and for that alone, the 3.8 million people left out must have an apology.

These decisions are now rightly being examined by the UK covid-19 inquiry. Module 9, which focuses on the economic response, is considering how eligibility criteria were set, how fraud risk was assessed and how trade-offs were made between speed and fairness. That scrutiny is essential, because the consequences of exclusion were not abstract; they were human, financial and, in many cases, long-lasting. The inquiry must not simply catalogue what happened, but confront what it meant for those left outside the system.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): A 2021 University of Bristol report stated that women in their 40s with dependent children were disproportionately represented among the excluded. That raises concerns about child poverty, mental ill health and compounding the effects of the gender pay gap. Does my hon. Friend agree that research is needed into those and other longer-term impacts, so that they can be addressed?

Manuela Perteghella: Absolutely; I fully agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, that is one of our asks, so that we do not make the same mistake again.

My constituent Victoria, who is in the Gallery, ran an events business hosting exhibitions and award ceremonies. She was ineligible for any scheme. A bounce back loan was taken out simply for the business to survive. Five years on, the debt remains, the recovery never fully

came, and the business is now closing. Another constituent of mine moved roles, and was informed that he would not be furloughed by his new employer, as the cut-off for furlough through payroll had passed. There was little consideration of people in that position.

Another constituent was a director of a small education consultancy. They were told that income as dividends could not be distinguished from unearned income, despite verified accounts and professional oversight. The effects of that decision did not end when lockdowns lifted. The financial impact of exclusion was severe, but the human cost was greater still. Campaign groups have documented widespread mental distress across those excluded from support, including cases of suicide linked to financial hardship during the pandemic. There were people who felt hopeless, abandoned and unseen. The mental health consequences of exclusion are still being felt, and they should weigh heavily on this House.

The excluded have three requests of this Government: an apology to the nearly 4 million workers who were abandoned; parity of support; and an acknowledgment of the loss of earnings and consequential losses. I ask the Minister to meet the all-party parliamentary group on gaps in covid-19 financial support, so that he can hear directly from those affected.

At the same time when millions of taxpayers were excluded from support, vast sums of public money were spent on dodgy personal protective equipment. The National Audit Office has confirmed that billions were lost through error and fraud across covid-19 schemes. The PPE MedPro case starkly illustrates that imbalance: a company fast-tracked through the Government VIP lane was paid £122 million for surgical gowns that were later ruled unfit for use, and has since been ordered to repay £148 million to the public purse.

This debate is not just about reflecting on what went wrong; it is about recognising and acknowledging the injustice, starting with an apology to the nearly 4 million workers who were abandoned under the Conservative Government. We also must prepare properly for the future. Public health experts have been clear that we should be talking about not if, but when, there is a future pandemic or national emergency. When the moment comes, this House will have a responsibility to ensure that no one slips through the gaps again.

Emergency support schemes must be designed around the reality of how people work in this country. Millions of people do not fit neatly into a single employment category. They combine PAYE work with self-employment, run a small limited company, take time out for caring responsibilities or build new businesses from scratch. That diversity is a strength of our economy, not a problem to be designed out of eligibility. The state already holds vast amounts of information through His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Companies House and other bodies. The lesson of covid is that the issue was not a lack of data, but a lack of willingness to use it flexibly and fairly.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I worked in health and social care during the covid pandemic, so I did not experience furlough—in fact, we worked very hard indeed. Some of the excluded self-employed people that the hon. Member refers to are still suffering today. Does she agree that they are paying the price for the previous Government's sheer incompetence in managing the process?

Manuela Perteghella: I fully agree with the hon. Member. I hope that the new Labour Government will reflect on what went on, and will engage with all those who were excluded, so I look forward to the response from the Minister.

Next time, inclusion must be the starting point, not an afterthought.

Preparing for the future is not only about better scheme design; it is also about restoring trust in how public money is handled. During the pandemic, many legitimate taxpayers were denied support on the grounds of fraud risk while vast sums of public money were lost through waste, error and contracts awarded through so-called VIP lanes. The PPE Medpro case raises serious questions about how decisions were made and who benefited from them. While hard-working families and small businesses were pushed into debt and hardship, those connected to questionable contracts were fast-tracked and rewarded. Huge sums were handed out with little scrutiny and, in some cases, for equipment that put our brave doctors and nurses at risk, that could not even be used, or that ended up being incinerated. That imbalance matters because it corrodes trust.

If we fail to learn these lessons, we fail the very people who kept paying in even when they were left out. If we succeed, future emergency support can be fast, fair and trusted. That is what those who were excluded deserve, and that is what this House should commit to delivering.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. In the region of 10 Members wish to speak. If they restrict themselves to about five minutes each, I will probably get everybody in.

3.45 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I thank my friend the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing this incredibly important and long-overdue debate, and for being such a strong voice for those excluded from covid-19 financial support.

The gaps in covid-19 financial support all-party parliamentary group, which I chair, currently has 77 cross-party members, which demonstrates the strength of feeling across the House and the desire to represent constituents affected by this issue. We have just heard a powerful case for acknowledging that approximately 3.8 million people were wholly or partially excluded from meaningful covid-19 financial support. Years later, many remain burdened by unimaginable debt, some disgusting smears, declining mental health and the loss of homes, businesses and livelihoods.

I was an advocate for some of these under-represented people in my previous role as the NASUWT national executive member for the six counties of north Wales. Supply teachers, with no contracted hours at all and no guaranteed work from day to day, even before the pandemic, were placed in a terrible position. In four of the north Wales counties I represented, a furlough-type payment was arranged. In two, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn, a furlough payment was not arranged. That cohort of workers went through incredibly difficult times. In any capacity, professional or otherwise, when we speak

[Steve Witherden]

with people who cannot pay their rent or are in mortgage arrears, or when we hear young, hungry children crying in the background over the phone, it leaves a deep and lasting impression.

During the run-up to the 2024 general election, I met campaigners for ExcludedUK and learned that this situation was far bigger than supply teachers in two counties in north-west Wales; it affected millions of people across the country and in many different industries. One of those campaigners was Ken, a small business owner and now a constituent of mine. He remembers the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) promising to the nation that no one would be left behind, and then the shock of finding himself with no support. Not only was he left without support for day-to-day living, but he had to shoulder the ongoing costs of keeping a business afloat. The pandemic brought much to a halt, but software licences, professional fees and other essential overheads did not stop.

Ken began working at age 17 and is now 72. He describes the pandemic as the only time he needed help. The help was not there. That feeling has stayed with him ever since, and not only because of the toll on his mental health, but because of the monthly reminder when he has to repay the bounce back loan that he was forced to take out in order to survive the pandemic.

Ken's is just one of many people still suffering from the after effects of being excluded. Forty known suicides have been directly linked to exclusion from covid-19 financial support, but hundreds more people have attempted suicide, and there is widespread clinical anxiety, depression and trauma. Those figures relate only to individuals known within the ExcludedUK membership, and are likely to represent only a fraction of the true number.

Will the Minister acknowledge that the exclusion of around 3.8 million taxpayers from meaningful covid-19 financial support was a serious policy failure? Will the Government publish an assessment of the continuing financial and psychological harm, including suicide risk, and set out the support pathway for affected people? Finally, what steps is he taking to ensure that future crisis support will be inclusive, with stronger parliamentary oversight?

I wish to put on the record my personal thanks to Jennifer Griffiths, head of member welfare at ExcludedUK and secretariat of the APPG—she is the backbone of this campaign, and without her tireless work, many more lives would have been lost—as well as to Tim Pravda, for his long-standing advocacy and indispensable voice in this ongoing fight for justice. I would appreciate it if the Minister agreed to meet the APPG, ExcludedUK and bereaved families of those who died by suicide linked to exclusion.

3.50 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

There is no doubt that the hardship affecting families, businesses and communities as a result of covid-19 policies is ongoing. The depth of suffering is hard to read about. People have been pushed to their limits, mentally and financially, and have had to endure indignity

and injustice through no fault of their own. I hope that we can now all agree that it should never have happened. It is something that we never want to see happen again.

The various Government financial support schemes that were set up helped many people, but for the forgotten businesses and individuals who, for one bureaucratic reason or another, were deemed ineligible, the situation was patently unfair and unjust. Some 3.8 million UK taxpayers were excluded from support, while the rest of the working population were paid to stay at home. Why were they excluded? The reasons were arbitrary. Financial support was not forthcoming if a person was newly self-employed, a PAYE freelancer, a director paid in dividends, starting a new job—the list goes on. The rules were random and confusing, and they pushed so many people into desperate situations.

Sadly, we should not have been surprised that that happened. Although some marvelled at the speedy roll-out of the Government's schemes, the reality was that they were patchy, poorly thought out and full of gaps—of course they were. How could we ever expect to shut down our society and economy and be able to cover the gigantic financial cost of doing so while ensuring that every person was properly looked after? It was unrealistic—an unprecedented state intervention that was doomed to fail.

I totally agree with Members present who are pushing for assurances that that will never happen again, but if we cannot look back with honesty and clarity about what was done, we are doomed to make the same mistakes again. Lockdown was the mistake from which all that injustice and suffering flowed. It was an unknown and unevicenced imposition that should never have been inflicted upon the British people. Many experts predicted from the start that it would cause misery and, horrifically, cost hundreds of thousands of lives through unintended but very real collateral damage.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for her powerful speech. Our opinions on lockdown may differ, but does she agree that, had we not gone into lockdown, many more thousands of people would have lost their lives?

Esther McVey: I do not believe the evidence proves that. We can look to other parts of the world where that was not the case.

This policy had unwavering and enthusiastic support from across the House, with just a few of us in this House—too few—raising valid concerns, but we were shut down. It should be obvious that some people cannot be damaged in the name of protecting others with interventions such as lockdowns that we do not even know will work. The moral mathematics never added up.

And now we must live with the consequences of what we did. We spent in the region of £400 billion on the covid-19 response—a vast sum that will be clawed back through increased taxation and hardship for generations to come. Of course, the Conservative party had to put up taxes to pay for that £400 billion, and it was voted for by pretty much every Member in the House. For me, such a statist, socialist intervention would never work, and that is proving to be the case.

Those businesses that did manage to survive after everything that was thrown at them in the name of covid are now having to face more gloom and doom

from this socialist Government in charge of our country, with their two tax-rising Budgets and their removal of business rates relief without understanding it—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The subject of the debate is financial support specifically during the covid pandemic. The right hon. Lady might want to make sure she stays within scope of that.

Esther McVey: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I added on that sentence because I felt it was very relevant that those who did manage to survive the pandemic are now not surviving, because of the extra taxes that are being put upon them and the removal of business rates relief that was introduced during covid, and it seems that the Chancellor does not even know how that works. Those businesses are suffering twofold, because some of that covid benefit is now being removed. It is no wonder Labour MPs are being banned from pubs, as we see mass closures of pubs.

I simply ask that we examine the bigger picture. Those 3.8 million people who were excluded from financial support suffered a terrible injustice, but so too did those who received support, because lockdown took from everyone: children denied education; mothers forced to give birth alone; people suffering heart attacks, strokes and sepsis but too frightened to burden the NHS; bereaved families unable to mourn the dead—the list of injustices goes on and on. None of it should ever have happened. The costs were always going to be too high, and worse, there appears to be no evidence that lockdown prevented covid infections.

The covid inquiry recently made two incredible assertions. One was that lockdowns were harmful but should have started earlier, and the other was that the modelling should not have been used to justify major policy but simultaneously proved that 23,000 lives could have been saved. Finally, lockdown was, as Professor Sunetra Gupta from the University of Oxford said—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The debate is not about lockdown; it is about financial support. I hope the right hon. Lady is concluding her remarks.

Esther McVey: I am concluding my remarks. I am pleased to have been able to speak today as one of a handful of 650 MPs who stood by “the Forgotten Ltd” and by many of our constituents whose businesses went out of business. I was one of the few in the House who stood up for them.

Finally, as Professor Sunetra Gupta said, this was like taking a hammer to a fly on a pane of glass: you might or might not kill the fly, but you definitely shatter the window. It will take us a long time to pick up the pieces. Next time we face a similar crisis, let us not panic and reach for the hammer.

3.58 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing the debate on this really important subject. The covid-19 pandemic was an incredibly difficult time for many people—healthcare and other key workers who served their communities courageously; people who contracted the virus and their loved ones; children and young people who missed out on education and

social interaction; and anyone who had to isolate alone. It was also an immensely stressful time for people who lost their incomes but could not get financial support. As we have heard from other Members, that group included many different types of people. I would like to share the stories of two constituents who have faced financial repercussions as a result of the covid-19 pandemic.

One of my constituents was a journalist and table tennis coach when the UK went into lockdown in March 2020. She was unable to do either job, but received no Government support, as she was deemed a fraud risk because her earned income was less than her combined state and work pensions. She feels that she was

“abandoned by those who should have had some empathy for the small business entrepreneurs whose lives were so badly affected by lockdown”.

Another constituent of mine is a business owner who entered insolvency due to the pandemic, through no fault of his own. He had to close his worldwide travel risk management business because of the restrictions that were in place at the time. Despite having run a viable business before covid, he now finds himself subject to extremely high interest rates—up to 32% on loans that he is trying to secure to set himself back up in business. He is concerned that he is being penalised, as if his insolvency was the result of mismanagement or poor creditworthiness rather than extraordinary and unforeseeable external circumstances. That not only hinders recovery efforts but may discourage future entrepreneurship.

I would be grateful if the Minister would address the experience of both my constituents, as well as how the Government can recognise the financial hardship that many taxpayers across the UK suffered during the covid-19 lockdowns and ensure that similar experiences will never happen in the future?

4.1 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) on securing the debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for it.

As we approach the six-year anniversary of the first lockdown, I am sure that many colleagues will agree that the time of face masks, social distancing and self-isolation feels so very long ago. However, for millions of individuals and countless businesses, it has been an even more arduous six years. As we have heard, research now suggests that about 3.8 million UK taxpayers were excluded from any support and did not enjoy the security that so many of the rest of us did.

As we reflect on the ongoing fallout of the pandemic, it is vital that we take on lessons learnt, but the matter of groups excluded from financial support during the pandemic is not one we have learnt about only in retrospect. Issues were raised at the time—in real time—and the failure to listen and act is one that any Government must recognise and make efforts to rectify.

We all understood why the initial schemes were targeted to support the majority of people—employees and established self-employed people—but we waited in vain for the then Conservative Government to provide support schemes for the other 3.8 million people. One outstanding issue, as we have heard, was the unnecessarily rigid criteria for the self-employed income support scheme. The glaring issue was the exclusion of the recently self-employed, as entitlement required a tax return from

[Charlotte Cane]

the year 2018-19. That, combined with the 50% income rule, which hon. Members have mentioned, prevented many people from getting any help. We have heard too about women who may have kept their businesses ticking over for a few years while they were on a maternity break or caring for someone, who found that their support was based on a low-income year rather than more representative years.

Many small businesses were forced to take out bounce back loans. The Government have estimated that many such loans will not be recoverable because many businesses were forced to close. However, those that have clung on are still working to pay the loans off—all while working in an environment of spiralling energy costs and a business rates system that still does not work properly. I visited one such business in my constituency only last week. To manage current costs, the owners have reduced staff and taken on more of the work themselves. They have run through the figures for next year, and the expected rise in business rates plus their covid loan repayments mean that they are considering selling up or closing the business.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): While many small businesses in my constituency were grateful for the support they received, their main concern, which many repeated to me, was about the abrupt end to support measures. Almost overnight, small businesses found themselves having to repay loans, and cover staff wages and all those other expenses, even though the economy had not bounced back and their sales had not returned to pre-covid levels. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to ensure that in the event of a future crisis, as well as not excluding those who need support, anything given to people to help them through such a period does not end with a cliff edge but is tapered to allow them to adjust to the post-crisis system?

Charlotte Cane: I agree. When we set up something to deal with an initial crisis, it is really important that we do not take it away too quickly when the crisis may be over but the economy, as the hon. Member said, still has not bounced back.

After facing the turmoil of the pandemic, small businesses, many of whose directors were also unable to claim financial support, have been afforded little by way of meaningful relief, all the while barely affording to cover their costs. Those small businesses contribute so much to our local economies and communities as much valued hubs. I see that time and again in the towns and villages across my constituency.

One of my constituents suffered particularly badly. He ran a specialist travel business whose income inevitably collapsed during covid. He got no support—he was actually told by a local Conservative that they saw “no point in supporting those whose jobs won’t exist”.

He had had hope because Labour in opposition criticised the Conservatives’ lack of support for the 3.8 million, but now he feels “disheartened and abandoned” in what he describes as the “tumbleweed” since Labour came to power. Through determination and hard work, he has rebuilt his business, but he wants to ensure that future self-employed generations do not suffer what he calls the same nightmare.

The pandemic has done deep and lasting damage, but we must recognise that simply learning a lesson does not go far enough. It is not too late for the Government to fill the gaps in pandemic financial support, relieve businesses of their burdens and provide meaningful support to those often financially vulnerable people who missed out unnecessarily. Will the Minister now recognise that covid-19 financial relief failed to provide fair and even support, and take steps to ease the ongoing burdens faced as a result?

4.7 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing this really important debate. When the covid-19 pandemic unfolded, it tested every part of our society. It pushed our health system, our communities and our economy to the brink. In that moment of crisis, emergency financial support was rightly created at unprecedented speed. Those measures protected millions, but despite the scale of that effort, far too many people were left behind. The ExcludedUK campaign emerged because an estimated 3.8 million individuals fell through the gaps in pandemic financial support. Those were freelancers, newly self-employed people, small business owners, PAYE short-term contractors and others whose circumstances simply did not fit the rigid eligibility rules. They were contributing members of society who paid taxes, built businesses and supported local economies, yet at the moment they needed help most, many found none.

That includes constituents in Mid Cheshire, many of whom contacted me ahead of the debate. They had done everything asked of them—they had built livelihoods and paid their taxes—but still found themselves excluded from support when the pandemic hit. People saw their livelihoods disappear overnight. Some were forced to drain life savings, sell belongings or take on unsustainable debt just to survive. They felt unheard, unseen and unvalued by the systems meant to protect them.

Tragically, for some, the emotional and financial devastation became unbearable. Each of those lives lost is a reminder that policy decisions are not abstract; they reach deeply into homes, families and futures. We must not only recognise and acknowledge the impact that exclusion had on those individuals but show renewed determination to ensure that such gaps never re-emerge. The pandemic has taught us something essential: economic resilience is public health resilience. There can be no effective emergency response if large groups of people are left without support. A society is only as strong as its most vulnerable moment.

As the UK continues to develop its preparedness planning for future pandemics and national emergencies, it is vital that support systems are designed with the flexibility to meet people where they actually are, not where policy assumes them to be. That means ensuring that any future emergency financial support schemes are properly stress-tested in advance against real-world employment patterns so that they reflect the diversity of modern working lives before they are ever deployed. No one contributing to the economy should face a crisis without a lifeline.

Mental health impacts must be treated as a central component of emergency planning, not an afterthought. Just as importantly, the voices of those previously excluded should be included in future policy discussions so that

lived experience shapes the solutions of tomorrow. Preparedness must mean more than storing equipment or writing contingency documents; it must mean designing a compassionate, comprehensive safety net that recognises the full spectrum of working lives in the UK and ensures that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

Matt Turmaine: Covid-19 clearly had an enormous impact on the economy of the world and the UK. In terms of preparing ourselves for any future threat under these circumstances, does my hon. Friend agree that the fraud and corruption facilitated by the previous Government was an absolute disgrace? It is up to this Labour Government to get our money back and solve those problems.

Andrew Cooper: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has done exactly the right thing by setting up the covid corruption commissioner. During the pandemic, there were those who saw it not as a moment of national emergency in which we should all get together, but as an opportunity to line their own pockets. The Chancellor is doing exactly the right thing by trying to root out those people and make sure that they suffer the consequences.

We cannot change what happened, but we can choose what happens next. Let us learn the lessons from past schemes that left too many people excluded, and move forward by building systems that protect everyone. Let us ensure that in any future crisis, we never again leave millions to face hardship alone. What specific steps will the Government take to ensure that any future emergency financial support schemes are designed with the flexibility, fairness and real-world applicability needed to prevent millions from ever again being excluded in their moment of greatest need?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): There will now be a formal four-minute time limit.

4.12 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) on securing this important debate.

During the pandemic, the state quite rightly intervened on an unprecedented scale. Hospitality businesses received grants, employees were furloughed and billions were distributed through schemes that were fast, generous and non-repayable. Yet alongside that, there existed a shadow group who did not fit into neat categories: new starters, new businesses, PAYE freelancers, many directors of limited companies and numerous other groups, as we have heard. Millions of people saw their work vanish overnight. Their income collapsed, and when they applied for help, they were told bluntly, "Computer says no."

Meanwhile, the Conservative Government's handling of PPE contracts left taxpayers out of pocket to the tune of billions. An interim Government report found that defective PPE contracts cost the British taxpayer at least £1.4 billion. VIP lanes and fast-track deals with Tory friends and supporters led to waste, inefficiency and fraud. This was money that could have kept millions of small businesses and self-employed people afloat, yet it was instead mismanaged at the hands of well-connected insiders.

The vast majority of those excluded earned under £50,000 per year before the pandemic, working in trades, retail, education, the creative industries, hospitality and

events. They were economically active, often running microbusinesses that supported local jobs and sustained vital supply chains. As we have heard, 3.8 million people were excluded—roughly one in 10 of the UK workforce. While their neighbours received thousands of pounds to stay afloat, they were left with nothing.

As a cabaret bar owner, I saw for myself what that meant in practice. My freelance artists, the musicians, the singers, the burlesque dancers, the drag queens and the self-employed performers received no help from the state. Years later, many are still living with the debts, which did not end when the lockdowns did. For those who were excluded, be they freelancers, sole traders or small businesses, survival often meant borrowing through bounce back loans, credit cards, overdrafts and personal loans.

Many are still repaying those loans today, at a time when rising energy prices, inflation, supply chain pressures and the cost of living crisis make every repayment a struggle.

What makes this hard to accept is that the exclusion was not inevitable; Treasury-ready solutions existed. Analysis by ExcludedUK shows that fully costed, low-fraud proposals based on HMRC data could have reached the vast majority of those excluded. Those solutions had backing from across the political spectrum and were supported by business groups and experts, yet Ministers in the Conservative Government chose not to act, unlike the Northern Ireland Executive, who worked with HMRC to deliver targeted grants to newly self-employed people and limited company directors who were excluded from UK-wide schemes. If it could be done in Northern Ireland, why could it not be done in the rest of the UK?

The Government are rightly pursuing the fraudsters where money was wrongly paid out, but they cannot ignore the money that was wrongly withheld. The recently published final report of the covid counter-fraud commissioner makes it clear that weakness in preparedness, data sharing and oversight was the reason why millions were excluded. It is incumbent on the House to acknowledge that those who were excluded were wronged; it was a serious policy failure with lasting consequences, and we must address its legacy. That means looking seriously at debt relief or redress for those forced into borrowing to survive. It means learning from what worked in Northern Ireland and ensuring that in any future crisis, support is inclusive by default, so that no group of taxpayers are ever again told, "The computer says no."

