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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 20 January 2026

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

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

*The term "Independent" may denote—

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

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

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House of Commons

Tuesday 20 January 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Yemen

1. **Abtisam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of the situation in Yemen. [907360]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): In November I made the first ministerial visit to Yemen in six years. I met the President and the Prime Minister to reaffirm the United Kingdom's unwavering support for a unified and stable Yemen. We support their commitment to reform, and we continue to focus on delivering humanitarian assistance to all those in need in Yemen and, alongside our international partners, using every diplomatic lever to advance peace. The recent escalation of tensions in southern Yemen threatens to undermine those goals. We therefore welcome the calls by Yemen's President for a dialogue addressing these issues, and Saudi Arabia's offer to host a conference. We will continue to support efforts to achieve a swift diplomatic resolution.

Abtisam Mohamed: In the context of what the United Nations special envoy has described as a rapidly worsening humanitarian and economic crisis in Yemen, does the Minister welcome the forthcoming southern dialogue conference, led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council? How is the UK, as penholder on Yemen, supporting that process to deliver a tangible road map for a way forward that addresses the aspirations of southern communities?

Mr Falconer: I do welcome Saudi Arabia's southern dialogue conference. As my hon. Friend has said, it is supported by the Arab League and the GCC, and it is a vital step amid a worsening humanitarian and economic crisis. As UN penholder, the UK is actively supporting the process, through sustained engagement with Saudi leaders, the UN special envoy and regional partners, to help shape a credible road map that reflects southern communities' aspirations.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): In his statement on 5 January, the Minister referred to the United Arab Emirates' call then for a ceasefire. What discussions have since taken place with the United Arab Emirates, and is that still its position?

Mr Falconer: We have been in regular dialogue with our allies in the United Arab Emirates, and I understand that its position remains to support a ceasefire. I know that it is taking part in extensive dialogue on these questions, not just with us but with some of its other Gulf partners.

Gaza and the West Bank: Humanitarian Situation

2. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [907361]

14. **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure the continued delivery of aid in Gaza and the west bank. [907373]

20. **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [907380]

24. **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help ensure the continued delivery of aid in Gaza and the west bank. [907384]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is still dire, because of the winter conditions and a lack of urgently needed aid. Last month we were pleased to learn that UK-funded tents had entered Gaza to provide critical shelter for 12,000 people, and the Government are matching £3 million of donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee's middle east humanitarian appeal, but far more still needs to be done. We still need much greater access through crossings and the lifting of barriers to aid in order to deal with this humanitarian crisis.

Anna Dixon: We have all witnessed the unfolding catastrophic humanitarian disaster in Gaza, exacerbated by the collapse of the Gazan health system and the suspension of aid delivery. I am therefore shocked that the Israeli Government plan to prohibit some 37 international non-governmental organisations from operating in Gaza and the west bank, including Médecins Sans Frontières, ActionAid and the Norwegian Refugee Council. What steps have the UK Government taken to prevent this, and what more do they intend to do?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend about how incredibly damaging the deregistration of vital international NGOs is. They do incredible humanitarian work, which includes providing, through thousands of staff, lifesaving services worth hundreds of millions of pounds in Gaza. They simply cannot be removed or replaced, and it is extremely destructive to prevent them from operating. That is why I led a joint statement, on behalf of 10 countries, urging the Israeli Government to allow these essential international NGOs to operate in a sustained and predictable way, and we will pursue this as part of phase 2 of the peace process.

Peter Prinsley: Last year, my surgical colleague Mr Rahbour, of West Suffolk hospital, spent a month at the Nasser hospital in Gaza. When I met him last week, he gave a graphic description of the situation in and around the hospital. He is one of the brave

NHS workers of whom we can all be intensely proud. As we have said, access to humanitarian aid is very difficult, and many internationally recognised agencies have lately been banned—as, indeed, I am myself banned. What further representation can we make to resolve this? Surely it is in the interests of all people in Israel and in Palestine for this fragile peace to be preserved.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need to maintain the fragile ceasefire and to make progress towards peace and, ultimately, the two-state solution that is in the interests of the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. I, too, have heard horrendous stories about medical conditions from some of the brave doctors who were operating there, before the ceasefire, in the most difficult and dangerous of conditions. We are very clear that the humanitarian support that still needs to be surged must include medical supplies and healthcare support. Not only is this an issue that we raise continually with the Israeli Government; we are also raising it as part of phase 2 of the peace process.

Andy McDonald: I thank the Foreign Secretary for her answer. Yesterday the Prime Minister made a welcome statement on the importance of sovereignty and the international rules-based order, yet within the state of Palestine, 37 international NGOs will no longer be allowed to deliver humanitarian aid, on the say-so of Israel. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK Government understand and accept that continued humanitarian access into Palestine must be determined by the Palestinians, and that it cannot be undermined either by Israel or by the board of peace? Can she say what concrete actions the Government intend to take to counter Israeli obstructions and give proper effect to the sovereignty of the state of Palestine?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend about the destructive impact of deregistering NGOs. Part of the 20-point plan that President Trump set out, which Israel and all countries signed up to, was about substantially increasing humanitarian aid and support in Gaza. Instead, the current situation takes us backwards. It is significant that the Palestinian National Committee for Gaza has now been set up. I have continually pressed, in all the international discussions, that the committee should be able to take responsibility for significantly increasing humanitarian aid.

Yasmin Qureshi: Even during the ceasefire, Israel is blocking humanitarian aid into Gaza while pushing ahead with illegal settlements in the E1 area, which the UK Government have described as a

"flagrant breach of international law".

Does the Foreign Secretary accept that, by these actions, Israel is essentially trying to bury the idea of a state of Palestine? Apart from good words, what concrete action are we going to take to prevent that from happening?

Yvette Cooper: As my hon. Friend knows, the UK took the historic decision to recognise the state of Palestine in the autumn. We are clear that ensuring there is a two-state solution also means tackling illegal settlement expansion and settler violence. Alongside 26 international partners, we have condemned the E1 settlement plan and the recent steps to further that plan. I urge Israel to listen to the weight of international opinion on this issue, because it needs to be part of delivering the 20-point plan and a just and lasting peace.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Secretary of State will well know that the terrorist group Hamas refuse to disarm—in fact, they have forced their brutal rule on the Palestinian people. Equally, aid trucks that are desperately needed in Gaza are looted by Hamas terrorists. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to make sure that the international aid that we all want to see given to the Palestinians is not looted and diverted to Hamas?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member raises two important issues. We agree that the decommissioning of Hamas weapons is a central and crucial part of the 20-point plan. That is why the three issues that we have continually prioritised are the establishment of the Palestinian National Committee, the increase in humanitarian aid and the establishment of the process for decommissioning Hamas weapons. We have put forward proposals based on our experience in Northern Ireland and our expertise, and I believe that we urgently need to make progress as part of phase 2.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): There are reports that this morning Israeli security forces arrived at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency compound in Sheikh Jarrah, in occupied East Jerusalem. Security guards were forced out of the premises, bulldozers subsequently entered the compound and began to demolish UNRWA buildings, and the demolitions are ongoing. If that is true, it is not only an unprecedented attack against UNRWA and its premises; it also constitutes a serious violation of international law, and of the privileges and immunities of the United Nations. What consequential action will the Foreign Secretary take if these reports are true?

Yvette Cooper: We had issues last month with Israeli authorities entering UNRWA's compound in East Jerusalem without prior authorisation. UN premises are inviolable under international law, so we have already raised this and condemned it. It is immensely important that everyone recognises the important role that UNRWA plays, and this year the UK has committed £27 million to help it scale up lifesaving aid, including food, water, shelter and medical care.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Pressure on the UK to join the expensive and dodgy-looking Gaza board of peace has been ramped up by President Trump's messaging overnight. Will the Government politely decline to join the Gaza board of peace while reviewing their position on Chagos, given the US intervention overnight?

Yvette Cooper: That was a slightly contorted question, but the right hon. Member will know that the board of peace proposal was originally in the 20-point Gaza plan. The proposals that have now been put forward are very different from what was previously expected for Gaza, so it is right that further international discussions are under way. All those details are being discussed, and we will see where that ends up. However, I think the critical issue is support for the Palestinian committee, because Gaza should be run by the people of Gaza—by

Palestinians—free from Hamas. The crucial thing now is that we need to support it and ensure that Palestinians have not just humanitarian support, but the decommissioning of weapons and support for their long-term future.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The irony, of course, is that we already have a board of peace, and it is called the UN, but President Trump is undermining it at every step. Five days ago, a group of 22 UN experts deemed the ban on international NGOs to be

"part of a systematic assault on humanitarian operations…and another step in the deliberate dismantling of Gaza's lifeline".

Twenty-one children have died of extreme cold in recent days, and 7,000 tents have been swept away due to the weather conditions. We need to do more directly, and if these NGOs cannot do it, what are the Government doing to get tents, shelter and heating into Gaza?

Yvette Cooper: Let us be clear that nothing can replace the UN or its charter. The UN is the bedrock of multilateral co-operation and international law. I met the Secretary-General this weekend, while marking its 80th anniversary, to reaffirm our support for the UN and its work. On the humanitarian issue, over 3,000 people have been affected by a new wave of heavy rains and strong winds across the Gaza strip over the last week, with huge concerns about hyperthermia and collapsing shelter structures. That is why I have also discussed with Tom Fletcher, of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, what more we can do to ensure that support gets into Gaza, which has to be a priority for phase 2 of the peace process.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): As my right hon. Friend has said, hundreds of thousands of displaced families in Gaza are living in torn tents and roofless homes, being exposed to the rain and freezing temperatures, with further storms due. What further steps will she take to persuade the current Israeli Government to allow in the materials necessary for more robust shelter, particularly—and immediately—for families with young children?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important matter. When we see the really flimsy shelters that families are in, despite the terrible flooding and the winter conditions, we know the impact this is having, including in contributing to disease and further displacement. So we are continuing to urge the Israeli Government to change their restrictions to allow better-quality provisions and construction materials into Gaza, and to make sure we meet those basic humanitarian needs. That commitment was made in the 20-point plan not just by Israel, but by all countries, and we need action to support that.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Given the utterly extraordinary news yesterday that Donald Trump has invited Putin and Netanyahu to sit on the board of peace, does the Foreign Secretary recognise that the board of peace is unfit to contribute to the task of peacebuilding? Additionally, it includes no Palestinians and almost no women. Does she recognise that it would be inappropriate for Britain, or indeed Brits, to participate in it, and what does she suggest as an alternative?

Yvette Cooper: The most important organisation or network for the future of Gaza is the Palestinian committee —the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza, made up of Palestinians. Gaza should be run by Palestinians. That is crucial, and that is what we should be supporting to take forward. On the wider question, Putin is not a man of peace and does not belong in any organisation with the word "peace" in the name.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The House needs the full facts regarding aid entering Gaza and why the Government are not more engaged with the Civil-Military Co-ordination Centre. What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to support the disarming of Hamas and secure the immediate release of the remaining hostage? Following White House announcements on the board of peace, including the involvement of Tony Blair, can she confirm what UK input there has been and whether any UK Ministers will be involved, and give a clear assurance that the UK would reject President Putin being on the board, given his illegal invasion of Ukraine and alliance with Iran?

Yvette Cooper: I have actually answered every single one of the right hon. Lady's points already, if she had listened. We have been one of the leading countries in driving forward proposals for the decommissioning of Hamas weapons. We are working with other countries on that and will continue to do so because we think it is a priority. On the humanitarian work, work has been done by the CMCC, but it goes nowhere near far enough. We are seeing deteriorating conditions in many areas because of the winter conditions, and the removal of non-governmental organisations simply goes backwards. On the board of peace, it is different from what was proposed, and that is why international discussions are under way, and we will see where they end up. But let us be clear that it is the Palestinian committee and the Palestinian people who need to lead the running of Gaza going forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The composition of Donald Trump's board of peace looks increasingly like a rogues' gallery, with President Putin now having been invited to join. Meanwhile, the Palestinians have been left out of that board entirely, and it is increasingly clear that this is not about peace at all. I have two questions for the Foreign Secretary, which she has not yet answered. Can she tell the House whether Government Ministers have spoken with Tony Blair about his role, and will she categorically condemn these current plans and call instead for the United Nations to lead peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in Gaza, with Palestinians at the heart of this?

Yvette Cooper: We strongly support the role of the United Nations. Many of these points were set out as part of a UN Security Council resolution, which had widespread support. We think it is important to have the underpinnings of the UN and international law more widely, and to maintain the international consensus that we need to move to the next phase. The proposals that have been put forward are different from what was described, and are not focused on Gaza. The focus now

for Gaza has to be on the Palestinian committee and on key practical issues such as the surging of humanitarian aid and the decommissioning of Hamas weapons. Our focus needs to be on the practical next steps, and we will work with everyone to ensure that happens.

Security of Greenland and the Arctic

3. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): What diplomatic steps she is taking to help Greenland strengthen its security. [907362]

7. **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): What diplomatic steps her Department is taking to support security in the Arctic region. [907366]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): As I set out in the House yesterday, we continue to support the people of Greenland and to make it clear that the future of Greenland is a matter for the Greenlanders and the Danes alone. We are working to increase the support for security across the Arctic region, which is why I visited Norway and Finland this week.

Graham Leadbitter: Yesterday, the Prime Minister attempted to justify the hesitant approach that is being taken to Greenland, the US and the EU as being in the national interest, yet there was nothing in the national interest about Brexit, a false-hope deal that has left us far away from our European friends, desperately clinging to a US Administration who do not care about our national interests. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the UK is nothing but a cork in the ocean, bobbing around at this moment of international crisis, neither here nor there—and all because of a disastrous, isolationist, self-sabotaging Brexit?

Yvette Cooper: The UK works with our NATO allies, some of whom are part of the EU and some of whom—like us, and like Norway, where some of our closest partnerships are—are not. This is about strengthening our Arctic security, because the Arctic is the gateway through which the Russian northern fleet can threaten the UK, Europe, the US and Canada. Arctic security is a transatlantic security issue.

Callum Anderson: I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement yesterday. I welcome the renewed recognition of the Arctic's strategic importance to Europe's collective security, and of the need for NATO to develop a more credible deterrence posture. Will she provide a further update to the House on how the Government are using their diplomatic influence in NATO to drive a more coherent, long-term strategy for Arctic security, rather than relying on individual national responses?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. We have proposed a stronger role for NATO on Arctic security. Just as NATO has a successful Baltic Sentry and an Eastern Sentry, we are arguing for an Arctic sentry that co-ordinates operations and intelligence for countries right across the Arctic, and also countries like the UK, which are heavily affected by Arctic security, even though we are not part of Arctic security. That is why we are substantially increasing our presence in northern Norway and working with Norway on new, groundbreaking frigates.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): With his threats against Greenland and, now, against her partners, including the UK, Donald Trump has driven a presidential motorcade through NATO and the entire system of post-war security. I am pleased that the Prime Minister yesterday made his objections to Trump clear, but words are not enough. We must show President Trump that his actions have consequences, and that we will act in concert with our allies, as we are much stronger when we stand together. Yesterday, the Prime Minister ruled out the idea of preparing retaliatory tariffs for use only in the event that the President carries out his threats on 1 February. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we should take no options off the table when dealing with a corrupt bully such as President Trump?

Yvette Cooper: The UK Prime Minister will always act in our national interests. That means pursuing Britain's security, prosperity and values. That is what he has done at every stage, and it is exactly why he was so firm with the President about our support for the sovereignty of Greenland. We are working continually with our international allies. We are co-operating closely with partners right across Europe to respond in a strong and firm way, in order to prevent a trade war that will cause damage to UK and US industry, and to build instead the collective partnership on security that is in all our interests.

Tackling Forced Labour Practices

4. **Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with international partners to help tackle forced labour practices. [907363]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): There is no place for forced labour in our global economy, especially when the victims are so often women, children and persecuted minority groups. We are working through a range of multilateral bodies, including the G7, the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to eradicate forced labour from supply chains. We are reviewing the effectiveness of our rules on responsible business conduct to ensure that the UK continues to set the global standard on the elimination of forced labour.

Mr Quigley: I thank the Minister for his response. However, the UK's Joint Committee on Human Rights has warned that without stronger action, we risk falling behind the EU and the US, and even becoming a dumping ground for goods produced with forced labour. Will the Government commit to introducing legislation that sends a clear and unequivocal message that the UK stands firmly against Uyghur forced labour, and will not allow such products into our market?

Chris Elmore: We are clear that no company in the UK should have forced labour in its supply chain. We are committed to promoting and protecting human rights, including in Xinjiang, and we continue to work with international partners to hold China to account

for its human rights violations. The Government's review of responsible business conduct is considering a range of policy options to tackle forced labour.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): As the Energy Secretary insists that we move as quickly as possible to renewables, may I ask the Minister what steps he has in place to ensure that the materials—90% of them are processed materials—used in renewables are made without slave labour and human rights abuses?

Chris Elmore: We of course support voluntary human rights due diligence by businesses, as recommended in the UN's "Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights". As I mentioned in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley), in the Government's review on responsible business conduct, those will be some of the options that we take forward.

Cyber-attacks: Global Response

5. **Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking with international partners to help improve the global response to cyber-attacks and ransomware. [907364]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): We work closely with our international partners to deter and disrupt those responsible for malicious cyber-activity. To date, 42 international partners have supported UK activity to expose cyber-threats, and 74 countries are members of the counter ransomware initiative, led by the UK. In addition, 27 counties have publicly endorsed the UK and France's Pall Mall code of practice, which aims to tackle the proliferation of cyber-intrusion tools.

Uma Kumaran: The Minister will remember that when the Russia-backed cyber-crime network Lockbit was smashed in 2024, it was the direct result of intensive collaboration between the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. They worked together to defend Europe from Russia's hybrid attacks, which seek to weaken our role in the world. Is that not a reminder that we are all safer, on both sides of the Atlantic, when we work together, and that we should never forget where the real threats to our national security come from?

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend's remarks. Indeed, they echo what we heard this morning from the Speaker of the US House of Representatives about working together as close allies and across NATO. It is good to welcome guests in Parliament today from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, too.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. As is evidenced by the 2024 Lockbit and 2025 Media Land sanctions packages, the UK works closely with key partners, and remains committed to using all available tools to defend against cyber-threats. Our co-ordination with Australia, the United States and other allies demonstrates to adversaries that we will not tolerate assaults on our public and private institutions and our democracies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive responses. On ransomware and what we are trying to do with technology, Northern Ireland leads the way on cyber-security, as does south-east England, but the technology is always advancing. The Minister has responsibility for ensuring that we are protected, but at the same time, we need to ensure that our technology moves forward, so that we can equal or outdo our enemies. Can the Minister give us an assurance that that will happen, and that Northern Ireland will be part of it?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member rightly extols the virtues and skills of the excellent workforce in Northern Ireland and across the UK on these issues. I have had the pleasure of meeting people from a number of cyber-security companies. We are doing all that we can to increase the skills chain, and to ensure that we stay steps ahead of our adversaries. We will not tolerate activity that hits consumers and individuals in the UK and risks our national security. We will work with others to defend this country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Iran is a cyber-menace that is committing digital warfare against democracies around the world and its own people. Most recently, it has cut its own citizens off from the internet to hide the scale of its atrocities. Do the Government have any plans to use their cyber-capabilities to take on Tehran in its moment of weakness, and how they will prevent Tehran from evading tariffs by using cryptocurrency?

Stephen Doughty: It was perhaps an unexpected elevation, but I welcome the shadow Minister to his new role, and thank him for his important question on a very serious matter: the threat from our adversaries. He is right to point out Iran, but there are many others who are attempting to damage our national security and hit consumers and individuals in the UK. He will understand that I will not go into operational details on any matter relating to our cyber-defences, but he can be assured that we keep the activities of our adversaries closely in mind, and we are doing all we can to defend this country against all threats, wherever they come from.

Chagos Islands: Marine Protection

6. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What assessment she has made of whether the Mauritian Government are able to effectively protect Chagos' marine environment. [907365]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Chagos archipelago and marine protected area is one of the world's most important marine environments, and as has rightly been recognised by Members across the House, both the UK and Mauritius are committed to its protection. I can confirm that no commercial fishing will be allowed, but low levels of artisanal fishing will be permitted for the sustenance of Chagossian communities, which is compatible with nature conservation. We are working closely with Mauritius to ensure that adequate patrolling capabilities will be maintained after the marine protected area enters into force.

Blake Stephenson: I thank the Minister for his response. A recent Yale University report ranked Mauritius last out of 131 states for stringency in relation to its marine protected areas, and a woeful 173th out of 180 for the

protection of biodiversity. Mauritius has even admitted that it does not have the capacity to patrol the area, and that it is open to commercial fishing. I recognise the response that the Minister gave, but Britain has kept the Chagos marine environment pristine for 50 years. Why do the Government not want to secure that legacy in law?

Stephen Doughty: With the greatest of respect, because I know that the hon. Gentleman raises the issue with sincerity, I was just very clear. It was on 3 November that Mauritius announced the creation of the Chagos archipelago marine protected area, and it has confirmed that no commercial fishing will be allowed in any part of the MPA. We are working very closely with Mauritius on patrolling and protecting the environment. These are important issues, and I assure him that we are absolutely seized of them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Prime Minister said that Five Eyes partners, including the United States, backed the Chagos surrender Bill, but today the American President has publicly opposed it, rightly citing the very concerns that we Conservative Members have raised about the malign influence of China and Russia, and their benefiting directly from the surrender of the Chagos islands. Is President Trump right? Given that Labour's Chagos surrender Bill will cost £35 billion, compromise our national security and betray the rights of the Chagossian community, when will the Government finally see sense and scrap this shameful treaty?

Stephen Doughty: Again, the right hon. Lady has made wild claims about costs. What she says is simply not the case. We have been absolutely clear that the UK will never compromise our national security. As we have made clear repeatedly, the agreement that we have struck is vital to protecting our national security and that of our allies, and to guaranteeing the long-term future of a base that is crucial for the UK and the United States. Our deal secures the operation of the joint US-UK base on Diego Garcia for generations. It has backing from across the Five Eyes, as well as from other international partners. I remind the right hon. Lady that, in May, the US Secretary of State said,

> "The Trump Administration determined that this agreement secures the long-term, stable, and effective operation of the joint US-UK military facility at Diego Garcia."

We will of course have discussions with the US Administration in coming days to remind them of the strength of this deal, and of how it secures the base, and I am surprised that the right hon. Lady has made these comments in the context of difficult conversations about Greenland. She joins us in standing for its sovereignty and right to self-determination, so I urge her to be a little more reflective in her comments.

UK Citizens Detained Abroad

8. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support UK citizens arbitrarily detained abroad. [907367]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): One of the Foreign Office's most serious and important duties is standing up for British nationals who have been wrongly detained overseas, and supporting the families here at home who are working desperately for their release. We are committed to strengthening our efforts, including through the appointment of a dedicated envoy for complex detention cases. We expect to confirm that appointment in the near future.

Douglas McAllister: Exactly 3,000 days ago, my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal was imprisoned in India, and 3,000 days later, he remains arbitrarily detained. He faces the death penalty on trumped-up charges, having been brutally tortured to make a confession. While in opposition, our Prime Minister rightly recognised my constituent's detention as arbitrary. We need to do more than just raise his case with Indian counterparts. My constituent was acquitted in March last year of all charges, but now faces essentially eight duplicate cases based on the same evidence. Does the Foreign Secretary or the Minister agree that this is clearly double jeopardy, as recognised under Indian, international and UK law, and will the Government make that clear to Indian counterparts?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his persistence, and for the force of his advocacy for his constituents. Despite progress in Mr Johal's legal proceedings, eight of the cases against him remain outstanding, as my hon. Friend said. We continue to raise concerns about Mr Johal's prolonged detention with the Government of India at every appropriate opportunity, and to emphasise the need for a prompt, full and just resolution of Mr Johal's cases in India's independent legal system.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Sadly, Jagtar Singh Johal's case is not the only instance in the world of human rights violations against British citizens, and one of our biggest allies has just said that peace is no longer a priority for it. Given that the world is such a dangerous place, and given the threat to the human rights of British citizens abroad, does the Minister agree that the time has come to make consular assistance a legal right for British citizens across the globe?

Mr Falconer: We are committed to introducing a right to consular assistance. We will return to this House with more detail about what form that will take.

Palestine: International Humanitarian Law

9. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What diplomatic steps she is taking to help ensure that international humanitarian law is upheld in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [907368]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): We have consistently called on all parties in Palestine to comply with their international humanitarian law obligations. Where this Government have had concerns about Israel's commitment to those obligations, we have taken decisive action. That has included stopping exports to the Israel Defence Forces that might be used in Gaza, suspending negotiations with Israel on a new free trade agreement, and last month voting in favour of the UN resolution that welcomed the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on Israel's obligation to allow lifesaving humanitarian assistance to reach Palestinian civilians.

Ian Lavery: In July 2024, the ICJ ruled that the Israeli occupation and settlements were illegal, and must be ended and dismantled. Then, in September 2024, the UN General Assembly gave Israel 12 months to bring to an end its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories—a deadline that has now lapsed by more than four months. Why, after a year and a half, have the Government still not published their response to the ICJ advisory opinion? Is there something that we do not know, but perhaps should?

Mr Falconer: In that period, the UK has made a range of significant determinations in relation to our policy in the middle east. Of course, we continue to consider the Court's advisory opinion on Israel's occupation carefully. There is lots in that advisory opinion with which we agree, and which is, indeed, already Government policy. We agree that settlements are illegal, and we have already taken strong action against them. Since this Government came into office, we have introduced three packages of sanctions related to violence against communities in the west bank, and we continue to keep these matters under review.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Since the recent ceasefire came into effect, over 450 Palestinians have been killed by Israel. UNICEF reports that over 100 Palestinian children have been killed in Gaza since 10 October. Israeli airstrikes are ongoing, and the mental and physical torture and violence continue unabated. Will the Minister tell the children still alive in Gaza what action the UK Government will take to force Israel to comply with international law and allow essential humanitarian aid into Gaza, and to make the ceasefire a real one and stop the killing?

Mr Falconer: I know how deeply so many of our constituents and, indeed, Members of this House feel about these issues, and how often they raise them. We will continue to take action in the way that the Foreign Secretary set out this morning. It is vital that the ceasefire holds, and that we make progress in the three areas set out already, and that is the priority for Ministers.

Official Development Assistance

10. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on planned levels of spending on official development assistance. [907369]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): We are committed to international development, but we must modernise our approach to reflect the world we live in and the threats that our country faces, while maintaining economic stability at home. We are committed to meeting the overseas development aid budgets that have been set out, but with less money, we must focus on having greater impact. Every pound must deliver for the UK taxpayer and the people we support. We will sharpen our focus on humanitarian issues, health, climate and nature, and that will be underpinned by a focus on economic development.

Olly Glover: The United States Government have cut funding for research and development on lifesaving health solutions that help the world's poorest people. In that context, the UK has the opportunity to embrace world-leading scientists who are no longer welcome elsewhere. Will the Government seize the opportunity to both continue progress on life expectancy in the global south and boost the UK's economy by increasing their spending on global health research and development?

Chris Elmore: I cannot comment on the US's decision; it is a matter for its Administration. As I have mentioned, one of the focuses of our ODA support will be on health. We have announced to the House additional funding for tackling life-limiting conditions, particularly on the continent of Africa, so the lifesaving work around health carries on.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The conflict in Sudan is affecting millions of people, including thousands of women affected by horrific sexual violence. I have been hearing from aid workers on the ground who are working with those women. Will the Minister assure the House that, despite aid budget cuts, support for the women victims of sexual violence in the conflict in Sudan will not be cut?

Chris Elmore: I know what a hugely important issue this is to all Members across the House. I can confirm that additional funding has been allocated in relation to the Sudan conflict. We are, of course, calling for the violence to end, particularly the violence that is targeted at women and girls. I assure my hon. Friend that part of this continuing funding is for trying to tackle the extreme levels of sexual violence that women are experiencing in Sudan.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): As the Minister will know, part of the official development assistance budget goes to investment in businesses creating employment in the poorest parts of the world, such as British International Investment, which is now undoubtedly the best development finance institution in the world. Will the Minister continue to ensure that BII receives injections of capital so that it can go on doing that brilliant work and earning a decent return for the British taxpayer?

Chris Elmore: I am pleased to say that the international development Minister in the other place, Baroness Chapman, is due to meet the group imminently. We will continue that work, including through my conversations with nations in the ODA context, on how we provide more support for business as one of the changes to ODA moving forward.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I hate to disagree with the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell), who I respect greatly, but in an era when we have less money I wonder whether we should focus on reaching the poorest people the most. There are other models, including the International Finance Facility for Education and the International Finance Facility for Immunisation, that offer ways to leverage much more money. By putting in a small amount, we can leverage up to four times more. Will Ministers, including a Treasury Minister, meet me to discuss such proposals and consider innovative forms of development finance in an era of less ODA?

Chris Elmore: I am, of course, more than happy to meet my hon. Friend, as diaries allow.

Support for Ukraine

11. **Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [907370]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): The UK continues to support the Ukrainian people in the face of unrelenting Russian aggression, which includes the targeting of Ukraine's energy infrastructure and civilians. On Friday, we were proud to mark the anniversary of the 100-year partnership that we agreed with Ukraine last year, and we will continue to provide military and economic support, as well as support for Ukraine's energy security.

Kirith Entwistle: The Bolton branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain is situated in my constituency and helps families to settle and keep community ties strong. As the UK marks the first anniversary of the UK-Ukraine 100-year partnership, what more is the Foreign Secretary doing, working across Government, to ensure that Ukrainians in the UK are provided with the support they need to rebuild their lives?

Yvette Cooper: The 100-year partnership is about people-to-people links and the long-term connections between the UK and Ukraine.

If I can just take a personal moment on this, Mr Speaker, I can report that one of the teenagers who came to stay with us in Castleford at the very beginning of the Ukraine war, and who has since returned to Kyiv, has continued her training to be an international-standard ballroom dancer and is back in the UK with her partner this week in the run-up to an international competition. I wish them both the very best.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sure the entire House endorses what the Foreign Secretary has just said.

In a week when the Government are sadly letting down Hongkongers in London, Chagossians in exile and Northern Ireland veterans in retirement, can we absolutely rely upon continued support for Ukraine's gallant resistance to atrocious Russian imperialism?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member should know better than to ask a question like that. As he knows, the UK has been continually strong in our support for Ukraine, for the people of Ukraine and for Ukraine's continued military resistance. For too long, Russia has underestimated not only the people of Ukraine but Ukraine's friends. That is why the UK, through the coalition of the willing, has been leading support for Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The Foreign Secretary will have heard President Zelensky's warnings last week about the supply of air defence missiles—we must heed them. Will the Government make more weapons available, scale up production immediately or broker new military aid packages with our allies to ensure a constant supply of missiles?

Yvette Cooper: The UK is working very closely with our partners, through NATO and also more broadly, to ensure that Ukraine has the military support it needs, including weapons and equipment, and support for its energy infrastructure and intelligence gathering, where the UK plays an important role. We have set forward commitments alongside the French Government, and have that forward lean on the ability to support Ukraine if a peace agreement is reached backed by security guarantees. The UK is very much leading the military and wider support for Ukraine.

Topical Questions

T1. [907385] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): In a few weeks' time, we will reach the fourth anniversary of the Ukraine war. Extreme efforts have been made over recent months to pursue a just and lasting peace, but still we have seen no sign that Russia is willing to make peace. In the early hours of today, Russia attacked Ukraine with 34 missiles and 339 drones. That follows four previous nights in which Russia fired 537 drones at Ukrainian cities, largely targeting energy infrastructure. Ukraine's energy system is experiencing its most acute crisis of the war, and Kyiv residents are currently receiving three hours of power, followed by 10-hour outages. On 16 January, as we marked the first anniversary of the 100-year partnership, I announced a further £20 million of UK support for vital energy repairs. Our commitment to supporting Ukraine is unwavering.

Dan Carden: I am grateful for that update. The brutal Iranian regime is dying and a new Iran is being born. We can assist that process, in the Iranian people's interests and ours, by banning the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. If the Foreign Secretary requires a new legislative instrument for a proscription mechanism for state and state-linked bodies, will she bring that to the House? Will the Foreign Office prepare for the day after, convening Opposition parties to cohere them and mobilise expertise to decide on a future democratic—

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on—the hon. Member has to help me to get others in.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will know that as Home Secretary I commissioned a review of the legislation which recommended changes, because existing legislation is drawn up around terrorism, and we need to be able to deal with state-backed threats. I assure him that both I and the Home Secretary take the threats from Iran extremely seriously.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Government have just given planning permission to the new Chinese super-hub embassy—the document is 240 pages; there it is for us to read—while Jimmy Lai, a British national, continues to be imprisoned in appalling conditions on bogus political charges under the disgraceful Hong Kong national security law. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is unacceptable for China to be rewarded with this spy hub in the heart of London while Jimmy languishes in prison?

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Foreign Secretary will know that we have made the strongest of criticisms of the decision on Jimmy Lai. We continue to pursue that issue with the Chinese Government and to stress the urgent need for him to be released immediately on humanitarian grounds. She has raised the issue of the independent planning decision, and she will know the independent planning processes that need to be gone through. I understand that the Security Minister will be making a statement to the House on this topic shortly. All I would point out to her is that diplomatic consent was given by her hero Boris Johnson. She had many years as Home Secretary to pursue any concerns she had.

Priti Patel: In the light of the right hon. Lady's remarks and the fact that Jimmy Lai's sentencing is expected soon, does she agree that when the Prime Minister goes to kowtow to Beijing and comes back with no movement on Jimmy Lai's release, that trip should be regarded as a failure of British diplomacy?

Yvette Cooper: We believe that it is exactly because we have deep concerns about the issues around Jimmy Lai and the need for his urgent humanitarian release, but also because of wider security issues, that we should engage with the Chinese Government. Refusing to engage with the Chinese Government, when we have such serious issues and concerns, would be irresponsible.

T3. [907387] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): I recently visited the Lodge community centre in West Bromwich to meet five of the 25 young people who had arrived in the UK from Gaza to receive specialist medical attention—they were with their families at a fun day put on by the Yemeni Community Association. I spoke with them about their community in Gaza and their journey here to the UK. Can the Minister tell the House what learning the Department has taken from the programme so far, in particular about the support required by the young people and their families while they are in the UK, and whether it is the intention to expand the project further?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): As the House will be aware, we have supported a number of sick and injured children to leave Gaza. I am very proud of our work in this area. We work closely across Government, including with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and with local authorities, to ensure that children and families arriving in the UK receive the help and support they need. In relation to future plans, I am sure I will return to the House in due course.

T2. [907386] **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): President Trump's new version of the board of peace will apparently cost $1 billion to join, Trump will chair it for life and Putin will be invited to join and offer his views on peace making. I understand that the Foreign Secretary is still having conversations about it, but has she managed to identify a single good reason for the UK to join?

Mr Falconer: As the Foreign Secretary set out earlier, the board of peace was part of the 20-point plan, which we welcomed, and there was a UN Security Council resolution, which also enshrines the progress made in the talks. Of course we want to see the ceasefire hold in Gaza. We are fully engaged with our American and other counterparts on these questions, but as the Foreign Secretary has set out already, we are discussing the way ahead with our allies.

T4. [907388] **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Settler violence and expansion in the occupied west bank is a daily threat to Palestinian communities. In the face of persistent violence, entire villages have been forcibly displaced. This is ethnic cleansing, enabled by the Israeli state. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that a ban on trade with Israeli settlements would show Israel that we are serious in opposing this disgraceful activity?

Yvette Cooper: We are deeply concerned about the escalating settler attacks and the fact that they have reached new heights, with more attacks last year than any year since the United Nations began recording such incidents. We need the Government of Israel to abide by their obligations around settlements and settler violence, but we also need to ensure that we pursue this as part of the broader peace plan process—the 20-point plan process—to build the greatest possible co-ordination around delivering not just peace for Gaza, but a two-state solution.

T5. [907389] **Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Reflecting on the balance of forces in Europe, both allied and Russian, will the Foreign Secretary articulate the risk that she thinks the UK is taking when it has such a small military and is committing several thousand troops, maybe tens of thousands, to Ukraine through the coalition of the willing?

Yvette Cooper: This Government are responsible for the biggest increase in defence investment since the cold war, because we recognise the importance of defending our national security. I would also say to the hon. Member that Ukraine's security is our security. The threat from Russia affects us all.

T7. [907391] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): It will be impossible to get the necessary aid into Gaza until the Rafah crossing is fully open. Will the Minister update us on progress in trying to persuade the Netanyahu Government to do the right thing and open the Rafah crossing?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his continued advocacy on these issues. The 20-point plan clearly outlined the need to open the Rafah crossing, and indeed other crossings. There have been discussions between various partners, but we continue to press the Israelis to open all the crossings now.

T6. [907390] **Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): An opinion poll in the *Sunday Herald* at the weekend showed that three quarters of Scots would vote to join the European Union. They get that leaving the EU was a disaster a decade ago, and it is even more of a disaster given the international situation now, so why do this Government continue to pursue yesterday's policies, backed up by yesterday's men and women?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): With the greatest respect, the hon. Member knows that this Government have strengthened our relationships with the EU: we have a security and defence partnership; we are securing a sanitary and phytosanitary deal; and we are rejoining Erasmus+. Those are all things that will make a tangible difference for people in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and we are very proud of them.

T8. [907392] **Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): In her interview two weeks ago in *The Sunday Times*, the Foreign Secretary warned that the only person who benefits when NATO is divided is Vladimir Putin. That warning looks even more relevant today, so may I ask her once again to remind her colleagues across the Atlantic that this is the time to come together as an alliance and remember who our true enemies are?

Yvette Cooper: I gather that that sentiment was also expressed by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, who has been with us in Parliament over the last few days. I think there are many people on both sides of the Atlantic, across Europe and north America, who recognise the vital importance of our NATO alliance to keeping all of us safe.

T9. [907393] **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): My constituent Pelin Omar has asked me about the ceasefire that was announced on Sunday between the Syrian Government and the Syrian Democratic Forces, which has already unravelled, with fighting resuming in less than 24 hours. What is the Foreign Secretary doing to promote humanitarian access, international monitoring and a long-term reconciliation between the Kurdish people in Aleppo and northern Syria and the Syrian Government? Do the Government support more devolved government as a solution to bring about lasting peace for the Kurdish people?

Mr Falconer: Many across the House will be aware of the fast-moving situation in north-east Syria, which is of concern to the British Government. We are calling for de-escalation, and we want a halt to the advance into the north-east. We continue to focus on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Over 16.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, and we are delivering up to £104 million of assistance this year.

T10. [907394] **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): What action are the UK Government taking to support Tamils in seeking justice for past and current injustices?

Mr Falconer: The UK is active in seeking justice and accountability for Sri Lanka's Tamil community. Indeed, we lead in the UN Human Rights Council on the resolution on Sri Lanka. Last year, we sanctioned Sri Lankans for human rights violations in the civil war, and we have made clear to the Sri Lankan Government the importance of improved human rights for all in Sri Lanka, as well as reconciliation. Let me take the opportunity to wish the Tamil community a happy Thai Pongal.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Despite the Minister's assertion that the Government are holding the Israeli Government to account, I would like to remind them that a tender has just been issued by the Israeli Government for a further illegal construction of more than 3,000 homes in the E1 project in the west bank, which will completely cut the west bank in half. Will the Government now comply with the ICJ's opinion that third states like ours have a duty to bring Israel's illegal occupation to an end by imposing sanctions on Israeli Ministers in their professional capacity and to prohibit UK companies from involvement with illegal settlements?

Mr Falconer: The Foreign Secretary and I have set out the position in relation to settlements over the course of this session, but I want to be clear: we have been the strongest that we can in condemning the increase in both violence by settlers and settlements themselves. I have from this Dispatch Box announced sanctions on Israeli Ministers, including Mr Smotrich and Mr Ben-Gvir.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I proudly declare that I will be visiting the Falkland Islands as a guest of their Government next month. What can the UK Government do to alleviate EU tariffs of between 6% and 18% on their fishing exports, so that the Falklands Government have more money to spend on health, education and their treasured environment?

Mr Falconer: We remain strong defenders of the Falkland Islands as part of our global great British family. I was pleased to speak with the new Legislative Assembly just the other day. It was, of course, the Brexit deal that the previous Government negotiated that left the Falklands out when it comes to tariffs, but we continue to work closely with them on a range of trade and tariff issues and have done so successfully in relation to the United States.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Israeli occupation of the west bank has resulted in almost 1,000 deaths over the past year and a half. We have seen the loss of villages, the loss of life and the continued enabling of settler violence against ordinary Palestinian people in their villages, and this morning there are reports that the Israel Defence Forces are now demolishing the United Nations Relief and Works Agency headquarters in Jerusalem. When are the British Government going to do something serious, with sanctions against Israel for its continued illegal occupation of the west bank?

Mr Falconer: I answered the substance of the right hon. Gentleman's question when I replied to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam). We are aware of the reports in relation to the UNRWA headquarters in east Jerusalem and, as the Foreign Secretary has set out already, we are taking them very seriously indeed.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Over 900 doctors have been killed by the Iranian regime since 1979. A leading medical union warns that Iran's state health system is near collapse and medicines are increasingly scarce, leaving children vulnerable for lack of basic care. Does my right hon. Friend agree that urgent international action is needed to hold the regime to account, particularly for the devastating impact on paediatric care?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the deep humanitarian concerns arising from the lack of adequate healthcare in Iran. Her point comes after what we have seen in recent weeks: the most brutal of killings by the Iranian regime and the deep concern about the safety of protesters. I can report to the House that we have secured a special session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, which will take place on 23 January and will provide an opportunity to raise exactly these issues.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): When President Trump was frustrated with President Zelensky last year, he withdrew intelligence sharing with Ukraine for a short period. Will the Foreign Secretary, who oversees GCHQ and MI6, assure the House and my constituents that should such a threat that intelligence sharing with the United Kingdom be withdrawn, even for a temporary period, develop from the White House at some point, she and her counterparts will remind the US President that the Five Eyes partnership also keeps Americans safe every single day of the week?

Yvette Cooper: I first had visits to Washington about the strength of the Five Eyes partnership, including meetings with the CIA and others, more than 25 years ago. Our Five Eyes partnership runs back many generations; it is deep and important, and it continues to take the threat from Russia in Ukraine incredibly seriously.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): With two out of three FCDO-funded programmes dedicated to disability inclusion coming to an end this year, what targets will the Government set to ensure that their remaining programming will prioritise and can be accessed by disabled people, 80% of whom live in the global south? Will the Minister offer some assurances that there will be sufficient capacity within the FCDO to support disabled people across the globe?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): The UK has long promoted global disability rights through our global programme to support disability inclusion in health, education and employment, plus access to innovative assistive technologies. In addition to our work to mainstream disability inclusion across the FCDO's priorities, the UK is co-chair of the Global Action on Disability Network that strengthens international co-ordination on disability rights and accelerates that progress, including in the global south.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Iranian regime is killing protesters in their thousands, and the communication blackout is enabling abuses to happen away from public view. The Minister said yesterday:

"They must restore internet access."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 48.]

What are the Government doing with partners, so that we can hear the voices of those freedom fighters?

Mr Falconer: As I said to the House yesterday, we treat the internet blackout in Iran as a breach of the human rights of the Iranian people. We continue to work on this issue with our partners for the reasons that my ministerial colleagues have set out, but I will not give further commentary on operational business.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Allies do not threaten each other, either militarily or economically, so the whole House will be troubled by comments made by the Trump Administration in the past couple of days. What is the Foreign Secretary doing to communicate with our NATO allies and the Trump Administration how unacceptable those comments are, and what are we doing to ensure the integrity of our NATO alliance?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that the Prime Minister has spoken to the President and I have spoken to Secretary of State Rubio. As I set out in my statement yesterday, tariff threats are no way to treat allies. It is also important now that we strengthen our international co-operation on issues like Arctic security, while respecting sovereignty and collective security, and that means putting the sovereignty of Greenland at its heart.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Israel is the only country in the world that automatically and systematically prosecutes children in military courts, trying between 500 and 700 Palestinian children in that way each year. According to Save the Children, those children are at serious risk of contagious disease, hunger and abuse. Can the Minister reassure me that the Government are doing all that they can to put pressure on the Israeli Government to end this practice?

Mr Falconer: We are deeply concerned about the detention of Palestinian children by the Israeli military and by the allegations that my hon. Friend refers to. The UK calls for all reports to be fully investigated. The arrest and detention of children must follow due process, in line with international juvenile justice standards, and we call on all parties to the conflict to grant the International Committee of the Red Cross immediate and unfettered access.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): Will the Foreign Secretary explain why, if she rightly supports the self-determination of the Greenlandic people as part of the Kingdom of Denmark, she does not support the self-determination of the Chagossian people to remain a British overseas territory?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member likes to call himself a patriot. He has just joined the party that is the weakest on Russia—a country that threatens our country—and led by a leader who has continued to question the role of Russia in beginning the Ukraine war, the role of NATO and even in the Salisbury killings. He should look a little bit inwards before he tries to make points in here.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Given the scale of the planned FCDO budget reductions and significant staffing cuts, what assessment has been made of which policy areas will be deprioritised as a result of those measures? What redundancy mitigation steps are being taken in line with the 2016 civil service protocols and how those changes are expected to impact both UK personnel serving overseas and country-based staff?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will know that we have been doing extensive work to ensure that the Foreign Office is focused on the key priorities and on delivering for the national interest. She will also know that there was a quite significant expansion in the staffing, including the UK-based staffing, of the Foreign Office over the previous five years. It is right that we ensure the Foreign Office is most focused on the national security issues and prosperity issues as well as many of the issues that she and her Committee are concerned about around international development. We will continue to provide information to her Committee on this matter.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): A 14-year-old child, the son of my constituent Mr Greaves, has been detained by the French state for 440 days. He is a British citizen with no dual nationality. He has received no schooling and, most concerning of all, has not received even a single welfare visit by the British consulate, despite having been chased many times. Will the Foreign Secretary intervene personally in this case and meet with me to be able to secure a welfare visit?

Stephen Doughty: I am happy to meet with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the case.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, Uganda held elections. There were wide-ranging accounts of people being prevented from going to polling stations and of ballot stuffing. In one polling station, more votes were cast than there were electors. There is now widespread violence, and the son of the so-called President of Uganda has threatened to murder the leader of the opposition, Bobi Wine, who lost the election. What can the Foreign Secretary tell me about the veracity of the elections? What is she doing to protect British citizens in Uganda and to ensure the safety of members of the National Unity Platform?

Chris Elmore: We have consistently advocated for peaceful and credible elections, and we encourage any disputes to be addressed through peaceful and legal means. In relation to the opposition leader, we have engaged across the political spectrum to advocate for peaceful elections, including for the opposition candidates to be able to campaign freely and safely, and we continue to do so, including through our high commission.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): In answer to an earlier question, the Foreign Secretary said that the future of Greenland should be determined by Greenlanders and Danes, yet Members across this House are just finding out that any opportunity to give Chagossians a referendum has been stripped from this afternoon's discussions on the Chagos Bill. Why does the Foreign Secretary think that the Chagossians do not deserve the same rights that she considers to be so fundamental to Greenlanders?

Stephen Doughty: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are going to be discussing those issues this afternoon; we will have ample time to discuss the amendments down for consideration. He also knows that we have engaged extensively with Chagossian communities.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the International Criminal Court's deputy chief prosector said that atrocities in Sudan would be repeated from town to town unless impunity for belligerents ended. What measures have the UK Government been taking to make it clear to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement North, as well as to the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese armed forces, that they must protect civilians and let aid through?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue, because the continuing humanitarian crisis and horrendous violence in Sudan are deeply troubling, and I worry that they are not getting sufficient international attention. This weekend, I discussed extensively with the UN Secretary-General what further action can be taken and what concerted pressure can be put on any country that has any influence on the warring parties. We urgently need a ceasefire, but we also need an end to the horrendous and brutal violence, particularly the sexual violence towards women.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Through his new folly over Greenland, President Trump is increasingly bringing the UK closer to Europe. At Denmark's request, would the UK allow European forces to use the UK's command infrastructure for operations in and around Greenland?

Stephen Doughty: As the hon. Lady knows, we already work very closely with Denmark in NATO. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary has made clear our desire for an Arctic sentry programme, and we work with other partners in the High North through the joint expeditionary force, so we already work very closely together.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Last week, I met a mother from my constituency who told me a terrible story. In October, her daughters were taken by their father, supposedly for a day out at the fair, but they never came home. It seems he has abducted them and taken them out of the country, either to Afghanistan or to Pakistan. Can the Minister set out what the Government can do about these kinds of abductions, and will he meet me to discuss how we get these little girls home?

Mr Falconer: Of course I will.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): According to Open Doors' world watch list, which was released last week, Yemen is now the third most dangerous country in the world to be a Christian. Since January, over 50 Yemeni Christians have been arrested and imprisoned, facing intimidation, interrogation and the risk of torture. Will the Minister explain why freedom of religion and belief has not been made a clear prerequisite for continued UK aid, with robust monitoring on the ground?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful for an opportunity to comment on aid into Yemen. As I am sure the hon. Lady knows, there are significant restrictions on aid into the north of Yemen, where the Houthis are in control. It is rather easier to get aid into the south of Yemen, but given the events referred to earlier, doing so remains complex. We continue to prioritise freedom of religious belief, including through our excellent envoy, who is a Member of this House. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss these issues further.

Mobile Phones and Social Media: Use by Children

12.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): I would like to make a statement on the next steps this Government will take to keep children safe online and give them the childhood they deserve.

Last week, I said in this House that artificial intelligence and technology have huge potential to create jobs and growth, to diagnose and treat disease, to transform our public services, and so much more besides. However, this Government know that we will only seize this potential if the benefits of technology are felt by all, not just a few at the top, and above all, if people know that they and their children are safe online. We have already made significant progress on this crucial issue; the Online Safety Act 2023 introduced one of the most robust systems globally, with groundbreaking steps to tackle illegal content and activity and to protect children from harmful and age-inappropriate content. We have long known, though, that there is more to do.

My first act as Secretary of State was to make online content that promotes self-harm and suicide a priority offence, so that platforms must take proactive steps to stop users seeing this material in the first place, and swiftly to take it down if it appears. We have also made intimate image abuse and cyber-flashing priority offences. We have introduced an offence in the Crime and Policing Bill to criminalise artificial intelligence models that have been optimised to create child sexual abuse material.

Eight days ago, in response to the abhorrent and illegal spreading of sexualised deepfake images of women and children without their consent by Grok, I said that we would uphold British values and British laws and that we would fast-track legislation, making it an offence to create non-consensual intimate images. I also said that I would make that a priority offence under the Online Safety Act 2023. Since then, I am pleased to say that X has announced it will ban the generation of intimate images of real people. That will be carefully monitored, but I and the Government have welcomed the announcement.

The story does not end there, though. I know that up and down the country, parents are grappling with how much screen time their children should have, when they should give them a phone, what on earth they are seeing online, and the impact all that is having. Yesterday, I met bereaved families who have suffered the most unimaginable tragedy as a result of what their children have experienced online. It was one of the most devastating discussions I have ever taken part in, and I pay tribute to their courage and dignity.

I know that many parents are deeply worried about a whole range of other impacts on their children, such as the consequences for their mental health, their concentration and sleep, their sense of self-esteem, and their ability to learn and to explore the online world without fear. We are determined to help parents, children and young people to deal with these issues with a lasting solution that gives children the childhood they deserve, enhances their wellbeing and prepares them for the future.

Last year, the Government said in response to the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill—a private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who is now the Minister for Children and Families—that there would have to be further action on these issues. Since I was appointed to this role, I have been urgently considering this matter, because keeping children safe online is a top priority for the Government and for me personally.

Today I can tell the House that we will bring forward a swift three-month consultation on further measures to keep children safe online. That will include the option of banning social media for children under 16 and raising the digital age of consent, to stop companies using children's data without their or their parents' consent. The consultation will include a range of other options, too, such as: whether there should be curfews overnight or breaks to stop excessive use or doomscrolling; how we ensure more rigorous enforcement of existing laws around age verification; and action to address concerns about the use of virtual private networks to get around important protections.

We will consult parents, the organisations representing children and bereaved parents, technology companies and, crucially, children and young people themselves, because their views and voices must be heard. We will look closely at the experience in Australia, which, as many people know, has just introduced a ban on social media for under-16s. We will make sure that the consultation is evidence-led, with input from independent experts.

We are prepared to act to deal with the serious concerns that parents, teachers, doctors and others have about children's screen time in schools and at home. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary announced that for the first time ever we are developing screen time guidance for children under five, which will be available from April. Today, I can confirm that we will also develop evidence-based screen time guidance for parents of children aged five to 16. While we have already been clear that mobile phones have no place in our schools, the Government will take further action as part of our determination to safeguard children and support their wellbeing. Today, we have published updated guidance on the use of mobile phones in schools, and we have asked Ofsted to include that in its inspections, because we want there to be no doubt in the minds of school staff, parents and young people that phones should not be used in schools.

I know these issues are important for Members of Parliament, teachers and the medical profession, many children's organisations, young people themselves and, above all, parents across the country. Many people, including in this House, are strongly in favour of a ban on social media for the under-16s as the best and clearest way forward to protect children and stop acute and chronic online harms. They want action now, but others take a different view, saying that they worry about letting online platforms off the hook and that a ban would simply push harms further underground and, above all, stop children using the positives of social media, such as connecting with like-minded people, finding those who love in the same way and love the same things, and getting peer support and trusted advice. There are clearly risks in all these different approaches, which is why I believe that a proper consultation and promoting a national conversation, especially with the public, is the right and responsible way forward.

[Liz Kendall]

I want to make one thing crystal clear: the question is not about whether the Government will take further action—we will act robustly, as we did with Grok. The question now is about the next steps and acting effectively, together with children and families. That is what our consultation will deliver, because we are determined to ensure that technology enriches children's lives, rather than harms them. We want to give children the childhood they deserve and prepare them for the future. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.56 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of her statement. What does an ailing Prime Minister do to demonstrate firm and decisive leadership? He launches a consultation, with a variety of options. What does he do when the Conservative party, the House of Lords, trade unions and more than 60 of his own Labour MPs line up against him on a tricky issue? Rather than take a clear position on a social media ban for children and getting phones out of schools, as the Conservative leader has done, this Prime Minister finds an unkempt meadow with some lengthy grass in it, and he boots the tricky issue right in. The House does not just need to take my word for it. One senior Labour MP has said that this consultation will "take too long". Another said, referring to a social media ban,

"The immediate reaction is that this is just a way of kicking it into the long grass."

There is a straightforward question that Ministers must answer today: is the Government's apparent change of heart on a social media ban for real? Is this consultation a way of elegantly managing yet another U-turn, or is it simply a device to get the Prime Minister through the parliamentary week, while the position remains unchanged? If it is progress, it can be celebrated, but let us not forget that until very recently, the Prime Minister said that he was personally opposed to a social media ban for children. In December, the Culture Secretary confirmed that she is against one. The Business Secretary is opposed. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister said on the media this very morning that the Government do not take a view. In fact, the only senior Labour figure we know who is clearly in favour of a ban is Andy Burnham. That is some leadership.

What is the Secretary of State's personal view, and what is her message to Labour MPs who would like to vote for a ban this week? Each of those rebel MPs will be asking themselves, "After the Prime Minister has Grand Old Duke of York-ed me up and down so many hills, can I really trust him to see this through?" That is especially so given that this same proposal was tabled previously, and Labour voted it down, just as it voted down our amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill on a phone ban in schools. It is just like when they were told not to support their own colleague, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), when he had a private Member's Bill on this issue. Knowing where the Secretary of State personally stands on a ban—not where she stands on a consultation and not what she thinks about having a variety of options—may help ease the minds of Labour MPs.

What of the timeline? Does a three-month consultation mean that legislation to introduce a social media ban will be ready in time for the King's Speech? If not, and if MPs do not vote for a ban this week, they will not have another chance to do so for 18 months. The opportunity to change things is now. How many on the Government Benches will take that chance?

The Government must have a great deal of the evidence that they need. The Secretary of State's predecessor commissioned a University of Cambridge review of children's wellbeing in relation to smartphone use, messaging and social media, which was due to report in December. Can the Secretary of State tell us what the report said? The urgency is obvious. Everyone, especially parents, can see what social media is doing to children. It is not just exposure to extreme or explicit content, although of course that matters. The Online Safety Act 2023, which we introduced, is already addressing illegal material and age-gating, and that work is ongoing. However, the harm goes wider. Social media has created an anxious generation hooked by products designed to be addictive, displacing real-world activity and undermining attention, emotional regulation and mental health. Schools and families deal daily with the consequences: cyber-bullying, social anxiety and fractured concentration.