4.16 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): In the early days of the pandemic, the country came together in the worst of times, making unprecedented sacrifices in all of their lives so that they could collectively fight the pandemic and save lives. The pandemic also put the structure of governance and our public finances under extreme strain; there were undoubtedly difficult—sometimes impossible—choices that had to be made. Such is the responsibility of government, but as the covid inquiry and many of our constituents have told us, there were people who were failed.

Financially, individuals and small businesses in my constituency and—as we have heard powerfully—across the country found themselves excluded from support, as their lives did not map cleanly on to the fantasy of seamless transition from workplace to workplace and

[Euan Stainbank]

from business to business. They were told that their circumstances meant they did not qualify. They included new businesses, the newly self-employed, freelancers, those on parental leave, and company directors of small businesses who received their income from dividends and a salary, to name just a few. That point has been made powerfully by several Members, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden).

Those who were in the most precarious employment were also hit hardest, with job opportunities limited. We saw youth unemployment spike during the pandemic, from 12.4% immediately before the lockdown to 15.2% only four months later. Many of those young people were made unemployed because of the high turnover and insecure nature of their workplaces—they were not on the payroll when 19 March 2020 came around. Just before the first lockdown, I and many other students were working seasonally in the hospitality sector, on zero-hours contracts, taking time off during February and March to complete the honours levels of our degrees. We expected to return to work that summer alongside pursuing our careers, but we were not given any support during the pandemic and found that our employment opportunities were limited, with no furlough available.

There was no restitution for the loss of income and opportunity many young people faced during the pandemic. The impact was that the generation most likely to be employed in those casualised or ad hoc employments were set back. Plans to move out of home, pay off their student loans and begin a career—the proof points of a successful journey through our economy—were delayed. For many, survival became the predominant need; the desperate need to pay their bills, feed their kids, and survive through any means possible. Although the pandemic was hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime event, this Government must be prepared for any such eventuality. What I have described is a good reminder of the harm of balancing the labour market in one direction.

One constituent who got in touch with me about this issue was a company director who was paid in dividends and a small salary, and who received no support because of that gap. They pointed out that not only was the lack of support hugely challenging, but colleagues and competitors in the same industry with a clearer definition of self-employment did receive support and were provided with a significant competitive advantage, which continued to this day. That is harmful to the economy, and is an injustice to my constituent and limited company directors like them. Years later, people feel like they are still trying to tread water with a weight chained to their ankle as they maintain businesses while paying back extensive loans that they took out to bridge the pandemic's severe impact on their business.

I commend the Government on the very good work they have done to identify the clear waste and instances of fraud that occurred during covid. The covid corruption commissioner identified £10.9 billion in losses due to weak accountability, bad quality data and poor contracting under the previous Government. We can go further, and I would welcome an acknowledgement from the Minister that better design in the previous Government's schemes could have averted those losses. That money should and could have been spent on deploying support that would have unchained many people, including my constituents,

from the extensive consequential impacts they went through at the time. Those impacts should be recognised through a clear and unambiguous statement of support for those people by delivering an apology on behalf of the British state.

I commend the campaigners at ExcludedUK and its supporters, who have been relentless in advocating almost six years on from the start of the pandemic. They are fighting every day, chained financially to the circumstances caused by the pandemic—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I call Iqbal Mohamed.

4.20 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing this important debate. The covid pandemic was an unprecedented crisis that placed immense strain on ruling parties worldwide. Few, if any, could dispute that rapid, decisive intervention was necessary to prevent an utterly catastrophic collapse in the British economy. However, acknowledging the scale of the challenge does not absolve the Government of responsibility for how that money was spent, how their support schemes were designed and implemented, or how recklessly public funds were safeguarded.

While some degree of waste and fraud is inevitable in a crisis, the scale of loss during the pandemic was not inevitable, but the result of systemic failure within the UK Government. That failure remains unchecked under the current Labour Administration. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that covid support measures totalled somewhere between £169 billion and £192 billion. That included a variety of schemes, from furloughing individuals to protect them from unemployment to grants and loans intended to help businesses stay solvent.

However, the support system simply did not work for nearly 3.8 million freelancers and self-employed workers. Many were excluded altogether from financial assistance through rigid eligibility criteria, outdated data or the blunt distinction drawn between modern forms of work. That said, much of the covid-19 spending—for those to whom it was available—undoubtedly saved jobs and prevented mass insolvency. Departments and public bodies were forced into reactive policymaking, scrambling to design schemes in real time, often without effective oversight or proper safeguards against abuse. Nowhere was that more evident than in the scale of fraud committed against the Government support schemes.

According to the independent covid counter-fraud commissioner's final report, published last month, some £10.9 billion of taxpayer money was lost to fraud and error across covid support schemes. Of that sum, only £1.8 billion has been recovered so far. The remainder, as the report makes clear, is likely beyond recovery, with fraud prevention efforts identified as falling short across Government. The causes of this failure are well documented in the aforementioned report, but one particular point that stuck out to me was that banks were instructed to suspend their usual due diligence, despite voicing explicit warnings about heightened risks of fraud.

Better design was possible. Britain appears to stand alone in the G7 on the scale of fraud experienced during covid. Other countries managed to move quickly while still embedding stronger checks. The lesson is not

that speed and scrutiny are incompatible, but that the Government of the time chose not to prioritise the latter. That so few consequences have followed these failures only deepens public cynicism with democratic political processes. Keir Starmer was elected on a—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We do not refer to the Prime Minister by his name, but as the Prime Minister.

Iqbal Mohamed: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Prime Minister was elected on a platform that pledged to clean up politics and crack down on those who defraud the public purse. However, instead of introducing stiffer penalties for individuals and corporations that are illegally profiteering from a crisis, the Government are spearheading punitive legislation on alleged welfare fraud, criminalising innocent benefit claimants.

In conclusion, what unites all of what I have spoken about, as it does Members from all parts of the House, is that fraud, waste and cronyism are a failure of governance and a failure to adequately plan and properly design systems to protect the public purse. If we are serious about restoring—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I call Olly Glover.

4.24 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for her passionate speech and for securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for giving time to this topic. As many hon. Members have said, covid feels like a distant memory to so many of us, but it continues to have severe, long-lasting effects, including those we are discussing today. I will talk about a couple of constituents who have been affected by the issue of covid-19 financial support exclusion.

Fiona and her husband, Bill Bruty, ran a training and consultancy business called Fundraising Training from their bedroom. It helped charities, both here and abroad, to raise money by running training courses. Fiona and Bill were affected by the fact that no financial support was given to business owners whose income principally derived from dividends. Although they eventually received £2,000 from South Oxfordshire district council, they went through tremendous stress and financial struggles. In their words:

“Nobody has understood what happened and the mental anguish it caused to so many of us who had paid taxes and did not have business premises.”

For Fiona and Bill, face-to-face training has never recovered from the pandemic. Bill has suddenly had to put everything online, which has ultimately been good for them, as they have learned to adapt to our increasingly online lives, but that is an effect that we have seen in many other small businesses.

Rob is a limited company director who felt that he and other limited company directors were badly treated, as it was deemed too hard for HMRC to check where dividends came from. Limited company employees were also denied the right to earn income from other sources.

Where do we go from here? First, it would be interesting to hear from the Minister what redress he thinks should be considered, given the campaign that ExcludedUK has mounted. Secondly, it is important that we learn for

the future. Of course, we all hope that the scientists are wrong, but many of them fear that it is only a matter of time before another pandemic, for a variety of reasons. Indeed, there may be other forms of economic hardship, which means that we will need to consider these matters again and come up with better processes in future.

This debate points to the fact that politics in this country has perhaps been more focused on larger companies, rather than on those who run their own businesses and are self-employed. That is something that we in this House should all think about. The issues that small businesses have raised with me more recently—many of them suffered during the pandemic—are a big concern, because they are being impacted by current decisions on business rates, alcohol duty and other taxation policies. I am proud that the Liberal Democrats were one of the first parties to call for support for self-employed people during the pandemic, and we secured an urgent question on the topic on 24 March 2020.

It is so important that we recognise the contribution that small businesses and the self-employed make to our economy. As well as learning the lessons of the pandemic, we really need to think about how we can support them so that they are better prepared in case of a future economic disaster like the one we all lived through between 2020 and 2022.

4.27 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing this important debate. The covid-19 pandemic was undoubtedly one of the most impactful and damaging events to unfold in our lifetimes. Being told to stay inside was incredibly difficult for everyone; people were unable to see loved ones and were uncertain about the future. Thankfully, that time is now just a memory for most—one that we would rather forget, and which we can put behind us as we move forward.

Sadly, though, covid is something that many people cannot move past, as we have heard. Across the country, people have lost businesses, lost their homes and, in the worst cases, lost loved ones to the financial stress that the pandemic caused. To add to that distress, the hard-working British people who fell through the gaps have had to watch on as numerous instances of fraud and PPE procurement mismanagement have come to light. Billions of pounds have been wasted and lost; had it been managed properly, that money could have saved people's livelihoods.

In my constituency of Mid Dunbartonshire, we have seen local businesses close. One constituent, who still feels the impact, has told me that a complete lack of support forced their takeaway business, which they had built up from scratch, to shut, yet when they tried to move on, they found that they were at a disadvantage. Despite holding a personal taxi driver's licence, they had to rent a taxi plate at a cost of more than £400 a week.

The absence of meaningful support during covid did not just cost them their business at the time; it continues to have a direct and measurable impact on their ability to rebuild their livelihood today.

My constituent is just one of the nearly 4 million people impacted, and these people deserve support, acknowledgment of the loss that they suffered, and an

[Susan Murray]

apology. Beyond that, we need to listen to the voices of those affected, and to learn from their experience, so that we can find and plug the gaps in our system that people have fallen through. As the world becomes more unstable, we must make sure that, at home, people and businesses have security. If we are serious about building resilience as a country, we cannot simply move on and hope that those left behind will do the same. We must recognise the harm that has been done. We must be honest about the failures that allowed people to fall through the cracks, and we must take steps to fix them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Benchers' speeches. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.30 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing this debate and for her excellent opening speech, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time to debate this important topic.

Small businesses and self-employed people played a vital role in sustaining communities throughout the challenges of the covid-19 pandemic, often at significant personal and financial cost. The pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on people, affecting the livelihoods of millions from all walks of life. There were additional concerns for self-employed people and small business owners, who faced even greater uncertainty because of the lack of support from the then Tory Government. The Liberal Democrats have stood by those people from the get-go. We were the first party to call for support for self-employed people during the pandemic, and we helped to secure the support scheme for them.

The covid pandemic had a devastating impact on people across the country, and tens of thousands of people lost their life. We must never forget the tragedies of that pandemic, as people lost mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, friends, husbands or wives. People were left isolated, unable to see others for weeks on end. They were unable to visit sick relatives, attend the wedding of a loved one, or hug their family at funerals. It is possibly a measure of how much time has passed and how much has changed since then that only a minority of those in the Chamber were Members of Parliament during the pandemic; I think I am the only Liberal Democrat in the Chamber who was here then. Like many MPs during the pandemic, I received heartbreaking correspondence from my constituents. Their struggles will stay with me, and I will remember their suffering for as long as I continue to represent my constituency.

I reflect with gratitude on the bravery of the doctors, nurses and carers who did everything they could; they often worked incredible hours to save lives and support those around them, and often put themselves at risk. I think of the thousands of people who selflessly helped their communities, be it as vaccinators, by picking up prescriptions, or by shopping for elderly and vulnerable neighbours. We must not forget those who suffered, and those who made sacrifices to ensure that the suffering was limited as much as possible.

The strong sense of public service and neighbourliness shown by people across the country was not reflected by the Government of the day. The covid inquiry has confirmed that systematic and political failings worsened people's suffering. A lack of scrutiny and accountability led to wrong decisions, often with catastrophic results—from the lack of preparedness for a pandemic to the failure to protect those in care homes, the cruelty and inflexibility of the isolation that people endured in the most desperate circumstances, including on their deathbed, and most shockingly of all, partygate. We must ensure that there can never again be such suffering or such a lack of preparedness.

It is particularly important that the Government continue to recognise the contribution made by small businesses and the self-employed during the covid pandemic. The Government should ensure that they have learned the lessons of that period, and keep under review its long-term impacts. Ensuring that people and businesses can leave behind the series of economic challenges that began with the pandemic—including the energy crisis, the rising cost of living and the growing tax burden—and remain resilient is essential to our long-term economic and social wellbeing.

The Government need to do more to recognise the value of the self-employed, contractors and small businesses to our economy. There is so much more that they could do to support them, and to show the value of what they contribute—the flexible working, the specialist expertise and so on. There is a range of ways that contractors, the self-employed and small businesses can support the broader economy. We need to do much more to recognise that value. The Liberal Democrats are calling for greater transparency and support for the self-employed in, for example, Making Tax Digital. That was originally intended to simplify the tax system, but it has created new burdens, costs and confusion. We must make sure that the self-employed are properly informed and supported through that reform.

The Liberal Democrats strongly supported the expansion of workers' rights during the passage of the Employment Rights Bill, and we pushed for some of those benefits to be extended—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Lady is referring to the self-employed and small businesses who were impacted by covid-19 financial support, but I am not convinced that Making Tax Digital and the Employment Rights Bill fall within the scope of this debate.

Sarah Olney: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted to reflect the value of the self-employed to our economy, and to reflect on how, as we learn the lessons from covid, that group of workers can be supported more broadly. That is a pressing issue for now, but I accept that we are debating what happened six years ago.

The extremely challenging period that small businesses and self-employed people went through just a few years ago makes it even more important that the Government address the major challenges that they are experiencing here and now. For many, those challenges include repaying the loans that they took out to maintain their business. Today, as they face increased cost challenges, that continues to be a huge burden. I sincerely hope that the Government will listen to the impassioned speech of my hon. Friend

the Member for Stratford-on-Avon and think about how they can do more to support self-employed people, contractors and small businesses, who contribute so much to our economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.36 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) on securing this important debate. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken—I think more than 10 did—about what their constituents suffered and continue to suffer. They set out some very powerful examples.

It is almost six years since the first cases of covid were recorded in the UK, after two Chinese nationals travelled here from Wuhan. As has been said, these were some of the most challenging times for our nation. Some 230,000 people tragically died, and there is a very powerful memorial just across the river to remind us; we see it every day. Lockdowns and restrictions were imposed. Choices were made that no Government would want to make. As a newly elected MP, I was faced with the need to vote for and support measures restricting people's freedom—something that I did not expect to have to do when I came into this place.

Clearly, not every decision taken was right. Mistakes were made, as they would be in a pandemic, but overall this unprecedented challenge was met with unprecedented action. On the economy, the subject of this debate, the actions taken by the then Conservative Government protected millions of jobs, and supported businesses and those most in need. When the pandemic struck, the Government acted swiftly. The coronavirus job retention scheme—the furlough scheme—which protected 11 million jobs at a cost of £70 billion, was announced on 20 March. Shortly afterwards, the first lockdown was announced. At its peak, nearly 9 million people were on furlough, preventing widespread unemployment. For the self-employed, a topic covered in most contributions, the self-employment income support scheme was set up and delivered nearly £30 billion, across five rounds of grants, to nearly 3 million individuals. Those schemes provided a lifeline to those whose livelihood was threatened through no fault of their own.

Beyond the employment support schemes, eight grant schemes saw £23 billion paid to small businesses. They were administered by local authorities. I pay tribute to the work they did to put in place systems and mechanisms for processing those payments rapidly and getting the support to people who needed it. Through three loan schemes, nearly £80 billion-worth of loans were approved. The bounce back loan scheme supported 1.5 million businesses with nearly £50 billion of funding.

It was not only loans that provided crucial support. Some £10 billion was made available in business rates relief to nearly 370,000 premises in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector, and we are now seeing the consequences of unwinding some of that support. VAT for the hospitality sector, which was particularly affected by the restrictions and rules that were put in place, was cut to 5%. I supported the campaign for that cut, as did many Members across the House. That unprecedented package supported jobs and livelihoods across the UK.

The Government also acted to help certain groups who faced particular challenges. A £20-a-week uplift was put in place for people on universal credit to help

those on the lowest incomes, and rules about eligibility for benefits were relaxed. Additional support for jobseekers through the kickstart and restart schemes was also rolled out.

Of course, as the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon and other hon. Members have said, the support did not reach everyone. ExcludedUK was established in May 2020 to represent individuals and small business owners who fell outside the main financial support schemes. As has been set out, the group estimates that around 3.8 million people were unable to access full financial support, despite losing their income. Those individuals included the newly self-employed, company directors paid in dividends, and those whose self-employment income was less than half their overall earnings.

I know the genuine hardship faced by my constituents in that situation from my time in this House, and from raising constituents' issues with Ministers. Hon. Members from across the House will remember the constant Teams and Zoom meetings with Ministers, in which we put forward the position of those people, as well as the debates held in the House and the reports by the Treasury Committee and others drawing attention to the situation.

The response that was consistently provided was about the challenges in identifying workable solutions for HMRC's system, which, as the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) said, was unable to differentiate dividends coming from an individual's company from money from other sources. The cut-off points—the £50,000 threshold—for self-employed people also led to real difficulties and unfairness. The fraud risk, which has been referred to by a number of hon. Members, was one of the reasons given by the then permanent secretary to the Treasury as to why schemes put forward by the Federation of Small Businesses were cited as not being possible. There were changes through the five self-employment income support scheme grants. Frankly, though, the restrictions created the impact on the people to whom hon. Members have referred. The ongoing concerns raised by the campaign merit serious consideration—and the covid inquiry will give them that consideration during the module referred to by the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon.

Looking to the future, we should ensure that if and when the next pandemic strikes, we have better data, and better systems to put in place support, if needed; Making Tax Digital may help in that regard. We should ensure that rules do not exclude people unfairly. Equally, we must learn the lessons from the pandemic, particularly around the damaging impact of lockdowns, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) said; if we do not put those restrictions in place, such huge financial firepower will not be needed.

In the pandemic, the pressure for action to help people and businesses was incredibly intense. There were trade-offs relating to time and the checks that could be implemented on support schemes. I recall vividly the clamour for support for small businesses, which I was part of. That led to the bounce back loan scheme, which had limited checks, leading to consequences involving fraud. That scheme, however, enabled lots of businesses to survive that would not otherwise be here today. The Government could have spent months designing the perfect scheme while businesses collapsed and families struggled; instead, they acted to protect lives and livelihoods. Some £410 billion was spent on covid measures—an

[James Wild]

extraordinary sum that added greatly to our debt. However, predictions by the Bank of England that unemployment would reach 9% were prevented. Unemployment peaked at 5.2%, before falling back to 3.7% two years after the first lockdown.

However, a lot of people clearly missed out on full financial support. While there will continue to be debate about the decisions taken and lessons to be learned, undoubtedly our country would be in a far worse place today were it not for the decisions taken at the time.

4.44 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) on securing this debate. I thank hon. Members from both sides of the House for their powerful contributions. Although much of the debate has rightly focused on the detail of the financial support made available by the then Government during the pandemic, we have also heard many deeply personal stories about businesses and individuals who were directly affected.

In two months' time, the country will come together to mark the sixth anniversary of the start of the pandemic. That will be an opportunity for us all to remember and reflect, and to pay tribute to all those who died, whose loss is still so keenly felt in all our constituencies. The pandemic cost over 227,000 lives in our country, and I know that loss and grief are still felt by families whose loved ones were lost during that difficult period.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) said, reflecting on the pandemic is also a moment to express our gratitude, once again, to all those who worked throughout the pandemic to provide vital and, in many cases, lifesaving services to all of us across the country. It is also a moment to recommit to learning the lessons of what happened during that time, so that we are better prepared for future crises. The Government are committed to learning those lessons and doing all we can to protect businesses and individuals across Britain in future.

As well as having a huge impact on the lives of people and their families across the country, as we have heard today, the pandemic was a huge economic shock. GDP fell by a record 19.4% and thousands of businesses faced closure, so it was necessary to support businesses and individuals affected. We supported putting in place the measures mentioned by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), including the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme, and various business grants and Government-backed loan guarantees. It is right, however, that we as a country now reflect on how those schemes were implemented by the Government of the day.

As we have heard from many hon. Members, a number of people experienced genuine hardship and distress because they were excluded from the available schemes. Many of those experiences have been described powerfully in today's debate, including by the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon in her opening speech and by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden). We also heard a number of other stories about individuals and businesses across the country from my hon. Friend the Member for Truro

and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), the hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane), and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), who also spoke about the significance of economic resilience and preparedness for the future—an important topic that I will return to in a moment.

We also heard from the hon. Members for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) and for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), and my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), who spoke about the impact of the pandemic on young people, which has had a lasting effect, as we are all keenly aware. The hon. Members for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) and for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) also spoke about their affected businesses and constituents. One of the themes of those contributions was about what we as a country are doing to prepare for the future, to ensure that if a similar crisis happened again, we would be better prepared. As a Government, we are considering how we might better target and reach excluded groups in future, including through better real-time data collection.

As hon. Members know, the official covid-19 public inquiry is considering how future emergency schemes could be better tailored to the modern labour market. The inquiry recently held public hearings focused on economic support for people and businesses during the pandemic, and it will publish its final report in due course. The Government, including the Treasury, fully participated in those hearings and provided a substantial amount of evidence. We will carefully study and consider any recommendations, mindful of our responsibility to vulnerable groups and our commitment to value for money.

As hon. Members have also made clear, no assessment of the previous Government's record during the pandemic can ignore the fact that billions of pounds of taxpayers' money was lost to fraud. That was a failure of monumental proportions, and we are all continuing to pay the price. That is why, on taking office, we took action to recoup the money owed, including by appointing Tom Hayhoe as the covid counter-fraud commissioner. In December he published his report, and the findings are shocking.

According to the commissioner, covid fraud cost the taxpayer a staggering £10.9 billion—that is enough to fund daily free school meals for the UK's 2.7 million eligible children for eight years. Of course, we recognise that our predecessors in government were responding to a crisis, the nature of which demanded acting at speed, but the cynical exploitation of pandemic support was foreseeable.

Last year, an arrest was made following an HMRC investigation into a company, Luxe Lifestyle, which was awarded a £25 million PPE contract, having been referred to the procurement VIP lane by a Conservative Minister and a party chairman. The company won that contract despite having no employees, no assets, no turnover and £9,000 of debt. While Luxe Lifestyle did end up supplying some items, they were all inadequate and unusable. That is just one example. It does not begin to scratch the surface of covid fraud, but we have heard no apology today from the Conservatives for their actions—no apology to this House, and no apology to the British people who have been left to pick up the bill.

We cannot allow this ever to happen again. That is why the Government introduced tougher sanction powers in the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025 to help recover stolen funds, and why we have

rolled out specialist fraud recovery teams to track down suspected fraudsters and recover taxpayer cash. Since coming to office, the Government have recouped almost £400 million paid in error or that was obtained illegally through covid fraud. As the Chancellor has made clear, this fraud is a fraud against the British people, and we will leave no stone unturned, leave no question unasked, and leave no fraudster unchallenged until we have cleared up the mess we inherited.