China's version of TikTok, Douyin, limits children to an hour a day and promotes educational content, but western platforms do the opposite: engagement loops are optimised for emotional arousal. We welcome scrutiny of those algorithms and steps to stop children's data being exploited, but there is a simpler option, which is to keep children off these platforms altogether while allowing adults the freedom that follows. Conservatives believe in parental responsibility: we believe in freedom for adults, but we also believe in protecting children. We believe in policing age, not policing speech. It is not to strip parents of their roles and responsibilities to recognise that the online world can be a discombobulating nightmare to supervise. It is not to be a modern-day Mary Whitehouse to worry deeply about children being exposed to images and topics that they are simply not equipped to deal with.

This consultation also includes a rethink on phones in schools. I see that the Education Secretary is present; for months she told us that it was a gimmick and unnecessary, although most secondary school pupils say that phones are still used extensively. By when will phones be banned in schools, and how quickly will Ofsted enforce that? Will it be enforcing against guidance or against the law, because guidance is simply not enough? We must be up front in saying that the challenges of implementing any social media ban are real. We support the Government as they navigate those challenges because we want this to work, but can the Secretary of State make it clear that digital ID will not be a requirement to pass age verification on social media sites?

The truth is that the internet grew as a pioneer society, with consequences that we are all reckoning with. It now needs to be retrofitted with very clear rules for children. They need to be protected. Other countries are taking the approach of a social media ban; will this Government in the UK do the same?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady has talked about leadership. May I remind the House that last week, when the Prime Minister and I showed strong and firm leadership on X and Grok, she claimed that the issues were a legal grey

area—which they are not—and compared our stance to that of the mullahs of Iran, which would be laughable if it were not so offensive.

The hon. Lady asked whether we had published the research by Professor Orben. Yes, we have: we have published it today, and we are going further with some—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the Secretary of State, and this private conversation between the two Front Benches is not helpful.

Liz Kendall: If the hon. Lady does not like hearing me repeat her words back to her, she should not say them.

As I have said, we published that research today, and we have gone further with some short, sharp trials in respect of different interventions and the impact that they may have, because I think that that is very important. The evidence is evolving and we need to move faster in that regard, but it will not cause delay in our action.

The hon. Lady mentioned Ofsted. Perhaps she does not understand that the chief inspector of Ofsted welcomed the new guidance today, which is an important step forward.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): He also said, "Ban, ban, ban."

Mr Speaker: Order. I want no more of this, and I genuinely mean that, from someone who is meant to be looking after education. I think we all need to set an example.

Liz Kendall: You have taken the words right out of my mouth, Mr Speaker.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about my personal position. I believe it is right and responsible to act swiftly, but to do so by carrying out a proper consultation. Let me tell the House what my position is: I will act, I will get results, and I will deliver for the British people.

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

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I welcome the consultation. We know that technology has changed childhood, we believe that it has changed child socialisation and we think that it may have changed brain development, perhaps even motor neurone skills, but there is little concrete evidence beyond the individual terrible stories and, of course, the profits of the big tech platforms. That is why my Committee will soon be launching a digital childhood inquiry to examine these issues, hopefully in time to respond to the consultation.

May I, however, urge the Secretary of State not to assume that a ban will be the answer to the challenges that technology poses? We need to make tech work for all of us now. May I ask her to review her Department's refusal to accept the recommendations of my Committee's inquiry into social media and algorithms, particularly with regard to platform responsibility, user control, digital advertising and social media business models?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for that powerful and sensible question, and I welcome her Committee's review, because those are hugely important matters. We should see this as being not only about social media, but about the use of phones and the issues affecting children in the digital world in which we now live. She will know, because I gave evidence to her Committee, that I am constantly reviewing our position on all the important points that she and the Committee raised in its last report, and that, in particular, the Minister for Digital Government and Data, who is also the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts, is looking into the impact that advertising, social media and digital platforms can have. That is a firm commitment from the Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Last year, I carried out a "safer screens" tour in my constituency, hearing directly from young people, because the Liberal Democrats consider children and young people to be at the heart of this issue. Teenagers shared concerns about extreme content pushed by algorithms, but also about being glued to their screens alongside their younger siblings. One said, "It's as addictive as a drug, and I feel the negative impacts every day." Another pleaded, "Help—I just can't stop." Last week, more than 1,700 parents emailed me calling for a social media ban. One mother said that the social media used by her two boys "fills me with dread." Another highlighted the way in which

> "anxiety, reduced attention, online bullying, and exposure to harmful content are becoming common topics among families."

Parents, teachers, experts and young people themselves are crying out for action, which is why the Liberal Democrats have long raised this as a public health issue. We pushed for the digital age of data consent to be raised to 16, and for the tackling of addictive algorithms. We voted to ban phones in schools, and called for health warnings. Now the Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment in the other place to ban harmful social media for under-16s, based on film-style age ratings extending to 18. We would reset the default age for social media to 16 now, with strong age assurance, because enough is enough.

This world-pioneering approach brings age-appropriate standards to online safety. We are learning from Australia, and preparing for today's reality. Our risk-based approach, supported by more than 40 charities and experts including the NSPCC, the Molly Rose Foundation and the Internet Watch Foundation, will stop new platforms slipping through the net while addressing harmful games and AI chatbots, and protecting educational sites such Wikipedia and safe family connections. Crucially, it does not let social media companies off the hook.

We have had age-appropriate safety standards offline, for toys and films, for decades. After 20 years of social media platforms clearly prioritising profit over children, building addictive algorithms that keep children and adults hooked, it is time to take action. We do not need consultation—we need that action now—but at least in this consultation we must look into how, not if, we will implement a ban on harmful social media for under-16s. I urge the Government to consider such a ban, with swift timelines, to address this growing public health crisis, and to act on our proposals now. Our children's future is not something to be played with.

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady explains very well the views of children, young people and parents who are grappling with these issues. I disagree with her: I think we need a short, sharp consultation because there are

[Liz Kendall]

different views, but we definitely want to act. I am very interested in the idea of age classification, and I would be more than happy to talk to her about that. We all see how this issue affects our own children, and we need to help them cope at different ages. I am sure that many hon. Members will raise different options, and I am more than happy to discuss those with them.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the launch of the consultation and the Government's commitment to an evidence-based approach. The evidence is clear that mobile phones have no place in schools. Many schools have managed to implement a ban, but those that have not done so, or which have only implemented a less successful version of a ban, often speak about the challenging nature of the dialogue with parents and children as they seek to implement a ban. They say that having a statutory ban, which would require them to ban phones by law, would help. Why is a statutory ban not being announced today, and can the Secretary of State confirm that it is not off the table?

Liz Kendall: My schools say very similar things, and I know the Education Secretary has heard my hon. Friend's question. Different models are set out in the guidance. For us, the outcome is absolutely clear: there is no place for phones in schools. I am sure that we will hear more views about that, but this is an important next step.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): The evidence will never be perfect on this subject, because this is an effect that is happening right around the world at the same time—there is no control group. Countries are now acting—it is not only Australia; other countries are moving in this direction as well—and I welcome today's announcement. The Secretary of State will need to make definitional decisions, so it is fair enough to have a consultation to get to the definition of "social media" and to work out what counts as an addictive, compulsive design feature, although I am not sure that that was in her statement. It is fine to have a 12-week consultation, but I am troubled by the possibility that the period after the consultation will stretch, as it sometimes does, in an open-ended way and we will not get the action we need. Will she commit to a deadline after the close of the consultation?

Liz Kendall: I have said before that patience is not my greatest virtue. I do not intend for the period before we publish the consultation or afterwards to be long in any way, shape or form. I want to have a clear position before the summer.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I welcome the leadership that the Secretary of State is showing on this issue. In Bury North, parental appetite for a ban on mobile phones is real, but so are the practical considerations when parents rightly want to track the location of their children, have a form of emergency contact and be able to reach their children safely. Does she agree that the existence of this anxiety is not about the technology itself, but about the design for use? Social media platforms are shaping our children's childhoods, with excessive screen time and endless feeds absorbing the equivalent of a full-time job's worth of hours of our young people's lives every week. Will the Government's approach focus on shaping healthier digital environments and rewarding first-mover tech companies that lead on safer design, rather than simply leaving the burden on families?

Liz Kendall: We absolutely want to focus on children's health and wellbeing online, and it is really important that we see more competition in this sector, with different options being available for children and young people. I hope that by having a consultation, we will get the debate going and get that action going, because it is extremely difficult for parents to manage this situation. We all share their worries as Members of Parliament, but also as parents ourselves, and we are determined to get this right and to act swiftly.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): These arguments are very well rehearsed, and this announcement is long overdue. Last year we did a survey in my Gosport constituency, and 80% of parents agreed that social media is making bullying worse for their children. Last week the Culture, Media and Sport Committee took evidence from child psychologists about children's TV and video content. Among the many things they told us, they explained the learning from Australia: it is critical to plan for whatever gap is created. If we reduce screen time for young people, there must be safe places for them to go and activities on which they can spend their time. What is the Secretary of State doing on a cross-Government basis to make sure that these issues are tackled as well?

Liz Kendall: I will read that evidence—I am sorry that I have not yet done so, but I absolutely will. The hon. Lady is right: if children are going to spend less time online, what will they do in the real world? That is why our new youth strategy involved the biggest ever consultation of young people. They said that they wanted something to do, somewhere to go and someone to care. That is why we are backing a new generation of youth clubs and youth workers, to ensure that young people have the chance for dance, drama, music and sport, both in and out of school, in order find their spark. This is about providing a better future for our children. We can only do that across Government, and that is the action we are taking.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The last time I was in the Chair for a statement on this issue, we ran out of time. It would be really helpful if colleagues ensured that their questions are short.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Organisations such as the Molly Rose Foundation highlight that evidence to support social media bans remains very uncertain and warn that blanket restrictions could unintentionally cause harm by pushing young people towards unregulated platforms, remove trusted online spaces, undermine digital literacy and, indeed, create a cliff edge at the age of 16. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must take a calm, evidence-based approach to this complex issue and ensure that children's voices are central to the consultation?

Liz Kendall: I agree 100%.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I say this not just as a constituency MP with correspondence from hundreds of parents in my inbox, but as a mum: a review, however short, kicks the can down the road, even though we have the legislative vehicle for change in the other place right now. Will the Secretary of State please talk to our Lords counterparts and ask them to support the Liberal Democrat amendment, which takes a harms-based approach?

Liz Kendall: I have no intention of kicking any can down the road, but I do think that listening to different views is the right and responsible approach. It is perhaps old-fashioned in politics these days to try to find common ground and to listen respectfully to what people have to say. That does not mean that we will not lead and act, but I do think it is vital that those views are heard. I have no intention of dragging this out; I want swift action and next steps. We will have to disagree on the consultation, but I am more than happy to discuss with the hon. Lady and her colleagues any views that they have about the way forward.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. When I trained as a physics teacher, I saw both the enrichment that tech can provide, with easy access to calculators and apps to enhance learning, and the disruption, with endless notifications, distractions and cyber-bullying incidents. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the consultation harnesses the opportunities that tech provides while protecting kids at risk?

Liz Kendall: It is partly about having the consultation, in conjunction with the wider action that we are taking. Next week will be the anniversary of the AI opportunities action plan, and we will set out how much we have already achieved, but the next step is to seize the benefits of those technologies. This country is and should continue to be a world leader in AI and science, and hon. Members will hear more from me about this next week.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Families in my constituency are deeply concerned about the impact of social media on their children's wellbeing. Just last week a headteacher told me that schools need the Government to act, and young people themselves describe the real damage that social media is doing to their mental health. The Conservative party has shown leadership by calling for clear age limits, because we recognise that protecting childhood is about setting responsible boundaries. Parents are asking for action now, so why are the Government not making a clear commitment today?

Liz Kendall: We have given clear support through all the steps we have taken on making the encouragement of self-harm and suicide a priority offence, as is cyber-flashing. We have taken action on nudification apps, updated the guidance for school and made sure that Ofsted will carry out inspections on that. I understand that the hon. Lady is strongly of the opinion that we should act now. I believe that a short, sharp consultation is the right way forward, because families and children really need that support. At the weekend, over 40 organisations signed a letter saying why they think a ban is the wrong approach. I think it is right to listen to them, because we have to lead, but we also have to listen and try to bring people with you.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): As one of the Back Benchers pushing the Government in this direction, I feel that the Secretary of State is taking the right approach in looking at the evidence and having a broad consultation to make sure that we get this right. However, what we can do to ensure that the voices of children and young people and parents in Bishop Auckland are included in the consultation?

Liz Kendall: What I will certainly be doing in my Leicester West constituency is holding events in schools with parents and organisations that represent children and families, and we can get cracking on that now and during the consultation. I want to hear Members' views, so that we can make sure we get the questions in the consultation right and then take that out into the country. About 10 years ago, when I was in opposition and a member of the Science and Technology Committee, we had an inquiry into keeping kids safe online. I did a big thing with my local schools, and it was really interesting because at that time young people said they wanted to be online for some of the benefits, but already saw the problems—the bullying, the harassment and what was happening to younger children. Children are savvy, and this issue has been going on for a long time. We are determined to set the right path for the future, and I am sure my hon. Friend will be helping us get that right.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): We should not underestimate the complexity of this issue or the potential for unintended consequences from a complete ban. There is early evidence that some unintended consequences are already occurring in Australia. Parents are rightly worried and they are demanding action. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to listen to those parents, young people themselves and the many organisations and individual experts in the field, many of whom oppose a full ban, to reach not only a considered position, but a robust and enforceable one? Does she also agree that enforcement of the Online Safety Act has not been remotely strong enough, and that, notwithstanding this consultation, existing enforcement must be better funded and ramped up?

Liz Kendall: We certainly intend to learn from Australia's experience and evidence of the ban there—I hope that I and the Minister for online safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan), will be visiting soon. I do listen to the concerns raised by organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Internet Watch Foundation and the Molly Rose Foundation about the unintended consequences of a ban, and I intend to look at all those points of view seriously. However, as I have said to the House earlier, the question is not whether we act, but how. On age verification, I am extremely interested in what more we can do to enforce the existing law, and we will be gathering evidence on those points.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for this statement, acknowledging the real harm that social media is causing for children. As a former Schools Minister, I know how welcome these announcements will be for teachers and parents, who are contacting us in droves. However, as she knows, time is of the essence. All the time we spend contemplating is time that children still remain vulnerable

[Catherine McKinnell]

to those algorithms and this addiction. Will she give the reassurance today that not only will this consultation be swift, but the delivery of its outcomes will be swift, and—she has just said this—that there will be real action to enforce the regulations already in place that should be protecting children today?

Liz Kendall: I have no desire to hang about, because this is happening to children and young people now—and because my hon. Friend would have my guts for garters if I did not act swiftly.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I realise that the Secretary of State has been sent out to manage a growing political problem—*[Interruption]*—honestly. She is speaking in stentorian terms to try to inspire some kind of confidence, but if colleagues look at the statement, they will see that there is nothing of substance in it at all. That is disappointing, given that in a private Member's Bill only last year—I was a sponsor of the Bill brought in by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who is now on the Government Front Bench—promises were made that are not even delivered by this statement.

In particular on schools—since I have to ask a question—could the Secretary of State acknowledge an inherent conflict? She says that the Government are clear that mobile phones have no place in schools, but she is going to update the guidance on how they should be used in schools. Could she at the very least confirm that that guidance is going to tighten their use in school, and that there is no possibility of any loosening of the current situation?

Liz Kendall: If the right hon. Member had read the guidance that has been published, he would know that this is about how schools can introduce such a ban effectively. I would say that the statement goes further than the private Member's Bill he recommends. Last but by no means least, I have been focused on and working on this issue since 2016, as I have said, so if he does not mind, I will diplomatically reject that comment.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I really welcome the Secretary of State's leadership and commitment. I run a work experience programme, "Your Voice, Your Future", which encourages young people to get involved in politics and government. Some of the participants produced a powerful campaign called "Rise above the rumours", which was all about how the rapid spread of misinformation online is harming young people's mental health and fuelling division. Can the Secretary of State say how young people in my constituency and across the country can get involved?

Liz Kendall: "Rise above the rumours" is quite a good tagline. My hon. Friend will probably hold events with her schools—primaries and secondaries—and get children to have a full debate, put forward their views and maybe even vote on what they want, and if she does so, I will definitely look at the results.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I have had almost 1,800 emails from constituents urging for something to be done about this. I declare an interest as the mother of four young adults and teenagers. Local headteachers and campaigners tell us repeatedly about the mental health issues and harmful algorithms, but the tech companies must be held to account. If the Secretary of State is serious about urgency and prioritisation, speed is of the essence. Today, the Online Safety Act Network, supported by 42 civil society groups, has asked for urgent amendments to the Online Safety Act 2023. Has she looked at that?

Liz Kendall: Yes, I have, and I am determined to act swiftly, but there are different views on this issue. The hon. Member will feel very strongly, as do those in her constituency who have contacted her, but the truth is that there are different views that must be heard and listened to, but we will act swiftly.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the action on mobile phones in schools. Harmful interactions can take place in online games and on instant messaging platforms, and we need to be alive to the risk of driving use to less well-regulated spaces and into virtual private networks. I am also concerned that opaque feed algorithms, which reinforce our worst prejudices and recommend harmful content, can have mental health impacts on adults as well as children. Can she assure me that her review will look at this broader issue, and will she ensure that young people's voices are at the heart of the consultation?

Liz Kendall: I will absolutely look at those issues and make sure that young people's views and voices are at the heart of this. It is interesting that, when we look at the Australians' experience, we see that they had to define what social media is and what it covers. That has not been as straightforward as some might have thought, and I think it is really important that we look at it closely. The OSA does not have a definition of social media, so that is one thing we need to consider.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Secretary of State has made reference to the interaction of whatever she may consult on with the operation of the current law. Following on from the comments of the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), will the Secretary of State confirm that even if the Government pursue a ban on social media for the under-16s, they will not seek to dilute the child safety duties under the Online Safety Act?

Liz Kendall: I think it is really important that those duties are upheld and implemented. As I have said, I am very interested in highly effective age assurance measures, which are already required for some of the most serious issues, including pornography, and whether they should be extended to other areas.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I recently met Youthline, a fantastic mental health charity for young people in my constituency, and Berkshire Women's Aid to talk about the effects of social media on young people's mental health and their ability to form healthy relationships. Will my right hon. Friend commit to listening to the views of such organisations, as well as to Bracknell parents and children, as she looks at the results of the consultation?

Liz Kendall: Yes, and I urge my hon. Friend to send us details of those opinions so that we can ensure they are heard loud and clear.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that the Government have no intention of introducing criminal sanctions against parents or guardians of children who access social media through parental accounts?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady has got this wrong, but her party wants to scrap the Online Safety Act 2023, and that says everything about Reform.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): The Children's Commissioner spoke to a group of 15 and 16-year-olds in 2024 and found that three quarters of them had been sent a beheading video. It is possible that a great number of children are protecting us from what they see online, instead of us protecting them. Can I emphasise strongly the importance of speaking to a large range of children from different backgrounds about this? Sadly, they do not always feel able to make us aware of everything that they are exposed to online.

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue, which is making sure that young people trust us and feel confident in raising these matters. It is our job to make sure that nobody is frightened to say what is happening to them. We will not get this right unless we talk to people of all ages and from all backgrounds, in all parts of the country. Hon. Members know that they have a vital job to play in their constituency. As Secretary of State, I am responsible for the entire United Kingdom, so I urge hon. Members, for all the politics and show in this House, to engage locally, because then we will get this right.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is quite clear that social media is causing a health and wellbeing crisis among young people. Parents are absolutely terrified about the content that their children are viewing and the amount of time that they are spending online. Just a couple of months ago, 14 and 15-year-olds in my constituency told me about the profound pressure that they feel to be on social media. They feel a compulsion to use it, but they do not want to. Will the Government get off the pot and announce a ban? Perfection really is the enemy of the good here. The evidence is plain to see. We need action, not words.

Liz Kendall: The hon. Gentleman knows what I think about why we have to do a consultation, so I disagree with him on that, but he is right to say that we should not let perfection be the enemy of the good. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made a point about the evidence. I discovered 10 years ago, before so much had changed online, that young people know that some of this stuff is bad; they do not want to do it, but they cannot help themselves. If we were all honest with our ourselves, we would know that we behave like that sometimes, too.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): Earlier this month, I hosted in Parliament a performance by students from Kent of "Generation FOMO", a powerful verbatim play that looks at young people's real experiences of using social media. It highlighted the impact that social media use can have on mental health, and how it leads to an increase in anxiety and depression. I therefore welcome the consultation. Can it also look into the ability of tech firms to develop loopholes that would destroy the impact of any ban?

Liz Kendall: I want to hear the views and the voices of the good people of Kent on this, whether that means having a separate meeting with my hon. Friend, or his sending me that information, which I am more than happy to look at.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I recently visited the Fulham boys school, which, 18 months ago, introduced a complete ban on smartphones in school. That school and Kingsbridge community college in my constituency both talk about the transformative effect that a ban has had. The most compelling evidence for me is this: where a secondary school completely bans smartphones, children at the feeder primary schools are under less peer pressure to buy phones, so the age at which those children get a phone is rising to 12, 13 or 14. Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that she has not dismissed the idea of supporting headteachers by banning, through legislation, smartphones in secondary schools in England and Wales?

Liz Kendall: I have set out the Government's position on this. I know that the hon. Lady wants us to go further, and I hear what she says. This is a really important point. Several friends have told me that their children feel totally left out at school if they do not have a phone, and the peer pressure to have one seeps down to younger siblings and other children, so the hon. Lady is right to talk about the route through. We want to make things as simple as possible for schools, teachers, parents and young people, and to make it clear that there is no place for phones in school.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I have recently been asking my constituents what they think about a ban on phones in schools, as well as for their thoughts about social media for under-16s. It was clear that, regardless of their politics, they all wanted to have their views heard. They were so grateful to be asked, instead of having something imposed on them. Will the Secretary of State join me in South Derbyshire for the consultation meetings that I hope to have, so that my constituents feel that they are being heard by the decision maker right at the top?

Liz Kendall: How can I resist?

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Last week, as the Secretary of State will recall, some of us were loudly heckled for suggesting that X was beginning to give way on Grok. Now we know that that was true, so events are moving fast. Can the Secretary of State at least assure us that she will immediately—during the consultation and anything that follows on from it—instruct the civil servants who would have to prepare for a practical ban to get on with the task provisionally, so that no time is wasted?

Liz Kendall: Deeds, not words—I have always believed that. I want to prepare for all options, because when we make a decision, we want to implement it as soon as possible.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I welcome the Government's consultation on smartphone use and social media. Raising the minimum age is the right step towards protecting our children, as we know that social media has led to devastating consequences. We also know that excessive screen time is linked to myopia and dry eye disease. When the Secretary of State brings forward guidance, will it take account of the risks for sight loss?

Liz Kendall: My right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is leading on the guidance on screen time. I will definitely raise that issue with her. My primary schools are extremely worried about screen time. For children under 5, there are also implications for language development, fine motor skills and communication confidence. All those issues are important, but I will definitely raise the point about the impact on people's eyes with my right hon. Friend.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Over the past year, I have spoken to hundreds of children in schools across my constituency as part of my safer screens tour. It has been very distressing to hear from them about the material that they have been exposed to, and to hear that social media companies have not come back to them when they have reported this harmful content. If the Secretary of State agrees that there should be a ban on children accessing harmful social media platforms, will the default age for accessing them be 16?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have set out that we will consult on the age of 16, but I remind the House that the Online Safety Act has very strong provisions against illegal content for people of all ages and harmful content for children. We need to make sure that it is effectively enforced now, whatever decision is made through the consultation.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the announcement of this consultation. Parents and carers, families, schools and children themselves are looking for help and leadership on the issue of keeping children safe in the digital world. Will she assure me that the consultation will cover two things? First, will it cover the concept of misinformation? Claims about misinformation are levelled at social media providers. Secondly, will it consider all options for dealing with the addictive nature of social media, and algorithmically personalised feeds?

Liz Kendall: This is very much about keeping children safe online. I have said that we will look at raising the digital age of consent, the positive impact that could have on how companies use algorithms, and the many related issues. I am of course happy to discuss matters further with my hon. Friend, but the consultation is absolutely focused on children.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Many young people watching us will be thinking that issues of addiction and online harm are not simply age-related. This debate reflects, I fear, many parents' and carers' lack of confidence in the ability of the Online Safety Act and Ofcom to deal with rapid technological change. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with Ofcom about the powers and further action that it could take now, in particular on artificial intelligence chatbots?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend will know that I have already said that I have looked seriously at the issue of AI chatbots. Those that use live search and those that share user-to-user content are covered by the Online Safety Act, but where the chatbot has an interaction with an individual without live search or user-to-user content, that is not covered by the Act, and I am considering how we fill those gaps. I have said that if further action is needed, we will take it. Ofcom will understand that the expectation—from not just Members but the public—that there will be swift and effective enforcement is paramount.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and place on record my thanks and gratitude to Rosalind McClean and Charlotte Carson from a local campaign group on smartphone-free childhoods. She is right to bring forward a consultation and engage with young people, but my parliamentary colleagues in the other place will tomorrow, if proceedings allow, support an amendment that would lead to a ban for under-16s. In the consultation, is she proposing a social media ban for under-16s, simply asking for views on the age at which a ban should be set, or giving options?

Liz Kendall: We are including the option of a ban for those under 16; that will be clear. We will propose raising the digital age of consent and we will look at the other issues I listed in my statement. I understand the right hon. Gentleman's party's approach in the other place. We want the consultation to happen. His party will have strong opinions, but we think that this is the right and responsible way forward. We will do this as swiftly as possible.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I place on record my appreciation of the Secretary of State for standing up to the richest man in the world. Whether it is standing up and acting, or the statement on online harm made weeks ago by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), this Government are taking the protection of children seriously. In Bolton South and Walkden, parents see the effect of social media on children. Will the Secretary of State stick to her intention to consult fully, especially with children under the age of 16?

Liz Kendall: The Government as a whole are determined to stick up for British values and British law. I am proud that we did that last week, and we will continue to do so. I absolutely commit to ensuring that the views of children and young people in my hon. Friend's constituency, as well as across the country, are heard loud and clear.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Secretary of State has demonstrated her commitment and interest in this issue at the Dispatch Box this afternoon, and we thank her for that. However, with the greatest respect, if social media had just arrived in our sitting rooms two weeks ago, a consultation might be necessary, but the canon of evidence about the demonstrable harms being done to our young is now very clear; that is what we

have all read in our inboxes in recent days. The consultation will not throw up anything that we do not already know. Still less will it find a unanimity of view. There will always be differences of view on whether to ban. To govern is to choose. Can I urge the Government to choose to act swiftly, and to use the legislative vehicle in the other place to act now, because too many of our young people are on a precipice?

Liz Kendall: To govern is indeed to choose, and we showed our determination to do so last week. We will choose on this issue, but I want people's views to be heard. Sometimes, we need to try to bring people together. The hon. Gentleman is right that we will never get everyone to agree on anything, but making sure that people are heard is really important. Maybe that is old fashioned, but I believe that it is right. Then we will act, lead and decide.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I welcome the steps to protect our children on social media platforms. It is very difficult to see how that can be achieved effectively without further detailed checks and balances on users and, essentially, the tech companies themselves. Social media governance is like the wild west; it is like cyber-anarchy at this moment in time, with bots, fake accounts and goodness knows whatever undermining our fantastic society. What will my right hon. Friend do to tackle the problem of digital lawlessness?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We have taken steps; the Online Safety Act is a really important step forward. Ever since that became law we have taken further action on cyber-flashing, nudification apps, and sites that promote self-harm and suicide. I am very interested in looking at highly effective age-assurance measures. They are already in use for most of the serious harms for children, whether pornography, suicide or self-harm. It will be part of the consultation to see what more we can do, because we want to ensure that the laws of this land are upheld.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Just to help Members, I will be calling this statement to an end at 2 o'clock, because we have a lot of business afterwards.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Anna is a child development doctor in my constituency. Every day, she sees children who have been harmed by excessive screen time. The Secretary of State says that she wishes to come to a clear position before the summer. When we come to that clear position, how urgently will change happen? How long will Anna keep on seeing children damaged by too much screen time?