While we work to fix those problems, we are also turning towards the future, making sure our country is well prepared to face future crises. Much has been learned already from the covid-19 pandemic, but the scale of the economic emergency facing the country nearly six years ago underlines the need to continue embedding these learnings into the Government's systems and processes. As I have already set out, we have taken tough action to track down the fraudsters who profited on the previous Government's watch. We are improving and enhancing the Government's analytical and modelling capabilities, to ensure that we can better target support schemes in future. We have launched the National Situation Centre, enabling us to identify and plan for a range of risks and improve our crisis response.

We have conducted, through Exercise Pegasus, the largest cross-Government pandemic simulation in British history, helping to make sure we are better prepared than before, that our plans are battle-tested, and that we are ready to adapt. As the official covid-19 inquiry draws to a close, we stand ready to study any recommendations and to take action where needed.

The economic implications of the covid-19 pandemic for this country were profound. In response to this unprecedented crisis, it was of course necessary to act quickly for our economy and for our communities. But we know that mistakes were made, and the British people were defrauded to the tune of over £10 billion. That is money that should have been spent on schools and hospitals but which has instead gone into the pockets of fraudsters and criminals. There will also undoubtedly be wider lessons to draw from the design of support schemes and the impact those schemes had on various groups across the economy.

As a Government, we will continue to enhance our resilience to future shocks. We have set to work on that since the election, and our efforts will intensify after the official covid-19 inquiry publishes its final report. We will do whatever is necessary to build a safer and more secure country for the future. I will end by again thanking all hon. Members for sharing the experiences of their local businesses and individual constituents in the debate.

4.52 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I am grateful to all hon. Members who attended today's debate to support their constituents. The people we have talked about today ask not for special treatment, but for fair and equitable treatment. They paid in and followed the rules, but when the crisis came, they were left behind, with heartbreaking consequences. I hope that the Minister will meet the APPG in the near future.

In conclusion, if we are serious about learning the lessons of the pandemic, recognition, redress, accountability and change must follow. Otherwise, the next time a crisis strikes, we risk repeating the same injustice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial support for small businesses and individuals during the covid-19 pandemic.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Nesil Caliskan.*)

PETITION

Postal services in Inkberrow

4.54 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I rise to present a petition about postal delivery services in the village of Inkberrow and to thank the hundreds of constituents who have also shown their support by signing online. A reliable and regular postal service should be a basic expectation, yet my constituents are missing vital healthcare and business communications because of their chaotic service. I have met Royal Mail several times. Despite its assurances, the issue has not been resolved satisfactorily. The strength of feeling behind the petition shows how desperately the community needs a dependable service.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Redditch in Worcestershire,

Declares that the postal delivery service in Inkberrow village requires improvement.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action to ensure that Royal Mail provides an adequate postal service in Inkberrow.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003157]

Protection and Management of Young Trees

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environmental Audit Committee on 3 September 2025, on National Highways and environmental sustainability, HC 1284; Correspondence from the Environmental Audit Committee to the Secretary of State for Transport, on National Highways evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, reported to the House on 3 December 2025; and Correspondence between the Environmental Audit Committee and National Highways, dated 13 November, 3 November and 30 September 2025, reported to the House on 26 November and 22 October 2025.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nesil Caliskan.)

4.55 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking organisations including the Woodland Trust, the Arboricultural Association, the Forestry Commission, Highways England, the Horticultural Trades Association and the National Forest Company, and Ness Champion, founder of the Biophilic Design Conference, for their engagement ahead of the debate.

I think most people like trees. I go around saying they are great—tree-mendous, indeed—so much so that my mum and dad got me an “I Spy Trees” book for Christmas, which I think will become somewhat easier to complete in the spring and summer months. Trees are woven into the very fabric of our nation, our culture and our heritage—the apple tree that sparked Newton’s revolutionary thinking on gravity; the Tolpuddle Martyrs’ tree, a symbol of solidarity and the birth of the trade union movement; Sherwood forest, immortalised by Robin Hood; and the famous 100 acres, home to Winnie-the-Pooh, Tigger and co. Trees are place-makers.

I recently visited a new development called Linmere, where trees are quite literally used to sell the place, with marketing material suggesting that residents

“stroll through tree-lined avenues and take in the nature around you.”

Everyone moving in gets their own new tree in the garden. Trees improve our lives. They improve our health, both physically and mentally. Urban trees, shrubs and hedges reduce exposure to air pollution by dispersing and capturing pollutants such as particulate matter and ozone. Collectively, urban woods in the UK do a brilliant job of removing an estimated 7.5 kilotonnes of pollutants every single year. Trees can also be lifesavers. Research suggests that increasing green space by just 1% in the most deprived urban neighbourhoods in England is linked to 37% fewer preventable deaths.

Trees also reduce flooding. I was struck when I visited a local school on a soggy day last year, when many homes and businesses had experienced flooding, and asked the headteacher whether the school had had any problems, and it had not. She pointed to the trees on the surrounding playing fields, which had intercepted the rainfall and absorbed so much water. Forest Research estimates that trees deliver over £400 million a year in flood protection. In the summer, the same trees offer vital shade. Crucially, our trees lock away carbon for decades or even centuries. UK woodlands store around 1 billion tonnes of carbon.

Despite all those brilliant benefits, as a nation we are under-treed—we are well below the European average. That makes us the second largest importer of timber in the world. I am delighted that the Government have pledged to plant three new national forests. The first, in the west of England, is under way, and next the Ox-Cam growth corridor will see growth of a different kind—from seed to sapling to forest. With £1 billion of investment in tree planting and forestry support over this Parliament, and tree planting at its highest rate in over 20 years, with 10,000 football pitches-worth planted last year, “plant, plant, plant” is a good mantra.

But we also need to think about something rather less catchy: “establish, establish, establish”. The first three to five years of a tree’s life are critical. That is when trees are most vulnerable to drought, damage, disease and death. Of course, tree and woodland creation will always involve some risk. There will be years when the weather means more trees do not make it, even when best practice is followed, but what we are seeing goes far beyond unavoidable loss—to the planet and the public purse.

University of Sheffield research found that only 61% of the trees meant to be present on new developments were there.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nesil Caliskan.)

Alex Mayer: The research found that 39% of the trees were missing or dead. Along the A14, National Highways planted over 860,000 trees in 2020, but the failure rate was 45%. More detailed evidence comes from the evaluation of urban tree planting across four cities—Bristol, Birmingham, Nottingham and Leeds—covering trees planted between 2012 and 2022. The team says that just finding out what was planted and where was far harder than it should have been. Record keeping is not good. Even freedom of information requests did not yield data. “Do the trees exist?” they kept asking. Of the 820 expected trees, they discovered that only 687 were actually planted, so 23% of funded or required trees were never planted at all. Of those that were planted, only 42% were in good condition. Around one in five had died or been removed—we might call that a trage-tree—and nearly a third were in poor condition, showing stress, damage or inadequate growth. Very few were growing as we would want them to.

The National Audit Office reported that £48 million of Government investment went into the urban tree challenge fund. If these outcomes are representative, around £10 million of that investment may already have been lost—literally dead wood. This is not a marginal issue; it is a systemic value-for-money problem.

Why are these young trees dying? The research consistently points to similar causes: the wrong tree in the wrong place. I am struck by how often, especially in new builds, the trees are the responsibility of landscape gardeners. There can be a tendency to over-prioritise aesthetics, or even a rightful desire to create a sense of place, over choosing trees that will survive and thrive.

We need better species selection—the right tree in the right place for the right reason—with climate resilience built in. But even if it is in the right place, research shows that young trees are prone to damage from

poorly managed stakes and ties, strimmer damage, soil compaction and, sadly, vandalism. Staking in particular is an issue. It should be a temporary support, not a permanent restraint, but there are too many examples of trees literally being strangled by ties that are far too tight and so restrict the natural expansion of the trunk, so as the tree grows, the ties cut into the bark, disrupting the flow of water and nutrients. Sometimes it simply is not anyone's job to remove the stakes and ties after a year or so. We see on new developments that landscaping and management fees often do not translate into tree care at all and, in some cases, actively contribute to tree loss.

Another cause of early tree death is insufficient water because young trees are thirsty. Newly planted trees need to be watered two to three times a week. They knock back 50 to 100 pints each time. They need deep and regular soaking. Establishing trees need water once a week in dry weather. Watering in the first one to two years is one of the most important factors in whether a tree struggles long term or goes on to thrive.

What needs to change? I know that this Government are committed to early years, so do we perhaps need a best start tree hub as well where everybody learns about watering, mulching and formative pruning?

As I have outlined, the data is patchy. How do we do better as a nation? Does the Minister support mandated record keeping, minimum three-to-five year aftercare plans and reporting requirements tied to planning permission, grants and public contracts? In housing developments, should tree planting and aftercare contracts always be bundled together, so responsibility cannot be passed away? How do we better implement those planning conditions relating to aftercare?

I do not expect the Minister to be able to give me answers to all this; she may direct me to other Departments. That is important, as the issue of trees is not just for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; it is also about housing, communities, transport, health and more. However, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government currently lacks an in-house tree expert. It has been over a decade since the Department had an arboriculturist role, which previously provided expertise on urban trees, including tree planting and tree preservation order regulations. The sector says that it feels that gap keenly. Will the Minister reassure me that the welcome England tree action plan will have cross-departmental buy-in? Will it contain best practice, including clear schedules for watering, mulching, pruning and monitoring?

Of course, much of that already exists, for example in the Arboricultural Association, which I know stands ready to support the Government, and Highways England, which learned from its A14 debacle—the survival rate for trees in its 3 Million Trees project now stands at 85%. Maybe there could also be a section on performance-related tree payments—bonds with sums released only when trees are established so that the reward comes not for trees that are planted, but for trees that thrive, so that aftercare can no longer be treated as an afterthought.

For the Government's ambitions to flourish, we will need thriving tree nurseries. The excellent "Strong Roots" report has many recommendations to nurture the sector and increase the number of British-grown trees: for example, to better align tree supply with planting grants

to give nurseries confidence to invest, so that we avoid situations like the Scottish Government cutting their forestry grant scheme budget by 41% back in 2024, and to boost training, apprenticeships and skills development in tree production. One thing that stood out to me was that the report suggests introducing a British-grown tree certification logo to strengthen market identity. I can very much imagine the Minister launching the "Great British Trees" logo, so I would love to hear her comments on that.

Tree planting without establishment is not climate action; it is waste. However, with simple policy changes, we can ensure that young trees survive, thrive and deliver the economic, environmental, social and economic benefits that we all know they promise.

5.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):

What a pleasure it is to stand in this glorious room panelled with English oak cut down in the wake of world war two to refurbish this great Chamber of democracy, and at this Dispatch Box, a gift from New Zealand crafted from its native puriri wood, which I see every time I stand here. I passionately agree with my hon. Friend's opening speech. I am so grateful to her for bringing this topic to the House today.

Across England, trees and woodlands are more than just part of our landscape; they are intimately woven into our national identity. They cool our air and our cities and shelter our wildlife. Whether it is on a walk through an ancient forest or for a moment beneath a single tree in a city park, trees have a remarkable ability to restore us. They help us with anxiety, grief and loneliness and give us space to breathe. They are woven into our shared national culture. They have stood as symbols of endurance, wisdom and renewal. They are centuries-old sentinels—witnesses to our history. Growing up in Coventry, I played every weekend in Coventry's War Memorial Park, a great city's act of remembrance for those we lost in world war one. Every tree has a plaque beneath it remembering the people who died. It is a living memorial to the lost. Our woodlands are places where childhood memories are made and where Christmas strolls and new year's day walks become traditions, where children climb, and occasionally fall, where dens are made and where dogs are walked—hopefully on a leash.

As the Minister with responsibility for forestry, I have the privilege of regularly seeing the majesty and benefits of our woodlands up close, and I reassure my hon. Friend that we are taking the necessary steps to ensure that we have woodlands and trees for the future. Just last year, I opened Forestry England's Delamere seed processing centre—a net zero building made of timber—which is named after long-serving Forestry England team member Vernon Stockton. The centre will process up to 4 tonnes of high-quality tree seeds, providing the starting point for the forests of the future.

I have stood in Kielder forest with the people who manage it. I have visited the Community Forest Trust, which sent me home with two Scots pines and two hornbeams. Three of those trees have survived three London droughts. Of course, back in 2011 I led the fight against the Conservative party proposal to sell off the public forest estate; I am passionate about trees.

[Mary Creagh]

My hon. Friend is right to list the benefits of trees. Tree-planting in England is at its highest-recorded rate for 20 years—7,000 hectares last year. We will boost that further through our manifesto commitment to create three new national forests. What a privilege it was to plant a tree as part of that establishment. We will plant 20 million trees over the next 25 years to create that new western forest. On Monday, we opened the expressions of interest process for the planned forest in the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. We will launch the competition for a new national forest in the north or the midlands by July this year. These new forests will bring peace, shade and joy to millions around the country, and the Ox-Cam forest will bring forestry much closer to my hon. Friend's constituents.

As my hon. Friend says, without maintenance in the early years to help establishment of the trees, the impact of the investment can be reduced. That is why the Government fund establishment and provide expertise and advice to keep trees alive. All Government-funded woodland creation must be designed and planted to the UK forestry standard—a world-leading technical standard for sustainable forest creation and management agreed between all four UK nations. At its root is planning and design. Good planning grows strong woodlands and gives our trees the best start in life. Paying for planning is not a cost; it is an investment in resilience. That is why we offer the woodland creation planning grant—thousands of pounds to fund the groundwork before the first sapling goes in.

Of course, once they are in the ground, young trees are vulnerable and need maintenance to establish. Maintenance includes checking young trees for disease, replacing dead trees, and sometimes even watering during periods of drought. That is why we also fund ongoing maintenance through the England woodland creation offer. Capital payments cover the planting essentials, followed by £400 per hectare per year for 15 years, to support maintenance tasks that give the trees the best possible chance of survival.

We do not rely on planting alone; we back nature's own hand. Funding for natural colonisation lets woodlands expand organically, allowing species to establish where conditions suit them best. It may appear tatty and scruffy to some, but nature thrives in the mess and wild—it thrives best when we let it go. It is unrealistic to expect 100% survival rates, because that does not happen in nature, as we have seen during recent storms.

Last autumn we witnessed a great spectacle of nature: a mast year in which the overproduction of seeds and acorns meant that they blanketed woodland floors. After woodland species have gorged themselves and are ready for winter—the squirrels in my garden are absolutely fat as butter—there is still more than enough intact material to produce the next generation of trees.

Nature knows that not every seed is going to make it. We mirror that approach. The schemes that we fund as a Government dictate that trees are planted at a higher density than would be seen in mature woodland, to take into account the natural level of tree mortality. Some trees do die, and some are lost to tree disease—a risk to both established and newly planted trees and woodlands. We have seen what can happen with ash dieback and now with *Ips typographus*, the eight-toothed spruce bark beetle—that is quite a mouthful.

The Government have a robust regulatory regime in place that minimises biosecurity risks from imported material while meeting World Trade Organisation standards. Recipients of many Government grants are required to source trees from suppliers that meet the plant health management standard. Healthy saplings stay healthy because we prevent pathways for harm. My hon. Friend got a book about trees for Christmas. I am the lucky owner of a brand-new almond tree that I got for my birthday, which is going to do battle with the olive and the bay tree. Let's see what happens—I shall report back next year.

Species choice is ever more important in a changing climate. Today's species and the trees of the past may not thrive in the near future. For example, I have been told that as we have hotter, drier summers and warmer, wetter winters, cherry trees are a species that may not be climate-resilient in the future. Forestry England has published a list of 30 priority tree species selected for ability to withstand extreme weather and resist pests and diseases. It is crucial that those who want to plant trees and create woodlands do so with an eye on the future.

I said at the beginning that I agreed with most of what my hon. Friend said. I, too, am furious when I see parched trees lining motorways or streets on new developments where the trees have been left to die. I encourage local people who care about their trees to water them, particularly in the early days and during hot summers. My hon. Friend mentioned the urban tree challenge fund. Like our woodland creation grants, that fund did not simply fund planting; it provided multi-year establishment costs alongside the up-front capital costs.

In our urban tree planting grants, we require evidence of good establishment rates, and we withhold payments where that has not been met. That is not always the case for planting that is not funded by Government—for example, on the new housing estate that my hon. Friend talked about, where, despite planning conditions, the same effort towards tree survival is not always made. Developers must do better. Those trees are not decorations; they are an investment that will bring future residents the benefits we have talked about today. Aesthetics cannot take priority over survival.

There is a wealth of guidance provided by organisations inside and outside of Government on what the right tree for the right place is, and I urge people to use it. We are improving that guidance. Our Trees Outside Woodland project compared the survival rates of different establishment approaches. That project concluded last year, and the findings are feeding into our grant designs for tree establishment.

We have invested over £150,000 to investigate in greater detail the causes of mortality in recently planted trees. That work is ongoing. Of course, we have globally leading science down at Kew Gardens. I had the pleasure of spending an hour with Kevin Martin, the head of tree collections and arboriculture, who has been going over to Kazakhstan in central Asia to collect tree seeds and do the research to work out which trees are going to work in the future. The upcoming tree action plan is being developed in partnership across Government and with the sector, and will emphasise the importance of using best practice. Last year, as part of our procurement changes, we recognised the "grown in Britain" timber standard.

We fund tree establishment because it is good government. It is climate security, it is local pride and it is economic sense. We know that great people are working in our community forests. The Forests With Impact programme is working with prisoners at His Majesty's Prison Haverigg in Cumbria, and 250,000 saplings have been produced there to create the forests of the future. The organisation works with prisoners to ensure that social justice reparations for their crime also offers them a route out of crime and hope for their future when they leave prison. Those young trees will grow into the woodlands we promised—into greener towns, resilient farms and thriving forests.

I want to conclude by thanking everyone who loves trees: thank you for believing in the power of trees and in the potential of people, and for your commitment to a greener, fairer Britain. This Government will work with those who love trees, and we look forward to creating and amplifying the impact they make.

Question put and agreed to.

5.19 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 January 2026

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Food Inflation

1.30 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of food inflation on the cost of living.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, which I requested in October last year, and to those colleagues who are here today to speak in the debate and supported the application to the Committee.

We know that, whatever our political persuasion, politics at its best is about values. I came into politics to do everything I could to ensure that every single child in every single family has the best possible start in life. How do we measure that? How do we track progress on this fundamental principle, so crucial to who we are as a society? We know that the cumulative effect of inflation meant that UK food prices rose by a total of 38.6% between November 2020 and 2025. An element of that, of course, is linked to energy inputs into food processing.

I hope there is a consensus, right across the political divide, that the most basic indicator of whether every child has the best start in life is whether every single family, whatever their circumstances, can afford decent, nutritious food. Without first applying that most fundamental of benchmarks, how on earth can we even begin to think about ensuring that every young person has the chance to thrive in school, in work and in life?

Surely we can all agree, across the political spectrum, that the existence of food banks for families in 2026 is a stain on our conscience. I pay tribute to the great work of the Middle Lane food bank and all the other food banks in my constituency, with wonderful volunteers—faith groups, charities and local grassroots people, doing their best every day to ensure that every family has access to quality, nutritious food—but why are we having to do that?

I will be asking the Minister to commit to ending the need for food banks for families by the end of this Parliament, to work with colleagues on the possibility of an essentials guarantee in our social security system, to ensure that local housing allowance keeps up with the reality of rental costs and to investigate a publicly backed food hub or wholesale platform that could create more inclusive local communities.

I am so pleased that the two-child cap on universal credit has now been scrapped—a decision made since I lodged the request for this debate. From April this year, that policy change will go to the heart of what we need: a society where everyone can thrive, and the change that people voted for in July 2024.

Why do we not have an economy that works for everyone? Maybe we need to start by looking back into history. During the second world war, as all kinds of items became scarce, the rationing system tried to ensure an equitable distribution of all the essentials, but there was one exception: eating out was off the ration. So long as people could afford to go to the Ritz, the Carlton or another nice restaurant, they did not need to give a second thought to rationing. The Government then, working hard to at least give the impression of equality, decided in 1942 to cap restaurant meals at five shillings—I am told that is £21.70 in today's money—and limit them to three courses.

Much has changed, of course; in 1945, the Labour Government rebuilt the country, introduced the national health service and built the welfare state. However, if we are to make any honest and thoughtful assessment of how far we have come since 1945, the first thing we need to look at is whether every family can afford nutritious food, without having to make the choice to go without it.

The Trussell Trust's second "Hunger in the UK" report found that, in 2024, 14.1 million people, including 3.8 million children, lived in food-insecure households. In the borough of Haringey, of which most of my constituency forms a part, 3,938 households are likely to be facing food poverty. The report also found that the risk of hunger can be a lottery, depending where people live; households in the most deprived areas in the UK are three times as likely to be food insecure as households in the least deprived areas.

Some groups of people also face much higher risks of hunger and food bank use than others. In the Trussell community in 2024, three in four people were disabled. One in three children under the age of five are now growing up in a food-insecure household.

There has also been a growth in the number of people in working households being referred to food banks; they now represent nearly a third of referrals. More than two thirds of those working households are on incomes so low that they are also in receipt of universal credit. Most alarmingly of all, hardship is becoming normalised; the report says that 61% of people who experienced food insecurity did not consider themselves to be facing hardship, meaning that they did not really want to turn to a food bank for support. Families going without food no longer even consider themselves to be in hardship.

How did we get here? It is an income problem, a poverty problem and a structural problem, and we need to have an honest conversation about that. Over half of people receiving universal credit experienced hunger last year and 87% of people referred to food banks were in receipt of means-tested benefits. Families struggling to afford food also generally struggle to afford other essentials. For example, people referred to food banks in the Trussell community in 2024 on average had just £104 a week to live on after housing costs—just 17% of what the average household across the UK has. Ultimately, the need for food banks is about incomes, not food; it is an inability to afford food and, of course, other essentials such as rent, clothing and toiletries.

We need to recognise the issues that bring households to a point where they cannot cover the cost of both food and other essentials. Real median household incomes have fallen and wage growth has failed to keep up with the cost of living. Meanwhile, private rents have also

[Catherine West]

risen at record rates, made worse by the failure of housing benefit and the failure—for quite some time now—to have sufficient housing supply to reduce the cost of rent. In 2024, half of all private renters receiving social security for housing costs experienced food insecurity and those households on the lowest incomes have suffered the most. The Food Foundation estimates that since April 2022 the price of a typical basket of food has increased by nearly a third.

We also know that the prices of cheaper food rose at a much higher rate than the prices of more expensive food.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She is right to highlight the issue of inflation, especially food inflation, but does she also recognise that although the price of food is going up, the food producers, predominantly farmers, are not seeing a similar rise in the income they get for producing that valuable food?