Liz Kendall: We will act as swiftly as possible. I am extremely keen to hear from medical professionals—I received a letter from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges on this issue—and we will be engaging with them deeply to ensure we get this right and act as swiftly as possible.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I am one of few Members here today, and potentially the only woman, who had social media as a part of their childhood under the age of 16. That is why I am so shocked that the Conservatives can come here today and demand such urgency, when they left my generation to view harmful content for a decade. Social media has defined my life and being literate in it has shaped my career for the good at times, but it also meant that there was a language barrier between me and trusted adults—a language barrier that I fear will only worsen and widen under a blanket ban. I urge colleagues across the House, when talking about an entire generation, to bring them with us and not to send a message that it is simply easier to remove young people from social media than it is to remove the harmful content on it. Will the Secretary of State assure me that my generation and the generation that followed will be at the heart of this consultation?

Liz Kendall: Once again, my hon. Friend shows the courage of her convictions and the experience she brings to this House. I know her life in fashion has been crucially shaped by the online world, which does provide opportunities for young people, so maybe I will ask her whether she can ensure that the Government hear from people like her in her generation, so that we can take their views deeply into account. We want to prevent harms and we will take action to do that, but we need to hear from young people for whom social media has given them a chance and a future.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I have heard from literally hundreds of parents and teachers in the Scottish Borders who want social media to be banned for under-16s. We all know that these apps are addictive and are causing serious mental health challenges for our young people. I am now getting messages from parents who have heard what the Secretary of State has said and fear that she is simply kicking the issue into the long grass. Why will the Government not take action now?

Liz Kendall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is taking exactly the right approach. This place is littered with legislation that turns out not to be as good as it should have been, and then it does not get amended—and late amendments are not a good thing either. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) highlighted some of the important health impacts. Will the Secretary of State proactively seek information from health specialists, including psychologists such as Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, who is very expert in the teenage brain?

Liz Kendall: Yes, we absolutely want independent experts to feed in their views. My career started out in the world of public health at the King's Fund, and thinking about this issue in a public health framework is extremely important.

As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) just said, people want action. I know that and have said loudly and clearly that I want to hear the views of all parents and families. I will listen to those views, but I also want to take evidence, including from—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman chunters that I do not care. I do not think that my actions over

[Liz Kendall]

the past 10 years have ever shown that that is the case. *[Interruption.]* I did not hear what the hon. Member's actual question was.

As I was saying, I want to hear from all those involved, including from—*[Interruption.]* There are many chuntering from the Conservative Benches. I have already said that I want every single MP in this House to feed through to us the views of their constituents. I want to hear from those in the medical and other professions, because it is important that we do this properly and get this right.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I know that parents, grandparents and, indeed, young people across Ceredigion Preseli will welcome action to tackle the harms of social media and mobile phone use. Given that education, which will be so important in implementing these measures, is a devolved responsibility in Wales, will the Secretary of State seek early discussions with the Welsh Government to ensure that any outcomes of the consultation are implemented equally across the United Kingdom?

Liz Kendall: I recognise those points and want to work closely with the Welsh Government on all these issues.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is clear that social media harms our children. I am firmly of the belief that when a child is being harmed, it is the Government's duty to act. I support a ban, but even the most cursory engagement with Hartlepool residents shows me very clearly that there is a range of views among parents on this issue. Can the Secretary of State fathom what possibly could be the objection to listening to parents?

Liz Kendall: Not really.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): We have censorship for films, which is not necessarily for violent or sexual content and sometimes for psychological content. Policing such things could be difficult. Following the consultation, it will take time to put together a report. What concerns us is when and how action could be taken, because the King's Speech will have passed. If the right hon. Lady concludes that there has to be a social media ban for under-16s, what mechanism could be put in place in such a short time?

Liz Kendall: The right hon. Member knows that the mechanism will depend on the policy that we put forward. I want to do this properly and thoroughly so that when we take a decision, it will work and not have unintended consequences. I want us to have thought through all of that so that we have a policy that lasts. It is really important that we get this right. There are strong, different views across the House. It is good that many hon. Members have their own strong opinions; it is what this place is all about. I am trying to take the country forward and build consensus, but we will never get everybody to agree. Leadership is required, and that is what we will deliver.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I welcome the Government's launching of a national conversation about the impact of screens and tech on our children. As part of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's inquiry into children's TV and video content, we have heard evidence that not all screen time is equal. Content that is meant for engagement can be beneficial for a child's development, but content that is designed for attention, such as fast-paced images bombarding children, can be harmful. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the consultation looks at the quality and purpose of the content that our children are consuming on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and at what more can be done to ensure that platforms support the right type of content for our kids?

Liz Kendall: Absolutely. I was at Braunstone community primary school in my constituency not long ago, where I was shown the incredible power of AI to help teachers with lesson planning. One teacher told me that using it meant that he could free up 30 days a year to be present for his kids in school and his family at home. Teachers were also using AI tutors to help narrow the disadvantage gap between rich and poor kids. We need to look at the quality of screen time, so my hon. Friend's point is very well made.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): After more than a year of raising the issue in this House, illegal drugs including spice are still being brazenly sold to children online. If that is not harm, I do not know what is. What are the Government doing to ensure that all powers under the Online Safety Act are being used by Ofcom to stop this appalling harm to children? If the legislation we have cannot deal with it, will the Secretary of State consider including in her consultation how we might stop this pernicious trade?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Member raises an extremely important issue. I have put on record my determination for Ofcom to use the powers it has to act swiftly; I have made that very clear in private and publicly. I am more than happy to hear what more the hon. Lady thinks could be done.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): As a signatory to a letter calling for an Australia-style model that places responsibilities on tech firms to block under-16s from social media, I welcome the Government's consultation. Families in Bedford and Kempston are very clear that platforms are harming our children now. I am pleased that the Secretary of State is committed to a rapid consultation, but will she also commit to a clear timetable for bold action before more young lives are damaged?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I have said repeatedly in this House that we need to do the right and responsible thing, which is to consult. I do not want to hang around. I want to work out the very best and effective way forward, and I want proposals that will hold and last.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): In meaningful consultations, the Government set out what they are minded to do and set out a model. This consultation does not define social media or set out an enforcement model. It does not say anything about how age verification should be done. If they do not set out

their model and what they intend to do, how at the end of the consultation will they have a practical guide or model to implement? They will not. If we are to follow this up with another consultation, I fear that parents and grandparents in Beverley and Holderness will be deeply disappointed with the dithering and delay displayed by the Secretary of State today.

Liz Kendall: The right hon. Gentleman knows that this is a statement, not the publication of the consultation. I very much look forward to his views when it is published.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Leading doctors have warned that social media has become a public health emergency that casts long shadows over our children's minds. From self-harm to sleepless nights, distorted self-images and sexualised images, and the addictive nature of social media, the damage runs deep. Does my right hon. Friend agree that protecting young people's wellbeing must come before digital profit and convenience? Will she commission research into the long-term side effects of social media, including on cognitive and motor development, in order to shape policy not just now but in 10 years' time?

Liz Kendall: I think I mentioned earlier the letter I received from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, which I believe is taking forward further work on this issue. Clinicians gave personal testimony about the horrific cases that they have treated in primary, secondary and community settings. I know that they will want to work closely with us on this. I thank my hon. Friend for her question.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I really welcome this statement. It coincides with the early-day motion published today in my name calling for children under 16 to be banned from social media that is deliberately designed to be addictive and is driven by profit. We have heard from Members across the House about the harms, which I will not repeat. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that any future consultation and subsequent legislation is based on the foundations of health and safety by design, and when can we expect the legislation to come into force?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Member is right; we want to ensure that this is about not only safety but enhancing the wellbeing of children, looking particularly at issues of mental health and anxiety. That will absolutely be at the heart of the consultation and any future proposals.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is 20 years since I co-authored the first code of practice on new forms of content on mobile. In the intervening 20 years, we have seen the proliferation of over-the-top services that bypass the network-level filters that we introduced as part of that code of practice. However, social media does not neatly fall into a categorisation of either age-inappropriate or harmful, so will the Secretary of State please commit to working with the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, which is working already to gather evidence on the harm to ensure that our conclusions from this consultation are evidence led?

Liz Kendall: Yes.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): This is the final question.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I am so happy that the Government are finally waking up to this issue and how serious it is, and that there is a cross-party consensus on the need to ban social media for under-16s. Social media platforms are designed to be addictive; we all know that. Most adults cannot control themselves, so how can we expect our children to? Enforcement will be the key issue, so would the Secretary of State please give her views on what she thinks enforcement could look like and on what she has already learned from our Australian friends, who are leading the charge on this with legislation?

Liz Kendall: I hope that the action we took last week on Grok shows that the enforcement of existing laws is absolutely paramount. We will definitely be learning from the experience in Australia, not just about how the policy was developed and the definition of social media there, but about enforcement. I am more than happy to report back to the House on that.

Many colleagues have been unable to get on this statement, and I am sure that there are others who want to feed in their views. I really do want to hear from colleagues. We will certainly be organising events in the House for colleagues to come together, and they can also contact the Department to put forward the views of their constituents. That is my job: I am a member of this Labour Government but also the Secretary of State for the country. I believe that, when we get this right, it will be a legacy of which we can be proud.

Sarah Pochin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to my perfectly reasonable question, the Secretary of State said I had "got this wrong". She did not explain in what way exactly I had got it wrong. Does she not agree that all Members in this Chamber—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. When the hon. Lady makes a point of order, she should address it to the Chair, not to the Secretary of State. The issue she has raised is not a point of order and it is not a matter for the Chair. I am sure she can follow it up with the Secretary of State outside the Chamber or in writing.

Chinese Embassy

2.2 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I would like to make a statement on the national security considerations of China's proposal to build a new embassy at the Royal Mint Court in Tower Hamlets. I know that Members will by now be well aware that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has approved China's planning application. Some right hon. Members have been briefed by my security officials, and some Members will have seen the statement from the Intelligence and Security Committee, as well as the letter from the director general of MI5 and the director of GCHQ.

The decision made by the Secretary of State for Housing was an independent, quasi-judicial planning one. It concludes a process that began in 2018 when the then Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, gave formal diplomatic consent for China to use the Royal Mint site for its new embassy, subject to planning permission, and welcomed it as China's largest overseas investment. Given the potential for legal proceedings, it would not be appropriate to give a commentary on the grounds for the decision. In its decision, MHCLG notes that

"the package of security measures proposed would be proportionate to the proposed use of the site"

and that

"no bodies with responsibility for national security, including HO and FCDO, have raised concerns or objected to the proposal on the basis of the proximity of the cables or other underground infrastructure."

I know that some Members have raised concerns regarding the security implications of the new embassy, and it is on that issue that I want to update the House. National security is the first duty of any Government, and that is why the intelligence and security agencies have been absolutely integral to this process. The ISC, which is the Committee entrusted and empowered by this House to scrutinise the Government's most sensitive information, has today released its judgment on the security implications. I thank it for its work, and I am reassured by the depth of its scrutiny throughout this process. In its statement, the ISC concluded,

"On the basis of the evidence we have received, and having carefully reviewed the nuanced national security considerations, the Committee has concluded that, taken as a whole, the national security concerns that arise can be satisfactorily mitigated."

I can confirm today that the Home Office has received a letter from the director of GCHQ and director general of MI5 that makes it clear that

"as with any foreign embassy on UK soil, it is not realistic to expect to be able wholly to eliminate each and every potential risk…However, the collective work across UK intelligence agencies and HMG departments to formulate a package of national security mitigations for the site has been, in our view, expert, professional and proportionate."

They judge that

"the package of mitigations deals acceptably with a wide range of sensitive national security issues, including cabling."

Indeed, they note that the consolidation has "clear security advantages".

Our security services have over a century of experience of managing security matters relating to foreign embassies on UK soil. This Government, and the last, have been aware of the potential for a new embassy at this site since the Chinese Government completed the purchase in 2018. The issues that continue to be raised in media reports are not new to the Government or the intelligence community, and an extensive range of measures have been developed to protect national security. We have acted to increase the resilience of cables in the area through an extensive series of measures to protect sensitive data, and I can confirm that, contrary to reporting, the Government had seen the unredacted plans for the embassy and the Government have agreed with China that the publicly accessible forecourt on the embassy grounds will not have diplomatic immunity, managing the risk to the public.

Based on all that, and given our extensive work on this matter, I am content that any risks are being appropriately managed, but let me be clear: the build also brings clear national security advantages. Following extensive negotiations led by this Government, the Chinese Government have agreed to consolidate their seven current sites in London into one site. That is why, following deep scrutiny by security officials, the Government have been able to conclude that we can manage the security concerns related to the embassy.

Although there are those who have, and who will no doubt continue to have, concerns about the embassy, it is a fundamental and normal part of international relations that countries agree to establish embassies in each other's capitals. While some would stick their heads in the sand and ignore the obvious need to engage, this Government are engaging with China confidently and pragmatically, recognising the complexity of the world as it is and challenging where we need to, because for our security, our economy and our climate, China matters. To be clear, this is not a question of balancing economic and security considerations; we do not trade off security for economic access.

Of course we recognise that China poses a series of threats to UK national security, from cyber-attacks, foreign interference and espionage targeting our democratic institutions to the transnational repression of Hongkongers and China's support for Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. That is why I announced a package in November to protect our national security, which set out the range of work the Government are taking forward to strengthen the security of our democracy against the threat from foreign interference and espionage. It is also why, for example, in December 2025 the UK sanctioned two China-based companies that have carried out cyber-attacks against the UK and its allies; why we have completed work to remove Chinese-made surveillance equipment from sensitive sites; why the UK has sanctioned 50 Chinese companies under the Russia sanctions regulations as part of our efforts to take action against entities operating in third countries over economic and military support for Russia; and why I will be hosting a closed event in February with vice-chancellors to discuss the risks posed by foreign interference from a range of states and to signpost our plans to further increase the sector's resilience.

Taking a robust approach to our national security also includes engaging with China. Under the previous Government, engagement with China had ground to a halt. That made us no safer; indeed, it is only through engagement that we can directly challenge China on its malicious activity. By taking tough steps to keep us secure, we enable ourselves to co-operate in other areas, including in pursuit of safe economic opportunities in

the UK's interest, and in areas such as organised immigration crime, narcotics trafficking, and serious and organised crime. This is what our allies do and this is what we are doing: delivering for the public, putting more money in their pockets and keeping them safe through hard-headed, risk-based engagement with the world's most consequential powers.

I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for the ongoing attention that they give to protecting the UK's national security. China has posed, and will continue to pose, threats to our national security. However, following detailed consideration of all possible risks around the new embassy by expert officials across Government, I am assured that the UK's national security is protected. Let me assure this House and the country: upholding national security is the first duty of Government and we will continue to take all measures necessary to defeat these threats. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.11 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Let us be in no doubt about the threat that China poses: MI5 has warned that Chinese intelligence is actively trying to disrupt our democracy; bounties have been placed on the heads of Hong Kong campaigners; Members of this House have been directly spied on by China; China actively supports Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; and China is infiltrating universities and businesses to acquire sensitive technology, as well as stealing it directly. Yet this Government have failed again and again to take the action needed.

This Government failed to place China in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. This Government failed to properly support the case against two men accused of spying for China on MPs in this House. And now this Government have shamefully approved plans for a Chinese super-embassy. Despite everything China has done on our soil, China has been rewarded with exactly what it wants: a super-embassy that will be a base for espionage, not just in the UK but likely across Europe as well.

The Government have capitulated to Chinese demands. The Prime Minister himself said to President Xi at the G20 in November 2024,

> "You raised the Chinese embassy building in London when we spoke on the telephone and we have since taken action by calling in that application."

In other words, the Prime Minister did precisely what President Xi told him to do and then he faithfully reported back afterwards.

The decision has serious implications. Last week, *The Telegraph* published plans showing 208 secret rooms and a hidden chamber just 1 metre from critical data cables. Our economy depends on those cables, so what assurance can the Minister give that those cables will be secure from Chinese interference?

In paragraph 97 of his decision notice, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who made the decision, admits that he had not even seen unredacted plans before making his decision. How can he possibly have assessed the risk, as the decision maker, without having seen those plans? He also admits in paragraph 13 that he did not follow our suggestion to hold section 321 closed hearings to take evidence. Once again, how can the Secretary of State possibly have taken the decision in an informed way without having personally assessed the risk? It gets worse, because paragraph 8.63 onwards of the inspector's report admits that China can legally refuse to allow UK authorities to inspect the building during or after construction—so we are going to have no idea what is being built in there in any event.

The Minister referred to the ISC. He said that someone in Government has seen unredacted plans, although we know that that was not the decision maker, the Secretary of State. Has the ISC seen those unredacted plans? It has been suggested to me that it has not. The ISC says that the risks can be mitigated, but mere mitigation is not enough. Mitigation entails only a partial exclusion of risk, and nothing is said about how to manage future developments in China's capabilities—developments that we cannot anticipate today. The Minister for some reason forgot to quote this, but the ISC also says that the Government process was not robust enough. It says that it lacked clarity on national security, that the key reports lacked the necessary detail and that the Government do not have the "dexterity" required to handle China. Does the Minister accept those elements of the ISC report?

Others share those concerns. A US Government source was recently quoted as saying that the UK had "downplayed" the risks. Last week, the White House was reported to be "deeply concerned", and the chair of the US House of Representatives China committee says that he opposes the plans on the grounds that Americans' data may be "at risk". Does the Minister agree with our American allies?

It is clear that this decision is timed to be shortly before a planned trip by the Prime Minister to China. He apparently intends to seek some kind of economic deal with China to fix the mess he and the Chancellor have created here, with jobs down and unemployment up since the election. From its timing and from President Xi's clear demands, this planning consent appears to be linked to the Prime Minister's imminent visit and to the economic deal. It seems clear to me that the Government are trading national security for economic links, and that this is a shameless capitulation to China's demands.

China is spying on us. It is subverting our democracy, it is repressing people on our soil and it is stealing our technology. Is the truth not this? In those circumstances, giving them what they want is simply the wrong thing to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the Minister, I gently remind shadow Ministers and spokesmen that there is a time limit, which the right hon. Gentleman exceeded somewhat.

Dan Jarvis: I listened carefully to what the shadow Home Secretary had to say. There was a glaring gap in his analysis: he did not seem to want to say anything about the level of challenge that we inherited from the previous Government in the laydown of the diplomatic estate. He did not want to accept that, as with other countries, there is a degree of risk that has to be managed. I explained that very carefully and made sure that he had the opportunity to come in this morning for a briefing. I was also at pains to stress in my opening remarks that although, of course, balanced views have

[Dan Jarvis]

to be taken about these things, there are national security advantages to the proposals that have been agreed. I know that he and other Conservative Members do not want to agree with that, but I think it is important that we debate—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Nonsense.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman says it is nonsense. He is entitled to his opinion, as are this Government. I hope that he takes the opportunity to look carefully at what the director general of MI5 and the director of GCHQ have to say. I also say to him and to some, but not all, Conservative Members that this is a moment when I would have hoped we could discuss these things in a sensible and reasonable way. That is how we should approach matters relating to national security.

I do not think it would be such a bad thing to hear a bit of humility from some Conservative Members, not least because the attack that we heard from the shadow Home Secretary and which other hon. Members have already engaged in might have landed a bit fairer and a bit truer if they had not spent 14 years in government flitting between hot and cold, neither consistent nor credible on what is, after all, one of the most complex geopolitical challenges that we face. The Conservatives went from golden age to ice age, and from welcoming China with open arms to choosing to disengage almost entirely with the world's largest nation, which, along with Hong Kong, is our second-largest trading partner. It is convenient for some Conservative Members to forget that it was Boris Johnson, as Conservative Foreign Secretary in 2018, who granted consent for the Royal Mint site to be used as diplomatic premises. He said he was proud to

"welcome the fact this is China's largest overseas diplomatic investment."

That was a Conservative Foreign Secretary. In recent times, we have seen Conservative MPs U-turn on the original position of their Government and take a different approach.

This Government will ensure that the approach we take is underpinned by consistent and pragmatic engagement with China, but we will do so a way that absolutely ensures our national security. The House will have heard the important contributions that have been made by the ISC, and the conclusion that it has drawn. The House and the country will have heard the comments from the directors general. These are important contributions. Nobody should underestimate how seriously the Government have taken this matter. We have engaged with it incredibly closely. The intelligence and security agencies have been involved in the process from the outset. I can give an assurance to those who have doubts that we will, of course, continue to monitor this process carefully, but we believe that this is the right judgment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I respectfully say to the Minister that that was an incredibly long answer—indeed, longer even than the question. Perhaps questions and responses need to be briefer.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): Many of my constituents will continue to have serious concerns about the proposed new embassy in my constituency. These include concerns about China's human rights record, espionage and, in particular, local disruption. A development of this scale would cause significant disruption for local residents, especially those in Royal Mint Court, who now face considerable uncertainty, including privacy concerns and the fear of losing their homes. What assurances can the Government provide to my constituents, particularly those residents, regarding their concerns? Can the Minister also say more about the national security concerns and how they will be satisfactorily mitigated?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is an assiduous Member of the House and represents her constituents incredibly seriously. She will understand that, for obvious reasons, there are limits to what I can say about the specific measures and mitigations that will be put in place, but I am grateful to her for entirely understandably raising the concerns that some of her constituents have expressed. I assure her that we will want to work closely with her to minimise any disruption to local residents, and of course I would be happy to discuss these matters with her further.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement and for the time his officials took to brief me earlier today.

The Government's decision to approve plans for the Chinese mega-embassy represents far more than a planning matter. It shows that Ministers have learned very little from the evidence exposed in recent months of Chinese spying efforts to infiltrate British politics and this House. Throughout this stunted process, the Liberal Democrats have consistently called these plans out for what they are: a mistake. The Government know that the decision they have made today will further amplify China's surveillance efforts here in the UK, endangering the security of our data. Planning conditions are meaningless without proper enforcement. Given the unprecedented security concerns surrounding this site, how will the Government ensure that planning conditions are rigorously monitored and enforced, particularly in regard to the underground cables that the current plans come dangerously close to?

No amount of planning conditions can address the fundamental problem. The embassy does not clean Chinese officials of their human rights abuses. It is shocking that China has placed bounties on the heads of democracy activists from Hong Kong who live in the UK. That type of interference and intimidation in our country is totally unacceptable, so in the light of this decision, will the Government include all Chinese officials, Hong Kong special administrative region officials and Chinese Communist party-linked organisations on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme?

Beyond the security and diplomatic concerns, there are fundamental questions about our democratic freedoms. The previous Conservative Government attacked our fundamental right to protest, and this Labour Government have continued to erode those freedoms. As a democratic society, we must protect the right to protest peacefully,

including near embassies and including for Hongkongers living in the UK. Will the Government continue to guarantee the right to protest, even as this embassy moves ahead?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, not least because she came along in good faith this morning and attended the briefing at our invitation. I hope she found it helpful. I am acutely conscious that there are technical details that the House will understand I am not able to get into, and that is why we took the opportunity to brief the hon. Lady and other right hon. Members this morning. I am afraid that I do not agree with her analysis of our understanding of the threat. I referred earlier to the significant number of measures that we have taken in recent times to protect our national security.

The hon. Lady also asked me about the cables, so let me take this opportunity to update her and the House on that specific point. The allegations that have been much discussed in the media are not new to us or to the security agencies. Our intelligence services have scrutinised the plans, and an extensive range of measures have been developed and are being implemented to protect national security, including putting in place additional resilience measures to protect sensitive data—

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What does that mean?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member asks me what that means. I hope he will understand that it would be unwise of me to get into the technical detail of the mitigations that we are seeking to put in place. Surely he understands that the Security Minister is not able to get into the guts and the detail of precisely what we are going to do—*[Interruption.]* If he is just patient for—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am simply not going to have this. There is too much chuntering, and indeed yelling, across the Chamber from a sedentary position. The Minister might like to focus on responding to the question that was asked by the Lib Dem spokesperson, not to heckling from the rest of the Chamber.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Opposition Members have made points about transparency, and it is important that I take this opportunity to give as much detail as I can, but it is important for the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) to understand that, as Security Minister, I cannot get into the detail of precisely what we are going to do, for what I thought would have been fairly obvious reasons.

Let me say to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) that the Government have been aware of the potential new embassy proposal since 2018. Our security services have been involved throughout that process, and an extensive range of measures have been developed and are being implemented to protect our national security. I can give her the assurance that she seeks that an extensive range of measures have been developed and are being implemented to protect our national security.

The hon. Lady also—quite unfairly, I have to say—criticised the Government's belief in the right to protest. I do not think that that is a fair critique. The Government take very seriously the right of people to protest in our country. It is a cornerstone of our democracy and the Government will always ensure that people have the ability to protest in a peaceful way.

The hon. Lady asked, entirely reasonably, about the foreign influence registration scheme. I am waiting for Conservative Members to ask me about that as well. She will know that FIRS is still a new scheme. It came into force relatively recently, on 1 July, and more effectively on 1 October. She will understand that any decision with regard to FIRS will be brought to Parliament in the usual way.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement, which is of course complex and raises significant issues that are shared on both sides of the House. He has referred to the issue of national security, and I fully appreciate that he is unable to talk about the mitigations that have been put in place. I am grateful that he has re-emphasised that point a number of times. As part of the evergreen nature of assessing the risks that we face, both during the building of the embassy, if it continues, and beyond, is he able to assure the House that, wherever possible, he will keep this place updated about any change in the risk assessments and that, if a more detailed analysis is required, the ISC will be fully apprised of that?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to say that these are complex decisions, and right to make the point that there are significant restrictions on what can be said in this Chamber. I can give him the assurances that he seeks. Ultimately, of course, it is for the Intelligence and Security Committee to decide what lines of inquiry it wants to proceed with, but we have given it close assurances of the work being done, and it has had access to material, so that it can take its own view. I make a commitment to him and to the vice-chair of the Committee, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), that we will continue to engage with the Committee in a constructive way, and that when we feel that it is necessary or appropriate to update the House further, we will of course do that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the vice-chair of the ISC.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): As you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House would expect, the Intelligence and Security Committee has investigated the security implications of this proposal, and specifically whether the intelligence community had sufficient opportunity to feed in any security concerns, and whether Ministers had the necessary information on which to base a decision. I want to quote directly from our conclusions, which represent the Committee's unanimous view:

> "On the basis of the evidence we have received, and having carefully reviewed the nuanced national security considerations, the Committee has concluded that, taken as a whole, the national security concerns that arise can be satisfactorily mitigated."

I will say, though, that we have been concerned solely with the national security perspective, not with the other arguments for or against a new embassy.

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

It has proved more difficult than it should have been to get straightforward answers to our basic questions. The process in Government does not seem to be effectively co-ordinated, or as robust as would have been expected. In particular, there was a lack of clarity about the role that national security considerations play in planning decisions. We will take those matters up further with the Government, as I know the Minister would expect.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, and to all members of his Committee. Parliament entrusts the ISC with holding Government to account, and the ISC is able to do that in a way that other right hon. and hon. Members cannot. He made two key points. First, he shared the Committee's analysis of the concerns expressed about national security. I hope that Members in all parts of the House listen carefully to what he says, and look carefully at the judgment that his Committee arrived at. Secondly, he made an important point about process, which I take seriously. I have no doubt that quite a lot can be learned from the process, and I am happy to talk with him and his Committee to identify the lessons that should be learned, and to ensure that we do things better next time.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I place on the record that I support completely what the deputy Chair of the ISC, of which I am also a member, just said. The process issue needs looking at urgently, and the deputy Chair was clear about the problems we faced. An important letter today from the GCHQ and MI5 heads to the Foreign and Home Secretaries says clearly:

"the collective work across UK intelligence agencies and HMG departments to formulate a package of national security mitigations for the site has been, in our view, expert, professional and proportionate."

Would the Minister like to comment on that?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I reiterate the points I made about process. I have a huge amount of respect for the Committee. I had the pleasure—that is how I will describe it—of appearing in front of the Committee not so long ago. I do not think it is a state secret to say that the Committee gave me a pretty tough grilling, and that is absolutely how it should be. The point he made about process is important, as is his point about the letter from the director generals. It is a rare occurrence for the director generals to make public comments. They are both extremely professional, and I have the pleasure of working with them regularly. They are both people of great integrity, and the House and the country should listen very carefully to what they have to say. They have made the point that, collectively, our security services have 100 years of experience in dealing with the challenges from foreign embassies. That is not to be remotely complacent about the nature of the threat that we face, because clearly it is very different from what it was in the past.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I do not think I am breaking the Official Secrets Act if I gently point out that when I used to chair the Intelligence and Security Committee, I repeatedly deprecated the use of the word "mitigation", because it covers such a wide range of sins, but leaving aside security considerations just this once, does the Minister accept, as he should, that this is a colossal propaganda win for totalitarian, communist China? Is there any argument that was used in favour of China getting this embassy that would not have carried exactly the same weight if totalitarian, imperialist Russia had wanted to buy this building? Would the Government have stopped Russia from doing it, and if they would have done, on what grounds?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful, as always, to the right hon. Gentleman—

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): No, you're not.

Dan Jarvis: I genuinely am, because I respect the wisdom of someone who has served in this House for many years. The right hon. Lady questions my gratitude to the right hon. Gentleman. I can give her an assurance that I have a huge amount of respect—

Esther McVey: Answer the question!

Dan Jarvis: I am answering the question. I have a huge amount of respect for Members who have served for a long time, and particularly those who have chaired the ISC. We need to find a mechanism to ensure that Members like the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) have access to some of this information, so that they can make informed comments in this House. I take his point, although I do not agree with it, about mitigations. He understands that there are limits to what I can say on the mitigations. On his substantive point, I do not agree with him that this is a win for China, not least because I could not have been clearer about the importance of the consolidation of the estate. The Government have reached an agreement with China that the existing diplomatic footprint in London will be reduced in size from seven diplomatic sites to one. I am not sure that that constitutes a particularly big win in my book—

Sir Julian Lewis: A propaganda win.

Dan Jarvis: Well, it is a statement of truth, and I think it undermines the right hon. Gentleman's argument.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Even if we accept that the national security concerns about this new embassy have been mitigated, as evidenced by the letters from the security agencies today, and even if we accept that consolidating the seven properties that China owns into one gives us a security advantage, that is still cold comfort to the Hongkongers whom I represent in Leeds South West and Morley. They still have to live with transnational repression. In the case of Chloe Cheung, she still has to live with a £100,000 bounty on her head. Of course, they now have to live in fear that this new embassy might become their prison. What assurances can the Minister give Hongkongers in my constituency and, indeed, the UK that they will be protected from the ever-lengthening arm of the Chinese Communist party?

Dan Jarvis: I do not accept the basis of the argument that my hon. Friend has made. He would be well advised to place more emphasis on the point about consolidation, because I am confident that that will deliver meaningful operational benefits; that has been

agreed by the security experts. Let me find what I hope is an important point of consensus: I am absolutely clear about how unacceptable it is for China, or any other nation for that matter, to seek to persecute individuals who are resident in the United Kingdom. The Government take these matters incredibly seriously. That is why the defending democracy taskforce, which I chair, has completed an extensive piece of work looking at transnational repression.

A number of actions have come from that piece of work, which have been routed right across Government. We take this incredibly seriously; I have met a number of people who have been the victim of TNR. It is completely unacceptable for China or anyone else to persecute people in this country. However, I ask my hon. Friend to consider the fact that we are talking about a proposal that will deliver an embassy for China at some point in the future. The Government and I have to deal with the level of threat as it is. Given the point about consolidation, I am confident that this is a proposal that we will be able to make work in the national interests of our country and all the people who live here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): While I associate myself with the wider security concerns, will the Minister forgive me if I raise a narrow point? He knows what I am going to ask, because I have asked this twice already and not had an answer. The correspondence between the Government and the Chinese reveals that the medieval monastery on the site—an important monastery called Eastminster, rather than Westminster, where we are now—will remain on inviolable Chinese territory. Any UK citizens visiting it will have to be frisked, and will effectively be in China. What reassurance can the Minister give to those who have bounties on their head—the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) mentioned them—or to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who has been sanctioned by the Chinese state? What further reassurances can the Minister give that UK citizens visiting their own heritage will not be in danger when going on to the site?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the Father of the House, who has consistently made this point; this is at least the third time that I have heard him raise it. I hope that he heard the point I made earlier—I looked at him purposefully—about the question that he asks, but let me take this opportunity to say that the bounties are completely unacceptable behaviour, and the Government will not stand for it. The point that he raised is one that I have looked at very carefully, and I responded to it earlier, in my statement.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I have been sceptical about this new embassy, but I take the points made today by Members on the Intelligence and Security Committee, as well as the response from GCHQ and MI5. I have also listened to my constituents, including the Bracknell Forest Hong Kong community, who tell me that they are concerned about the ongoing transnational repression that they are experiencing. My hon. Friend has talked a lot about the work that the Government have already done. Will he commit to continuing to engage with the Hong Kong community, so that we can continue to adapt our response to the emerging threats that they experience?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has consistently raised points on behalf of his constituents, and I can give him the assurances that he seeks. Let me say to him and the House that we condemn the Hong Kong police's efforts to coerce, intimidate, harass and harm those living in the UK and overseas. These acts of repression will not be tolerated in our country. Along with other ministerial colleagues, I have taken the opportunity to raise these concerns directly with the Chinese authorities, reaffirming that the extraterritorial application of Hong Kong's national security law is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in the UK. I can give him the assurances that he seeks, and I am very happy to discuss this matter with him further.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Hongkongers and other Chinese dissidents in the UK will be rightly concerned about this news. I want to make it completely clear that the Liberal Democrats have serious concerns that this project will enhance China's ability to conduct transnational repression against Britons and Hongkongers on British soil. What is the timeline for closing the seven existing Chinese consulate buildings, once Royal Mint Court is opened? Will the Government publish the 2018 note verbale confirming that the embassy was contingent on planning approval, ensuring that the Government did not prejudge the application? Finally, paragraph 62 of the Secretary of State's permission letter states that

"lawful embassy use of the site"

would give no cause for worry about interference with the sensitive cabling that runs adjacent to the secret basement rooms. After China's proven record of unlawful espionage against MPs and British institutions, does the Minister agree that this is a catastrophic misjudgment, and that we have no hope of our laws being observed by the Chinese Communist party?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. When questions run to two pages and take a minute, perhaps Members might think about cutting them down slightly.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman has expressed an opinion, and he is entirely within his rights to do that, but I hope he understands that I am also entirely within my rights to point out that his opinion is not backed up by the intelligence services or the security agencies, which have looked incredibly carefully at the detail of the proposal. He states baldly that the proposed embassy site will deliver additional capability to China, but I again make the point about consolidation, and about the security advantages that we think will accrue from this proposal. I hope the hon. Gentleman understands that I will not get into the timeline today, not least because I have to be incredibly careful about what I say, given the likelihood of further legal proceedings, but I am very happy to discuss these matters further with him and his Liberal Democrat colleagues.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I want first to make it clear that I do not agree with this decision. It will have a chilling effect on Tibetans, Hongkongers and Uyghurs, and other Chinese people

[Alex Sobel]

who merely dissent from the regime in Beijing. I have three questions about the application. First, what guarantees do the Government have that the seven other sites will be closed and disposed of? Will the new site be built by British construction companies hiring workers in the usual way, or by Chinese construction companies bringing in their own labour? What forms of building inspection control will be present during and after the construction?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend has a long and proud track record in this area, and I listen carefully to what he has to say. He will forgive me if I disagree with his analysis of the chilling effect of this decision, not least given the points about consolidation and the security advantage. He has asked about the seven sites. Let me give him and the House an absolute assurance that that is part of the deal agreed with China. The deal is that the seven diplomatic sites forming the existing diplomatic footprint in London will be consolidated in the individual site.

In terms of the precise details about construction and other activities, my hon. Friend will understand that there are agreed procedures for these kinds of activities. I think a point was made earlier about the relationship with the United States and the concerns that they might have expressed—which I do not recognise—but it is useful to note that China built a new embassy in the United States not so long ago, so this is not a particularly uncommon occurrence. However, I give my hon. Friend an assurance that we will keep a close eye on the points he makes.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that I raise these issues as a sanctioned individual. Not only am I sanctioned, but my whole family is sanctioned, I have been trolled by operatives from the security service of China, and I am under constant watch by them, all the way through. On the basis of that, I simply ask him this. When the Secretary of State issued his letter, he said—this was quoted earlier—that the concern about cables should not present a problem for "a lawful embassy use". Nothing about the Chinese is lawful here in the United Kingdom. Is it lawful for them to attack Hongkongers who have fled here? Is it lawful for pop-up police stations to go on pulling people in? Is it lawful for them to place bounties on people's heads? Is it lawful for them to be asking British citizens living next door to Hongkongers to bring them into the embassy, so they may collect their bounty? These are all unlawful acts. The truth is that this Chinese embassy, with its 200 extra staff, will increase that. In every place where China has put more people in its embassy, transnational repression has increased. Does the Minister not agree with that?

Dan Jarvis: Try though I might, there was never going to be a scenario where I would be able to satisfy the right hon. Gentleman today in what I have been able to say. He and I have had exchanges on these matters on many occasions. It is completely intolerable and unacceptable that he and members of his family have been sanctioned, and he knows the Government's position on that.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of law. UK law is sacrosanct, and where anyone—whoever they might be—falls short of it, they will be held to account by this Government. He made a specific point about the potential for an increase in staff. Again, there are clear procedures that rest with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office: where a foreign nation seeks to bring additional staff resource into a country, that all has to go through the normal diplomatic channels and has to be agreed by the Foreign Secretary.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman does not support these proposals. I understand that he has strong views, which I have a lot of respect for, but I hope he can respect the fact that we have engaged seriously with this proposal. The security services have been involved from the outset. Ultimately, Government have to take a view. We have taken the view that the national security implications can be mitigated. We have also taken the view—and I know that some Opposition Members do not agree with it—that there could well be some security advantages as a consequence of these proposals. I undertake to keep him and other Members up to date, and if he wishes to discuss it outside this Chamber, I would be happy to do that.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Will the Minister confirm that the UK Government are happy with rewarding and emboldening a nation that has one of the worst human rights records, that conducts espionage on these islands and in our Parliament, that has imprisoned a UK national—Jimmy Lai—on trumped-up charges, that has committed crimes against humanity against the Uyghurs and that is the single most important enabler of Russia's illegal war machine against Ukraine and its civilian population, which we as parliamentarians have stood united against?

Dan Jarvis: I am sorry to say that I do not agree with the framing of the hon. Gentleman's question. While he is entirely right to raise specific concerns, this is not about rewarding China.

Chris Law: It is.

Dan Jarvis: It is not. It is about the importance of engaging confidently and pragmatically, in a way that will enable us to take opportunities where they present themselves and where it is in our national security. As I made clear in my earlier remarks, that is not just about economic co-operation; there are other areas where we need to co-operate with China. I referenced three in my opening comments: organised immigration crime, serious organised crime and narcotics trafficking. Those are important areas where we need to work with China. Ultimately, the most important thing is that we safeguard our national security. That is why we have worked incredibly hard to look carefully at the detail of this proposal and to make sure we have the right mitigations in place.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister explain how, by giving China the embassy it wants, the Government are demonstrating that they are holding China responsible for—in his words—"unacceptable behaviour" that they will not stand for?

Dan Jarvis: In part, it is because of the reduction in the diplomatic estate from seven sites to one.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): So the Chinese communist regime sanctions Members of this House, spies on Members of this House and carries out more cyber-attacks than any other country. The Minister admits that they are a national security threat, yet the Government think it is a good idea to kowtow to the Beijing bullies and allow this mega-embassy. If the decision is in the national economic interest, could the Minister confirm that some British steel might be used in this Chinese embassy? Can he guarantee that it is in the national security interests of British citizens?

Dan Jarvis: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting the clip that he no doubt will be posting on social media in the not-too-distant future; that is up to him. He seems to operate in a world that is quite selective in the decisions it seeks to make. I looked over to him earlier when I referenced the requirement for co-operation on areas such as organised immigration crime. I do not know whether he thinks that is a good thing. I do not know whether he or his party have a policy about whether, given the concerns that are shared across this House, we should be engaging with China on matters relating to immigration. He will understand, I hope, that as part of the work to stop the small boat crossings in the channel, it is necessary to engage with our near neighbours, but it is also necessary to engage internationally. I am not clear whether he thinks that is a good thing, and I am not clear whether he thinks we should engage with China on those matters.

What I am clear about is that this Government will engage pragmatically, do the right thing and secure the economic opportunities, but fundamentally, we will always make sure that we underpin our national security. The hon. Gentleman's point about British steel is a fair one. This Government will always want to support UK-based manufacturers and UK-based industry. To end on a point of consensus, let us always look for opportunities to buy British.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am hopeful that we can find consensus that questions and answers need to be shorter. I intend to keep the Minister here until all Members have been satisfied this afternoon, but we do need to speed up.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): There is a pattern of behaviour here: the failure to act meaningfully over Jimmy Lai, the mysterious collapse of the Chinese spy case and now this abject national humiliation. Let's call this what it is: this is appeasement of communist China for economic gain. We tried that in the 1930s, and look where it got us. Why are this Labour Government kowtowing to China—a communist regime that imprisons 1 million Uyghur Muslims in concentration camps for having the temerity to believe in God?

Dan Jarvis: In one sense, I can agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there is a pattern of behaviour; he is right about that. The pattern of behaviour is doing the right thing and making sure that we safeguard our national security.

Mr Francois *indicated dissent.*

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman might roll his eyes, but he was a Minister in the previous Government, and he has served in this House for a number of years. He knows that under his Conservative Government there was a complete lack of consistency with regard to our policy on China. This is a significant geostrategic challenge. In the end, Government have to make decisions and have a clear-eyed policy. Anyone who thinks that we should not be engaging with China is naive.

Mr Francois: Appeasement.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman uses language that I think is inappropriate, unhelpful and inaccurate. I have made the point about consolidation, about the national security advantages and about this Government's commitment to securing our national interests. Let me say one final thing. He is right to raise the case of Jimmy Lai. He knows the Government's clear commitment that Jimmy Lai should be released immediately.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the Minister believe that the approval of this Chinese mega-embassy makes the British people safer?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman is very experienced from his own time in government, and he will know that difficult decisions have to be made. It is my judgment that, ultimately, this is the right way to proceed and that we have to engage with China for the reasons I have explained. Ultimately, nothing—nothing—will prevent this Government from ensuring our national security. That is why we have progressed this proposal incredibly carefully and made sure we have the right mitigations in place.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Last week, I made it clear that any hostile intelligence service would struggle to find a better location for espionage than the now approved Chinese mega-embassy. What assessment has been made of the risk that this site could be used for surveillance, intimidation or coercion of critics of the oppressive communist regime who are living in the UK? How do Government justify a decision that is both shameful and reckless in its disregard for national security?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the points the hon. Lady has made, but of course, we are already dealing with those challenges. Some Members seem to think that we do not have to mitigate and manage those risks at the moment. We do. There are those who think—and it is an entirely reasonable position if people want to take it—that the situation could get worse with the agreement of this embassy. As I have tried to explain, because of the mitigations we have put in place and the consolidation of the diplomatic estate, there are clear national security advantages as a consequence of this proposal. She does not perhaps agree now, but I hope she understands that the Government take these matters incredibly seriously and will do everything they can to safeguard our national security.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): China is notoriously transactional in its international relations, so what do we get in return?

Dan Jarvis: I always listen carefully to the right hon. Gentleman, not least because I seem to remember that he was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Prime Minister, Lord Cameron, whose Government had quite a different relationship with China from the one we have now. He will remember that very well, as do I. While I am grateful for his advice, I hope he has borne in mind the points I made about the consistency of the previous Government, including the one he served in.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): In the light of what you have said, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope that you see this as short question and I hope that I get a short answer.

Does the Minister know if the security services have any concerns at all about the proposed new Chinese super-embassy—yes or no?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Lady has seen the letter that has been published today by the director general—

Esther McVey: Yes or no?

Dan Jarvis: I do not know how much time the right hon. Lady spends thinking about matters relating to national security or understands the nature of the—

Esther McVey: That is condescending!

Dan Jarvis: Not at all—I am seeking to explain to her that this Government, like the last Government, manage a range of national security risks. That would be the case whatever decision was taken around this proposal.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I am going to ask again: does this make the British public safer—yes or no?

Dan Jarvis: Fundamentally, Government are there to make the British people safer. For the reasons that I have explained, I am confident that this is the right decision from a national security perspective.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Is not the plain truth that this was a predetermined political decision from the moment that the political decision was taken to call it in, when the Government were faced with due process because the council had refused the planning application? After all that has gone on, does this not simply bring the whole planning process into disrepute? London's Labour group has condemned the decision, so is not one of its members right when he says:

"wrong embassy, in the wrong place, at the wrong time"?

Dan Jarvis: I do not agree with the hon. and learned Gentleman's analysis. I have been crystal clear that people are entitled to their opinions and will have different views. What sensible members of the public will be interested in is what the security professionals—the security agencies, the intelligence services, those people who really understand the nature of the risk and the threat—have said and what they think, and I have been clear about what they think and about the way in which we have approached the process, which I believe will deliver national security benefits for our country.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Let me point out that when the previous Conservative Government proclaimed a "golden era" of relations with China—when David Cameron welcomed President Xi for a state visit in 2015, as Theresa May was championing Huawei for our 5G infrastructure—the security services supported their then Prime Minister; or they were brought into line, which I expect is what happens under these circumstances. Can we ensure that we are not using the security services for propaganda purposes? I predict that in the fullness of history, we will look back at this decision with great regret.

Dan Jarvis: I know that the hon. Gentleman gives a lot of thought and dedication to these matters. He reflected on the engagement that had taken place under the previous Government, under former Prime Minister David Cameron. The hon. Gentleman will understand, because he thinks about these things very carefully, that there is obviously a need to engage with China. President Trump will be visiting China in the next couple of months. President Macron has been, I think, three times over the past years. Prime Minister Carney has been there recently. Serious, grown-up people understand the need to have engagement and to work closely with countries like China. Sensible people will get that and will also understand that sometimes that involves tough choices. This Government do not shy away from making the tough choices. I accept the challenge that the hon. Gentleman offers—that the decision will be judged over the long term—but I think that this is the right thing to do and I am pleased that the security services agree.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The Minister says that China continues to pose a risk, and yet the Government today welcome this Trojan horse of an embassy into the heart of our capital. Consolidation helps China, not us, and planning conditions deal with the establishment but not the actual, real use inside the building in years to come. This has been asked many times before, but I ask again: are the British people safer as a result of this embassy—yes or no?

Dan Jarvis: I do not agree with the hon. Lady's analysis with regard to consolidation. This Government will always work to ensure that the British public are safer—that is our job, our abiding mission and the first responsibility of Government. I am confident that the decision that has been taken, with the mitigations in place, will deliver good national security outcomes for our country.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Government's decision to approve China's spy embassy is utterly wrong and puts national security at risk. Now that the embassy has been approved, if—or rather when—we get evidence that China is using the embassy for surveillance, torture or other inappropriate means, will the Government guarantee to close that embassy?

Dan Jarvis: As with any embassy, either in this country or around the world—let us not be naive about the fact that Britain has embassies right around the world—the Vienna convention lays down the way in which different Governments should behave with regard to the conduct of their diplomatic presences. We take our responsibilities under the Vienna convention very seriously, and we expect every other country, including China, to do the same.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister will be pleased to know that I am not going to ask him about the FIRS, but he quoted extensively from the weighty tome of the planning approval letter. It says that the Secretary of State

"notes that no bodies with responsibility for national security, including HO and FCDO, have raised concerns",

but he did not mention that it goes on to say that the Secretary of State

"considers that the lack of objection from these bodies on this issue carries significant weight".

Given that extensive measures had to be put in place to protect sensitive data, will he explain why neither the Home Office not the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office put in any objections to the proximity of the data cables and their vulnerabilities? On the issue of the consolidation of the consular buildings, last week the Government informed me that they had no record of how many properties within London or within the UK are owned by the Chinese state, so how will they keep track on other buildings that are used unofficially by the Chinese state?

Dan Jarvis: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman has not asked me about the FIRS—I have a very good response for him that I will not be able to give now. He is not quite right to say that I quoted extensively from the planning document. I did not—I referenced it only very fleetingly and then explained why that was the case. His key point is about the points that have been brought forward by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. No specific objections were raised by both those Departments because they had both satisfied themselves that the mitigations could be put in place to safeguard against the risk that might be faced. That is the reason.

Point of Order

3.6 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In written parliamentary question 99967, I asked the Department of Health and Social Care to publish training modules and guidance related to first cousin marriage and genetic risk. The Minister replied that these materials existed, but would not be published to this House or more widely. In written parliamentary question 102870, I asked the Minister if he would place those training modules in the Library of the House of Commons, and the Minister said there were no plans to do so. This is astonishing since that answer came after a freedom of information request to NHS England, which had already placed those very documents in the public domain. Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how a Minister might come to this House and explain why, yet again, Parliament has been denied information that was in fact releasable, as you have warned against on many occasions?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for advance notice of his point of order. He will know that, as Chair, I am not responsible for the answers that Ministers give to written parliamentary questions, although he might also know that the Procedure Committee is currently holding an inquiry into this very issue. I encourage him to provide evidence and to raise his concerns with that Committee.

Glaucoma Care (England)

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

3.8 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the detection, treatment and monitoring of glaucoma by optometrists in England; to make provision about the full integration of optometry and ophthalmology services for the purpose of glaucoma care in England; and for connected purposes.

I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am a practising NHS optometrist. I also thank the Minister for Care for coming to the Chamber for this valuable debate.

As a practising optometrist of many years, one of the heartaches of the role is this: during a routine examination, I can detect a condition that will forever change the life of the person who is sitting in my chair, and the patient is blissfully unaware of it. That is exactly what glaucoma does—it changes lives quietly, and often without warning. Glaucoma is known as the thief of sight, and for a very good reason. It damages the optic nerve at the back of the eye, with each nerve fibre representing a different point in the visual field. Because the loss begins in the peripheral vision, people often do not realise that anything is wrong until it is too late.

If Members would like a glimpse of what an advanced glaucoma sufferer sees, may I ask them to cover one eye completely and, with the other eye, to look through an aperture created by their hands and touch their fingertips to their palms? As the condition progresses, the aperture gets smaller and smaller and smaller, until eventually nothing is left. Imagine trying to navigate a busy high street, to cross a road or simply to move safely around one's own home.

This is not simply theoretical; let me give the House two brief but very real examples from my experience. I saw a woman who on two separate occasions was hit by a car from the side while driving her own car, before she finally came in for an eye test. She was unaware that there was a problem, because she could see number plates and road signs perfectly. What she could not see was the side of her vision eroding.

Another heartbreaking experience when a pensioner came to me with a handbag packed with what looked like her life savings. Cash in hand, she explained that she would spend whatever it took if I could just give her a pair of glasses that would allow her to see her two loves: her love of painting and her grandchildren. Unfortunately, no amount of money would be able to restore her sight, because glaucoma, as well as being silent, is usually irreversible.

Glaucoma is the leading cause of preventable blindness in the UK. Over 700,000 people are affected by it, and, even more concerningly, more than half of them are undiagnosed. That is 350,000 people walking and driving around, not knowing. It could be any one of us, or someone we love or work with. Indeed, a former Liberal Democrat Member of this House, Paul Tyler, was not diagnosed until a routine eye test.

In its early stages, glaucoma rarely has symptoms, and there are rarely any warning signs—just a silent, slow theft. By the time it is noticed, the damage is usually permanent, and the loss has far-reaching consequences. People lose not only their sight, but their independence and their ability to drive, read, cook and even leave their house. Falls increase and isolation grows, and then come the emotional and mental health impacts: fear, depression and the loss of identity.

Furthermore, with an ageing population, we face a growing crisis. Glaucoma cases are expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades, with a growth rate that outstrips the ageing population. A study from 2017 suggests that over the next 20 years, glaucoma cases will rise by 44%. That is hundreds of thousands more people who will need care, follow-up and support, and I fear that data will prove to be an underestimate.

Let me be blunt. Patients are losing their sight not because care does not exist, but because the pathway is broken and the follow-up is delayed. I recently saw a patient who was referred to the hospital and diagnosed with glaucoma. That bit was absolutely fine—the initial appointment happened—but the follow-up was postponed and then they missed an appointment. This meant that, by the time they came to see me again a year later, they had lost a significant amount of their visual field, to such an extent that even their central vision—their acuity—was affected. That anecdotal example corroborates the findings of major chains such as Specsavers. The problem is that current waiting list data provides a measure only of first appointments, not of the ongoing care that is vital to chronic conditions like glaucoma. We need published data on follow-up waiting times, because that is where sight is being lost.

Here is the reality. Hospital ophthalmology is one of the largest out-patient specialities in the NHS, with 8.9 million appointments a year in England between 2023 and 2024. It is estimated that glaucoma care accounts for about 20% of all hospital eye service appointments, with around 1 million visits annually across England alone. In 2024-25, it was reported that 600,000 people were on a hospital waiting list for an ophthalmology appointment. However, the ongoing care, such as the need for regular planned follow-ups for glaucoma patients, is often overlooked, with the numbers not hitting the headlines like those waiting for an initial assessment or surgery. NHS hospitals cannot carry this load alone.

Thankfully, this is where the Government's own NHS 10-year plan—in particular its ambition to shift care out of hospitals and into the community, and its focus on prevention, not sickness—closely aligns with the transformation needed in glaucoma care. There are over 14,000 qualified optometrists in England, providing more than 13 million NHS-funded eye tests. They are trained, regulated and ready to help. Community glaucoma services, led by appropriately qualified optometrists with the approved equipment, have already demonstrated the ability to reduce hospital appointment referrals by up to 71%. If implemented nationally alongside an optometry-based glaucoma monitoring service, it may be possible to release 300,000 hospital appointments every year. That is not a one-time saving; glaucoma is a chronic condition, and these are recurring appointments for people who are living with the condition, not cured of it. Making full use of the skills and capacity already in primary care takes significant pressure off hospital services, enabling them to focus on tasks that can be managed only in a hospital. This could save the NHS an estimated £12 million annually.

At present, 10 integrated care boards have no glaucoma case-finding or referral management services. Many patients in those areas who are referred to hospital could instead be retained in primary care optometry with appropriate commissioning, rather than being added to the existing waiting lists. Even more concerningly, 21 ICBs—half of them—do not commission a glaucoma monitoring service in the community and rely simply on the hospital eye service to follow up glaucoma patients for the rest of their lives. That is where the sight loss occurs, as the hospitals simply do not have the required capacity. This is a postcode lottery that punishes the vulnerable, especially when people from black and Asian communities are up to four times more likely to develop glaucoma and often have the least access to timely care.

Unlike in Wales and Scotland, where a "shared care" service for glaucoma is commissioned by every health board, optometry-led and properly integrated between primary care optometry and ophthalmology, often the approach of NHS commissioners in England is hospital-led. The recent draft "Getting It Right First Time" model, developed with minimal input from primary care optometry, risks reinforcing England's hospital-led approach and undermining the Government's own ambition to shift care from hospitals to the community.

We also see worrying behaviour at ICB level, with several ICBs removing the limited community glaucoma services that they had in place to make short-term savings. That is extremely myopic. Given the ongoing financial pressures on ICBs, we do not expect individual ICBs to make significant progress in commissioning optometry-led glaucoma pathways that fully integrate optometry and ophthalmology without clear direction from the Government.

The total cost of visual impairment in the UK is estimated to be £26.5 billion, and it is set to rise to £33.5 billion by 2032. Glaucoma alone accounts for £750 million. That is not just a cost to the NHS, but a cost of lost productivity, informal care and diminished quality of life. This is a silent epidemic, but it is not inevitable.

What am I asking for? What can be done to begin to tackle this silent epidemic? Fundamentally, I am asking for a national direction from the Department of Health and Social Care to ICBs that they should commission a uniform primary care glaucoma service that utilises qualified high street optician practices. Only by doing so will we end the postcode lottery in glaucoma care.

We already know what works, we already have the workforce, and we already have the technology. We now need clear direction and political will.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Shockat Adam, Marsha De Cordova, Jim Shannon, Brian Leishman, Jeremy Corbyn, Ayoub Khan, Iqbal Mohamed, Mr Adnan Hussain, Paulette Hamilton, Mark Pritchard and Adrian Ramsay present the Bill.

Shockat Adam accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 March, and to be printed (Bill 369).

SENTENCING BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Sentencing Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 16 September 2025 (Sentencing Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: 7, 1 to 6 and 8 to 15.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—*(Stephen Morgan.)*

Question agreed to.

Sentencing Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I inform the House that nothing in the Lords amendments engages Commons financial privilege.

After Clause 19

COURT TRANSCRIPTS OF SENTENCING REMARKS

3.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 7.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 7.

Lords amendments 1 to 6 and 8 to 15.