Catherine West: Indeed; if the hon. Gentleman is a listener to “Farming Today”, which I listen to in the mornings, he will know that the price of milk goes up and down, which makes it very hard for dairy farmers to survive. I agree that there is something there, and I am sure the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been looking at it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Lady is absolutely right in identifying the structure here. The market is one that is ripe for abuse. There are 15 behemoth retailers at the top and 210,000 primary producers at the bottom, leading to a situation where our constituents cannot afford to buy the food and the food producers cannot make a profit in producing it. Surely what we need to do is to look at that supply chain between the supermarket and the farm gate, build on the excellent work of Baroness Batters and her farming profitability review, and come forward with a revised food strategy, which we have been promised.

Catherine West: I know the Minister will have much to say on that issue, and I look forward to her response.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I shall add a Labour voice to the case for supply and production, but first I pay tribute to the Newcastle-Staffs Foodbank in Newcastle-under-Lyme, which does wonderful work, particularly at the Newcastle Congregational Church on King Street.

The intervention by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about supply and production speaks to the importance of the wonderful farmers in Newcastle-under-Lyme, such as the Jones family in Audley and the Williams family in Wrinehill. We can feed ourselves, but we can only do so if we support the farmers in my constituency, and those up and down our country.

Catherine West: Indeed, and it is wonderful to hear hon. Members speaking up on behalf of their constituents, particularly farmers—we now have so much more information about farming now than there was before.

Coming back to the point about the prices of cheaper foods rising at a much higher rate than the prices of more expensive food, cheapflation means that low-income families lose out. We know one reason for that is that margins on cheaper food are much tighter than those on more expensive food, so suppliers cannot absorb rising costs and households who are already selecting the cheapest varieties have nowhere else to go.

We also know that food inflation in the UK is generally higher than for our neighbours in Europe. Academic studies have suggested that Brexit has added as much as eight percentage points to food inflation, amounting to an extra £6.95 billion in food costs from December 2019 to March 2023. Since Brexit, the UK has lost the complex network of agrifood supply chains that we had shared with other members of the EU.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether my hon. Friend heard the testimony of Toby Ovens, the managing director of Broughton Transport Solutions, to the Business and Trade Committee the other day. He spoke about how we have lost that complex network, but gained a mountain of paperwork, which is accounting for much of the costs that are incurred for the food that is coming into our country. That includes 26 different stamps that he now has to get to import food into our country. Does she recognise that one of the ways that we can help bring food costs down is to get that sanitary and phytosanitary deal signed?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right, and is well versed on these issues. UK businesses face more red tape when they want to import from and export to the EU, invariably adding to costs in the sector. On 19 May last year, the UK and the EU agreed an exciting new strategic partnership, including an agreement to work towards a common sanitary and phytosanitary—SPS—area agreement to make agrifood trade easier. The Government estimate that that deal would add £9 billion to the UK economy in the long term. My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, who is also Minister for European Union Relations, has said that it will bring down prices on supermarket shelves. I pay tribute to him and his excellent civil servants for everything they are doing to foster a good working relationship with Brussels and secure a better deal for UK food suppliers.

In my constituency, we are blessed with a huge range of small shops and market stalls selling fruit and veg of every kind, but that is not the case across every region of the UK. Fresh food deserts—areas where people rely on convenience stores—are an increasing phenomenon. As research from Which? shows, people who have to rely on smaller supermarket convenience stores are often charged more for the same products, and do not always have access to budget and own brand ranges.

In the same way that people in the 1940s could go to a nice restaurant for a ration book-free dinner, in 2026 people can gain access to cheaper fresh food and budget ranges if they have access to a car so they can go to the out-of-town supermarket. A Sainsbury's poster from the rationing era acclaims the freshness of their produce due to high turnover of stock and guarantees that there will be no profiteering. I invite every supermarket to produce a 2026 version of that poster and to guarantee that they will not charge more for everyday food items

in their small convenience stores than they do in their out-of-town supermarkets, and that their budget ranges will be available at all their convenience stores.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for calling for this important debate. The Health and Social Care Committee are currently doing an inquiry into food, and supermarkets will be coming in shortly to talk to us about how they operate—we will have a lot of questions to ask. Obesity and nutrition are a particular challenge for people on low incomes. It is more than twice as expensive to buy healthy food. Does she agree that we need a cross-Government strategy to bring the price of food within a range that people on lower incomes can afford, and make sure that good, healthy food is not only affordable, but accessible everywhere in the country? We need Government, business and experts to work together on that. The time is now. The problem is real and needs to be addressed.

Catherine West: I look forward to reading the report that comes out of my hon. Friend's Committee.

How do we build a future without food banks? Let us look at what has worked. As a former borough leader, I introduced free school meals for all primary school children. It was a great equaliser and social leveller. Children were more focused and made better progress; families who were just about managing saved money; there was no stigma, as everyone sat together, and the people serving the food got the London living wage. These meals provide an opportunity for children to sit down to eat a nutritionally balanced meal, have meaningful conversations with adults and learn to eat with a knife and fork. Under our mayor, free school meals for all primary school children were subsequently rolled out across London. More secondary school children will benefit under this Government's new policies for all families receiving universal credit. I take my hat off to the Government for that change.

I am also incredibly proud of the Government's Best Start in Life holiday activities and food clubs, something my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) has campaigned on for years in this place, along with other Members. That £600 million investment, over three years, means nutritious meals and exciting activities for half a million children across the country every year, helping children to achieve and thrive. It means consistency for parents, who will not face a cliff edge on childcare when term time ends, and money back in the pockets of parents who would otherwise have to fork out during the holidays just so they can work to put food on the table. Children who attend the holiday activities and food clubs are more likely to take part in sport and exercise, which addresses the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman), and children feel more confident and social with their peers after attending a club.

Most importantly of all, as I have said, the scrapping of the two-child cap on universal credit will start making a real difference in April this year. It will be the most cost-effective way to lift half a million children out of poverty, and allow them to look forward to supporting their parents at the same time.

The essentials guarantee that I would like the Minister to consider would embed in our social security system the widely supported principle that, at a minimum, universal credit should protect households against going without the essentials. The experts—the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation—are calling for an independent process to advise the Government on benefit rates. As the Minister is from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, she may well wish a Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions to answer this point, but it needs to be said again and again that income is one of the key drivers of food bank need. As independent process to set universal credit could advise the Government to ensure that rates are based on need and essential costs.

A protected minimum floor for universal credit would provide a safety net below which no one should fall. It would build on the introduction of the fair repayment rate by limiting all universal credit reductions, including from the benefit cap, to 15% below the standard allowance. It would also provide support to households, both in and out of work, and help over 240,000 children.

The local housing allowance has not kept up with the cost of housing. We know that the Government are straining every sinew to bring on new, genuinely affordable homes, but the local housing allowance remains frozen while we wait for that reality to unfold. If that remains the case over the course of this Parliament, renters will be about £700 worse off by 2029, and 50,000 renters will be pulled into poverty. If we do not re-establish the link between the local housing allowance and actual rents, increasing numbers of people will be forced to turn to food banks because they simply will not be able to pay the rent.

Will the Minister commit to ending the need for food banks for families by the end of this Parliament? We have made other commitments on things we are going to do by the end of the Parliament—for example, on immigration—but what is more important than ensuring that every family and child can afford nutritious food? Will the Minister work with colleagues across the ministerial teams on the possibility of an essentials guarantee in our social security system, and on ensuring that the local housing allowance keeps up with the reality of rental costs in the private sector?

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On Friday, I visited the Coexist Community Kitchen in my constituency, which does amazing work to get the community in. It runs cookery classes, is accessible and has affordable and healthy food, and sometimes it is free. Quite a lot of people go there on social prescriptions. On the issue of cross-departmental working, does my hon. Friend agree that is not enough for the health service just to issue prescriptions? It needs to support community kitchens so that they can do the cookery classes and make the food available. There needs to be institutional support, as well as the prescribing end of it.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend, who is a former Minister, makes an excellent point. I know that the Minister present will look into our idea of a publicly backed food hub or wholesale platform. It could operate on a cost-recovery basis and work with local suppliers to help them to supply food to local schools, households and NHS facilities in their area at stable and affordable prices, thereby helping to develop thriving and inclusive local economies.

[Catherine West]

When it heard this debate was going to happen, the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union wrote to me to say that despite being in work, six out of 10 food workers say their wages are insufficient for them to meet their basic needs, such as food and energy, while nearly half say they are feeling food-insecure. Three out of 10 say they do not have enough food to feed themselves and their families. Let us make a difference. Let us make the change that we all voted for in July 2024.

1.49 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve not only under your chairship, Dame Siobhain, but on the Treasury Committee with you and the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West)?

I first became engaged in this subject during my first Parliament, when I joined the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty with the late Frank Field. He taught me a great deal, and we worked together on a cross-party basis to produce a report on hunger and food poverty. I was drawn to this topic by the fact that the Trussell Trust was founded in Salisbury by Paddy and Carol Henderson, who were taking food into Bulgaria at the time. In 2000, the first food bank was opened in Salisbury, and we now see food banks across the country.

While I will address what the hon. Lady spoke about, it is also important that we reflect on some of the deeper challenges that exist with food inflation, which is running at a much higher rate than the prevailing level of inflation. In preparing for this debate, I examined the facts carefully and read briefings from UKHospitality, the Food and Drink Federation, the National Farmers Union and the Trussell Trust, all of which provide helpful analysis. Over the five-year period up to August 2025, food inflation was about 10% higher than the prevailing general level of inflation. As the hon. Lady set out, that has had a massive impact on the poorest in our communities, who in different ways spend a higher proportion of their income on food.

We in this Chamber can all attribute different weightings to different aspects of this issue, including international global agricultural prices and the clearly significant disruption to the supply chain after the invasion of Ukraine. The Bank of England would assert that domestic labour costs and high pay growth is a key factor, particularly in sectors such as horticulture, where there is a degree of mechanisation. However, we are never going to remove the reliance—I speak as the son of a horticulturalist—on the hard work of people being paid to do a manual job.

In a written answer published just last week, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury spoke about the Government's intention to set out the food inflation gateway to examine all the different drivers of inflation. I acknowledge the work the Government are doing, and I am sure the Minister will follow up on that to reset somewhat the relationship with the EU. Business rates are also a factor, but if we look across milk, sugar, cheese and flour—some of the most basic staple foodstuffs—we see significant increases over the last five years, which range from 19% for flour up to 56% for sugar and 46% for milk. We have to be honest about all the different regulations and obligations that we put on those who

supply our food and prepare it for us in restaurants. The input-cost pressures need to be carefully weighed against one another.

I mentioned the significant increases in labour costs, and the agricultural sector's reliance on labour, but it is also about energy costs. Our energy costs are 45% higher at this point in time than those in France and Germany. That is a cost that many of the food processing industries just cannot avoid. The Government will assert that they are on a transformational journey, but until that we reach the destination, the costs are incredibly high and difficult to bear.

Animal welfare is an important issue for many in the Chamber and across the House. If we look at how farming works, we see that there is actually a lower density of poultry and beef, which leads to different costs for producing some of those things. We want to have it all, including the extended producer responsibility—a whole life-cycle responsibility for packaging. When we take all these things together, simultaneously, in a five-year period of global disruption, the outcome is very worrying. It would be remiss not to mention the impact of climate change on crops such as coffee, cocoa and palm oil.

The net effect is that food is too expensive for the most vulnerable and the poorest in our communities. That has really difficult consequences. It is a massive part of our economy. UKHospitality covers, I think, 123,000 venues, and 10% of all UK jobs. The sector generates £54 billion in tax receipts, so the changes that we make to its input costs will have enormous consequences. We have to be honest about which changes we are prepared to prioritise and which changes we cannot afford at this point in time, because they will have an impact.

I want to make a few observations about food poverty. Just last week I visited Maria Stevenson, who manages the Salisbury food bank, which used to be a Trussell Trust food bank and is now independent. She does an amazing job of analysing those who use the food bank—those who go occasionally or on a recurring basis—to try to give them additional support and make interventions, such as supporting them to secure the right benefits or helping them with other things in their lives. We have to grasp that.

None of us want to see food banks grow. We should have pride in what Paddy and Carol Henderson did all those years ago, but not in seeing food banks grow as they have over the last 25 years. We have to be honest about the situations people are in. Next Monday, we will have a financial wellbeing workshop in our guildhall in Salisbury, where the Money and Pensions Service is inviting people to open up and talk about cost of living pressures, so that we can find solutions.

I do not expect the Minister to be able to go through all the input costs today and give an analysis of how they are going to be reduced—although I recognise that there were some hopeful signs at the end of last year on both food inflation and general inflation, albeit from a higher base than I would have liked to have seen. We must also look into people's wider financial wellbeing and the circumstances they find themselves in.

Inflation is insidious. It removes the buying power of our constituents. One of the wealthiest countries in the world has people who do not have enough food to eat. We must all redouble our efforts to tackle that, so that we can be proud of what we have achieved by the end of

our time in Parliament. My experience is that, given their complicated circumstances, those experiencing food poverty need more than just a handout.

1.58 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair today, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) for securing this debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for his interesting, informative and considered contribution, especially in respect of food bank volunteers doing an awful lot more work than providing food.

Since 2010, we have seen an unholy trinity. First came the cruel and wicked ideology of austerity, which impoverished communities from all four nations of the United Kingdom. Political decisions were designed to create the inequality that ravaged communities up and down the country so severely, and academics at the University of Glasgow have linked that to hundreds of excess deaths. Then we had a pandemic, which increased further the wealth inequality from the years of crippling austerity, as the few got richer and accumulated more assets at the expense of the many.

We have witnessed eye-watering increases in life's essentials—food, energy, fuel, shelter and insurance—but at the same time wages have fallen in real terms for most of us. That obscene reality has been neatly packaged and labelled as the “cost of living crisis”, and that phrase has now entered everyday language. Millions of people struggling has become an accepted, normalised part of life, but for the millions in that position, describing it as “living” is wholly inaccurate.

Having to choose between heating and eating is no life; it is a battle merely to exist. I know that, because I have been in a similar position. Years ago, I had to tell my young son that he should have his tea on his own, “Because dad’s not hungry. I’ll have something after, once you go to bed.” But the truth was that we could not afford to eat. We went without, so he could have a meal. Those are the circumstances for hundreds of thousands of Scots today, right now.

Hunger and hardship are on the rise. According to recent research by the Trussell Trust, more than 1 million Scots went hungry due to a lack of money to buy food, including more than 200,000 children. This winter, Trussell Trust food banks expect to provide an emergency food parcel every 10 seconds—a 40% increase over the winter period compared with five years ago. An increase in food bank use has been a long-term trend. More than 14 million people, including 3.8 million children, live in food-insecure households.

True to form for the country of gross inequality that we are, there is a gulf in the risk of hunger, depending on where someone lives in the UK. Households in the most deprived areas are three times more likely to be food insecure than households in the least deprived areas. Three in four people referred to food banks under the Trussell umbrella are disabled, and one in three children under five are growing up in food-insecure households.

A key reason for growing food bank reliance is a social security system that is failing to protect people. The heightened cost of living has the largest impact on those with no savings, those already in debt or arrears or those on universal credit. In fact, just over half of the

people on universal credit in the UK experienced hunger last year, and 87% of people referred to food banks in 2025 were in receipt of means-tested benefits.

People on low wages are also impacted. I am 43 years old and when I was at school, if one of my peers was living in poverty, it was probably because their parents were unemployed. But nowadays, 30% of people referred to the Trussell Trust are working. Under a right-wing Government, the 2010s were a decade of wage suppression and wage stagnation. With austerity, wealth accumulation and cost of living pressures, working people have been plunged into deprivation, and politicians have allowed that to happen.

Relentless campaigning by civil society outside this place, and inside this place by me and other Labour MPs, influenced the Government to abolish the biggest driver of hunger and hardship: the two-child cap. By removing that wicked policy, Labour has lifted just under half a million kids out of poverty and hardship. Actions like that are why I joined the Labour party and why I remain in it today, but they must only be the start. Food bank use is rising, and my party needs to be far bolder and more ambitious now that we are in power. Make no mistake: the country needs us to be.

One measurement of what kind of country we live in is how our social security system functions, and whether it properly looks after the disadvantaged and the most vulnerable in our society. In government, we need to work with charities and with third sector and community organisations, which are heroically supporting people across the country who are struggling to eat and make ends meet. We must introduce a new programme like the essentials guarantee, which would embed in our social security system the fundamental principle that universal credit should protect people from going without the essentials of food, heating and toiletries.

Giving people a right to food should be part of that. We must ensure that people can eat and that their children are not going hungry. That is why I am fully behind the campaign by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) to introduce a “right to food” law, and why I will be helping to support his Right to Food Commission when it comes to Scotland to take evidence in May.

Of course, we should have a policy with a minimum floor in universal credit—a safety net that no one among us should ever fall through. We live in the sixth largest economy on planet Earth and poverty is a political choice. Because it is a political choice, it can be eradicated. We just need the politicians and the Government that are willing to do that.

We have to build a future in which people no longer rely on donations, charity and food banks, just to exist. We should start by implementing an essentials guarantee so that the basic rate of UC actually covers life's essentials—that could be a Britain that we are all proud of.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): In order to get everybody in, I ask Members to adhere to a discretionary five-minute limit on speeches. I call Katie Lam.

2.7 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) for securing the debate.

[Katie Lam]

For many people across the country, rising food prices are one of the most concrete ways in which the cost of living crisis impacts their lives. Thanks to rising costs, many families simply do not have enough money left at the end of the month to save for a home, plan a holiday or even send their children on a school trip.

In general, prices rise because of three things. First, they can rise because too many people want too few goods. If the demand for something grows faster than the supply, the price will of course rise. We saw that in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The supply of Ukrainian wheat fell, demand stayed the same and global food prices rose.

Secondly, prices can rise because it becomes more expensive to produce goods in the first place. To keep earning enough to survive, the people who produce those goods will need to increase their prices to cover their growing costs. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) mentioned, we see that today, as this Government's energy policies create the highest industrial energy prices in the developed world. Higher energy prices for businesses mean higher production costs, causing prices to rise. The same is true of higher taxes or greater regulatory costs, both of which this Government have imposed on businesses of all kinds.

Thirdly, prices can rise because of external factors, which can also be in response to Government policy. If the Government increase the supply of money, say, or keep interest rates too low, people will be more likely to spend, reducing the relative value of the pound in their pocket and, again, causing prices to rise.

If we talk to anybody involved in producing food in this country, we will hear a lot about the second cause. Costs are rising and prices are rising with them. As I mentioned, that is due partly to energy costs, but also partly to the vast sums food producers must spend to comply with the regulations they need to navigate if they ever want to sell their products.

Let us take dairy farms as just one example. What hurdles must a dairy farmer in Kent, in my constituency, clear if they want to sell milk, cheese or butter? To even begin the process, all dairy farmers must register with the Food Standards Agency as a dairy producer. If they want to turn some of their milk into cheese or butter, they must also get a separate approval as a food business establishment.

Cows must be kept according to regulations set out under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, which include rules on space, housing and veterinary care. The herd must be regularly tested by the Animal and Plant Health Agency for tuberculosis and brucellosis. They must be specifically protected to minimise contact with badgers, with the construction of specific fences and feeding facilities. Farmers must also create and implement a hazard analysis and critical control point plan identifying all potential contamination hazards and setting out plans to minimise them. They must test for certain bacteria and must be prepared for unannounced inspections by the Food Standards Agency.

If farmers want to sell milk, they must comply with the Drinking Milk (England) Regulations 2008, which define the appropriate fat content for different sorts of

milk and sets out specific rules on pasteurisation. If they want to turn the milk into cheese, they must comply with certain compositional standards, including rules on protected designations for specific regional varieties. If they want to turn the milk into butter, they must comply with the Spreadable Fats (Marketing Standards) and the Milk Products (Protection of Designations) (England) Regulations 2008, including rules on additives and fat percentage.

Then there are rules on labelling and marketing, on mandatory written contracts on milk sales to regulate pricing, and on manure spreading and waste management. If farmers want to adapt their buildings or extend them, they need to navigate the labyrinth of our planning system. Then and only then are they allowed to sell their milk, butter or cheese, and the price in the shops will need to reflect all the costs I have just mentioned if they want to keep the farm running.

Kerry McCarthy: It is always easy to criticise regulation, but we often find that regulations are introduced for very real reasons, whether that is protecting public health, animal welfare and so on. Will the hon. Member tell us which of the regulations and requirements she has listed ought to be dropped?

Katie Lam: What is important here, and what I am trying to set out, is how many costs farmers have to meet even just to get their produce out of the door. When we talk about food prices, it is inevitable that we will talk about why those prices rise, what the costs are and how they might be going up. Many of my farmers work incredibly hard to put food on people's tables, and my aim is to talk through the costs they face even just to be able legally to sell their produce. It is important for constituents who are listening to this debate to understand what goes into the pint of milk that they buy.

Dairy farmers live an extremely difficult lifestyle. They work long hours and can never afford to take a day off—the cows will, after all, always need milking. Thanks to farmers' hard work, we are able to enjoy some of the finest dairy products anywhere in the world. Given the difficulties they face, we should not be making their lives harder by forcing them to navigate mountains of paperwork and endless regulatory compliance. It is bad for them and bad for those who want to buy their products at an affordable price.

Ms Creasy: Will the hon. Member give way?

Katie Lam: I am so sorry; I am running out of time.

The same is true across every other type of farming or food production, from vegetables to vineyards. For the sake of those who put food on our plates and of families working hard to make ends meet, will the Minister—who I notice is wearing our favourite suit jacket again today, as am I—please explain what steps the Government are taking to reduce costs for food producers and, in turn, for producers across this country?

Finally, those Government hurdles are due not just to legislation. Peter Hall at Little Mill Farm in Marden in my constituency does incredible work with the Felix Project. He gives away thousands of apples and pears from his orchards to be eaten by children who would otherwise not be able to eat them. He would happily sell them to local schools at cost price or lower, but the tangled

bureaucracy of procurement makes that impossible. Addressing that issue would be a win for everyone. It would mean healthier food being provided cheaply for local children, supporting our farmers, tackling food waste, and preventing orchards from having to be grubbed up, which releases a lot of carbon into the atmosphere. Will the Minister please set out any plans she might have to make it easier for local farmers to sell their produce to state institutions nearby?

2.13 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) for securing today's debate. I know that you have both been consistent voices on food insecurity.

I start by giving a shout out to a local legend. Adam Raffell of the York Trussell Trust has done amazing work for families in York, for which I thank him today. I also thank the Prime Minister for his relentless focus on the cost of living, on which we have to bear down.

The Food and Drink Federation has shown that, since January 2020, food inflation has consistently outstripped non-food inflation. What was the cause? It was when the damaging and disastrous botched Brexit deal came into effect. Over the channel, our European neighbours, to be fair, have also faced rising food costs, but nowhere near as sharply. UK food inflation peaked at nearly 20%, year on year, in 2023 under the Conservative party's watch, while countries such as Germany and France peaked lower and returned to normal much faster. The UK is worse off, which tells us that we have to work more closely with our European friends.