Jake Richards: I begin by putting on record the Government's welcoming of the new shadow Justice Secretary, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), to his job. We look forward to working with him; he is somebody of some intellectual heft, and in any event, he is in the lucky position of having extraordinarily small shoes to fill. Of course there will be policy disagreements, as there should be, but my hope is that the new shadow Justice Secretary treads more carefully on issues relating to the independence of our judiciary and respecting our legal profession—perhaps there will be fewer vitriolic social media videos and more thoughtful analysis.

As for the former shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)—or, as he likes to call himself, the "new sheriff in town"—we welcome that the inevitable has now happened, confirming the fact that Reform is little more than a backwater for failed Tory politicians with an ego. I spent five minutes—five minutes that I will never get back—reading the memo that the former shadow Justice Secretary left lying about. It says,

> "Use humour—one of your best skills—don't be afraid to be self-effacing or have a laugh."

It certainly got us laughing. His memo also contains the memorable line,

> "Don't 'think'. You 'know' things to be true! Get out of the habit of saying 'think'".

I happen to think that he should get into the habit of thinking a little more.

The right hon. Member for Newark says that he has joined Reform to be "part of a team". We are still unclear whether he will remain speaking on justice issues, and he is not in his new place today. Over the weekend, it was said that there would be a mini-reshuffle at Reform—a rather depressing game of musical chairs. Whether its justice spokesperson remains the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin), or whether the right hon. Member for Newark takes over, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) has a go, or the hon. Members for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) or for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) join in, the story is the same: failed former Tories who cannot be trusted with our justice system, let alone our country.

The Sentencing Bill will make sure that we are never again in the position that this Government inherited, with prisons at risk of running out of places entirely, leaving us with nowhere to put dangerous offenders; police without the capacity to make arrests; courts unable to hold trials; and a breakdown of law and order unlike anything we have seen in modern times. That is why this Bill is vital. It does not kick the can down the road, and it does not shy away from making tough decisions to keep the public safe. Instead, it will end the cycle of crisis once and for all.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is making a powerful speech. He will recognise that the Bill is of huge concern to residents in my constituency, because many victims of crime who are waiting for justice to be served are waiting years for the person responsible to face trial. Does the Minister agree that it is really important that this Government get on top of the backlog and get people in front of courts as quickly as possible?

Jake Richards: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is a fine champion of this agenda and for his constituents in Harlow, and as he knows, the Bill does more than just fix the crisis we inherited; it will confront reoffending and keep our communities safe.

As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister set out during the very first debate on the Bill in this House, it takes us back to the fundamental purpose of sentencing, which is punishment that works. Punishment must work for victims, who deserve to see perpetrators face retribution; it must work for society, which wants criminals to return less dangerous, not more; and it must work to prevent crime. We want better citizens, not better criminals—that is what will deliver safer streets and protection from crime. The Bill will restore victims' confidence in the criminal justice system. I reiterate that nothing is worse for victims than prisons running out of places and crimes going without punishment, which is the situation we inherited when we came into government in the summer of 2024.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has outlined very clearly what the Government, and he in particular, are trying to achieve. There is a perception among the general public—this is certainly indicated in the press and the media—that the Government are going to be a bit soft on those who carry out crimes, but I am very much in favour of rehabilitation, as I think is the Minister. Can he please outline what will be done to enable those who leave prison to be rehabilitated and to ensure that they do not reoffend? The rising number of those who reoffend is incredibly worrying.

Jake Richards: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention. Over the course of this speech, I will set out what the Government are doing more generally to increase rehabilitation and crack down on reoffending. The hon. Gentleman states that there is a suggestion that this Bill is somehow soft on crime. I say gently to him that by the end of this Parliament, there will be more offenders in prison than ever before, so I completely reject that assertion.

I want to briefly pay tribute to the campaigners who have informed large parts of this piece of legislation and the amendments we are discussing. We are introducing tough restriction zones that limit the movement of

offenders instead of the movement of victims. The new restriction zones, which will be given to the most serious offenders on licence and can be imposed by a court, will pin any offender down to a specific location to ensure that victims can move freely elsewhere. This was campaigned for by Diana Parkes and Hetti Barkworth-Nanton, the founders of the Joanna Simpson Foundation. Once again, I pay tribute to them and all those who have campaigned for this crucial change.

Clause 6 introduces a new judicial finding of domestic abuse in sentencing, which will enable probation services to identify abusers early, track patterns of behaviour and put safeguards in place. I must pay tribute to the Liberal Democrats, and in particular to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for his tireless campaigning and willingness to work across parties to deliver this crucial change, which I know all Opposition parties support.

More generally, it is worth remembering that this legislation was carefully drafted as a result of the independent sentencing review led by the former Conservative Justice Secretary, David Gauke. [Hon. Members: "Great man."] "Great man", the Conservatives say, but they are voting against every single one of his proposals. I take this opportunity to thank him again for all his work—it was a thorough, comprehensive and excellent piece of work.

We are determined to ensure that the Bill receives Royal Assent as soon as possible—there is an urgency to this process. I remind the House that alongside this legislation, the Government are building prison places at a faster rate than ever before. In our first year, we opened nearly 2,500 new places, and we are on track to add 14,000 by 2031. In the next four years alone, we will spend £4.7 billion on prison building, but we cannot simply build our way out of the crisis we inherited from the Conservatives. The pressures on the system demand that we reform sentencing, but I remind the House that nothing in the Bill changes sentences for prisoners convicted of the most serious, heinous crimes who are serving extended determinate sentences or life sentences.

The Bill delivers vital reforms to our probation services. We are rebuilding the service that the last Government decimated, increasing investment by up to £700 million by 2028-29—a 45% increase. We are also recruiting; in our first year, we hired 1,000 trainee probation officers, and we are on track to hire 1,300 more this year. At this point, I want to pay tribute to all the hard-working probation officers in our country. They deserve full credit for what they do, and it has been important for us to find the extra resources to put into this service, to grow the numbers and the support available.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): In government, the Conservative party oversaw a disastrous privatisation of probation, which ended in a £500 million bail-out by taxpayers. Our Probation Service plays a critical role in the rehabilitation of offenders and in keeping our communities safe, so can the Minister further set out how the Bill will ensure that our probation systems are strengthened and fit for purpose?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Can the Minister perhaps restrict himself to the amendments?

Jake Richards: I welcome the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson). I will come on to the issue that she raises shortly.

While we cannot support Lords amendment 7 as drafted, we fully support the intention behind it of promoting transparency and improving the experience of victims. We agree that robust processes are required to ensure the accuracy of transcripts, but placing a statutory duty on the judiciary to approve the release of all Crown court transcripts could significantly increase workload and undermine efforts to drive down the Crown court backlog.

However, I am delighted to say that we have tabled a Government amendment that will expand the provision of Crown court sentencing remarks. They will be provided to all victims who request them, free of charge. This new clause puts victims firmly at the centre of the process. The new clause delivers a major step forward for transparency, enabling victims to digest sentencing remarks outside the pressures of a courtroom setting, and without charge.

The details on timeframes and processes will be set out in due course, but I can confirm to the House that our intention is to specify that transcripts will be provided within 14 days of a request being made. That timeframe will support applications made under the unduly lenient sentence scheme, and I can assure the House that we are considering the Opposition's amendments to the Victims and Courts Bill, which would extend that deadline to 56 days, extremely carefully.

I am grateful to Members for their engagement on this issue. This change represents a profound step forward for victims, and for transparency in our justice system. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) have been campaigning on this issue for some time. They deserve great credit, particularly the hon. Member for Richmond Park. For the first time, every victim whose case is heard in the Crown court will have this important right of access, free of charge.

3.30 pm

On Lords amendment 1, I must begin by thanking the shadow Justice Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and the parents of Lenny Scott, an ex-prison officer murdered by a former inmate in a horrendous revenge attack. The amendment answers their call for a small but important reform to sentencing around whole life orders. We recognise the unique and dangerous job that police, prison and probation officers do. They perform a distinctive role that involves routine contact with dangerous offenders. We want to ensure that the exceptional seriousness of murders motivated by those officers' important work is expressly recognised in the sentencing framework for murder; such crimes strike at the heart of the rule of law.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): A comment often made to me and my colleagues when I was policing was that as soon as I left the police station in full uniform, I was a sitting target, every single day. Does the Minister agree that the proposal for mandatory whole life sentences for those who murder police officers, prison officers and probation officers sends a clear and

[Matt Bishop]

unequivocal message that those offenders will be met with the harshest and most serious penalties on offer to the courts?

Jake Richards: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his service, his contribution, and his support for Lords amendment 1. As I said when I had the great privilege of meeting Lenny's parents last week with the shadow Justice Minister and Lord Timpson in the other place, this is not just about the technical mischief that the amendment solves; thankfully, these cases are few and far between. This is about sending the signal to the brilliant prison and probation officers that the work they do is respected by people in this place and the country at large. I hope that this small change goes some way to doing that. Indeed, since we have announced this change, I have met prison officers who have intimated their gratitude to Lenny Scott's parents, and to this place for hopefully making this change, and that is welcome.

Lords amendments 2 to 5 relate to the Sentencing Council. Through the amendments, we have sought to clarify what is expected from the Lord Chancellor and the Lady Chief Justice when they are considering any requests from the Sentencing Council for approval of its business plans and sentencing guidelines. Broadly speaking, the amendments do three things. First, if the Lord Chancellor decided not to approve a business plan, amendment 2 would require them to notify the council. It also requires them to lay a document before Parliament as soon as is practicable, stating the reasons for that decision. Amendments 3 and 4 make similar provisions under different guises.

Secondly, we want to make it clear that a very high bar must be met for any guidelines to be rejected, so amendments 4 and 5 provide that guidelines can be rejected only when that is necessary to maintain public confidence in the justice system. Finally, we have set out in the Bill that any approval requests from the council are to be considered as soon as practicable. Taken together, the amendments represent a significant step by the Government to ensure that these approval processes are surrounded by clear safeguards, transparency and accountability.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): While the Lords have endeavoured to amend the Bill in a number of areas, part 4, which allows foreign national offenders to be deported at any time during their sentence, are important to Northern Ireland. Because of article 2 of the Windsor framework, an assessment has been made that there is a risk that these offenders will not be removed in Northern Ireland, leaving us with a two-tier system in which foreign criminals in Northern Ireland benefit from additional EU-derived human rights protections, rather than being sent home. Will the Minister meet me and a number of my colleagues to discuss this important issue to Northern Ireland?

Jake Richards: This issue was raised, I think on Second Reading and on Report, by one of the hon. Member's colleagues. The legal advice we have received simply states that there is no discrepancy in Northern Ireland. I am happy to have a conversation with her and any other colleagues on that. It is clearly only right that these provisions apply to Northern Ireland, too.

The Government are committed to greater transparency on prison and probation capacity, and to current and future Governments being held to account. We have demonstrated that by publishing the first annual statement on prison capacity, in December 2024; the 2025 edition will follow shortly. Lords amendment 6 delivers on that promise by making it a statutory requirement to lay a statement on prison capacity before Parliament each year. Legislating on this duty ensures transparency in the long term, and delivers on the Government's commitment to do so. Never again will we be in the position that this Government inherited after the previous Government overlooked prison capacity for 14 years, leading to the crisis with which we had to deal.

The Government have also accepted Lords amendment 12, which removes the clause that would have introduced a power to publish the names and photographs of those subject to an unpaid work requirement. The purpose of the clause was to increase the visibility of community pay-back, and to ensure that the public could clearly see justice being delivered. We remain committed to ensuring that local communities can see the benefits of community pay-back in their area. However, we have listened carefully to those in both Houses who have raised issues relating to this measure, and, perhaps more important, to the concerns raised by our brilliant probation and prison staff on the ground, and following careful consideration we do not think it appropriate to proceed any further. We are confident that unpaid work, bolstered by wider provisions in the Bill, will continue to be tough and visible without the addition of this measure.

We are pleased to have made further progress on sentences of imprisonment for public protection. We want to do everything we can to enable those who are still serving such sentences to progress to the end of them, but we are not willing to undermine public protection. The amendments made in the Bill strike that careful balance. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 made significant changes to the IPP licence period: the qualifying period for referral to the Parole Board for consideration of licence termination was reduced from 10 years after first release to three years for those serving IPP sentences, and two years for those serving detention for public protection sentences who were convicted when they were under 18.

It is over a year since the first of those measures came into force. The licences of 1,700 people were terminated automatically on 1 November 2024, and a further 600 became eligible for referral to the Parole Board on 1 February last year. We have now gone further by giving those serving IPP sentences an earlier opportunity for licence termination, and providing an additional opportunity for license termination to those serving IPP and DPP sentences thereafter. Those serving IPP sentences will be considered for licence termination two years after release, rather than the current three years. That provides suitable time for support and rehabilitation in the community, while ensuring that our communities are best protected from harm.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I welcome the amendments that deal with IPP sentences. This is a matter of concern to many Members on both sides of the House. Can the Minister assure us that following the changes to IPP licence termination, these sentences will continue to provide for community rehabilitation, while protecting

communities from harm? Will the Minister also commit to continuing to work to resolve the remaining challenges relating to such sentences?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend, a member of the Justice Committee, always makes thoughtful contributions on justice issues, but in particular on IPP. A balance must be struck between public safety and ensuring rehabilitation. The Government think that the Bill has gone some way to doing that, but there is always room for further review and assessment as we proceed, and Lord Timpson, who is leading on this piece of work for the Government, will continue to engage with the Justice Committee on the issue.

I am very grateful for the improvements that have been made to the Bill during its passage in the House of Lords. I hope, particularly given the undertakings that I have given on the provision of sentencing transcripts, that all parties will be able to support the Government's amendments in lieu of Lords amendment 7. They represent a major step forward for transparency and for victims.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): There is no doubt that our justice system faces significant challenges. I have always acknowledged that, and during recent debates on a wide range of issues, from sentencing to prison capacity to probation to jury trials, there has been cross-party acknowledgement that for decades, under a number of Governments of different colours, not enough investment or political priority has been given to our justice system. That, however, should not and must not serve as an excuse for this Government to make changes to our justice system that damage it and fail to address the challenges before us. There are alterations that elements of the Ministry of Justice have always wanted to make. We should not let them use the excuse of the current challenges to finally slip them through the net. That is what we see happening in the Bill, in relation to the proposals on jury trials and, even more clearly, in relation to measures that are to the detriment of victims.

I welcome elements of this Bill, and I will discuss some examples. The Minister mentioned the restriction zones and the domestic abuse markers, but these measures are overwhelmingly outweighed by the fact that at the heart of the Bill is a catastrophic blow to victims' search for justice: it will let thousands of rapists, paedophiles and serious violent offenders out of prison earlier. The Minister mentioned the independent sentencing review; I remind Members that it gave absolutely no consideration whatsoever to what victims and the public think of the proposals on sentencing. The report is an insult to victims and their families, as many have told me directly.

During the Commons stages of the Bill, every party other than Labour joined the Conservatives in voting against these dangerous proposals, including the Liberal Democrats. In fact, a number of Labour MPs bravely abstained. It should be a matter of deep shame for Liberal Democrat Members that they have since joined Labour in voting to let rapists, paedophiles and serious violent offenders out of prison earlier, especially as they have previously articulated why this is wrong. It is a complete betrayal of victims of serious crime and their families.

This is likely to be my final opportunity to say that I am confident that Labour MPs will come to regret these elements of the Bill, and will find it difficult to explain themselves when victims see perpetrators of crimes such as rape, child sex offences and child grooming leave prison—sometimes having served only a third of their sentence—because of MPs' support for these measures. I will do whatever I can to ensure that victims know who made those choices, although so many alternatives were available to them. However, I have to accept that this Government's majority, with the help of the Liberal Democrats, has for now ended the campaign against this change, so we should consider the Lords amendments that are before the House today.

As I know that the public greatly value constructive cross-party working, I will begin with an important issue on which we were able to secure Government support. Lords amendment 1 would ensure that when a police officer, prison officer or probation officer, including a former officer, is murdered because of their service, a whole life order is the starting point for sentencing. This proposal originated from the Opposition, and I am grateful to the Government for accepting the principle, following my meetings and campaigning with Paula and Neil Scott, whose son Lenny, a former prison officer, was murdered because he refused a bribe from an inmate.

Parliament has long been clear that those putting themselves in direct danger by confronting and standing up to the most dangerous people in our society should have the greatest possible protection from our law: a whole life order. We had previously legislated to that effect through the introduction of a mandatory whole life order for those who murder police and prison officers who are undertaking their duties, but the case of Lenny Scott highlighted a gap in the law. Lenny was brutally murdered, years after his service as a prison officer, in revenge for handing in a phone that he found in a prison cell search. He had moved into a new phase of his life, and was enjoying work, the gym, and time with his children and the rest of his family, but he was shot in a car park late at night, simply for doing his job. Lenny's mum told me that she knew something was wrong when Lenny did not come home that evening. She even went out in the middle of the night to look for him, only to have the police arrive at her door at 1 am with the devastating news.

It has been a true privilege to work with Paula, and with Lenny's dad, Neil. I extend my sincere thanks to Lord Timpson in the other place, and to the Minister, for taking the time to meet them both, and for agreeing to work with them further to see what else we might do to improve protections for our prison officers. I am sure that the Minister will agree that it was clear from the meeting what decent, moral people they are, which explains the sort of person that Lenny was. I am also very grateful to Lord Timpson for bringing fresh thinking to this area by including probation officers in the measure. They too must work closely with dangerous, violent offenders, and sometimes stand up to them to protect the public. They face the same dangers, so they should get the same protections.

Although our wider focus must always be on preventing crime and protecting the public, it is right that clear gaps in the law should be addressed when they arise. The Opposition therefore support Lords amendment 1 in lieu of our amendment, and I know that Lenny's parents, family and friends have been delighted to see its progress in the House. In my time working with victims on campaigns, I have learned the pitfalls of naming a

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

law after an individual case—there are always others who might warrant the remembrance of their experiences in the naming of a law—but Lenny's family have every right to call this measure "Lenny's Law".

I will now consider amendments that attempt to deliver much-needed reform, but which are simply insufficient. Lords amendments 2 to 5 all concern the relationship between the Lord Chancellor and the Sentencing Council. Between them, they provide guidelines for specific scenarios in which the Lord Chancellor does not approve the Sentencing Council's business plan; conditions for withdrawing consent to the Sentencing Council's issuing of sentencing guidelines; and conditions for withholding consent to a request from the Sentencing Council to issue allocation guidelines, if it is necessary withhold that consent in order to maintain public confidence in the criminal justice system. We saw in the debacle of two-tier sentencing just how far the Sentencing Council has strayed, and these measures will not fundamentally correct that. The official Opposition have made it clear—I will restate it—that our firm policy position is that we would abolish the Sentencing Council, restore power to elected Ministers who are directly accountable to the public, and give Parliament a role when it comes to sentencing guidelines.

The functions of the Sentencing Council in delivering consistency through sentencing are well recognised, and it is not our intention to do away with the functions that will be restored to the Lord Chancellor's Office, but we believe it is for the Justice Secretary to be responsible for our sentencing guidelines, not a group of unelected individuals with no direct accountability to the public and limited accountability of any kind. Consultation with the public is not the same as accountability to the public, and we are clear that Parliament should have the power to act. Therefore, while these amendments are not a point of contention in the Bill's progress and we will not divide the House on them, I raise them to point out that they would not be part of a Bill introduced by a Conservative Government, as we would abolish the Sentencing Council entirely and fully restore accountability.

3.45 pm

Lords amendment 7, on court transcripts of sentencing remarks, was proposed and supported by the Opposition in the other place. It would require sentencing remarks delivered in the Crown court to be made available within 14 days of a request, free of charge, subject to judicial approval and existing reporting restrictions, and published online. As I have mentioned, that was a Conservative amendment.

I turn to something on which we can all surely agree, which is that sentencing remarks matter. They are how judges explain the seriousness of the offence, the harm done to victims and the reasons for the sentence imposed. For victims and offenders, a sentenced passed in a Crown court will be a moment of extreme seriousness in their lives. We can surely agree that people should not simply have to rely on their memory or on scribbled notes by those in court on their behalf unless they can afford to pay for a word-for-word record. That is a good example of how, for decades, our justice system has been doing things that no one from any party can really justify, and those things must be changed.

For victims and families, access to the remarks is often central to understanding the outcome of a case and to having confidence that justice has been done. It will also be crucial to their consideration in making an application to the unduly lenient sentence scheme, as the Minister mentioned. Officially, the Government continue to insist that that should remain available for 28 days, but I take on board the Minister's remark that they are considering a 56-day time limit. What I know is incredibly important to the families is that, as well as having a wider overall limit, those directly affected by the most serious crimes get a more extended period than simply 56 days, which is equivalent to the offender's ability to have a limited appeal in exceptional circumstances. I hope the Minister takes that on board.

The last Conservative Government initiated the piloting of access to the remarks for victims of murder, rape and other sexual offences. I am not aware of anything in the pilot that would make an argument against the measures we have proposed. Lords amendment 7 addresses that problem directly by placing in the Bill a clear duty on the court to provide sentencing remarks within 14 days, free of charge, and to publish them. The Minister said that that would apply to all remarks, but that is not what the amendment says. It refers to remarks on request, and that is short of where we should be in the end, which is to aim for all court transcripts of proceedings to be made available more generally. However, we have sought to be modest with the aim of garnering wider support.

We must remember that we have a system of open justice with very limited exceptions, and in the vast majority of criminal cases any member of the public can walk into a court and hear each and every word said. I acknowledge that Ministers have since indicated a willingness to move in the direction of greater access, and that is welcome, but their proposals fall short. Under the approach now proposed by the Government, key details—including the timetable for provision, the scope of any exceptions and the safeguards that will apply—will be set out in regulations, and the remarks will be available only to victims who request them, rather than other individuals. The Opposition believe that, for something as fundamental to victims' and society's understanding of justice as sentencing remarks, that is not good enough. If the Government truly agree that victims should receive sentencing marks free of charge within 14 days, there should be no difficulty in keeping that guarantee in the Bill itself. The Bill also fails to allow for the publication of remarks so that others are able to see them, and I am not clear whether a victim who receives the remarks under the Government's proposals would be allowed to forward, share or publish them themselves.

Why does wider transparency matter, as well as being a measure for victims? I point Members to the historical injustice of the appalling grooming gangs offences. It is clear that the hard work done to revisit historical examples of these offences, ensuring that the public are fully aware of the full horror of what happened and continues to happen to these girls and boys, has made a difference to the public's and Parliament's understanding. That is what transparency does: it drives accountability, and it should not simply rest with the victims to secure that.

The judiciary accepts that, in principle, through our open courts and through the select broadcasting of sentencing in high-profile cases, transparency is vital,

and this agenda must continue to be driven forward. The Government's proposals fall far short, and at a time when public confidence in the justice system is under strain, transparency and accountability are not optional extras, but essentials. Lords amendment 7 delivers a clear, practical improvement for victims and others by guaranteeing, in primary legislation, the timely, free access to sentencing remarks. The Opposition will vote to keep it, and I urge the House to do the same.

I do not intend to hold up the House further, as I wish to ensure that others with interests in other Lords amendments have the opportunity to speak. I have made it clear that we welcome some of the provisions in this Bill, but I have also made it clear that regardless of anything positive in the Bill, it is enormously damaging to one of the core purposes of our justice system, which is ensuring that victims of serious crime and their families are able to secure true justice. It is a matter of personal regret that I was not able to persuade Labour Members of the damage that the Bill will do to that. It will now fall on the shoulders of victims and families in future months and years to speak up when their perpetrators walk out of jail early, and even more concerningly, when victims are stalked, abused, raped or violently attacked by criminals who should have been in prison. It will fall on them to speak out and get these measures reversed. Those of us on the Conservative Benches will be there to help them raise their voices. I hope, by then, that at least some Labour Members will do the same.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): This Bill delivers the long-term, joined-up, sustainable reform that our criminal justice system desperately needs. I will comment on amendments 1 to 7 and 14, which will strengthen the Bill. We inherited a system on the brink, with prisons close to running out of places, courts paralysed by backlogs, police forced to operate with one hand tied behind their backs, trust broken and fear raised—a breakdown of law and order that left communities such as mine in Portsmouth paying the price.

In Portsmouth and across the country, the justice system is struggling under the weight of an unprecedented backlog. Crown courts in England and Wales now have between 77,000 and 78,000 outstanding cases waiting to be heard. Ten of thousands are open for a year or more, and some defendants are waiting for up to four years before trial dates are even available. Those delays mean that victims in my city and beyond are denied timely justice, eroding confidence in our courts. The Sentencing Bill and wider reforms are a crucial step towards tackling the backlogs, speeding up justice and ensuring that offences are addressed without further delay.

The Conservatives talk tough on crime, but their record tells a very different story. They increased sentencing lengths without building the capacity to support them, and in 14 years added just 500 prison places. When the system finally broke, they released tens of thousands—*[Interruption.]* They released 10,000 offenders early, largely in secret, shattering public confidence in justice. This Government are working hard to fix their mess. We believe in prisons. Many offenders must go there and some for a very long time. We have already opened 2,500 places and we are on track for achieving 4,000 by 2031—the biggest expansion since Victorian times.

We also have to be honest about the challenge. We cannot just build our way out of a Tory prison crisis. We owe it to the British public to reduce crime and the number of victims. That is why the Bill reforms sentencing, so that punishments can cut crime and rehabilitation can help reduce crime and the number of victims. That includes tough, credible and visible punishments in our community. Offenders will be closely monitored through tagging, restrictions on where they can go, and strict conditions that curb their freedom. Courts will be able to impose no-go zones, banning offenders from entering specific areas such as town centres, retail zones, building sites or industrial estates where they have previously offended. Those are not soft options. They are enforceable restrictions backed by modern technology with real consequences if they are breached. This approach is vital for crimes that devastate working people.

I would particularly like to mention the horrendous, life-changing crime of tool theft. In Portsmouth and across the country, tradespeople have told me this story time and time again. When tools are stolen, it is not just about the property they lose; it is about income lost, jobs cancelled, damage to reputation and families pushed into financial stress overnight. In some cases, it has led to our tradespeople taking their own lives. I have campaigned relentlessly on this issue, working closely with tradespeople, industry bodies, police, insurers and retailers. Together, we made the case that tool theft must be treated as a serious and repeated crime. As a result of that work, the Bill and these amendments will deliver real change for victims. Repeat tool offenders will now face tougher sentences in court and in our communities.

Dr Mullan: Does the hon. Lady accept that, as a result of the Bill, the vast majority of those offenders will only have to serve a third of their sentence, instead of half?

Amanda Martin: We are clearing up the mess left by the Tories. People are still waiting for their day in court. It is not okay for a crime to be committed and for there not even to be a sentence for four or five years. If the shadow Minister would like to intervene again, I will give way.

Dr Mullan: Would any single one of the tool theft victims the hon. Lady is taking about agree that those offenders should serve only a third of their sentence?

Amanda Martin: They will be serving longer than under the Conservatives, who did not care about tradespeople or construction crime. Repeat tool theft offenders will now face tougher sentencing because of a Labour Government, including tagging on release, strict movement restrictions, robust unpaid work and no-go areas that stop them returning to the places where they targeted working people. This is about disrupting criminal behaviour, protecting livelihoods and showing that Labour is the only party that stands squarely with those who work hard and play by the rules.

Chris Vince: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for her personal work to tackle the huge issue of tool theft, which has had a huge impact on tradespeople in my constituency of Harlow. Does she agree with me that, as she said, it is not just about the person themselves

[Chris Vince]

but their family and their livelihood? Being a victim of such crimes also has a huge impact on mental health, so I thank her for her work.

Amanda Martin: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and for the work that he has done in Harlow. I repeat that to my knowledge there was not a Government before us who even cared about tradespeople.

In addition, we are investing up to £700 million more in community punishment and increasing probation funding by 45%. That means better supervision, faster enforcement, and a system that is credible both to offenders and the public, and looks to reduce repeated crimes for victims.

I welcome a number of Government amendments that further strengthen the Bill. As the daughter of a retired police officer—I note my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) is also in his place; his dad was a retired probation officer—I have family and friends still serving in the force and as prison officers. I welcome Lords amendments 1 and 14, which broaden whole-life orders. Murder is the most heinous crime a person can commit, and the amendments ensure that those who murder police officers, prison officers or probation officers, including where the crime is motivated by their current or former duties, face the full force of the law. These crimes strike at the very heart of the rule of law and it is right that sentencing reflects that.

I also welcome Lords amendments 2, 3, 4 and 5, which strengthen transparency and accountability around the Sentencing Council. The amendments set a very high bar for rejecting sentencing guidance, ensuring Parliament is informed where decisions are taken, and helping to maintain public confidence in the justice system. Crucially, they sit alongside the reforms that reflect legislation I fought for in my Theft of Tools of Trade (Sentencing) Bill, to ensure that sentencing properly takes account of the full circumstances and the impact on victims. That principle is vital: justice must never lose sight of the harm done to victims and communities when crimes are committed.

Lords amendment 6 is another important step forward. By placing a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on prison capacity, the Government are ending the culture of secrecy we inherited and ensuring proper accountability to Parliament and the public.

I strongly welcome the Government's amendments in lieu to Lords amendment 7, which will ensure victims can access transcripts of sentencing remarks free of charge. This is a meaningful improvement for victims, an important move towards a more transparent and humane justice system, and another step in the right direction of putting victims at the heart of our justice system.

The Bill ends the chaos we inherited. It restores confidence in justice and it delivers punishment that works for communities such as Portsmouth now and into the future. I am proud to have worked hard on developing the Bill and I am proud to support it.

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

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank Members of both Chambers for their contribution and their continued work, in particular the prisons Minister for engaging collaboratively with Liberal Democrats in the other place and for making concessions both in the legislation and at the Dispatch Box.

We are pleased to see Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 7, which introduce the provision of free transcripts of sentencing remarks to victims. It has been a long-standing campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) to see the provision of all court transcripts, and victims gaining access to an improved level of transparency and accountability is a great first step.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I just want to take this opportunity to say my personal thanks to the Minister and everybody involved in bringing the legislation to this stage. I pay tribute once again to my constituent Juliana Terlizzi, who came to see me when she was charged £7,000 for the transcript of the trial that saw her rapist sent to prison. The amendment in lieu is a huge step forward for victims of all kinds, and I am really pleased to see it in the legislation. I want to put on record my huge thanks to everyone for that.

4 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us that the heart of this amendment are victims and their ability to understand what has come in the sentencing remarks. So much happens in a court trial, whether it means reliving past trauma or confronting a perpetrator, and listening to proceedings can feel like a foreign language for many. Others, who choose not to attend the sentencing hearing, have no knowledge of what was said. That is why having consistent free access to transcripts is vital. It provides an opportunity to process the events of court proceedings afterwards or to read them for the first time. For many, this can provide closure and an opportunity to move on, but it is also the route for appealing a sentence if they believe it to have been unduly lenient.

Providing victims with court transcripts free of charge would markedly improve experiences for victims and survivors, but I do have some questions regarding the Government's amendment in lieu. Could the Minister provide some clarity as to whether the term "victim" is applied as per the definition used by the victims code and whether, in the case that a victim is unable to personally request sentencing remarks—such as victims without capacity or victims who are children—immediate family members of victims are included within the provision?

Dr Mullan: Since I cannot ask the Minister myself, I might ask the hon. Lady if she agrees that we also need clarity on whether deceased victims' family members will have a right to transcripts?

Jess Brown-Fuller: The victims code lays out that if a victim is deceased, the immediate family—parents or siblings—would be included. That is why I asked that question of the Minister.

Subsection (3)(c) of the amendment in lieu allows the Secretary of State to provide exceptions to the requirement to provide a transcript of sentencing remarks. What sort

of exceptions do the Government anticipate, and as per subsection (3)(d), what sort of information may be omitted from a transcript? If the Secretary of State does not plan to use sweeping powers to except or omit, why are such provisions included in the amendment? The previous Government ran a very limited pilot of free court transcripts. Will this Government publish a detailed review of that pilot?

We believe that this provision could and should go much further, and as per the campaign by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park and Baroness Brinton in the other place, we have tabled an amendment to the Victims and Courts Bill that would mean that all transcripts are provided free of charge, including judicial summaries and bail decisions.

The Lady Chief Justice recently spoke to the Justice Committee about a pilot with HM Courts and Tribunals Service on the use of AI for transcripts, especially in the asylum and immigration courts. She described it as a "great success", so I would be keen to understand if the Government will work with the Liberal Democrats to progress this work. We do appreciate the growing cross-party support on this issue and the work of all in the other place to achieve this important first step today.

We also welcome the Government committing to a statutory annual report into the state of prison capacity and, importantly, the Probation Service. This is an important mechanism for oversight that will improve long-term assessments of the health of our justice system. We were very happy to see the Government accept our amendment to remove clause 35 from the Bill, which did nothing to address the crisis in our justice system and was totally at odds with the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. We welcome the amendments tabled by the Government to strengthen protections in relation to the Lord Chancellor's approval of sentencing guidelines.

We have been supportive of many of the provisions in the Bill aimed at addressing some of the key failings in our crumbling justice system. Our courts, prisons and the Probation Service are all at breaking point, and without urgent intervention they are at risk of failing completely. The Bill offered an opportunity to ease some of the pressures our system faces, where currently the needs of victims, offenders and the system more widely are too often ignored. We also need to ensure that our prison system is one of rehabilitation—one that ends the cycle of reoffending and reduces long-term pressures. All of the Liberal Democrats' work on this Bill has been in that vein, in order to get the legislation into a better place to achieve those aims.

To conclude, we realise the mess that our justice system finds itself in. We have always aimed to work collaboratively and productively in a cross-party way to ensure that we can begin to turn the tide on this crisis, and we will continue to do so. We need a sustainable solution, which includes cutting reoffending, tackling the court backlog to reduce the number of people in prison on remand, and properly resourcing our Probation Service, which will no doubt feel the impact of this legislation most acutely. The Bill contains a number of proposals that Lib Dems have campaigned for as part of the wider package of reform, but it still could go much further to ensure that it is fit for purpose to protect victims and safeguard our justice system for the future.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Bill will deliver long-term and sustainable reform to our criminal justice system and make sure that we never again end up in the position where dangerous offenders are not being locked up, the police do not have the capacity to make arrests and courts are not able to hold trials. It was a breakdown in law and order like nothing we have seen in modern times, because the last Government increased sentence lengths without reckoning with the consequences of doing so, adding just 500 places during their time in office. That was a dereliction of duty beyond comprehension and something that must not be forgotten in the context of this Bill.

Our prisons were brought to the point of crisis; frankly, they only survived until the 2024 general election because, on the quiet, the last Government released 10,000 offenders early, completely undermining public confidence in our justice system. *[Interruption.]* Well, it's true. The shadow Justice Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), is shaking his head. I was working in the Prison Service—I know what went down. I know exactly what happened. While the Bill was born out of necessity, it includes absolutely transformational reforms that Governments of all colours should have introduced in years past.

It is not that we are not being tough on crime—in fact, it is quite the opposite, because as the Minister has laid out, there will be more people in prison at the end of this Parliament than ever before—but, as has been outlined today, anyone who thinks we can simply build our way out of this crisis is not living in the real world and is not serious about public policy. It is welcome that we are deporting more foreign national offenders and bearing down on the court backlog to reduce remand prisoners. All of that is necessary but not sufficient, which is why this Bill is very welcome.

I want to speak specifically about amendments 1 and 14 and the broadening of whole-life orders. When I was a prison officer, I found it incredibly frustrating how little acknowledgment was given by wider society to the serious assaults and injuries that staff often had to suffer. I will take this issue up with the Minister another time, as I know it does not relate directly to the amendments, but I do think it is important that there is public recognition of how dangerous the job can be, including for probation officers. I pay tribute to Lenny Scott's family, who have worked tirelessly to advocate for this welcome change. I hope that every Member of Parliament from across the House will support those amendments, which send the clear message that this House backs our police, probation and prison staff, given the particular dangers they face, and that we support them today and every day.

Although the Bill may have been born out of necessity—and, frankly, emergency—at the start of this Government's time in office, I am proud that it is a Labour Government who are introducing the reform that our justice system has long needed. I am proud to support the Government amendments today.

Jake Richards: Today is a pivotal day. Subject to agreement from this House and from the other place, the Bill will complete all its stages and shortly become law. I want to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe

[Jake Richards]

(Sir Nicholas Dakin). Although I was the Minister to take the Bill through the House, his painstaking work in developing the policy was fundamental and he deserves great credit.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin); at every opportunity, including this debate, she rightly raises her campaign to clamp down on tool theft and she is a fine champion for her constituents. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson). She brings huge experience to debates on these issues. We are taking measures to give prison staff further protections, but I am happy to speak with her about what more the Government can do.

We have aired the debate on the Sentencing Council before. The Conservative position was developed by the former shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick).

Dr Mullan: It was a team effort.

Jake Richards: The hon. Member says, "It was a team effort." I am not sure about that. The Conservatives' position is an example of real constitutional vandalism. It has never been the case that this Bill would threaten the independence of the judiciary. Our amendments, and the proposal set out in this legislation, ensure that there is a democratic lock around sentencing and that there is a role for this place, but that the Sentencing Council remains independent. That is absolutely the right thing to do.

I welcome the degree of consensus on transcripts. The Conservative position on this amendment, at the back end of last week and then early this week, seems to have changed a few times. Our amendment in lieu strikes the right balance. If anyone could seek a free transcript of sentencing remarks, we might be in the position where our court staff, who have a big job in getting a grip of the backlog, spend all their time issuing transcripts.

Let me turn to the issues raised by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller). We have to look into the question of what happens with transcripts when victims are either children, deceased or where there is a lack of capacity. It may be that the victims code does that already for us, but we have to get it right and we will ensure we do so as the policy is developed. She mentioned her concerns about exceptions and omissions and asked me to ponder on examples when those exceptions could be engaged. Of course, this may be relevant when there are issues of national security or public safety, but one would hope that such circumstances would be extremely exceptional. It is important, though, that those provisions are in the Bill.

We believe that our amendments will allow for more openness. They are ambitious but also realistic, considering where the technology is at the moment and the pressures on our court system. Do we want to go further when we can? Absolutely. We believe in the fundamental principle of transparency and openness in our justice system, and where we can, we will.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I apologise that I was not here for the Minister's opening speech; I was chairing the Justice Committee. I do not think that matters, though, because I agree with him on the amendments. They strengthen the Bill considerably. They bring more openness and transparency, and we welcome all the recommendations here, whether in relation to the Sentencing Council, to the prison capacity report, to the transcripts through the amendments in lieu, or to IPP prisoners. They are all welcome improvements on the Bill. We think that they need to go further in some areas, particularly in relation to IPP prisoners, but this is a good step along the way.

Jake Richards: I always welcome an intervention from the Chair of the Justice Committee. As I said following an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox), the work on IPPs is an ongoing process led by Lord Timpson in the other place. I know that he is always happy to engage with hon. Members from the Select Committee.

I conclude my remarks by stating firmly that the Bill will solve the mess that this Government inherited and begin to make sure that our prison system is fit for the future. I once again thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have engaged with the Bill throughout its passage. Their expertise strengthens it in many important respects.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 7.

The House divided: Ayes 319, Noes 127.

Division No. 410] [4.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas

Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, rh James
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jade Botterill and Stephen Morgan

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Berry, Siân
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Chowns, Dr Ellie

Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Denyer, Carla
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Ramsay, Adrian
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Noes:
Harriet Cross and Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendment 7.

Lords amendments 1 to 6 and 8 to 15 agreed to.

Sally Jameson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to apologise for inadvertently making an error. At the start of my speech on the Sentencing Bill, I forgot to declare that I remain a member of the Prison Officers Association, following my time in the Prison Service. I hope that the record can be corrected.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for her point of order. Her comments are now on the record and the record is corrected.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Holocaust Memorial Bill:

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(2) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(3) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(4) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(5) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(6) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(7) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(8) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.—*(Christian Wakeford.)*

Holocaust Memorial Bill

Consideration of Lords amendment

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I inform the House that the Lords amendment does not engage Commons financial privilege.

After Clause 2

LEARNING CENTRE PURPOSE

4.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

I am grateful to Members of both the Commons and the Lords who have so diligently scrutinised the Bill throughout its passage. I thank the noble Lord Khan of Burnley for taking the Bill through the other place and for being so thorough in his approach.

Before I address the Lords amendment, I would like to take a moment to remind the House why we introduced the Bill in the first place. There is a long-standing cross-party commitment to establish a new national Holocaust memorial and learning centre. We do this to mark a profound and dark moment in our history, to remember the sheer loss of humanity and to continue to learn the lessons day after day, generation after generation. This simple three-clause Bill was introduced in February 2023 to enable us to make progress in delivering that.

The Bill does two things: first, it authorises expenditure on the construction, operation, maintenance or improvement of the Holocaust memorial and learning centre; and secondly, it seeks to remove a statutory obstacle to its being built next door in Victoria Tower Gardens, should it receive planning consent. The Bill does not provide the Government with planning powers to build the memorial and learning centre; those are being sought through the separate statutory planning process.

On the face of it, Lords amendment 1 looks uncontroversial, and I have no doubt that it is well intentioned. However, the Government cannot accept the amendment. In short, the amendment seeks to deal with matters that are not part of this Bill and are more properly dealt with elsewhere. Following debates in the other place, there have been constructive discussions with those leading support for the amendment to consider how best to proceed. In the light of those discussions, I want to assure this House that the Government's aim in establishing a national Holocaust memorial and learning centre, in line with the cross-party consensus since 2015, is to increase understanding of the Holocaust and of antisemitism. There must be no question of the learning centre deviating from that purpose.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I declare a sort of interest, in that many members of my family were murdered in the Holocaust. I understand the meaning of the term "Holocaust" to be the Nazis' mass extermination of the Jews during their period in power, both in their own country and in the countries they occupied. I have not followed the progress of the Bill as closely as I should have done, but I get the impression that there is some move away from keeping it specific to that terrible crime, towards widening it to cover massacres in general and other terrible racial crimes. I think the intention behind the Bill and the museum was that it should be about the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their associates. Can the Minister confirm that that is still the situation?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I can confirm that that is the case, and I will be very clear and explicit about both the intention and what we will do to enshrine that intention.

The learning centre will provide a solid, clear historical account of the Holocaust, leaving no visitors in any doubt about the unprecedented crimes perpetrated against Jewish people. The content for the learning centre is being developed by a leading curator, supported by Martin Winstone, the Holocaust historian and educator, and by an academic advisory group. With their help, we will ensure that the content is robust, truthful and fearless. It will stand as a vital rebuttal to Holocaust denial and distortion in all its forms.

Delivery of the Holocaust memorial and learning centre is being supported by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation. We value the work of the foundation, which has been steadfast in its determination to build the memorial and to create a learning centre in which the story of the Holocaust is told powerfully, unflinchingly and honestly. We aim to make sure that the body responsible for the Holocaust memorial and learning centre has the independence and permanence that the Holocaust Commission sought. We will provide the operating body with governing documents that are clear and specific, leaving no doubt that the learning centre has been established to provide education about the Holocaust and about antisemitism.

We will also ensure that there are appropriate processes for the appointment of governing body members, and provide support so that they have a clear understanding of their role. The governing body will be permitted to hold fundraising and commemorative events and public lectures, as long as they are appropriate to the intent and purpose of the learning centre. It will be for the trustees to determine what activities are consistent with the aims of the memorial and learning centre.

I hope that I have shown that there is no disagreement between the Government and those who wish to ensure that the learning centre focuses very clearly on the history of the Holocaust. No additional clauses are needed in the Bill to achieve what we all want to see. Moreover, there are inevitable risks in seeking to prescribe too narrowly what the learning centre is permitted to do.

The better way to proceed is to put in place clear and robust governance arrangements for the learning centre, and to place on the trustees the responsibility for ensuring that the facts of the Holocaust and the long history of antisemitism are explained clearly and honestly, for this and future generations. Our aim must now be to pass this Bill and to move ahead as quickly as possible to establish the national Holocaust memorial and learning centre.

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

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The Bill returns to the House at an important time of year. Next week, we mark Holocaust Memorial Day, when communities

[Sir James Cleverly]

across the country will pause to remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children who were murdered during the Holocaust.

As a former Home Secretary, I have seen at first hand the strength and dignity with which Jewish communities have preserved the memory of the Holocaust. When I was Foreign Secretary, I saw that also in Israel and in other countries. The people who preserve that memory do so not only to honour those who were murdered, but to educate future generations. That act of remembrance is a service to the whole country, and it shows that education is essential if the memory of the Holocaust is to endure, and if we are to confront antisemitism wherever and whenever it appears.

This Bill has taken much longer to progress than any of us would have wished. I am therefore pleased that the Government have chosen to take it forward. The primary purpose of the Bill is clear and narrow in scope. It is about the Holocaust, ensuring that the lessons of the Holocaust are learned and that history is preserved for future generations. On that point, there is strong and genuine cross-party agreement in both Houses. I thank the Minister for meeting me and listening carefully to the concerns raised by the Conservatives. Those discussions have been constructive, and I welcome the seriousness with which they have been approached.

There has been contention during the passage of this Bill. Strong views have been expressed about the location, the security and the design of the memorial. Those debates reflect the importance of this project and the desire to ensure that it is done properly. However, the issue before us today is the purpose of the learning centre. Conservative and Cross-Bench peers have been clear in expressing their concern. They have sought assurance that the learning centre will exist for one purpose only: to provide education about the Holocaust and about antisemitism.

I welcome the assurances that the Government have now provided, in particular the commitment that the learning centre will be focused exclusively on the Holocaust and on antisemitism, and that there must be no question of its drifting from that mission or that purpose in future years. I also welcome the commitment that the governing documents of the future operations body will make that purpose clear.

Those assurances matter. This memorial is intended to last for generations, and it must have a clear mission that future trustees and future Governments cannot dilute or reinterpret. In the light of those assurances, we will not press this matter to a Division. That reflects the progress that has been made through constructive discussions in both this House and the other place.

Let me make one final point clear. Those assurances must be carried through, and the good faith of those who have entered into the conversations needs to be rewarded. I recognise that concerns about the design have been raised throughout the passage of the Bill both directly with me and with the Government. While those matters fall outside the scope of the legislation before us, I hope that Ministers have listened to those concerns and will ensure that they are communicated more widely to those involved in the construction of the education centre.

If this House is to create a lasting national Holocaust memorial, it must be clear in its purpose and faithful to its promise.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State for their speeches in opening this important debate. I absolutely welcome this Bill and its aim to create a lasting memorial to the 6 million people who lost their lives in what was probably the most devastating event in recent history, to those who survived and carry the scars with them, and to their families. I recognise what my hon. Friend the Minister has said about the Bill and Lords amendment 1, and in particular about the need to move the Bill forward at pace.

I am attending a Holocaust Memorial Day event in Harlow at the weekend. The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2026 is "Bridging Generations". The reason why this Bill is so important is that we need to recognise that the responsibility of remembrance cannot just end with survivors. When we came together in this House last year to recognise the 80th anniversary of the end of the second world war, we all recognised that it would be one of the last significant anniversaries for which veterans of that terrible conflict would be with us.

We must recognise that, as we move forward, those who survived the terrible events of the Holocaust will no longer be with us, but we must carry their flame and continue to remember. We must build a bridge between memory and action, between history and hope for the future, and education about the Holocaust and antisemitism is hugely important for that reason. Like many right hon. and hon. Members across the House, I have visited Auschwitz and seen the horrors of the Holocaust, but what we perhaps do not see so often are the events that led to it; I think about Kristallnacht and the ghettos.

It has been a real pleasure to meet on a fairly regular basis with my local rabbi in Harlow, Rabbi Irit, to talk about how the Jewish community in Harlow is doing. I am pleased to hear that the Jewish community in my constituency has not experienced antisemitism, but we must always be mindful. I pay particular tribute to Rabbi Irit for the work that she has done with faith groups from across my constituency. For personal reasons, I was sadly unable to attend this year's interfaith service that she ran at Harlow synagogue, but I look forward to attending it next year.

It is an opportunity for the Christian, Muslim and Hindu communities to come together and show that we are as one in fighting the scourge of antisemitism and other forms of racism. I look forward to standing with Rabbi Irit and other religious leaders in Harlow at the weekend to recognise Holocaust Memorial Day. We must never forget the evils of the Holocaust, and I am really pleased that this Government are taking that mission very seriously. This Bill is a huge part of that.

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

4.45 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): As the Holocaust begins to fade from living memory, it becomes ever more vital that the next generations continue to be properly educated about it, and that the victims are commemorated

with dignity and care. The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day, "Bridging Generations", reminds us that remembrance of the Holocaust does not end with the survivors; the responsibility now passes to all of us. We must engage with the past, so that its lessons are not lost in the future. The work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust encourages us to honour the legacy of all who were murdered in genocides, including those who have no family left to remember them. We remember them not through bloodlines, but through education and memorial. A Holocaust memorial and education centre in the heart of London would be a powerful, permanent commitment to that responsibility.

Six million Jews, along with millions of others—Roma, disabled people and LGBTQ+ individuals—were murdered in the Holocaust. That shows where hatred can lead. The genocides since show that we have not learned enough. Last year, hate crimes increased across our country, fuelled by political extremism. When we say, "Never again", it cannot be empty words; it must be our commitment to stand united against hatred.

Alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), I have met the Board of Deputies, the Jewish Leadership Council, the Community Security Trust and the Antisemitism Policy Trust to discuss the alarming rise in antisemitism and how we must respond to it. The Liberal Democrats believe that no one should feel scared or anxious when going to their place of worship. That is why, in our manifesto, we pledged funding for protective security measures for places that are vulnerable to hate crimes and terror attacks. While we are devastated that this is necessary, we are pleased that the Government have increased protections for synagogues, and ask that they continue to work hand in hand with those organisations for the safety and security of all Jews in the United Kingdom.

This memorial presents a vital opportunity to challenge antisemitism through education. We recognise the work that the House of Lords has done to safeguard its educational purpose, but we must ensure that robust security measures are in place, so that people can visit the memorial safely and without fear. It is also key that we deliver the memorial in a timely manner. The Conservative Government committed to this project following the findings of the Holocaust Commission in 2015; it is unacceptable that 11 years later, construction has yet to begin. In 2023, Holocaust survivor Manfred Goldberg said,

> "I was 84 when Prime Minister David Cameron first promised us survivors a national Holocaust Memorial in close proximity to the Houses of Parliament."

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): One of my constituents, Kitty Hart-Moxon, helped to set up the Holocaust Educational Trust. She will be 100 this year. My hon. Friend has spoken about bridging the gap; Kitty is handing over that work to Peter and Moira in her family, who will keep that going. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be a wonderful tribute to her to ensure that she can see this memorial and how important it is to the people of Great Britain?

Marie Goldman: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

Manfred Goldberg went on to say,

> "Last month I celebrated my 93rd birthday and I pray to be able to attend the opening of this important project."

Tragically, Manfred passed away on 6 November last year, at the age of 95. My thoughts are with his family. He was an extraordinary man who gave so much to Holocaust remembrance and education in the United Kingdom. As a nation, we must continue that legacy and ensure that this memorial and education centre are built through proper process, with careful planning, strong security and quick delivery. In doing so, we will be commemorating the 6 million Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust, honouring survivors, and creating a space that truly educates future generations, and that stands as a lasting commitment to remembrance.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There is universal recognition of the gravity of the Holocaust. It is widely and wisely regarded as the greatest crime in human history, which is precisely why this memorial should proceed only on the basis of broad consensus. No one wishes to create division around Holocaust commemoration, yet there is demonstrably no consensus in the Jewish and local community about the learning centre, or how it should be used. That was evidenced by the 2018 letter in *The Times,* signed by eight Jewish peers, expressing deep reservations about the current proposal.

The decision to site the memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens was made with good intentions—the proximity to Parliament was in recognition of the importance of the Holocaust—but it was taken without prior consultation or proper investigation, and it was opposed by the local council. Subsequent scrutiny has revealed serious flaws in the choice of site, and we cannot have a discussion of what the learning centre will be used for without understanding that. I have taken part in several debates on the subject, including the previous one, in which Sir Peter Bottomley, the former Father of the House, spoke. That was on the day the general election was called. No satisfactory answers have ever been given.

The plans are for a substantial underground structure on ancient marshland beside the Thames. The water table is known to rise sharply after heavy rainfall. Significant flooding occurred on the site within recent memory. Do we want to have to wet vac our Holocaust memorial every few years? We have had no answers on that point. Victoria Tower Gardens is a public park, protected by statute. It is maintained by the Royal Parks, which has never supported a memorial on the site. The chairman of the Royal Parks warned that it risked damaging one of the area's few open green spaces and set a dangerous precedent. Statutory protections dating back to a 1900 Act of Parliament are being undermined with little debate.

The park can realistically accommodate only a modest memorial without destroying its character. The current design would fundamentally alter the park. There would be an 80-metre ramp and a wide moat dividing the space, and large areas of grass would be replaced with paving. Rightly, the intention is for large numbers of visitors, particularly schoolchildren, to attend the national Holocaust memorial. No credible plans exist to manage coach traffic, drop-off points or parking, so the pressures on Millbank would be compounded. Local opposition is well documented, including from the Thorney Island

[Sir Edward Leigh]

Society. For residents and regular users, the park would largely cease to function as a neighbourhood green space; ordinary activities would become inappropriate in such a situation. Victoria Tower Gardens may also be needed to support the ongoing restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. Reducing flexibility now risks increasing costs and constraining future options.

Let us talk about the purpose of this memorial. I have been to Holocaust memorials. The most impactful Holocaust memorial internationally is the Washington model, which I visited. That Holocaust Memorial Museum is immensely successful, because it prioritises education through a dedicated museum that confronts the scale and the reality of the crimes. The most meaningful memorial we can offer is sustained education, to ensure that young people understand the Holocaust fully, and that its memory is never diminished. Had the learning centre been established years ago at the Imperial War Museum, as we have constantly suggested, and as the Imperial War Museum wants, hundreds of thousands of visitors could already have benefited from it, and there would have been no delay.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: I will finish, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The House of Lords has wisely passed an amendment clarifying that

> "The sole purpose of any Learning Centre must be the provision of education about the Holocaust and antisemitism."

It is a mystery to me why the Government oppose that, and why they have imposed strict time limits on debate. This much-desired memorial should be the result of clear consensus, not imposed in a way that stifles discussion. I am suspicious of why the Government are opposing this wise amendment from the House of Lords.

One of the reasons why an underground learning centre is inappropriate is that it is not a proper museum. I have been to the memorials in Israel and in Washington. They are huge structures, where people are taken through the whole process. We cannot understand the Holocaust unless we understand its beginnings, and how people came to be filled with such horrible hatred. This is basically just a bunker. It is totally inappropriate. It is also a security risk: there will have to be armed guards and railings. Just imagine the terrible nature of any appalling atrocity, perhaps a terrorist atrocity, that might be committed there. It is simply an inappropriate location. I do not know, but I suspect that the reason why the Government are resisting the amendment is that they are worried that this bunker—this totally inappropriate underground structure, which is not a proper museum—might become a target.

Dr Arthur: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way, on that point?

Sir Edward Leigh: All right, I will.

Dr Arthur: It is not that the Government are not giving way. The Government are showing leadership by negotiating with other parties to find consensus in this Chamber, and that is something we should celebrate. I am ashamed that, 81 years after the end of the second world war, we still do not have a national memorial. The Father of the House is talking about more debate, more time-wasting, and more Holocaust survivors dying before we even start work. Does he not recognise the need for this memorial? It makes absolute sense to place it next to the home of democracy in the UK, to celebrate what we did well during the war in terms of protecting the Jews, but also to mark what we got wrong.

Sir Edward Leigh: The point is that we—it is not just me, by the way, but a large part of the Jewish community—want a proper museum of the type that exists in Washington, and this, I am afraid, is not a proper museum. It is a small underground structure in an inappropriate place, difficult to secure. If this Government and the previous Government had proceeded with consensus, and had wanted to build an aesthetic memorial that paid proper tribute to the people who died, this could all have been passed years ago. The whole debate has been about the underground learning centre, not the memorial. Everyone accepts that there should be a memorial. Everyone wants a proper museum, but this is not a proper museum, and I am curious about why the Government are resisting the perfectly sensible amendment from the House of Lords. There is a real danger that in order to allay security concerns, the whole purpose of this learning centre may drift from the Holocaust, which would be extremely regrettable. I am sorry if I have irritated the hon. Gentleman, but this is a debate, and we are all entitled to express a point of view.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I welcome the spirit of the amendment; I welcome the Bill, of course; I welcome the assurances that the Minister gave; and notwithstanding some differences of opinion, I welcome the civility of the debate, which is exactly what is needed when discussing such a sensitive issue.