The Prime Minister recently said:

"if it's in our national interest to have...closer alignment with the single market...we should consider that",

and when it comes to food price inflation, I think the answer is a resounding yes. Although Reform and the Tories want to shout at Brussels, that will not pay for people's weekly food shop. An SPS agreement and closer alignment would strip out so much red tape, checks and delays. Fewer inspections and mutually recognised standards would mean less time stuck at the border, lower costs for hauliers and fewer spoiled loads. All those savings could be passed on to the hard-working families of this country.

Like any toddler, my son Robin's favourite food item is, of course, the Freddo frog. The famous Freddo index shows that since I was born—in 1995, believe it or not—there has been a 260% increase in the cost of the treasured Freddo. However, we also know of the phenomenon called shrinkflation. A few weeks ago, many of us gathered around the Christmas tree with our families, enjoying a tub of choccies. This year's tubs of Roses were more than 100 grams lighter than they were in 2018, but the cost has increased by 20%. If shrinkflation is so significant, does the Minister agree with the idea that it perhaps needs to be reflected on food packaging?

Another iconic British institution is the meal deal. We were all devastated when its price tipped from £3 to £3.50 or more—it was £3 in Tesco for over a decade. Can I make a confession to the House? As a tight Yorkshireman, I am always grabbing the three most

expensive products—crisps, drink and sarnie—even if I do not really like them, just to get the biggest discount. I have written to some retailers, saying, "Shouldn't we have a bit of an arms race? Who can be the first supermarket to get the meal deal back down to £3.50?" What a wonderful cost of living measure that would be for the grafters of Britain.

As a northerner, can I turn to another place to get a hearty snack? The Greggs sausage roll is well up there and, yes, I would pick Greggs over Gail's any day of the week. However, the price of a simple sausage roll has shot up by more than 50% in less than a decade. Something is not quite right there. It has gone up by 53% since 2016—I wonder what happened in that year. If anyone from Greggs is watching, can we have a serious deal on sausage rolls? Perhaps we could have a cost of living week when sausage rolls are just a quid?

What can we do? We need supermarkets and big food brands to play their part. They are making record profits, which should come with responsibility. Initiatives such as a cost of living week could be a start. Discounts on essentials, loyalty schemes that really make a difference and fair pricing on some staples should be the norm. We need more transparency, and labels should provide that.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. It is not for me to touch on stereotypes, but being his mate and, at Christmas, his secret Santa recipient, I can confirm that he is very generous indeed. We are all enjoying his speech immensely, but I wonder whether he agrees that no farm in this United Kingdom is better than a Staffordshire farm—with Ulster farms running close, of course, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) knows. With that in mind, we should all have a "Buy British" approach. That is good for my people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and for producers, and it will be good for our economy, too.

Mr Charters: My hon. Friend is spot on. If I can give a shout out to one of my constituents, I love buying from Grey Leys farm. It produces the most beautiful Jersey milk. Would it not be brilliant if schools and hospitals in the York area bought local dairy products? Speaking of milk, we should have an awareness of food inflation's impact on gluten-free and similar products for allergy sufferers and those with intolerances.

Tory Britain was defined by misery. Prices were up, wages squeezed and families left to struggle. Today, we are cutting prescription charges, tackling rail fares and easing the pressure where we can, but we must go further on food inflation to support the hard-working families of Britain.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I am very sorry to say this, but it would be great if the two final Back Benchers could stick to about four minutes.

2.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) for setting the scene, and to the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen).

[Jim Shannon]

This is a very important debate, because so many families out there are struggling. I very much welcome the Government's commitment to ending the two-child benefit cap. It will definitely make changes, but we cannot see those changes just yet. In Northern Ireland, annual food price inflation is 5.1%, and grocery spending has reached £4.4 billion.

The first Trussell Trust food bank in Northern Ireland was in Newtownards in my constituency, and food bank use last year was up 35%. We now see middle-class families, who have a wage but are unable to cope, using food banks. Overall consumer inflation in Northern Ireland has stayed around similar levels to that of the UK, which is about 4% to 5%. Recent research from Safefood indicates that food costs vary for many families. In some cases, it can be 50% of take-home pay for those with children.

I will give three examples in the short time I have. I know a family of two—a mother and daughter—who spend about £450 a month on groceries, including staple top-ups such as bread and milk. They made me aware that their rent is £600, so households are spending almost as much as their rent on groceries to eat well.

The second example is a family of five: two adults who work full time and three children aged from two to nine—wee tots, I would call them. They told me that they spend about £180 to £200 a week on groceries. Many may think that seems so much to be spending, but we often do not think of the breakfast before school, the break-time snack, lunch, dinner and endless litres of milk for children. Many working families are not eligible for free school meals, and parents want to ensure that their children have healthy, hearty meals. They have to get it right for their children from the very beginning. I would encourage children to drink their milk.

I want to briefly touch on the cost of baby formula, which has been increasing for numerous years. Certain formulas can range from £8 to £16 per standard tin, and that is not to mention the recent recall of SMA milk due to the potential presence of cereulide. Many families bulk-buy milk, and they will have to source it elsewhere in the meantime, before they can be compensated. They cannot do without milk for their children, so we have to address that increase in price. Almost £16 per standard tin is just too much.

The reality is that the announcements in the Chancellor's Budget of benefit uplifts and the freezing of tax thresholds do not go far enough to support a huge proportion of the population. Rising grocery prices create challenges for everyone. I am increasingly seeing working families struggle from month to month while trying to do their best and hold down their full-time jobs. In all my time as an elected representative, I have never seen such pressure on working families across this United Kingdom. The pressure is huge. In this economy, most people are feeling the impact. It is a month-to-month struggle, and they are not able to save. The cost of living means those families are not able to get back on their feet.

So what do we do? We look to the Minister. She will have to forgive me for saying that she will have to dig deep into her pockets. Our constituents need more help. The cost of living is stretching household budgets to breaking point. I believe that this is the Government's responsibility. To be fair to them, they are doing what

they can to ensure that no household is left struggling to put food on the table. We should look forward to having a society in which everyone can meet their basic needs without worry. If we cannot do it today, we need to do it as soon as possible.

2.23 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) for securing this debate.

I am a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, and we have been looking at the impact of the cost of living crisis on a range of vulnerable groups. The effects are everywhere: not just in the most deprived areas of the country, but even among wealthier communities, including my constituency. In the interest of time, I will concentrate on Horsham.

Local demand has surged. Horsham food bank tells me that its monthly distribution of food parcels has risen dramatically year on year. There has been a sharp rise in children requiring support, which mirrors the regional data that shows a 56% rise in food bank use across the south-east.

My constituent Rachel is a mother and a disabled woman whose partner works full time. She told me that there is often nothing left after she has paid the energy bill and fed her family. She lives on biscuits, because half the time she cannot afford to cook. She said that she feels exhausted and out of options, and she is unsurprisingly affected by depression. That has come about for her not because of poor choices but because incomes have simply not kept pace with the essentials.

I pay tribute to the fantastic work being done by organisations such as Horsham District food bank and FareShare Sussex & Surrey. I was interested in what the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) said about his local food bank, and there are lots of parallels with the work happening in Horsham.

FareShare has said that it prepared millions of meals last year to support local families who face rising cost pressures. It describes the combination of high food and energy costs as making the past year "the toughest yet" for its operations. It is moving beyond simply handing out food, and it also offers advice and helps people to put themselves in stronger positions. The food bank is in a unique position to build trust with people who might otherwise slip through the cracks because they are perhaps afraid or too shy to explain their circumstances. Timely advice on finances, nutrition and cooking can help people to get themselves off the dependency culture altogether.

So many people are living with no margin for error—if the washing machine goes wrong or the boiler breaks down, it is an instant crisis—so what more can we do? First, we need to ensure that universal credit and other benefits are set at a level that genuinely protects people from going without essentials. Joseph Rowntree Foundation research shows that current benefits still fall short of the real cost of living by £28, with shortfalls pushing families into hardship.

As previous speakers have mentioned, an essentials guarantee in our social security system would mean that no one should fall below the floor of being unable to afford food and heat. To make this lasting and fair,

we need an independent process to set benefit levels that draws on evidence, including lived experience, rather than leaving them to annual discretionary decisions. Many experts and organisations are now calling for such an essentials guarantee as a sensible way to depoliticise rates and anchor them to actual costs.

Secondly, we can cut the cost of food without spending even a penny. Research from the London School of Economics shows that Brexit added billions to household bills—costing individual households over £200 a year on average—and saw price hikes on basic essentials such as meat, cheese and many others that Members have mentioned. The Liberal Democrats have long argued that maintaining a customs arrangement with our closest trading partners could help to reduce unnecessary costs on imported foods that end up in people's shopping baskets, while still protecting good British farming.

Finally, local action matters, too. Devolution and targeted investment in local food infrastructure can link farms with food charities and community kitchens, create jobs and build resilience without making charity a default safety net. Food banks like those run by Horsham Matters are working towards the best result possible: making themselves unnecessary. Let us give them a helping hand.

2.28 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I commend the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) on securing this hugely important debate. The cost of living, particularly the cost of food, is one of issues I get contacted about the most by my constituents. The high cost of living is being driven by rising food prices. I was astounded just last week, when someone emailed me a photo of an £8 tube of toothpaste from the supermarket in Badger Farm in Winchester. It was not a special new one that claims to whiten teeth and cure all oral ailments; it was just bog-standard toothpaste. I think we are all finding that we leave the supermarket baffled. Often, I just pop in for some essentials and I leave with a bag of shopping that has come to £50 or £60. It is affecting absolutely everyone. We are finding that people are struggling just to meet the absolute basics—not just food, but other life essentials.

Several Members have spoken about farming and food producers. As a vet who grew up on a farm and so has worked in farming in many capacities, I think that that is one of the most underestimated ways of helping to address the cost of living crisis.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned, farm-gate prices are so low that many farmers are earning significantly less than the living wage, yet supermarket prices are so high that many people cannot afford to buy basic, decent quality food. That shows the necessity of the revised food strategy, which has to be an imperative for this Government.

I know what it is like to have to get up at 5.30 in the morning to milk cows, to calve cows in the middle of the night and to work all night lambing. Farmers work all hours in all weathers, but their income at the end of the year is often not related to the amount of work they put in, because it can be affected by factors completely out of their control, such as a disease outbreak, a trade deal or a weather event. The frustration of not getting

rewarded for the amount of effort, time and energy they put in is making many see long-term futures in farming as unsustainable. They need a huge amount of support.

Food security is part of our national security, but 45% of our food is imported. Given the volatile geopolitical situation, food is more than ever a key component of our national resilience. While we are desperate to have food that is more affordable, we must be mindful that signing trade deals with the USA that would undercut our farmers on welfare, environmental and basic public health standards would be hugely detrimental. We do not want chicken that has been washed in chlorine, we do not want hormone-treated beef and we do not want eggs that have been produced by battery hens. That would be bad for British farming, for animal welfare and, given the antibiotic use, for public health. I urge the Government to ensure that it is enshrined in any trade deals that those standards would be protected.

I want to pay tribute to the food banks in Winchester, which I have visited on more than one occasion. We have the Winchester Basics Bank and the food pantry in Unit12. I thank the huge team of more than 80 staff and volunteers for all their work; they are extremely busy at the moment. I also thank the community, faith groups and churches that support them.

Taking a step back, despite all our economic troubles, we are one of the wealthiest nations on the planet. We can be a nation where an honest day's work pays a living wage, where no one with a full-time job has to go to food banks to feed their children, and where no child ever goes to school hungry. We have to make these choices urgently; we must address them as soon as we can.

2.33 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) for securing this important debate, throughout which we have heard valuable contributions from Members rightly raising concerns on behalf of their constituents. We all know that food inflation significantly impacts the cost of living by eroding household purchasing power, and that it disproportionately affects those in low-income households, leading to food insecurity. Just last November, 61% of adults in Great Britain reported an increased cost of living compared to the previous month. Much of the reason for that was linked to the inflation of food prices.

I join Members across the House in thanking those who are going out of their way to support those who need it in their own constituencies, not only with advice but through operating food banks and providing comfort and support. Imogen and her team in the Salvation Army in Keighley, who I have met many a time, do fantastic work to help families not only in Keighley but across the wider Worth valley area in my constituency. I pay particular tribute to her and her team.

John Lamont: During this debate, much discussion has been about food banks. It is important that we also recognise food larders—I have a number in my constituency—where large shops and supermarkets donate their food at the end of the day or before the sell-by date. They minimise food waste and enable people to access low-cost or free food that they would otherwise have to pay for.

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and he must have known what I was coming on to in my speech. There are many other organisations and companies that are producing excess amounts of food. We need to reduce food waste, which is ridiculously high in this country, and utilise and redistribute high-quality food through a localised logistics system or a national strategic approach. Those at both grassroots and national level need to be thanked, but much more work is needed to focus on reducing food waste to help those on lower incomes.

Lower-income families spend a large proportion of their budget on food—about 14% in the UK compared to 9% for higher-income households—making those who are more vulnerable much more exposed to price spikes. We have already heard that the price of flour has increased by 19% and milk by about 46% in a relatively short period of time. As well as the vulnerability sitting with those low-income households in terms of their purchasing power, it also sits with the primary producer: the farmers and growers who are exposed to those spikes. They are not only exposed to their own vulnerability; they also lack resilience because they are entered into contracts with unfair terms and unfair adjustment mechanisms linked to supply and demand, and they have to compete against commodities and food that can be produced at much cheaper prices in places with different standards.

While the end price for some food products fluctuates for the primary producer—we have seen that with lamb, beef and milk prices this year—for others they do not. For example, in the arable sector, cereal prices are linked to global commodity prices and some of those feed wheat prices have not really changed in the last 20 years. Exposing those primary producers to fluctuating prices depending on what they are producing, but not mitigating the increase in associated input costs for producing that food, directly hits food inflation prices.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) mentioned the vulnerability associated with farm-gate prices. Return rates for our farmers sit at about 1%, if not at all, and therefore many of our primary producers are not even breaking even. That is why the Baroness Batters farming profitability review was welcomed, although it was frustrating that the Government held that report back. They did not give the opportunity for it to be debated on the Floor of the House through an oral statement; they just relied on a written statement. I encourage the Minister to allow time for us to get to grips with debating such a significant and valuable report so that all Members can contribute towards it. A key recommendation in that report was around the supply chain, which, as I think has been acknowledged, is not fit for purpose and disadvantages primary producers. That is why we want more funding and power going to the Grocery Code Adjudicator.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) highlighted the challenges around input costs increasing for our food producers and farmers. That has not been helped by policy choices and tax choices brought forward by the Labour Government in the last 18 months. Let us look at the rise in labour costs: the Bank of England says that the increasing costs associated with labour through the rise in employer national insurance, coupled with the rise in the national

minimum wage from £11.44 to £12.21 an hour—a rise of about 6.7%—has dramatically impacted not only the horticultural sector, but many of those food-producing businesses and large employers.

In April, employer national insurance rose from 13.8% to 15%, while the threshold has significantly reduced, falling from £9,100 to £5,000 per employee annually. That disproportionately affects companies who employ lower-paid, younger and part-time workers, many of whom are employed in the horticultural industry and the food-producing sector. That is, of course, combined with uncertainty around levels of investment. We have seen the changes to inheritance tax come through, and that is holding back a level of investment: many of those involved in the food supply chain want to invest, but are holding back due to uncertainty about being able to mitigate the inheritance tax changes coming down the line.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent picked up on, we have also seen new regulation, particularly for the dairy industry, and the hurdles that those sectors need to jump through simply to get their food product on the table. New regulation is having inflationary challenges: the un-Employment Rights Bill worked its way through the House and led to stagnation in business decisions, with investment held back from moving into automation. I am being contacted, as I am sure other Members are, by many employers who are not willing to risk employing people because of the challenges associated with the Employment Rights Act. I dare say many of those are young people and those with special educational needs or learning challenges, who want to get their first step on the employment ladder, but many of those businesses are holding back, which is leading to inflationary challenges.

There is also the extended producer responsibility tax, which has been recognised by not only the British Retail Consortium but the Food and Drink Federation as creating an inflationary challenge for our food sector, estimated to be about £1.4 billion, which will be passed on to consumers by those supermarkets. The British Retail Consortium believes that 80% of those EPR costs will be passed on to consumers, which will lead to higher food prices. Then there are the increasing energy prices; the funding being taken away from our primary producers—our farmers—such as delinked payments dramatically reducing in a short period of time to £600 as an annual payment, where just two years ago they would have been receiving much more; and challenges with the fertiliser tax and sustainable farming incentive.

That just adds to the inflationary challenges associated with food prices, which are predominantly hitting those on the lowest incomes. I ask the Minister not only what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be doing, but what conversations they will be having with the wider Government Departments. It is fine to have a food security strategy, but if that does not sit at the heart of Government, it is for the birds. The reality is that, if it sits under a Secretary of State who has responsibility for food but is not bought into by the likes of the Chancellor and those who are making fiscal adjustments, it will not have the positive impact that it needs to; we have seen that from the last two Budgets that have come out of this Labour Government.

I also want to understand from the Minister what recommendations she and her Department will be taking forward at speed—not only the few announced by Baroness Batters’ profitability review, but that specifically address food inflation challenges, give fairer reassurance to our farmers that farm-gate prices will increase and they will get what they deserve for the primary product they are producing and, ultimately, help those on the lowest incomes across all our constituencies with the cost of living.

2.43 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): It is a pleasure to serve under your excellent chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I too enjoyed being a member of the Treasury Committee—as the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) still does—to which you always make a trenchant and relevant contribution. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) on successfully securing this debate—I think she is on the Treasury Committee as well. There seems to be a preponderance of current or ex-Treasury Committee members in this debate, which perhaps suggests that the issue before us, food inflation, is, as anyone who has listened with an open mind to all the excellent contributions will realise, quite a complex issue.

There is no single cause for the fact that, in the UK, food inflation for the last period has been running about 1% above CPI inflation rates. Many Members, from all parts of the House, have talked about the effect that that has had on their constituents. This debate reflects real concerns about food inflation and cost of living pressures that are affecting millions of households across our country. Those pressures have been building for years, and too many families were left to face them alone under the previous Government. Tackling the cost of living remains at the heart of what this Labour Government hope to achieve in our time in office.

Food poverty is not an abstract issue, as many of us who visit food banks in our constituencies know; nor is food insecurity, which now touches more than 14 million people in our country—not a small number, and a very sobering one when we think about it. In my constituency, I see parents skipping meals so that their children can eat. I see many others relying on food banks to get by. When I was first elected, we did not have any food banks in Wallasey; we now have too many. All are doing a fantastic job; I pay tribute to the work that Wirral food bank does, and to the many volunteers who run social supermarkets and food clubs in the constituency, which have grown up to meet need as it has arisen.

I also pay tribute to Feeding Britain, which was started by Frank Field, who was my constituency neighbour. He perceived this issue and how much it was growing, and in his usual way he decided that he was going to do something practical and see what he could do to help. He did, and Feeding Britain now makes an important and interesting contribution to the work we are all doing to bring about this Labour Government’s manifesto commitment to ending the mass use of emergency food parcels by the end of this Parliament.

Kerry McCarthy: I echo what the Minister said about Frank Field. Quite a long time ago now, he approached me about setting up Feeding Bristol as an offshoot of Feeding Britain. Feeding Bristol has gone from strength

to strength, particularly with its holiday hunger programme, which provided tens of thousands of meals for children who would otherwise have gone hungry during the school holidays. We all owe Frank a debt of gratitude for that.

Dame Angela Eagle: I was thinking, when I attended his funeral a few years ago, what an effect he had at a grassroots level with his vision for getting stuff done. There are many hundreds of thousands of people up and down the country who, even though they might not know it, owe him a debt of gratitude.

The actions we have taken start with easing cost of living pressures and raising living standards. It is obvious, as many colleagues on the Government side of this Chamber have said, that one of the basic causes of food insecurity is the price of food, but it is also people’s inability to have enough income to do one of the most basic things in life: putting food on their family’s plates—or their own. Analysis demonstrates that that difficulty particularly affects those with children and those who have disabilities or other issues around being able to earn a reasonable amount of money if they are in work, so that they can cover basic costs. The Trussell Trust demonstrated, as my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) said, that a third of those who attend food banks for emergency food parcels are in work.

I found it interesting to hear Opposition Members say that increases in the national minimum wage or in the money that people earn for working were actually part of the problem. Those who do low-wage work also have to eat. Although the increases add a cost, we have to appreciate that maintaining a very low-pay society will not help us get out of this problem.

John Glen: I hear what the Minister says, but does she not recognise that if the prevailing increase in the national living wage is 6.7% and inflation is about half that, and given the other costs mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), many employers will not be able to take on any casual extra staff? They may even need to release some members of staff, which surely does not help anyone.

Dame Angela Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is correct at the margins, but I am also correct that having a very low-wage economy and not increasing the national living wage does not have a positive effect. As with all economic analysis, some of this is about the balance and which effect comes out top. We have tried many years with chronic low pay and very few rights at work, so we are now going to try something different. On the Government Benches, we think that people deserve a living wage for doing a full-time job. That is how we will get out of this situation.

The Government are taking a strategic, joined-up approach to tackling the cost of food to build a more resilient and fairer food system for the long term. I hope to reassure the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) that we are joining up across Government and it is not just DEFRA talking about this. Just this morning, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy) at a food poverty conference hosted by the Department for Work and Pensions, which brought together representatives from local authorities, the third sector and civil society.

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

That is where we can forge local, practical solutions to some of the problems that we have all perceived in our constituencies. The Government's job in that circumstance is to try to facilitate and empower those things to happen, rather than have a top-down approach that mandates what to do. There are certain things that we can have an effect on, and there are others that we need to use empowerment to bring about.

We are working together across Government to tackle this issue head on. That includes the child poverty strategy to boost family incomes and cut essential costs. It also includes the 10-year plan from the Department of Health and Social Care to tackle the link between poverty and obesity, which is an extremely important aspect of these debates; and the expansion and improvement of free school meals by the Department for Education. I personally believe that we must break the link between poverty and obesity, and get good nutritional food to everybody in the country. It is often cheaper to eat good nutritional food, but many people live in constituencies where there are food deserts or where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet said, there is a poverty premium on getting to good nutritious food, and we have to work with the industry to try to deal with that.

We are co-ordinating across Government to deliver real change and to break the cycle of sticking-plaster politics that preceded us. From April, the value of Healthy Start will increase by 10%. The weekly value will increase from £4.25 to £4.65 for pregnant women and children aged one to four, and from £8.50 to £9.30 for children under one. We will continue to work with retailers to expand access to healthy, affordable food, which we at DEFRA are particularly interested in bringing about. The expansion of free school meals will benefit about half a million more pupils, save families up to £495 per child per year and lift about 100,000 children out of relative poverty by the end of this Parliament.

We are extending the holiday activities and food programme, with £600 million to support children during school holidays. That was particularly welcomed by the local activists at the food poverty conference that I attended this morning. Our free breakfast clubs will be rolled out nationally, starting with 750 schools, ensuring that no child starts the day hungry for food. I have visited some of those breakfast clubs in my constituency; seeing children eating, playing naturally and being ready to learn as school starts is a real boost.

At DEFRA, we are introducing the food inflation gateway to ensure the impact of regulation. Opposition Members have been through some of the issues that they worry about with respect to that—none at greater length than the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam). The food inflation gateway is there to ensure that the impact of regulation on food prices is properly assessed before implementation and is looked at cumulatively.

Together, those actions are preventing the chaotic and unsequenced policymaking that characterised a lot of the chaos of our predecessor Governments.

We know that food price inflation is just part of a wider challenge on the cost of living, and our approach goes beyond tackling the cost of food alone—from energy bills to childcare. That is why this Government are taking action on all fronts: raising the minimum wage—I recognise that we and the Opposition have a bit of a political disagreement about the effect of that—extending the £3 bus fare cap to keep transport affordable, ensuring that Best Start in Life family hubs can be present in every local authority, backed by £500 million of funding, and removing the cruel and ideological two-child limit on universal credit to ensure that families receive support for all children, thereby helping to lift an estimated 450,000 children out of poverty. That is a serious and ambitious series of actions to tackle the pressures that families face.

I am also acutely aware of the pressures that farmers face, which is why we are looking to see what we can do—as the Batters report suggested—to strengthen the fair dealing regulations for farmers to ensure that they get a fair price for the food they produce. Building on the Food Strategy Advisory Board established by my predecessor, we are collaborating across the entire food chain to deliver a system that works for everyone. We have a great deal of work to do. It is not simple, but we are determined to get on with it.

2.57 pm

Catherine West: We have had an excellent debate and a lot of hope from the Minister in her remarks today. We have seen GDP figures up, the costs of borrowing falling, train fares frozen and cheaper fuel bills announced in the Budget, a pick-up in the housing market and the lifting of the two-child cap in April. There is a lot that we can be hopeful about. There is also the increase in the minimum wage, which has consistently been voted against by the Opposition.

This is not a new debate, but we must all redouble our efforts to reduce the use of food banks, particularly by families. We must also look at an essentials guarantee in social security systems, the cost of housing and how that contributes to poverty and food inflation. The SPS agreement with Europe is a very exciting development. We want supermarkets to pledge to stock budget ranges in their convenience stores. We would also like DEFRA to continue to back the food hub and wholesale platform publicly to develop thriving local inclusive economies.

We have so much to do. We are getting there, and with the excellent work of Ministers, together with thoughtful contributions from Back Bench Members, I am sure that we will arrive by the end of the Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of food inflation on the cost of living.

Gambling Harms: Children and Young People

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of gambling harms on children and young people.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell, and to see so many people in the Chamber today for this important debate. I am very aware that the topic of gambling and the harms that it causes to children and young people is important to many Members of this House and many of our constituents. There have already been quite a number of debates on gambling in this Parliament, and I know that Select Committees have looked at it as well. I have talked to my constituents and to various people who have been campaigning against the harms caused by gambling, and we feel that there has been a gap when it comes to looking at the impact: a lot of attention has been paid to adults who are gambling, but there are also real impacts on children.

I pay tribute to hon. Members who have been taking a strong stand on gambling. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) has been campaigning very hard on the impacts, and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has been working tirelessly over the years. It is a cross-party concern, so it is really good to see lots of people here.

I want to say thank you to my constituent Lesley, who lost her son to gambling several years ago. She cannot be here today, because she is having surgery, but apparently she is watching the debate through one puffy eye. My heart goes out to Lesley and to everyone who has lost loved ones due to gambling. We lose something like 500 people a year in this country directly to gambling, through suicide. The impacts are massive.

What I really want to explore today, in relation to children and young people, is how we should look at gambling as a public health issue, and one that is of rising concern because of changes in the way people gamble. People are gambling with all sorts of new technologies, and the country is gambling with lives. The charity Gambling With Lives is here: it has supported me, other MPs and our constituents who have lost people, and I want to say a massive thank you for its support.

We also have Rosie here today, who lost her son a few years ago to gambling. When people have lost those who are dear to them, it is so brave that they are standing up and saying, "This has to stop, because it is needless." Gambling is a normal human activity—but perfectly normal human activities such as eating, drinking and, frankly, having sex are things that we look at through a public health lens, because there are health consequences, and gambling needs to be treated in the same way.

With children and young people, it helps to look at the two broad ways in which they experience harms. People can experience harms from gambling directly. The number of people who engage with gambling at a very young age is shocking. Something that stood out to

me was when I met a young person in his early 20s who is now a real advocate, particularly for the impacts of gambling on communities that face high levels of deprivation and poverty. He started gambling when he was seven and had a serious gambling addiction by the time he went to secondary school, which had massive impacts on his schooling, his education and his relationships as he was trying to learn how to handle his finances in life.

We all know that people should not be gambling when they are seven, and as parliamentarians we all know that the law says they should not be gambling when they are seven—but it is happening. That is partly because the nature of gambling in our society is changing, including the way people access it. It is not just that they are going to the old turf accountants or the bookies on the high street; there are many new, innovative ways in which people are accessing gambling. Although I welcome innovation, I do not welcome innovation where it causes harm.

We also need to look at how much gambling is happening online on people's phones, and possibly at the interactions between the psychological mechanisms behind gambling and social media, because they have a lot in common. This room is full of politicians, and politicians may well doomscroll occasionally on social media—it is not unheard of. Lots of people in this room will know the feeling of scrolling through feeds on various social media platforms that I will not mention, at this point, and getting addicted. That is because various social media platforms have been engineered to hijack our dopamine chemistry and the reward centres in our brain—the stuff that we evolved so we could handle risky situations.

Gambling is a way of handling risk and turning risk into an activity that is pleasurable or exciting to a lot of people. We need to be able to handle risk, but people have hijacked it, just as some of the food companies and producers have frankly hijacked our appetites and driven us towards foods that drive up obesity. In the same way, alcohol companies can drive up drinking. I like alcohol, and none of this is a prohibitionist argument: it is an argument about regulation.

The second key issue is that, as well as being engaged in gambling, children are affected indirectly. I will address the direct harms first. Because people use social media, children have access to smartphones, meaning that the harm manifests in the same way as with adults who are gambling legally. They can access gambling 24/7 and are subjected to gambling advertisements and inducements to gamble at all times. That is what is happening to our children.

Although adverts are, in theory, targeted at adults, children are experiencing them, in the same way that they experience many other harms and things that we do not want them to see online. These adverts are designed to get into people's heads and get them to engage in gambling, often at points in the evening when they are quite vulnerable. Adults are reporting that, because advertising and gambling companies have all this data on them, adverts are being targeted towards the late evening, when they may be on their own in their bedroom and feeling a bit tired. When their defences are down, that is when they see a little inducement to gamble. The same is happening to children.

[Kevin McKenna]

We should be aware that the gambling industry spends about £2 billion on advertising in the United Kingdom. It is not spending that for nothing. We also know that, roughly speaking, the impacts of gambling on society cost about £1.7 billion. That is a soft figure, but it could well be a lot more; it is very hard to calculate the harms. The advertising industry is spending at least as much on advertising as the harm it is causing to our nation. That should give us pause for thought about the real impacts on our economy.

There is a lot of concern, not just over the accessibility of gambling and online slot games, but about the fact that many of them are marketed as games. I am a little bit old and I do not play computer games with loot boxes, but loot boxes are a form of gambling. This House has looked at them, and they are an inducement to gamble. Children are being exposed to the gamification of something that can cause harm.

We must look at gambling as a social activity that, for a very large number of people, is fatal. If we were looking at it as an illness, we would say that it had a high mortality rate. Of course, gambling addiction is an illness, and it does have a high mortality rate. That is why we need to look at it as a public health issue.

When children start as young as seven, they do not have the same defences as adults. There is increasing evidence that a person's brain has higher levels of plasticity until their mid-20s, and that adolescents are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours. At the same time that we want adolescents to start to learn responsibility in life, gambling is getting in and hijacking the development of people's ability to handle their own finances and adult decisions, and it is sucking them into online games.

I am very concerned about that, but I am equally concerned about the effects on children when an adult in their household is gambling. There is a double effect. We all know that if a household has someone in it whose gambling is out of control and causing damage, that can have knock-on and ripple effects. For children, who are in a more vulnerable position, we know that emotional and psychological harms are caused by being in a household with someone who is gambling, because of the behaviours that the adult starts to express—the tension and anxiety that they may be going through, and the unhelpful lessons that they may be teaching that young child.

We also know that gambling, and financial distress generally, can lead to conflict within families. It can lead to tensions, to relationship breakdowns and—as situations like this so often do in families, and as too many of us know from our own experiences and those of our constituents—to a spiral of abuse and neglect. Gambling is a key driver of that. If our Government are really serious about bringing prevention to the fore in the health strategy, they need to identify risks and harms and intervene early. Gambling is among those risks and harms.

I do not think we can make our health strategy work without tackling gambling, because so many other things are tied in with it. Financial insecurity is a key driver of health problems and health inequalities, and gambling is a part of the puzzle that we need to address. Gambling can also lead to financial deprivation; if there is no

money left, the children are going to suffer. We know that parents will often prioritise feeding their children ahead of themselves, but where the adult in the situation is a gambling addict, they are likely, unfortunately, to prioritise their gambling over their child. That is where there is a vulnerable, non-consenting child who needs extra support.

Those are the categories of harms, so we must think about what they mean in practice for children. What are the impacts? The harms are reflected in behavioural and physical changes in the children. It is obvious that there are physical changes as a result of being short of food, but there are also physical and behavioural effects of abuse and neglect that lead to longer-term impacts over a child's whole life. They can impact a child's ability to function well at school, and thereby impact educational attainment. They can impact the child's expectations of life. They can reduce their life chances. They can also add to a lot of the problems that we are facing across the country, where we have people in families with multigenerational unemployment who have not learned the habit of working, and children who think that gambling may be the way to a prosperous life. That is a real impact, and it impacts on so many other parts of the Government's missions.

We want to get people into work—into stable employment—but, if this is the environment that they are in, it can hamper that goal. My question to the Minister is, “If the companies that are playing these games—that are inducing harm and using the techniques of modern social media and modern online tools to get into people's heads—are undermining the Government's other missions, how are we going to act on that?” That is a really important question.

Gambling also has intergenerational effects, because children affected by it may become problem gamblers themselves. We are talking about large numbers of people: we think that 190,000 children in this country between the ages of 11 and 17 are affected by problem gambling. Nearly 25% of people who use online slot machines are engaged in problem gambling, and when we add it all up and include people who are at risk, it is about 40% of the total number of people who are gambling online. Those are large numbers of people in a growing and rapidly adapting market.

I would like to hear from the Minister about how the Government can move faster. We have seen challenges in the last few weeks with nudification tools, child abuse images and sexual abuse material appearing on mainstream social media because of the adaptability of artificial intelligence tools and their ability to move really fast. The tech companies are—as we want them to—innovating and developing things quickly, so the Government need to change their pace of action as well. I think we are a bit too slow on this issue.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Gambling is one of the most pernicious public health issues of our times, as we have said on the Health and Social Care Committee. It has to be seen as a public health issue. Children who are bombarded with gambling ads on social media and who are learning to see betting as a normal part of the environment are just being exploited by adults. They have undeveloped risk judgment and undeveloped impulse control. We have a generation being primed for addiction.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should do a number of things: ban gambling ads on platforms accessible to minors, prohibit influencer promotions, enforce harsh penalties on violators, mandate addiction warnings, require robust age verification and fund prevention programmes? In short, does he agree that it is time for the Government to see this as a public health issue and get tough with the simply gross adults behind this online exploitation, who are damaging our children and their future?

Kevin McKenna: My hon. Friend is very knowledgeable about this subject, and he is bang on about all those actions. It is exactly that: gambling has to be treated as a public health issue. I would endorse all those actions. The key thing is that we look to regulate alcohol, junk food and all such items because we know that they cause risk and cost us all money; if they are increasing demand on the NHS, they are costing us money. Who is paying for that? At the moment, it is not the gambling firms, which are externalising the costs of their business on the rest of us, and causing harm in society.

I really endorse what my hon. Friend said; we need to treat gambling as a risk, in the same way that we treat smoking, air pollution and drinking, and we need to manage it. That needs to be the lens through which the Government look at gambling, particularly when we consider children, who, of course, are different participants in society, economically. They are in a more vulnerable position, and they are our future. I entirely endorse that intervention, which leads me on to some key things.

I know that many of my hon. Friends want to speak and have some key points to make, but I need to reiterate that, at a fundamental level, this is not about banning gambling; it is about managing the harms caused by gambling. I represent a seaside constituency that has a dog track and seaside slot arcades. Those are things that we can manage, and they are in places we would expect to see such things. However, we know that, as gambling starts to move into new areas, that brings in new risks. That is why the fact that some of those things are moving away from seaside areas, where they can be controlled and people are used to regulating them, is a really important issue. I am not asking for us to ban them; I am asking for us to regulate, and to treat gambling harms as a public health emergency, which is what I believe they are developing into, because the tech is moving so fast.

I see my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East has taken her place.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right and is giving an excellent speech. It is not about banning gambling; it is about safeguarding. There are companies that are grooming children now to get them addicted to gambling. That is why we have to tackle gambling harms, not just online, but on our high streets. That is why my campaign to remove “aim to permit” from the Gambling Act 2005 is so important. Does he agree that this is all very much connected?

Kevin McKenna: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend; this is all very much interconnected. She used the terminology “grooming”; those psychology-based behaviours really are a form of grooming and manipulation. I also think it would help to start thinking about the effect of

secondary gambling on people, in the same way that we think about secondary smoking. Passive smoking became a very big concern; I do not want to call it “passive gambling”, but the secondary effects of gambling need to be taken as seriously as its direct effects.

What are the Government doing in terms of regulating gambling as a public health issue? That is a key question for the Minister. I really welcome the changes to the gambling levy, and I particularly welcome the fact that it is targeted at children in poverty; the money is being used to offset the harm, socially, that is directly caused by gambling.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) said, we also need to regulate gambling advertising, so how are the Government ensuring that gambling advertising regulations keep pace with the change in modern digital technologies, especially social media and pop-up ads? What steps are the Government taking to protect children and young people from gambling-related harm through the course of their whole lives?

While it is grabbing children while they are young—sometimes leading to the worst outcomes of all, with children killing themselves young—it is also affecting them as they move into adulthood and employment. Unfortunately, because once someone has this addiction it is very hard to move beyond it, even with a lot of intervention, many of those people then die in their adulthood; but the harm started earlier. I would really like to hear from the Minister on that.

3.19 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for delivering an excellent speech that covered many of the issues on which many of us in the all-party parliamentary group on gambling reform have been campaigning. I also thank him for organising this debate, as it is really important to focus on young people.

Like many in this room, I am a member of that all-party parliamentary group, and we are particularly concerned about the harms that gambling causes to people across the board. I put on record my thanks to the Government for listening to our campaign on gambling taxation, through which we have raised additional money from the most harmful forms of gambling: addictive online slots and casinos. We are protecting people by incentivising gambling companies not to work in those areas.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey mentioned, the scale of gambling harm in the country is enormous. He talked about how 2.7% of the population suffers from gambling harm, but I find the figure among young people most striking: it is 10.2% for those under the age of 25. Some 70,000 children under the age of 18 face serious gambling harms, including addiction, debt and mental health problems. We are certainly priming people in the next generation to get into even more trouble when they reach the legal age at which they are able to gamble properly.

I want to talk about gambling advertising in particular. The all-party group recently had an inquiry on the subject, on the back of which we have written to the

[Alex Ballinger]

Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the gambling Minister. I want to highlight some of the things that we pulled out from that inquiry, particularly the effect that gambling advertising has on children and young people. Whether it is through social media, sport or even gaming, we are particularly concerned about the way in which such advertising normalises gambling among people under 18. People of that age, who are not even legally able to participate in gambling, are being bombarded by adverts across the board.

There is loads of research on this issue, and a lot of it points to the fact that many gambling adverts target boys rather than girls, and they are much more likely to receive them. The University of Liverpool highlighted a really high incidence of new cases of problem gambling particularly among boys and young men between the ages of 17 and 20. In fact, 57% of boys under the age of 18 have seen gambling adverts at sport events in the last year. The University of Bristol found that, in just the opening weekend of the premier league alone, there were 27,000 gambling adverts or inducements.

Football is of course a family sport, and lots of people of all ages go. We have to ask ourselves: do we think it is acceptable that children—whether they are going with their parents, going alone or watching it on television—are subject to so many gambling adverts? We have talked about the voluntary industry measures that have been put in place, including the front-of-shirt ban that is planned to be introduced later this year. Obviously, that is a step in the right direction, but it is just a drop in the ocean compared with the number of gambling adverts that we see in a typical football match.

Social media is also an enormous problem—53% of boys have seen gambling adverts on social media. Of course, we are debating whether people under 16 should even be able to access social media, but one of the reasons against it is the amount of harmful content to which they are exposed, and gambling adverts are one such example. Particularly concerning is the fact that 31% of children who have been exposed to gambling adverts have seen them through influencers. These people are not typically talking about doing paid adverts or showing themselves as gambling advertisers; they are simply influencers talking about the ways in which people can access gambling products online.

There is a real problem in the self-regulation of content marketing. The Advertising Standards Authority has a Committee of Advertising Practice code of practice that requires gambling marketing communications to be clearly identifiable as such, but again and again, we are not seeing that followed. In fact, 74% of gambling ads on social media were found not to follow that basic rule, which is seriously concerning.

As we have spoken about, gaming is a real challenge—37% of young people who use games have been exposed to gambling-related marketing. Games are designed with the same psychological elements that we might see in gambling, as they target dopamine and encourage people to take that chance of an opportunity to win. Having elements of gambling and actual gambling in computer games means that we are priming children to get involved in dangerous types of gambling in future.

Influencers on platforms like Twitch are using opportunities to promote gambling and talking about it, which is very concerning.

Recent research by the academic Leon Xiao, who has provided advice to DCMS, found that 26% of games offered loot boxes that are illegal under current interpretations of gambling law. There is a real lack of enforcement and a lot of people are operating in this grey area, providing things that, under many interpretations of the law, are not legal. I have not even talked about the opportunities available to children to access the unregulated gambling market or to use crypto, or the many other dangerous types of gambling.

It is clear from talking to the many MPs engaged on this issue that the public are tired of this. Some 74% of people polled think that there are too many gambling adverts in sports and that under-18s should not be exposed to gambling advertising at all. That is a position that many of us can agree with. It seems completely reasonable considering the scale of harm that we are seeing.

A lot of the current situation stems from the fact that the Gambling Act was established in 2005 and we have not had primary legislation since then, while the world has changed completely. Many Members have talked about digitisation and smart phones, and how 24/7 online casinos have made things more difficult. We need to change the Act, but the Government could do a lot of things right now that would not require primary legislation, including effective regulation on advertising, marketing and sponsorship. That can already be done by the Gambling Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority.

Many other European countries, including the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium, have much stronger advertising restrictions than the UK. I urge the Minister to look at what lessons we might learn from other countries. I also ask him about the Betting and Gaming Council's report on gambling advertising, which I understand was commissioned by the Government and informs their policy at the moment. Does he agree that asking the BGC to mark its own homework in that way is problematic? Will the Government commit to publishing the findings from that report so that we can all see what advice the Government are getting from the sector?

The evidence is clear. The public are tired of gambling adverts—that much is obvious. I urge the Government to heed the report of the all-party parliamentary group on gambling reform, which will include proposals on limiting the most harmful forms of advertising, particularly as it affects young people. I will not pre-empt the report, which will be coming soon, but it will include lots of sensible steps that we can take on restrictions. It is important that we do not let outdated regulations allow more children to slip through the net and be primed for gambling harm in the future.

3.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for bringing this debate, for giving us lots of detail and information, and for giving us an opportunity to participate. I welcome the Minister and

am glad to see him in his place. I look forward to his response to our questions and requests. He is always a Minister who responds and tries to give us some reassurance, which will be good to hear.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey gave examples, and referred to a seven-year-old child. Probably my first understanding of what it was like to have an addiction to gambling was through a couple called Peter and Sadie Keogh from Enniskillen in Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, who lost their son Lewis to a gambling addiction. He started gambling at a very early age. Unfortunately, he lost his life to it. Ultimately, I am here to represent them and all others who have experienced a loss as well.

As we know, gambling legislation is different in Northern Ireland, yet we know the harm of gambling is still rife, similar to the situation here that Members have referred to. Greater protections must be put in place. GambleAware's 2024 survey found that some 1.6 million children in the UK live with an adult who displays signs of a problematic gambling addiction. It is not always about the person who gambles from an early age; the problem can also be the effect of gambling on young children. The survey also discovered that children exposed to gambling are four times more likely to go on to experience gambling issues themselves. Within the past 12 months, of those who had seen family members gamble, one in 15 people, or 7%, noted that it made them feel worried, and one in 20, or 5%, reported that it made them feel sad. That illustrates clearly the issues and the impact on families, and particularly children.

Gambling among children and young people is a significant and increasing problem, as shown by the most recent Gambling Commission annual survey, which found that some three in 10—almost a third—of 11 to 17-year olds had spent their own money on any gambling activity in the past 12 months, up from 27% in 2024. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey gave the incredible example of a seven-year-old; I cannot begin to understand how that happened, or the impact on the seven-year-old or, indeed, on the family.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister on the Gordon Moody charity. Members here on the mainland will probably know that it is a specialist provider of residential treatment for gambling harms. Over the last period of time, it has accepted and treated some 40,000 people for addiction. I met people from the charity only this week, to prepare information for this debate. They had seen a threefold increase in the number of applicants aged 18 to 24 seeking treatment in recent years. They made up 7.4% of the total applicants in 2025, up from 2.6%. The charity has two treatment centres, and a women's treatment centre as well, which deal with and try to help and support the families. Northern Ireland has no dedicated rehab centre under the Gordon Moody umbrella, but residents from Northern Ireland are entitled to, and do apply for, residential rehab for gambling, and are subsequently treated in the centres.

I have seen at first hand the results of gambling for family units at every level, and it is important that the necessary support is available to those experiencing gambling-related harms. That is why it is welcome that the statutory gambling levy will see more than £100 million of funding for research and for the prevention and treatment of gambling harms—indeed, the figure may

even be more, perhaps £120 million. Whatever it is, it is a massive increase, and it should be ploughed back in directly to help those with addiction problems.

It is vital, however, that the new system does not disrupt the existing, proven service that has been treating people for gambling-related harm for many years. One of the existing organisations is the Gordon Moody charity I mentioned, which offers specialist residential treatment to users across the United Kingdom. That needs to be retained, and the charity's services must be available, because they are vital.

The levy funding is due to kick in from April 2026, which is coming up. The Gordon Moody charity and others are facing a cliff edge, with no clarity as to whether they will be in receipt of funding after that time. As of late last year, Gordon Moody has already had to ration its service and it faces the possibility of further limiting the people it treats. It is therefore rather urgent—I ask the Minister to forgive me for throwing it on him at short notice, but we need some clarity on the matter today, if at all possible. I urge the Government to move quickly and to provide the interim funding for the next 12 months, while the long-term NHS funding frameworks are finalised.

The levy applies only to England, Scotland and Wales. From 1 April it will mean that people in need of support for gambling-related harms in Northern Ireland will be at a significant disadvantage, unless they can access a place in the centres referred to. The Northern Ireland Executive needs to commence the statutory power. The Minister is always very active, and able to put forward a case, so will he take the opportunity to speak to the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland—I think it is Gordon Lyons—to ensure that no nation is left behind in the darkness, with no access to treatment?

Gambling may be a sport for some, but for others it is a gateway to addiction, family breakdown and unemployment issues. As the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey said, in the same way as there is support for alcohol and drug addiction, there should be help for those with a gambling addiction. They must have similar treatment and that has to be funded. Those who create the games must pay towards the damage that is done, and that needs to be UK-wide. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say and to the encouragement that he will, without doubt, give us all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): There will now be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

3.34 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for securing this important debate, and for outlining so eloquently the harms caused to the estimated 1.65 million children who live in a household with a problem gambler.

Increasingly, children are not just affected by gambling harms; they are being actively targeted. Even in the past two years we have seen a doubling of problem gambling among young people aged 11 to 17. It is hard to be

[Lizzi Collinge]

surprised when it is everywhere we look. Every single Premier League team has gambling sponsorship. In the commercial break, we see celebrities from Danny Dyer to Harry Redknapp promoting casino sites. One ad says that “you don’t need to know everything about every sport. All you need is a feeling and a phone.”

That message is not subtle, and it is backed by money.

The industry spends a whopping £2 billion a year on advertising, and it does that because it works. In a GambleAware survey of 2,000 young people aged 11 to 17, a quarter said that seeing celebrities gamble or promote gambling made them want to try it themselves. Among boys aged 16 and 17, that rose to more than a third. Now, remember that most people—falsely—think themselves immune to advertising or celebrity endorsement, so the real number of young people who are being directly influenced to feel positively towards gambling is likely to be much higher.

According to the same survey, nearly 90% of children aged between 13 and 17 are exposed to gambling content online. Beyond the billboards and television ads lies a digital world that is far harder for parents like me to see, and it is far harder to regulate. Although some Members may not be familiar with platforms such as Twitch or Kick—I admit that I was not—their children will be. I must pay tribute here to my gen Z staffer Cat, who educated me, an elderly millennial born in the late 1900s, about these platforms. When I first heard the phrase “late 1900s”, I had never been prouder of our generation. It is a beautiful phrase.

The platforms that young people go on are flooded with live betting streams. Children watch them in their bedrooms, with parents completely unaware of what they are seeing. One in three children follow gambling-related creators. Many of the streamers are in paid contracts with big crypto casino brands. They are not gambling their own money; it is free credit given to them by the casinos, and it is rigged to show young people how easy it can be for them to win big or recoup any losses from gambling.

If talking up the thrill of betting is not a quick enough route to acquiring new, younger customers, many streamers use affiliate-referral links, whereby younger viewers are encouraged to join gambling platforms and streamers are rewarded with a hefty commission for each viewer they convert into a customer. Although these sites are nominally supposed to be 18-plus, the age restrictions can be got around, and some sites based overseas are a bit less fussy than operators based here.

Some of the creators did not start out promoting gambling. They built their audience first, with young people feeling a strong, trusting relationship with the influencers. Then, as the content creators build their followers, they become attractive to sponsors, so now their primary job is not entertainment but to bring their audience to their sponsors. To deal with urges, children report trying to watch gambling instead of doing it, but that does not work. It is called the urge paradox, and it makes them more likely to engage in harmful activity. This is the active cultivation of young people as customers.

We now know far more about how exposure, habit and addiction take hold. If gambling is now embedded in the digital spaces where children spend their time,

regulation must meet them there. Earlier this week, we changed gambling taxes to concentrate on the most problematic online gambling and raise money to tackle child poverty. I urge the Minister to look at the measures proposed by Members today and by the APPG, to see how we as a Labour Government can further protect young people and others from gambling harm.

3.39 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): What a fantastic pleasure it is to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for securing this important debate, and for his wider campaigning on this issue.

Gambling is not harmless. For young people, whose minds are still developing and are far more susceptible to addiction and social pressures, the risks are even greater. Some on the Opposition Benches often warn of a so-called nanny state or of Government overreach, but failing to act on gambling harms would be turning a blind eye to a growing crisis that is harming the most vulnerable in our society.

In many tragic cases, it is tearing families apart. Declan Cregan has bravely spoken out about how he became addicted to £1-spin gambling websites during his school lunch break. What began as a seemingly low-stakes, low-risk habit spiralled into a 10-year struggle that ultimately cost him around half a million pounds. It is not only those living with addiction who suffer the consequences; parents Peter and Sadie Keogh have faced the unimaginable pain of losing their son, who ended his own life after being overwhelmed by a gambling addiction.

Early exposure to gambling does not simply pose a risk but casts a devastating and far-reaching shadow over young people, families and whole communities. We know that gambling is harmful for adults, and often targeted at those who are already financially vulnerable, but the safeguards designed to protect children and young people have simply not kept pace with the realities of the digital age. Some 31% of young people report seeing gambling content promoted by influencers and, according to GambleAware, 30% of 11 to 17-year-olds have spent their own money on gambling in the last 12 months—a 3% increase since 2024. Despite those trends, GambleAware has warned that as a nation we still rely far too heavily on self-regulation, with responsibility spread across multiple Government Departments and no single point of accountability.

Meanwhile, existing intervention and support services are often designed with adults in mind. Young people who seek help frequently describe wanting confidential, youth-friendly support that feels private and accessible, but instead find services that make them feel further alienated and misunderstood. Many young people do not recognise their behaviour as harmful; they do not see themselves as problem gamblers, and see their actions as normal, or even expected, youthful risk taking. Tragically, they realise only when they are financially, socially and psychologically deep into the addiction that what seemed like harmless fun has taken a profound toll.

Gambling companies, whether online or on the high street, have repeatedly shown their unwillingness to take genuine responsibility for safeguarding their customers.

Only last week, in response to a signature on a joint letter on the harms of gambling led by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), I received a reply that effectively told me how wrong I was. It informed me of the virtues of gambling for our high streets and local economies. If these organisations are so convinced of the good they do, they should have nothing to fear from proper scrutiny. But we know that they are all too happy with the status quo, and wish to continue to mark their own homework.

If we are to meaningfully confront the escalating crisis of youth gambling, the Government must move beyond incremental tweaks and adopt a proactive, uncompromising approach to addressing the well-evidenced harms associated with it. We need swift, decisive action to modernise protections so that they reflect the realities of a digital world—one in which young people are routinely targeted and relentlessly exposed to risk. The support we offer must be designed to genuinely resonate with children and teenagers, meeting them where they are, speaking in a language they trust and providing services they will actually use. Only then can we stem the rising tide of harm and safeguard the wellbeing of the next generation.

3.43 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank those who have led the debate in our communities, including my hon. Friends the Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) and for Brent East (Dawn Butler), and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who are among the many Members with a passion for this issue. There are also all-party parliamentary groups that lead outstanding cross-party work on behalf of parliamentarians who have realised the scale and scope of this issue. I pay tribute to all the constituents who have communicated with me and raised this issue in campaign organisations and groups.

I have a personal testimony. One of my family members passed away early because of a gambling addiction—a secret addiction that we were unaware of until he passed away and his gambling debts were fully transparent. There are many families across the country who have been touched by similar stories about family members, friends and neighbours.

This issue is directly linked to how companies interact with people, and particularly the way that modern communication technologies are impacting young people. As colleagues have correctly enunciated today, 30% of young people have seen gambling-related content online. Advertising at sports events, such as premiership football games, is normalising the interaction with particular brands. There is also the use of online influencers, with young people looking up to or interacting with individuals who are being sponsored by organisations. There is a clear corporate agenda, with gambling companies seeking to increase their reach into ever younger cohorts.

We know that this is a growing problem. In 2023, 0.7% of young people aged between 11 and 17 experienced gambling addiction, but that has increased to 1.5% now. That is linked to online gamification and the mobile devices in our pockets. Some 8% of young people gambled online, indicating that apps and casino sites—many based in international locations, with extremely weak

barriers in place—are flouting legislation in this country. We also know that gambling on e-sports and other gambling is proliferating around the world—the problem persists not just here—so there are case studies from elsewhere that we can learn from.

Lancet Public Health recently looked into the issue and suggested that there is a gender divide here too. As colleagues have said, young boys are far more susceptible to the influences I have talked about—overwhelmingly so—than young girls, with 49% of young boys who are impacted by gambling having interacted with online media platforms. We also know that the sector is spending a fortune on influencing and advertising. As has been correctly articulated, £2 billion is spent annually in this space.

As Sports Minister, my predecessor as MP for Chatham and Aylesford, Dame Tracey Crouch, did outstanding work to try to restrict gambling access, through her work on fixed odds betting terminals. Indeed, she resigned as a Minister because the then Government did not take this issue, or the influence of the sector, seriously. I support her and the work that she has done. We need to be careful that extremely expansive commercial operators are not unduly influencing us; we must take that extremely seriously.

In the time I have left, I have some questions for the Minister. There is now a well-established, foundational link, both direct and indirect, between advertising and harm. What more can we do, working with the Advertising Standards Agency, to restrict such advertising? Several European countries have already done so. The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium have introduced regulations, so there is precedent for such restrictions.

What can we do to work with football and other sports to restrict advertising near schools and sports grounds in order to restrict excessive content marketing? What can we do to regulate the newer forms of gambling and advertising that we increasingly see on mobile devices? What can we do to ensure that the NHS and our other public health bodies really face up to this challenge, and can give free stigma-free advice to our young people?

Lastly, as I mentioned, every individual in this room will have come across cases where gambling addiction and harm have impacted someone, but that is just scratching the surface of a pernicious problem. If we do not deal with it in a respectful but forceful way as a Government, we will create legacy issues for generations to come.

3.48 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend—and fellow Kent MP—the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) on securing the debate and on his extremely insightful speech. He showed his background as a clinician, but also his concern for his constituents.

As others have said, this is indeed a very timely debate. The latest figures on young people and gambling, published in November by the Gambling Commission, should be a concern to us all. Some 49% of 11 to 17-year-olds had experienced gambling in the previous 12 months. Even more worryingly, 30% of 11 to 17-year-olds had spent their own money on gambling in the previous 12 months. I understand from GamCare, the charity

[Jim Dickson]

that runs the national gambling helpline, that in the last year callers to that helpline from my constituency of Dartford identified all sorts of problems—including financial difficulties, anxiety, stress and depression—as the personal impacts of their gambling.

GamCare also highlighted to me that among parents who are already gamblers at risk of harm, almost half have bet with their children and 38% have, for example, bought them a scratchcard. That might be innocent enough in itself, but it is a gateway activity likely to lead to problem gambling as those young people move into gaming and sports. Half of these parents report that they think their children are likely to gamble in the future, including by betting on sports and playing casino games when they are old enough. That is concerning when up to 2.2 million children are growing up in households where an adult is experiencing gambling harms.

I am, however, heartened by some of the steps the Government are taking across the piece, such as ensuring that the gambling levy money is spent on research and treatment and targets the communities and people most at risk, and the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget that we are seeking to raise taxes on the most harmful forms of gambling. I am proud to be a member of the Treasury Committee, which wrote a report recommending that to the Chancellor prior to the Budget.

One area the Government should look at—the Minister might address this when he sums up—is how we reduce the exposure of young people to gambling-related advertising. That was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), who has done so much work in this area. Four in five young people have seen or heard adverts or promotions for gambling through online or offline sources.

As a football fan, I see the level of gambling marketing in sport all the time. I welcome the voluntary front-of-shirt ban the Premier League is bringing in from the start of next season. My club, Crystal Palace, is in need of a new sponsor, not just because of the disaster of last Saturday, but because its current sponsor is a gambling company.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. It is vital that gambling companies come off football shirts, and I am so pleased that that is happening. I have a constituent, Chloe Long, who tragically lost her brother Ollie to gambling-related suicide. He was a big football fan, and she has spoken so powerfully about how ubiquitous the problem is, as my hon. Friend has said. She worries about young people growing up exposed to so much gambling advertising as a result of watching sport. My concern is that just asking clubs to look at this on a voluntary basis will not be enough. Does my hon. Friend agree that we may need to look at tougher action and clamp down on this link between gambling companies and sport on more than just a voluntary basis?

Jim Dickson: My hon. Friend raises an extremely tragic case, which I will deal with later in my speech. She also makes that link between sport, gambling and addiction, which is so pernicious, and which we need to see action on to ensure that we create an environment in which people are prevented from becoming addicted, rather than being encouraged.

As my hon. Friend rightly says, the front-of-shirt ban will not be nearly enough on its own; it is far from the end of the story. Gambling advertising, including perimeter TV and social media, continues to proliferate in sport. There are also the other parts of the shirt; this is a front-of-shirt ban on advertising, so stand by for lots more gambling company adverts on sleeves and other parts of the shirt from next season.

I have spoken before of my concerns about how the coroner service responds to gambling-related suicides. I remain of the view that the Government should ensure that the causes of preventable deaths, including ones related to gambling, are properly examined and addressed to prevent future deaths, with the evidence submitted by families properly considered.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) mentioned, just this week the inquest concluded into the death of Ollie Long, a football fan who took his own life after struggling with addiction for eight years, starting as a young person in his 20s. In his tragic case, there was a particular concern that, despite being registered with GamStop, which locked him out of the mainstream gambling industry, he was—likely through online advertising—able to place bets via online casinos based abroad. Although the coroner would not, as the family wished, include gambling as a cause of death, she has written to the Government to raise her concerns about the risks posed by illegal gambling sites, which is an issue Ministers are familiar with.

As we support and treat adults who suffer from gambling harms and we try to reduce the incentives in our wider environment to gamble, we have an opportunity to ensure that we do not allow this generation of young people to turn into the next generation of gambling addicts, with disastrous consequences for their life chances. Let us take that opportunity.

3.55 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for securing this important debate.

Gambling is increasingly accessible to children and young people, whether through online platforms, advertising or other media. There are serious concerns about the long-term consequences this will have on the health, wellbeing and development of children and young people across the country.

I am particularly concerned about the betting shops on our high street. On the high street in my constituency there are eight gambling establishments—on one street. Since I became an MP, I have objected to every planning application for a betting shop on our high street. Sadly, I have not won a single decision. I will never, ever let one go unchallenged, because as a former nurse I know all too well the terrible toll gambling can take on people's mental health and wellbeing, and sometimes it takes their lives. It pushes families into debt and can lead to addiction, which isolates people from their communities. It is also known to cause antisocial behaviour and to have knock-on effects that harm the entire area.

Birmingham Erdington is a young constituency with low educational outcomes, high unemployment and many houses in multiple occupation, so I am particularly

concerned about the effects of gambling. The gambling industry spent £2 billion on advertising and marketing in 2024. That was not by chance; it deliberately targets some of the most vulnerable people in our society. More than 1.5 million people suffer from problem gambling, with many more at risk. The annual societal cost of gambling harms is up to a staggering £1.7 billion.

We know that young people are more vulnerable to being harmed by gambling. That is due to natural brain development and unmediated exposure to gambling at an earlier age, through advertising, marketing and the presence of gambling-like elements in places parents might not expect, including loot-box mechanics—which I knew nothing about—in video games aimed at children. Some 69% of 11 to 17-year-olds recall seeing gambling advertising, which acts as a gateway into more serious gambling as they get older. The results are stark. The annual student gambling survey found that 49% of students gamble, with four in 10 reporting that gambling has affected their university experience.

The effects are inescapable. There are hundreds of gambling-related suicides annually in Britain—between 2% and 9% of all suicides. That cannot continue. Today I am calling on the Government and regulators to come together to ensure that young people are protected and that our high streets do not continue to be wrecked by out-of-control gambling and betting shops. The challenge is not insurmountable. Support is available, stigma can be challenged and change is possible. Gambling must be seen as a public health issue. Children need to be educated at an early age through the public health lens in schools, and education needs to be provided to families and parents. I will continue fighting for our young people and for the safe, vibrant high streets that our communities so deserve.

3.59 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) on his extremely knowledgeable and passionate opening speech. All the contributions that we have heard today have been based on a huge amount of knowledge, experience of constituents and personal connections. I am really grateful to colleagues; I have learned a lot from them.

Gambling clearly poses a serious threat to the wellbeing of our children and young people across the country. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is a very serious public health issue that needs tackling. As he said, some of the harm is indirect: adults in the family may be involved in problem gambling. Two thirds of people who gamble are in some degree of debt, and there are 400 gambling-related suicides per year, so gambling has devastating consequences for families and knock-on impacts on mental and physical health, education, employment and crime.

On indirect harms, I was shocked to read in the Gambling Commission's November 2025 report that three in five young people had some experience of gambling, and that half had gambled in the past 12 months. Much of that takes place through arcade gambling but, as we have heard today, online gambling is a growing problem. It includes traditional gambling sites and games with loot boxes, which encourage gambling-type behaviour

that sometimes puts our children on a trajectory to full-blown gambling in later life. I am sure hon. Members have read or heard about the shocking story of a 16-year-old who, in 2022, lost thousands of pounds online in just a few weeks after seeing adverts at a football game—we have heard a lot about football advertising today—and setting up an account in his father's name.

We are becoming increasingly aware of the addictive nature of social media and of how addictive algorithms are being harnessed to prey on and profit from children's vulnerabilities in many different ways—not just gambling. The Gambling Commission's 2025 survey found that young people are more likely to be exposed to gambling-related advertisements weekly online than they are offline. Thirty-one per cent of young people who saw gambling-related content on social media reported that influencers had advertising gambling-related content to them.

Concerningly, online gambling-related adverts give the impression that it is possible to make a lot of money quickly, while failing to portray the harms that gambling can cause. Given that, according to Action for Children, one in five children say that they worry about their family's financial situation, it is particularly cruel to prey on children's vulnerabilities in that way.

The knowledge that children and young people are regularly being encouraged to engage in risky behaviour with potentially devastating consequences clearly demonstrates the need for protection for children and young people, who are not aware of the dangers. Indeed, three in four children say that they want more to be done to reduce the amount of gambling advertising and content that they see. GambleAware's recent report found that seven in 10 children agree that it is difficult to avoid gambling advertising and content. When asked what they would say to those who produced the gambling ads, one child said that they felt that gambling operators and advertisers were

“grooming children into thinking gambling is exciting and fun and win lots of money. You”—

the advertisers—

“need to put the dangers and the loss of money on adverts”.

Given that gambling causes psychological distress, financial and social difficulties, and even addiction, it is clear that we need to reform the system to protect our young people. The Liberal Democrats have long been calling for reforms to protect people from gambling harms. We very much welcomed the Government's decision to double the remote gaming duty—a policy that we have long been calling for—but we believe that further decisive action is needed to combat the harms caused by problem gambling. We call on the Government to curb the impact of gambling advertising, marketing and sponsorship, including by ending inducements, direct marketing, gambling marketing and sponsorships at sports events, and pre-watershed gambling advertising. They should also introduce clear and enforceable restrictions on content marketing, particularly on social media, create a statutory independent gambling ombudsman with real power to protect consumers and resolve complaints, and replace the current self-regulation of gambling advertising with independent and enforceable regulation.

Given the role in this scourge that is played by social media and its harmful content and addictive algorithms, as well as harmful gaming, there is now growing cross-party

[Munira Wilson]

consensus that Government need to take decisive action much more broadly to protect our children from online harms, of which gambling is only one. I hope that not just the Minister today but Ministers across Departments will listen to representations and proposals from both sides of the House to ensure that we protect our children and young people from addiction, because we need to do that if we are serious about giving them every opportunity to thrive and fulfil their full potential.

4.5 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. For full transparency, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for securing this important debate. The protection of children and young people should unite every Member of this House. We all recognise that under-18s should not be gambling, and it is right that the law is strict on that point. Young people are still developing, as others have argued; they are more exposed to online influence and less equipped to assess long-term risks and consequences. That is why it is somewhat difficult to square claims that even limited exposure to gambling advertising is intolerable with the arguments made by some on the Government Benches for 16-year-olds to have the vote—but I will move on, because that is not the purpose of today's debate.

If we are to make real progress in protecting children, we must be clear about where harm and exposure actually arise, particularly in the online world, as we have heard, and ensure that our response is based on the best possible evidence. Crucially, as we have heard, harm to children does not come only from direct participation. Many children experience gambling harm indirectly—from parents or loved ones who themselves struggle with addiction. That can mean financial instability, stress at home, relationship breakdowns and wider impacts on a child's wellbeing, education and mental health. Those knock-on effects are real and deserve serious attention from Government.

That is why prevention, early intervention and family support matter so much. To that end, I would appreciate the Minister telling me or trying to work out why I have yet to receive a response to the letter that I, my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) and my hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston) sent to the Secretary of State on 6 November regarding the impending cliff edge on funding that fantastic charities such as Gordon Moody, Betknowmore UK, Deal Me Out, Ygam and GamCare are all facing. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has raised the issue, and the Minister will be aware that I raised it with him personally before Christmas, because we do need to ensure that Government understand the unnecessary worry that has been caused to charities that have real expertise in this space.

I understand that there may be interim grants to cover the next financial year, but that information is only just starting to come to light. I ask the Minister to tell us why the Government have left these essential charities in the dark over the future of the services that

they provide, and whether the Government will finally—hopefully—get their act together and engage with the sector, so that a real, working solution can be put in place for the long term and we do not have this ongoing situation in which gambling harm seems to fall between the DCMS and the Department of Health and Social Care. That is a real issue and concern. As a shadow Minister, I have visited a number of these charities to see the work that is happening on the ground. They do incredible work and have incredible expertise in helping people across the country, so we must ensure that gambling harm does not fall between the cracks any more.

Much of the debate has focused so far on advertising. There is no question but that children should not be targeted, and within the regulated sector they are not permitted to be. But at the same time, as we have heard, we cannot ignore the wider online environment in which children now live. Evidence shows that when young people encounter gambling-related content, it is most often through social media, streaming platforms and online influencers—the places where enforcement is hardest and protections are weakest. This is the area that I have most concern about as a shadow Minister, and I have spoken about it before, particularly in relation to some of the crypto scams that we see online. Someone mentioned doomscrolling, and I sometimes come across this content when doomscrolling. Illegal and unlicensed operators are exploiting this space and exploiting young people. They use influencers and celebrities in ways that licensed operators are explicitly banned from doing, and they operate in overseas jurisdictions, which means that age checks can be bypassed entirely. Once a child enters this space, there are no safeguards at all—no limits, no interventions and no support.

We must be honest about unintended consequences. When policy decisions, including sharp tax rises, weaken the legal, regulated market—I have said openly before that I do not mind bashing the bookies, but I am worried about the growth of this—the activity does not stop, but moves to the illegal market. I have made that point before in the House. Evidence from abroad shows such displacement to the black market, where there are no age checks, safeguards or accountability. In my opinion, that environment is far more dangerous for children and adults alike. Of course, we know that gambling harms exist, and every case involving a child is one too many, but they do not exist in isolation. They are closely linked, as we have heard, to mental health, family circumstances, financial stress and patterns of online behaviour.

That is why education, parental engagement and digital literacy must sit at the heart of the Government's response. Children need a clear understanding of risk and probability, a resilience to online marketing and the confidence to question what they see online. Parents need support, information and early help when problems arise. If Government Members want to do what is best for children and completely remove their exposure to unregulated, predatory advertisements from black market sites, I kindly encourage them to back the Conservatives' plan to raise the age of consent for social media to 16 years old to support children and parents. It is a bold policy that, as we have heard, has cross-party support, and I urge the Government to get on with it. I think it is the bold action that is needed to tackle online harms, including gambling harms.

Moreover, the statutory levy provides an opportunity to fund evidence-based education, treatment and prevention, including support for families affected by gambling addiction. That funding must be targeted, evaluated and focused on what works. Would the Minister outline what he is doing to step up work on this issue to ensure that charities have the funding certainty they require to continue their operations across the country? What are the Government doing to ensure that the Gambling Commission has the resources and the right approach to tackle the illegal black market and the targeting of young people on social media, particularly in relation to crypto?

4.11 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. You are a good friend to us all.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) on securing this important debate. I thought his speech was great; it covered all bases in looking at where we are on gambling harms. He was absolutely right to point out that significant attention is paid to gambling harms, but little attention is paid to the effects that those harms have on children and young people. I am glad we have sorted some of that in this debate.

My heart goes out to Lesley. I hope she has been watching this, albeit through one eye, and we all wish her a speedy recovery. I also pay tribute to Rosie, who is in the Public Gallery. Speaking as a father to two children, losing a child is heartbreaking, but using the loss of a child as a catalyst for campaigning on this issue is completely heroic and much beyond the strength of many of us. I thank her for that.

Unlike alcohol addiction, gambling is an invisible addiction, and it is often hidden from family members and friends, as we have heard from hon. Members. We must ensure that there are safeguards in place, particularly for children and young people; otherwise, we risk a generational slip into gambling harms, as many Members have said. There has been massive innovation in the gambling sector, which is why this issue has been brought to the fore. Young people have certainly been much more exposed to risks than other groups. I appreciate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey about direct and indirect harms. I think we have to deal with that.

Let me canter through some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised, before dealing with those raised by other hon. Members. My hon. Friend spoke about loot boxes, which were mentioned by a number of Members. We have commissioned independent academic research to assess the effectiveness of the new industry-led measures to improve player protections with regards to loot boxes in video games. We have engaged with the relevant Government Departments and regulators to consider the next steps, which will be published alongside the academic research in due course later this year. Some 20% of the gambling levy is going into research; we need a lot more research into these areas to make sure that any other regulations or guardrails that we introduce are fit for purpose, as these issues are changing all the time.

My hon. Friend mentioned the impact of parental gambling on children and households. That is a key part of the impact that parents' gambling has on children and young people. Statistics from the Gambling Commission's young people and gambling survey, which many Members have referred to, show that nearly 30% of young people have seen a family member they live with gamble. We also note the findings that young people who consider themselves to be risk-takers were also more likely to have seen a family member gamble. The National Gambling Clinic offers support for people aged 13 to 18 in England who have experienced harm from gambling. It offers a family and friends service alongside that, which provides support to those impacted by someone else's difficulties with gambling. Further to that, as I have already mentioned, 30% of funds from the statutory gambling levy—£120 million this year, in total—are being put towards prevention, some of which will subsequently be used to inform the Government's children and young people's strategy.

My hon. Friend quite rightly raised the issue of increased gambling activity among children and young people, and the stats on that have been read out a number of times already. We continue to monitor that issue, particularly in the sector of unregulated gambling, such as private bets between family and friends. We have all done it: we have been driving with the family, including the kids, in the car, and have had a little side bet on whether the next car that passes will be red or white, or something like that to pass the time. We need to be careful that what we do is not accidentally causing our families to slip into thinking that gambling is normalised, an issue that many people have already raised.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the Department of Health and Social Care and the fact that gambling is a health issue. I am aware that some Members of this House wish gambling to be considered a health issue for the Department of Health and Social Care—we heard that earlier from the Select Committee member, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman), who is no longer in his place. We continue to work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, colleagues and other stakeholders beyond Government to ensure that the wide-ranging harms associated with gambling are thoroughly considered and are reflected in future policy. That is why we have set the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and NHS England, alongside the appropriate bodies in Scotland and Wales, the task of commissioning for the prevention and treatment strands of the levy respectively. Gambling harm is partly the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care too.

The Government's men's health strategy was touched on by some hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. We have heard that gambling harm tends to be most prevalent in young boys, and the evidence points to that. Young men are more likely to gamble at higher levels, particularly with online casino-style betting. The Gambling Commission published research into the drivers behind that in December last year. What is clear is the need for further gambling education, and we are committed to working with relevant stakeholders and the prevention commissioner to explore the role of education in protecting children and young people from gambling-related harms.

[*Ian Murray*]

On the assessment of voluntary advertising measures, all licensed gaming operators in the UK must adhere to the Gambling Commission's licensing conditions and codes of practice, which require compliance with robust advertising codes enforced by the Advertising Standards Authority. The codes are regularly reviewed and updated, and they include a wide range of provisions designed to protect children and young people from harm. Those rules are further supplemented by a number of voluntary industry measures, such as the industry code for socially responsible advertising, and we continue to monitor the evidence base and to work with a number of stakeholders when considering the effectiveness of current regulations and gambling advertising. I am sure that the Gambling Commission has heard this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee debate we had last week.

I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger). I have heard him speak many times over the last couple of weeks, and he has not mentioned that Halesowen is the town of culture this year—he has missed another lobbying opportunity, but I put that on the record on his behalf. I thank him for welcoming our tax changes, including the £26 million from those tax changes that is being put straight into looking at and being more robust with the illegal market. I thank him for all he does with the APPG on gambling reform.

My hon. Friend welcomed the front-of-shirt ban; with that ban, I think the Premier League acknowledged the scale of the exposure problem, something that all hon. Members have mentioned and want to reflect on. He also raised the Betting and Gaming Council's report; I am not avoiding the question, but it is for the council to decide whether it wants to publish that report. I am sure it will have heard both my remarks and his on whether it decides to do that.

I am surprised that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke in this debate—he is normally such a shy and retiring Member. He is of course right to reflect on the fact that the gambling regulations in Northern Ireland are different, but I can reassure him that gambling officials met with their Northern Irish counterparts just last month to discuss gambling harm. They want to learn from best practice in both organisations.

The hon. Member also raised the specialist providers for the treatment of gambling harm and the late Gordon Moody, as did the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). I thank them all for the work that they do. The gambling levy of £120 million will help. The applications for it opened yesterday, and I encourage all hon. Members who have any contacts with those bodies to make sure that they are applying for those contracts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and many other hon. Members highlighted that the industry spends £2 billion a year on advertising—why? Because it works. Nobody spends money on advertising if it does not work. I enjoyed her saying that we are all from the late 1900s—I had not considered that before, but I certainly feel like it today. She also pushed us on what measures we can take.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) notes that young people have seen this as being normalised; that is something that we are all

having to deal with. He mentioned the letter sent to the gambling industry last week, and the response that he got, highlighting how wrong he was. I gently suggest to the industry that that is not the way to respond; they should engage with the issues and, if there is an argument to be made, let us have that argument, rather than telling hon. Members that they are wrong when they raise significant issues on behalf of their constituents.

I pay tribute to Peter and Sadie Keogh after the tragedy they faced in their family, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) for telling the personal story of his family. He asked about youth-specific gambling support: the National Gambling Clinic is an NHS service that provides free, confidential support for those aged between 13 and 18 experiencing gambling-related harm, and I would encourage any family member or anybody of that age to get in touch and engage with that service.

On gambling-related suicide, we all read the BBC story about Ollie Long this week, and many Members have referred to it. The Government recognise that the link between gambling and suicide is a sensitive area and a difficult one to research because of the linkages. It is very complex; I hope the 20% dedicated from the levy will help us with that research to build a much better picture of the harms and the direct associated areas. The Department of Health and Social Care also has a suicide prevention strategy; that is the health part of this, which is important for us to see.

I hope I have covered most of the issues that have been raised by hon. Members. I apologise to the shadow Minister about the letter sent to the Secretary of State on 6 November; we will chase that up and reply to the hon. Gentleman. I highlight the £120 million raised by the levy this year: the 30% that goes into prevention, the 30% that goes into treatment, the 20% that goes into research—I ask people please to engage with those distribution bodies—and the extra £26 million to tackle the illegal market. We all know the illegal market is a problem and I hope that money goes some way to dealing with some of those big issues.

To finish, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) raised the proliferation of betting on the high street. We know that is a problem; we had a Backbench Business debate on it last week, where we discussed those particular harms. In the interests of time, I refer her to that debate so she can see the result. The Prime Minister did answer a Prime Minister's question from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), who has been leading the charge on this, and he is fully committed to making sure those cumulative impact assessments are part of the planning and licensing process. I hope that will help the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington in some way.

I hope I have answered all the issues that were raised in the debate. We will continue to have these debates as the months and years roll by. The gambling Minister, Baroness Twycross, who is in the other place, who takes the lead on this, will have heard the debate and we will have regular meetings on the issues that come out of it. I hope that hon. Members continue to interact with the debate and continue the sterling work they have been doing.

4.23 pm

Kevin McKenna: I thank every Member who has contributed to this debate. It has been very powerful, and I have valued the detail that people have added; many are key bits of evidence that build up to show the threat that gambling represents to children and young people in this country. I particularly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) and the work that the APPG on gambling reform does. That work was important in preparing my understanding of the problem before this debate, as was the great work done by the Health and Social Care Committee. It was good to hear some members of that Committee contributing today. This debate has shown how profoundly this issue has affected people and how rapidly it is changing.

I thank the Minister for his reply, particularly his commitment to research. It is really important—the only thing I would add is that we have to move fast.

As someone from a health background, who has been involved in many health studies, I know that they can move too slowly. We are on rapidly shifting ground, so there are we need to take. While his Department does sterling work on this, I reiterate my feeling that, as always, health should be the principal lens through which we look at this issue. I thank the Chair, and everyone who has contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of gambling harms on children and young people.

4.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 15 January 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023: Fifth Assimilated Law Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): Today the Secretary of State has laid a report before Parliament pursuant to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 and published it on gov.uk. This report updates the House in line with the obligations under section 17 of the REUL Act, which requires a report to be published and laid before Parliament every six months detailing all revocations and reforms of assimilated law. This is the fifth report being laid before the House.

The report today summarises the data on the assimilated law dashboard, providing the public with information about the amount of assimilated law there is and where it sits across Departments. The dashboard reflects the position as of 23 December 2025, showing a total of 6,925 instruments of REUL or assimilated law concentrated over approximately 400 unique policy areas. Since the previous update to the dashboard, 61 assimilated law instruments have either been revoked or reformed. In addition, Departments have undertaken further analysis and amended their record of assimilated law. As a result, a net figure of 2,571 instruments have now been revoked or reformed in total.

The report gives details of 25 statutory instruments which were laid by the Government using powers under the REUL Act and other domestic legislation since the previous report. These statutory instruments amend assimilated law to deliver the Government's priorities. This includes, for example, the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (Amendment, etc.) Regulations 2025 which were made under the Environment Act 2021 and create a fair and level playing field for all businesses placing electricals on to the UK market.

The Government remain committed to fostering a pro-business environment through a streamlined regulatory framework that drives growth and supports innovation. This includes our work reforming assimilated law.

[HCWS1242]

Energy Infrastructure Planning: North Falls Offshore Wind Farm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by North Falls Offshore Wind Farm Ltd for an offshore wind farm with up to 57 wind turbines and up to two offshore substation platforms, and up to one offshore converter platform, located off the East Anglian coastline in the southern North sea.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining

authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

The statutory deadline for the decision on the North Falls Offshore Wind Farm proposed development is 28 January 2026.

I have decided to set a new statutory deadline of 28 April 2026. This is to allow time to request further information that was not available for consideration during the examination period, and to give all interested parties the opportunity to review and comment on such information. Although my preference would be not to amend the deadline, I am clear that applications for consent for energy projects submitted under the Planning Act 2008 must meet the necessary standards.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS1246]

JUSTICE

HMP Wandsworth Independent Investigation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): I wish to provide an update on the independent investigation into the escape of Daniel Khalife from HMP Wandsworth on 6 September 2023.

On 8 January 2024, the House was informed that the investigation, which was led by Keith Bristow QPM, had concluded. At that time, it was not appropriate to provide further detail, due to the ongoing criminal proceedings and the need to protect prison security. Those proceedings have since concluded. Mr Khalife was convicted for offences under the Official Secrets Act 1911 and the Terrorism Act 2000, as well as for escaping from lawful custody. He was sentenced to a total of 14 years and three months' imprisonment for those crimes.

Following the criminal trial, various details about events that occurred are now in the public domain, including how Mr Khalife escaped while on kitchen duty by using a makeshift sling attached to the underside of a delivery lorry. However, in the spirit of transparency and accountability, I wish to provide a fuller account of the investigation's findings and recommendations, while also maintaining caution that prison security is not compromised by doing so.

The investigation scrutinised five key operational themes: prisoner categorisation; security protocols and their application; assessment of escape risk; work allocation risk assessment; and operational capacity including staffing levels.

A prisoner's categorisation determines the level of security required to manage them, based on both their risk to the public and of escape. The investigation found that the decision to hold Mr Khalife in a category B prison was consistent with categorisation policy and based on adequate information. It also noted that category B conditions should have been sufficient to prevent escape.

The investigation nonetheless recommended that HM Prison and Probation Service consider whether improvements are needed to support the sharing of sensitive intelligence between operational partners to better inform future categorisation decisions.

HMP Wandsworth has taken meaningful steps to enhance the systems that inform categorisation decisions. Improvements include streamlining processes relating to intelligence generated by HMPPS, addressing operational backlogs and delivering staff training aligned with national standards. These improvements, combined with wider processes in place with relevant partners, support robust HMPPS decision-making relating to categorisation and prison placement.

The investigation identified shortcomings in the application of several security protocols on the day of the escape, including prisoner and cell searches, vehicle escorting, vehicle search procedures at the prison's main gate, prisoner counting protocols and the activation of contingency plans. It recommended strengthening local searching policies, enhancing local intelligence and recording practices and adopting a more rigorous approach to security risk assessment. While not found to be material to the escape, the investigation also recommended that the HMPPS policy framework for managing terrorist risk be updated to reflect current practice.

Since then, HMP Wandsworth has significantly strengthened its security framework. Search protocols have been revised, risk-based practices improved and the level of support from specialist search teams increased. Staff training has been prioritised to embed a more consistent and effective security culture. In addition, HMPPS has introduced an updated, internal policy framework for managing terrorist risk.

On the assessment of Mr Khalife's escape risk, the investigation concluded that the relevant policy had been applied correctly in his case. It also noted that the low incidence of prison escapes suggests that the current approach to escape risk management is almost always sufficient. The investigation nonetheless recommended that HMPPS review whether the current policy relating to escape risk places sufficient emphasis on prisoner behaviour outside of closed conditions, particularly where past behaviour patterns may indicate a greater risk of escape.

HMP Wandsworth has since enhanced its processes for identifying and managing escape risk. This includes improved daily monitoring, updated risk assessments, and assurance checks to ensure operational practices reflect current vulnerabilities. Furthermore, HMPPS has reviewed the national escape list policy, specifically the requirement to consider risk information, such as escape risk, from other secure environments such as police or military custody.

With regard to work allocation, the investigation found that Mr Khalife should not have been assigned to work in the kitchen based on the local policy in place at the time. It also identified that an opportunity to remove him from this role was missed. The investigation recommended improvements to HMP Wandsworth's work allocation process, including its risk assessment form.

HMP Wandsworth has since improved its approach to work allocation by strengthening risk assessment processes and enhancing the use of information held on HMPPS's intelligence reporting system. A new system has been introduced to ensure decisions are applied consistently and reviewed regularly, supported by targeted staff training and oversight mechanisms.

The investigation found that while staffing levels at HMP Wandsworth were a broader challenge, they were not a significant factor on the day of the escape. However, the investigation noted that wider staffing pressures

may have had an indirect effect. This includes reduced time for staff to carry out essential tasks, less assurance around the quality of processes being followed, and increased cross-deployment of staff across different activities within the prison. The investigation also highlighted the impact of staff churn on institutional knowledge and national pressure on centralised training capacity due to high volumes of new recruits. The investigation did not find evidence that staff corruption was a factor in the escape.

While the investigation made no specific recommendations on staffing, HMP Wandsworth has taken measures to strengthen staffing and institutional resilience, including increased security personnel, targeted training, and enhanced operational awareness.

The investigation also made several strategic recommendations to strengthen prison security more broadly. These included the need for HMP Wandsworth, supported by HMPPS, to develop a comprehensive and dynamic understanding of local security risks, implement a clear strategy to address them, and embed a stronger security culture underpinned by visible leadership. The investigation also recommended that HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice work collaboratively with scrutiny bodies to assess whether prison performance evaluations appropriately prioritise security and risk management, and recommended that HMPPS consider how the investigation's findings might be applied across the wider prison estate.

The prison has undertaken a comprehensive review of its security arrangements, informed by internal assessments and external scrutiny. A revised local strategy now guides operational practices, supported by strengthened leadership, improved intelligence handling, and embedded assurance processes. HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice continue to work closely with HM Inspectorate of Prisons and other scrutiny bodies, including independent monitoring boards, to support improvement across the system. These measures reflect a sustained commitment to enhancing security governance and provide a model for wider application across the estate.

The Government have taken the findings of the independent investigation into Mr Khalife's escape extremely seriously. HMP Wandsworth, HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice have acted swiftly and decisively to implement the investigation's recommendations. Through strengthened leadership, a renewed focus on security culture, and rigorous assurance processes, the prison has addressed the vulnerabilities identified. These reforms are not only embedded, but they are also being independently tested and continuously improved.

I am confident that the actions taken have significantly strengthened prison security. We must not become complacent, however, and I have made clear the importance of maintaining this momentum, not only at HMP Wandsworth, but across the prison estate. I am resolute in ensuring that lessons are learned to help prevent incidents of this nature occurring again in the future.

[HCWS1245]

Judicial Conduct Investigations Office: Annual Report 2024–25

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): With the concurrence of the Lady Chief Justice, I will today publish the 18th annual report of the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office.

The JCIO supports the Lady Chief Justice and the Lord Chancellor in our joint statutory responsibility for judicial discipline.

The judiciary comprises approximately 20,000 individuals serving across a range of jurisdictions. Over the past year, the JCIO received 3,279 complaints against judicial office-holders. A total of 89 investigations resulted in disciplinary action.

I have placed copies of the report in the Library of each House. Copies are also available online at: <https://www.complaints.judicialconduct.gov.uk/reportsandpublications>

[HCWS1243]

TRANSPORT

Railways Stations: Accessibility

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Minister of State for Transport, my noble Friend Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill, has made the following ministerial statement.

This Government are committed to improving the accessibility of Britain's railways and recognise the significant social and economic benefits of doing so. As we move towards the establishment of Great British Railways, we will provide greater detail of how these ambitions will be funded and delivered.

Since 2006, the Access for All programme has delivered step-free accessible routes at over 270 stations.

In May 2024, the previous Government announced feasibility work on 50 stations without indicating how the delivery of such schemes would be funded, raising significant stakeholder expectations. This Government are committed to a rigorous approach and to only making commitments that we believe are affordable and would represent value for money for passengers and taxpayers. As such, Ministers have carefully considered the findings of the initial feasibility work and have decided which will progress, using the following criteria:

Busy stations, where upgrades would benefit significant numbers of passengers;

Ensuring a good spread of projects across Wales, Scotland and different parts of England;

Making use of pre-existing technical development work; and

The presence of a third-party funding contribution.

On this basis, Ministers have made the following decisions in relation to the 50 projects announced by the previous Government:

Eight projects are progressing directly to delivery: Ash Vale, Colchester, Port Sunlight, Thirsk, Walton (Merseyside), Bellgrove, Aigburth and Rock Ferry stations—with the last two already in delivery.

Twenty-three projects are progressing to detailed design:

Battle	Kew Bridge
Bodmin Parkway Bredbury	Kidbrooke
Castle Cary	Marden
Dalston Kingsland	Newton for Hyde
Dorchester South Esher	Raynes Park
Falkirk Grahamston	Ruabon
Flowery Field	Shotton
Gunnersbury	Swanwick
Hedge End	Ulverston
High Brooms	Wymondham
	Yeovil Junction

Nineteen projects will not be progressing at this point:

Bushey	Sileby
Chinley	Sleaford
Church and Oswaldtwistle	Small Heath
Dudley Port	South Croydon
Dumbarton Central	Stamford
Inverurie	Stroud
Leagrave	Upminster
Ledbury	Whitchurch (Shropshire)
Maidstone West	Wivelsfield
Neath	

The Rail Minister has written to the MPs representing each of the 50 stations announced by the previous Government. He has offered to meet to explain the decision for those 19 projects that will not be progressing at this point.

A future round of AfA may be funded as part of the next spending review, and this could provide an opportunity to fully or partially fund accessibility upgrades at other stations across Britain. The process and timings for identifying potential future AfA projects have not yet been decided, although we have committed to reforming the AfA programme as we move towards the establishment of Great British Railways.

Third-party funding contributions will be a key consideration in choosing future AfA schemes. This approach recognises the limited funding that the Government can make available to fund accessibility upgrades, as well as the significant benefits they bring to local communities. To support this, officials will be working with Network Rail to develop guidance setting out best practice examples of how local funding packages have been assembled.

We inherited a significant backlog of AfA projects initiated under the previous Government. Although we remain committed to the delivery of the vast majority of these legacy AfA projects, Ministers have taken difficult but necessary decisions in relation to the following five legacy projects:

Beaconsfield—delivery deferred to railway funding control period 8 (2029-2034) to more efficiently align with planned station drainage renewal works.

Bronesbury—delivery deferred to 2028-29 to more efficiently align with planned station platform renewal works.

Cricklewood—indefinitely deferred as the benefits such upgrades would deliver to users of the station would not justify the significant disruption caused to other users of the Midland main line and the significant costs to passengers and taxpayers.

Ockenden—indefinitely deferred as the station is already highly accessible, with only certain peak time trains stopping at the inaccessible platform.

Palmers Green—indefinitely deferred as the benefits such upgrades would deliver to users of the station would not justify the significant disruption caused to other users of the West Anglia line and the significant costs to passengers and taxpayers.

The Rail Minister has written to the MPs representing each of the above five legacy projects and has offered to meet to explain the decisions made.

[HCWS1244]

Written Correction

Thursday 15 January 2026

Other Correction

JOHANNA BAXTER

Ukraine

The following extract is from the debate on Ukraine on 14 January 2026.

Johanna Baxter: 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.

[*Official Report*, 14 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 1010.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter):

Johanna Baxter: Russia has stolen 20,000 Ukrainian children from their home, and Russian authorities themselves report that more than **700,000** Ukrainian children have now been officially registered in Russia—a heinous war crime that continues unabated today.

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WRITTEN CORRECTION

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