I speak today not only to the House, but to those who will be gathering back home in Eastbourne on Holocaust Memorial Day 2026, 27 January. On behalf of our town —and those far beyond it—I pay huge tribute to a remarkable Eastbourne resident and Holocaust survivor, Dorit Oliver-Wolff, whose tireless Holocaust education work ensures that future generations never forget. She is a leading light, whether she is facilitating events such as Holocaust Memorial Day in Eastbourne, making school visits, or sharing her experiences through her book, "Yellow Star to Pop Star"—she is a published author. She also shared her story with masses of Channel 4 viewers when she appeared on "First Dates" in 2021, and told us more about her experiences. We thank Dorit so much for her advocacy, her service and her fabulousness.

Dorit's example serves as a testament to the need for the Holocaust memorial and learning centre that is the subject of this Bill. Education is our most powerful defence against hatred's return, and the theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day—"For a Better Future"—carries such profound weight. In that spirit, we remember the 6 million Jewish lives stolen and all victims of Nazi persecution. We honour their memory by confronting hatred wherever it emerges, including in the face of genocide in our world today, but sadly that confrontation requires vigilance.

5 pm

From the antisemitic attack on Bondi Beach to the targeting of Jewish people worshipping at their synagogue in Greater Manchester, hatred persists. In Eastbourne, the event organisers of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations have worked so hard to hold an event as safely as possible; in fact, I directly requested that the Sussex police strengthen their officer presence at the event to reinforce that. Although I am grateful that the police have agreed to review their presence and have accordingly deployed specialist officers with significant capabilities, it is a shameful tragedy that, in 2026, Holocaust memorial gatherings still require the extensive protection necessary today.

Our society, at home and abroad, has so much further to go. Legislation such as that before Parliament can take us some way, but defeating prejudice requires each of us to challenge antisemitism and division in our communities, our schools and our daily interactions. I say to those gathering in Eastbourne: thank you for remembering, for standing against hatred and for choosing a better future. As we embrace the path forward and light candles of remembrance, let us move towards the tolerance and humanity that the Holocaust victims and survivors were denied. We will never forget.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): Since the horrific attacks of 7 October 2023, we have seen a sharp and sustained increase in antisemitic abuse in Britain. Last year, a report commissioned by the Board of Deputies of British Jews found widespread failures to address anti-Jewish discrimination across public life, including in the NHS, education, the arts and policing. This matters today and is not a problem of the past. The Community Security Trust recorded over 3,500 antisemitic incidents in the UK in 2024—one of the highest totals on record.

I understand that some will try to tie what is happening here in the UK to Israel's actions in Gaza. People may hold strong views about that conflict, but we must be absolutely clear: British Jews are not responsible for the actions of any Government overseas. They are simply trying to live their lives, regardless of their faith or community identity. They should never be blamed, targeted or held accountable for events beyond their control. That is why remembrance must go hand in hand with education. Holocaust survivors are fewer each year, as we have heard, and we cannot rely on living testimony alone. We need strong, honest education about the Holocaust, about antisemitism, and about how quickly lies and conspiracy theories can spread, especially online.

The truth is that hatred is often fuelled by misinformation and a lack of understanding. Today conspiracy theories travel faster than ever, amplified by social media and algorithms that drive people towards ever more extreme content. Given the ease with which hate can spread online, a memorial linked to a learning centre—one that helps people to understand the Holocaust and confront antisemitism—has real value.

As we approach Holocaust Memorial Day, I hope the House can send a clear message: we remember, we educate, and we will stand against antisemitism and prejudice, in all its forms, wherever it is found.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I rise briefly because I agree with both the tenor of the debate and the tone in which colleagues across the House have quite rightly highlighted the sheer horror of the Holocaust, the importance of remembering its sheer scale and the challenges particularly, as the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) highlighted, in the context of rising antisemitism, and as the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) mentioned, in having fewer survivors with lived experience here to share their stories.

I want to address two points raised by the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). First, he raised a point that I surmise was on security, and I say to him that I simply do not know where the best site would be from a security perspective. It may be that somewhere between Parliament, which is obviously heavily secured, and MI5 would be an appropriate location for a site that will always carry security risks. It may be that other sites are better, and I defer to those with far more expertise than me.

I note that the current Father of the House—like the previous Father of the House— has spoken about his concerns with the design of the memorial, which I think reflects the fact that he is a former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, but I always have a slight concern. We obviously all agree on the principle, because it is important, and as the Member for Chelmsford said, after 11 years there is a need to make progress. I am not calling for delay—I certainly am not—because this is important, and we need to get on with it and to deliver it. However, it is fair to say that when the House is agreed on an issue, there is a danger that that issue is not sufficiently scrutinised.

As I have said, the current Father of the House, like the previous Father of the House, has raised concerns. He speaks as a former Chair of the PAC; I currently chair the Finance Committee. The Finance Committee is not responsible for restoration and renewal—the House will come on to debate that—but I have already seen very serious concerns emerging around the challenges of the programme. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, have huge experience of the programme. Indeed, the programme has been repeatedly delayed and seen significant cost overruns. The design before us includes a significant proportion of construction underground in a very constrained site. I think the Minister opened the debate extremely well and I agreed with much of what she said, but it seemed to me that she is giving the trustees quite a lot of discretion, so I simply want to say how important it is, on this programme, that there is very real transparency about some of the challenges that I fear will emerge with the design, the construction, the risk of cost overruns, the constraints and the compromises.

Can I bring that alive with one example? This site was constrained, and Parliament, as is its right, chose to vote to remove that constraint. On the R and R programme, I am told that the children's education centre has to move because of an identical constraint. I suspect that the interaction of this programme with the R and R programme will come before the House in due course and raise some challenges. Indeed, the House has not even decided about such matters as what will happen to the education centre under the R and R programme.

The importance of remembering the unbelievable horror of the Holocaust cannot be overstated—

Dr Arthur: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Barclay: If the hon. Member will let me, I would like to finish.

When all in the House agree on something, the question is whether the designs have been sufficiently scrutinised. Therefore, my plea to the Minister is to make a commitment to transparency and to communicating the pressures, which I foresee will emerge, in a very timely way.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: With the leave of the House, I rise to thank hon. Members of all parties for their contribution to this important debate. I appreciate that although the Government's commitment to establish a new national Holocaust memorial and learning centre has cross-party support, there are strongly held views in many quarters about how that vision is made a reality, and we are committed to listening and to engaging as we move forward.

I would like to start by thanking the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly) for the work that his party did to initiate this important scheme and the Bill, and for maintaining cross-party consensus and working constructively with us to find solutions to move forward. He was right to focus our minds on the purpose of the Bill and the key mission of the learning centre.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) was right to remind us of the need for pace and urgency. This process was initiated in 2015; it has taken far too long to get to this point. As he pointed out, as we delay and take time, the hope and ambition that the last survivors could see the construction of this memorial and learning centre moves further out of sight. We are determined to move at pace with construction, should we get the support of the House, to conclude it while the last remaining survivors are still here.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) gave a powerful contribution highlighting the reason for the Bill and the need constantly to remember, so that "never again" is not a hollow slogan or empty words. She was right that we are having this debate in the context of a rising tide of hate and division across our country. The collective task before us is to make sure that we move, deliver, remember and learn for this generation and future generations.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is timely to remind us all that if we held a minute's silence for every person killed in the Holocaust, we would be silent for 11 and a half years. It is right and proper that we have a national memorial. Can the Minister reassure the House? Antisemitism is not confined to history; it is happening daily. Whether it be attacks at football matches or in our streets, around us our Jewish friends face hostility simply for being Jews. As this centre remembers the Holocaust, will it also deal with the antisemitism prevalent in our society today? Will those Jewish friends feel confident that they will not be attacked when they go to the centre?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: The hon. Member is absolutely right. We are seeing increased antisemitism. We see case after case in all our communities. I spend a lot of time talking to the Jewish community and our faith leaders. I hear the fear, anxiety and worry. The Government are absolutely committed to responding to that and to making sure that we take action so that our Jewish friends in this country feel safe and feel that they can live their lives without fear of attack or prejudice. That is a collective ambition across the House, and one that we have to work day in and day out to deliver. Remembering, and remembering where this can take us, is part of that journey, which is why the Bill and the memorial centre are absolutely key.

I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for paying tribute to his constituent Dorit Oliver-Wolff, her legacy and her impact. There are so many survivors who have made such a huge contribution and have continued to give and continued to remind us. I hope that, collectively, we deliver this Bill for them and deliver the construction of this site.

The Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), is right to point out that there have been issues about the location. There have been large debates about this. I gently point out that there has been extensive consultation throughout the planning process; 4,500 responses were submitted to the planning application and a planning inquiry was held publicly. We have consulted, and we have heard and listened. The issue of the location is increasingly settled, but we will continue to work with the community and the council to get the design right. Critically, we will protect the garden, as the site will take up only 7.5% of the area of Victoria Tower Gardens. We will do a huge amount of work to make sure that the memorial centre is aligned and consistent with that public park. Critically, we are doing work to enhance the park, including the playground.

Let me end by reflecting on the contribution from the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) and his plea for transparency, which we hear. There is consensus and we want to maintain that consensus. That requires us to continue listening and engaging, and to keep the House updated. Any construction has difficulties going through planning but also delivery. Our commitment is that, because all Members have worked together to get to this point, we will continue to update the House.

I close by underlining the Government's determination to ensure that the learning centre remains firmly focused on education about the Holocaust and antisemitism. We will ensure that that determination is embedded in the future governance arrangements for the memorial and learning centre, so that there can be no dilution of or digression from that intent. We do that, as Members across the House have highlighted eloquently and passionately, to ensure that we remember that dark moment and learn the lessons of history so that it can never happen again. I hope we can now move ahead as quickly as possible to establish the Holocaust memorial and learning centre with the consent and the support of Members across the House.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendment 1;

That Miatta Fahnbulleh, Deirdre Costigan, Laura Kyrke-Smith, Mark Sewards, Peter Prinsley, Sir James Cleverly and Zöe Franklin be members of the Committee;

That Miatta Fahnbulleh be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Taiwo Owatemi*.)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

DIEGO GARCIA MILITARY BASE AND BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 9 September 2025 (Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on the Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 4.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

Question agreed to.

Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before we move to consideration of the Lords amendments, I can confirm that Lords amendments 2, 3 and 6 engage Commons financial privilege. Having given careful consideration to Lords amendments 2 and 3, Mr Speaker is satisfied that they would impose a charge on the public revenue that has not been authorised by this House. In accordance with paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 78, the amendments will therefore be deemed to be disagreed to and are not subject to debate.

Lords amendments 2 and 3 deemed to be disagreed to (Standing Order No. 78(3)).

Clause 1

COMMENCEMENT OF TREATY AND MAIN PROVISIONS OF THIS ACT

5.18 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Lords amendment 5, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 6, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 4.

Stephen Doughty: National security must always be the first priority of any Government, and that is all the more important during these uncertain times. This Government have always and will always act to ensure the safety and security of the British people. That is precisely why we have agreed the Diego Garcia military base deal and why we need to pass the Bill, so the treaty can come into effect. The deal secures the vital military asset for future generations. It allows the base to continue to operate as it has done for decades to come, protecting UK national security and regional stability, and that of our allies.

As part of this agreement, the Government have negotiated robust and extensive provisions to protect the base that will categorically prevent our adversaries from compromising the base or interfering with the vital protection the base gives to both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Doughty: I will make progress and then I will take some interventions—certainly from the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell).

The UK will never compromise on our national security, and as we have repeatedly made clear, the agreement we struck is vital for protecting it; it guarantees the long-term future of a base that is vital for the United Kingdom and the United States and our allies, and which had been under threat. Crucially, the deal secures the operations of the joint US-UK base on Diego Garcia for generations. It has been publicly welcomed

[Stephen Doughty]

by key allies, including our Five Eyes partners, and key international partners including India, Japan and South Korea.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Throughout the passage of this Bill, the Minister has prayed in aid the support of the United States of America and the wider Five Eyes community. This morning the President of the United States dropped what could be described as a depth charge on that and made very clear what he thinks. What are the House and the Government to read of what the Minister says was the American position on the Bill and what it appears that its commander-in-chief is saying today?

Stephen Doughty: We engage with the United States—our closest defence and security partner—on a range of issues, including this one, every single day, and we continue to do so. The hon. Member asks an important question. The United States and President Trump welcomed this deal in the spring, and when we discussed in detail why the agreement was needed, the strong protections that it includes and the vital security it provides for Diego Garcia, the Administration endorsed the agreement as a "monumental achievement" following a thorough inter-agency process in the United States. The hon. Member will know how serious that is.

In May the United States Secretary of State said,

"The Trump Administration determined that this agreement secures the long-term, stable, and effective operation of the joint US-UK military facility at Diego Garcia".

We will of course have discussions with the Administration in the coming days to remind them of the strength of this deal and how it secures the base for the United Kingdom and the United States. We will continue those discussions on many levels.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Following the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), does the Minister realise that the President of the United States, following his perspicacious comments last night, has had a chance to examine the deal in full? Does he therefore understand why the last Conservative Government, of which I was a part—indeed, doing the job the Minister is doing now—would never ever have got this deal?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said in this House many times, the last Government—the right hon. Gentleman knows this, as he was part of that Government—started this deal because they recognised that there was a serious challenge to the operation of the base, which is critical for our national security. *[Interruption.]* No, we have heard that claim made multiple times, but it is clear from the record of the Government of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), that they continued those negotiations right into the run-up to the general election in 2024. They engaged in 11 rounds of negotiations because they recognised, as did we, the very serious risks to the operation of that base.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I will happily give way to the former Cabinet Office Minister.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The Minister makes an important point. The key thing about the negotiations is that they were predicated on the United States' concern about the continuing operation of the base in the context of concerns around international law. The position set out by the President of the United States last night is that he is not concerned about this—in fact, he is concerned about the deal the other way around. Moreover, I do not think that any of us would think that there is a concern around international law vis-à-vis the President of the United States. We are talking about two material changes. Surely in the face of these material changes, now is the time to pause and reconsider the implementation of the treaty. The circumstances have changed.

Stephen Doughty: The circumstances have not changed. Again, we see this collective amnesia on behalf of former Cabinet Ministers on the other side, who, I remind the right hon. Member, engaged in 11 rounds of negotiations. They did that because they knew of the very serious security and operational reasons affecting the base. I refer him to the Secretary of War, who said at the time:

"Diego Garcia is a vital military base for the US. The UK's very important deal with Mauritius secures the operational capabilities of the base and key US national security interests in the region. We are confident that the base is protected for many years ahead."

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I have taken a number of interventions, so I will move on.

The deal had to be done because the base was under threat. Courts had already begun making decisions that weakened our position, and without the deal, as I have said many times, we faced the prospect of further wide-ranging litigation that could have rendered the base inoperable. Let me be clear, as I have been on many occasions: this is not just about the legal position; it is about the operation of the base.

Without a treaty and a secure footing, legally binding provisional measures could have been imposed within weeks that would have undermined base operations. Our ability to protect the electromagnetic spectrum from interference, to ensure access to the base by air and sea and to patrol the area around the base would have been eroded, and everything from overflight clearances to securing contractors could have been affected. That would have driven costs through the roof, deterred future investment and degraded the facility, and our adversaries would have jumped at the chance to disrupt the base—for example, by establishing outposts on the outer islands—with a guise of legality on their side. It is for all those reasons that the previous Government, many of whose former Cabinet Ministers are sitting on the Opposition Benches, undertook 11 rounds of detailed negotiations. It is also why they made critical concessions on the principles of sovereignty and direct payment.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I have taken a number of interventions, so I would like to make some progress. I will happily take further interventions later.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab) *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Graham Stringer: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I have heard him in this Chamber a number of times say that the United States supported this deal. The President of the United States clearly does not support it any more. I would have thought that that was the case for a pause, but I would also have thought that something else that has changed was the case for a pause: the resolution of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has also asked for the Bill not to go forward. Does the Minister not think that those two things together mean that we should pause?

Stephen Doughty: We will not pause in defending our national security interests and those of our allies. We will do the right things to keep our national security and the operations of the base working as they have done for many decades. Despite the claims from the Opposition Benches, I reiterate that it is a matter of public record that, on February 2024, the former Prime Minister spoke with his Mauritian counterpart to confirm his commitment to negotiations, which continued until the general election. It was simply not credible to try to hang on, hope for the best and endanger an asset that is vital to our national security. The reality is that the previous Government failed to secure a deal. They failed to secure protections for the outer islands, for example. When it came to a matter of critical security, they did not deliver, so I am proud that we have secured a deal that is able to do those very things.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way; every time he comes to the House, he is most courteous. He mentioned the example of the former Prime Minister, but the former Prime Minister stated very clearly that the negotiations had to result in a "mutually beneficial" agreement. That did not happen, and therefore the Government ended those negotiations. Today, this Government are expecting us to vote on Third Reading for a deal that our greatest ally—an ally that the Minister has advocated for through this whole process—has turned its back on. How can he expect the House to do that when the circumstances have fundamentally changed?

Stephen Doughty: I have explained the comments of the US Secretary of State, the Secretary of War and the US Government, as well as the President's previous comments. This is about our Five Eyes partners as well; it is about Canada, Australia, New Zealand and our other key partners. They all understand the critical national security capabilities that the base provides. It is also about Japan and the Republic of Korea. The deal has also been welcomed by a number of our other overseas territories. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would discount their views, but we are not willing to do that. We are willing to deliver national security and the capabilities that our Five Eyes partners need.

Let me turn to the issue referenced in the Lords amendments. I want to answer the many genuine questions that have been asked by a number of hon. and right hon. Members on behalf of the Chagossians. We have secured a deal that protects the interests of the Chagossians. I know that there are a number of Members of this House who rightly care deeply about this issue and have done so for many years, but I am afraid to say that there are others who have picked up the mantle for pure political game playing and who fail to recognise that there is a genuine range of opinions within Chagossian communities; there are some who oppose this deal and there are many who support it, and that simply has not been recognised by many. We deeply regret—I reiterate this—the way in which Chagossians have been treated by successive Governments in the past. That is why we are committed to a future relationship that is built on trust.

The treaty provides the only viable path to resettlement on the outer islands of the archipelago. We know that that is a matter of critical importance to many Chagossians. Following the Government's efforts, Mauritius has confirmed that all Chagossians who were born on the archipelago and their children will be eligible for Mauritian citizenship and for participation in a future resettlement programme, regardless of where they live. The Bill also preserves current British and British overseas territory citizenship, and the pathway to British citizenship for Chagossians, meaning that they will be able to hold both British nationality and Mauritian citizenship. In fact, as of April 2025, 94% of Chagossians with British nationality also have Mauritian citizenship.

5.30 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose—*

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con) *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I give way on this issue to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

Sir John Hayes: On that point, the Minister will be aware that the matter was debated at length in the Lords. Indeed, one of the amendments that we are considering deals precisely with the entitlements of the Chagossians. They were not involved in the negotiations at any stage, and they have made that clear. Why on earth would the Minister reject the Lords amendment, which simply says that they should have a defining say in their own future?

Stephen Doughty: With respect—Madam Deputy Speaker, you can correct me if I am wrong—it is a decision in relation to the engagement of financial privilege and the Standing Orders that means that those amendments are not for debate and will be disagreed with. That has been made clear by the Chair.

Working with Mauritius, we have also agreed the parameters for the operation of a Chagossian trust fund. On 12 December, the Mauritian Government approved legislation to establish the trust fund. That confirms, again, in response to many reasonable opinions expressed both in the other place and by those on the Opposition Benches—

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Chair made it clear at the outset that the amendments that deal with matters of finance were inappropriate to be considered here, for obvious reasons. I understood, however, that the amendments that we were debating, including those that reference the Chagossians, do not concern finance in particular. Can you clarify the matter?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Deputy Speaker who was in the Chair before me read out the statement, and I will do so again for clarity. Having given careful consideration to Lords amendments 2 and 3, Mr Speaker is satisfied that they would impose a charge on the public revenue that has not yet been authorised by this House. In accordance with paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 78, the amendments will therefore be deemed to be disagreed to and are not subject to debate.

We cannot keep having the same discussion again and again. This is a very substantial debate and many people hope to speak, so let us proceed as fast as we can.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you for clarifying that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In parallel with the other measures, we have established a contact group to give Chagossians a greater say in UK Government support to their communities and we are in the process of enhancing that group, as Baroness Chapman committed to do in the other place. Thanks to the work we have done and the reasonable concerns raised across the House, the Chagossian trust fund will be operated for Chagossians by Chagossians. There will be a Chagossian majority on the board, which will include a UK-based representative and a Chagossian chair. Those reasonable concerns have been raised in the course of the debates and we are trying to address them.

Graham Stuart *rose—*

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I need to make progress, as Madam Deputy Speaker has asked me to be conscious of time. I will come back for further interventions.

Before moving on to discuss the specific amendments, I express my thanks to the noble Lords for their tireless efforts and to the many noble peers who scrutinised and supported the Bill. Lords amendment 4 was tabled by the Government, and I thank Lord Lansley for his helpful conversation and collaboration on the topic. The amendment will change the parliamentary procedure applicable to the delegated power in clause 6. With that amendment, all instruments made using that power will be subject to the negative procedure. Previously, no parliamentary procedure applied unless the power was used to amend, repeal or revoke Acts of Parliament or statutory instruments made under them. The amendment makes it clear that the Government are prepared to work with those who engage in genuine, constructive dialogue, rather than those who rely on political point scoring, to achieve meaningful compromise.

Turning to the other amendments made in the other place, I make it clear that the Government are thankful for all the scrutiny and are willing to engage with challenge. However, the other amendments are either already provided for or not necessary, or they simply make political points and play games with our national security, so we cannot accept them.

Lords amendment 1 would amend clause 1 to prevent the Bill and the treaty from entering into force until the Government had sought to renegotiate the termination clauses to include the base becoming unusable due to environmental degradation. That is unnecessary and I shall set out why. First, limiting the circumstances in which the treaty can be terminated protects the UK's interests and those of the United States, which has invested heavily in the base. In line with the United States' wishes, the previous Conservative Government agreed to limit termination to two grounds, both of which are in UK control, and this Government have secured that—

Graham Stuart: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: I will if the intervention is on this point.

Graham Stuart: The Minister mentions the United States' wishes, and he appears to be presenting the case that the United States remains in the position that it was in previously, despite what President Trump said last night. The Deputy Prime Minister said in February:

> "If President Trump doesn't like the deal, the deal will not go forward".

Last night, President Trump said that he did not like the deal. Is it still going forward, or is the Minister suggesting that President Trump did not mean what he said last night?

Stephen Doughty: I have already answered that point. As I said, discussions will continue with the US Administration in the coming days, as they have done throughout the process. We will remind them of the strength of this deal, allay concerns and, of course, emphasise how it secures the base for both the United Kingdom and the United States. We work together on these matters. As the Speaker of the House of Representatives set out this morning, it is important that we work together on all matters of national security.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con) *rose—*

Jeremy Corbyn *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: Let me make some progress on the issue of termination.

As I have said, limiting the circumstances in which the treaty can be terminated protects the UK's interests and those of the US. The Government have secured that procedure.

Secondly, I reassure the House that, given the importance of the base, we are taking necessary steps to protect it from environmental damage. Working with the United States, again in partnership, we already have extensive measures in place, such as the coastal erosion programme, and scientific studies show that natural land loss over the past 50 years has been less than 1%. That said, we recognise the concerns of Lord Craig and Lord Houghton, and I would like to reassure them and Members of this House that the international law of treaties allows for the termination of a treaty when it becomes impossible for a treaty to be performed as a result of

> "the permanent disappearance or destruction of an object indispensable for the execution of the treaty".

Baroness Chapman set out the legal position clearly in the other place.

For further reassurance, since that debate we have consulted Mauritius to verify that it shares our assessment. I am happy to update the House that this has been

confirmed in writing to the Government. Mauritius is clear on the point, both as a matter of international law and in its domestic law. We welcome that confirmation by Mauritius and trust that it will assure Members in this House and in the other place who share this concern that such an amendment is unnecessary.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I give way to the former Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Sir Julian Lewis: The Minister seems to be putting an awful lot of faith in the good intent and reliability of the Mauritian Government. They are a close ally of China, which, he might remember, gave us cast-iron guarantees about the future of the Hongkongers once the lease on Hong Kong was given up. I gently remind him that the 2024 Labour manifesto, entitled "Change", stated:

> "Defending our security also means protecting the British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, including the Falklands and Gibraltar. Labour will always defend their sovereignty and right to self-determination."

Can he look the Chagossians in the Gallery in the eye and tell them that that is what the Government are now doing?

Stephen Doughty: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman and his role, and we have had many good conversations, but it is extremely unhelpful to, and unwanted by, residents in Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands that this false comparison keeps being made—

Sir Julian Lewis: It is in your manifesto.

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely, and we stand by that commitment to defend the Falklands and Gibraltar. That is exactly what we have been doing and will continue to do. I gently say that I fully recognise and respect the fact that there are many Chagossian groups who disagree with this deal as well as many who agree with it. Unfortunately, some of the comments in this place have represented only one side of that argument. It is our duty as a Government to listen to all those groups and to engage appropriately with them.

Lords Amendments 5 and 6 both relate to the costs of the treaty—

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to take any more interventions at the moment. I need to make some progress.

Lords amendment 5 would require the Secretary of State to publish the total real-terms costs of payments made under the treaty, including the methodology used by the Government Actuary's Department and the Treasury. I confess that it brings me some satisfaction to learn that the Opposition have eventually accepted the importance of quoting financial figures for a 99-year treaty in real terms. They have always known that it is misleading to ignore the impact of inflation—a pound today is not worth the same as a pound in 99 years' time—and now at long last they seem to have seen the light. Let us see whether, in today's debate, we can do away with the deliberately and misleadingly inflated figures that have been bandied about again by the shadow Foreign Secretary during questions today, and start discussing the financial elements of the treaty with accuracy and transparency.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I will carry on, and then I will take the intervention from the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), who has raised these issues before.

For all the good intentions, I am afraid that Lords amendment 5 is unnecessary. We have been clear about the costs of the deal from the moment of signature. We published full details of the financial arrangements the very same day the treaty was signed, including in the financial exchange of letters and the explanatory memorandum laid before Parliament. If Opposition Members are having difficulty finding where that is, it is on pages 9 and 10 of the explanatory memorandum. The documents set out the payment schedule and the confirmed amounts at that time.

The methodology is clear: the average annual payment has been calculated using forecast inflation figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility. We used the forecast GDP deflator, which is published regularly. That generated the real value of the payments, which is the valueusb adjusted for inflation to create a fair comparison with other costs. Members will recall that this equates to less than a quarter of 1% of the Defence budget and compares favourably to the cost of comparable overseas facilities. I have mentioned the facility that France pays for in Djibouti. This is an immensely more valuable facility. It is priceless for our defence capabilities and those of our allies.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the deal provides certainty and full operational use of the base for 99 years?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely, I can confirm that the deal secures the base for us and our allies. It secures the crucial capabilities that benefit ourselves, the United States and, indeed, all our allies.

I am happy to further canter through the calculations. The net present value was established by discounting the real value of the sums due to be paid over the duration of the treaty using the social time preference rate, as set out in the Green Book. That adjusts for social time preference, which is a reflection of the value society attaches to present, as opposed to future, consumption. That has been used in the UK by Governments of all flavours since 2003.

Members will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced a review of the social time preference rate shortly before Christmas. That follows a review of the Green Book last year. I do not know how that review will conclude, but I know that the Government used the correct methodology when the figures were published, and were clear and transparent in doing so, and we will continue to do so whichever way the review comes out.

Esther McVey: This evening, the Minister is trying to convince us to vote for this Chagos deal. The President of the United States says that the Government are handing over the island "FOR NO REASON WHATSOEVER", so can he give us some reasons?

Stephen Doughty: With the greatest of respect to the right hon. Lady, I do not think she has been present in many of the other debates on this issue—she popped up here today to make these points. I have been clear and answered the question already, so I will not do so again.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way and for his detailed explanation of how the calculations have been made. The Government Actuary's Department clearly stated that this deal would cost £34.7 billion. That figure was then confirmed by his colleague, the Minister for the Middle East, who said that all the figures had been ratified by the Government Actuary's Department, but his colleague sitting next to him, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, told me that that figure was inaccurate. Will the Minister therefore clarify how much this deal costs?

Stephen Doughty: We set out the costs clearly at the time, as I have done for the hon. Gentleman in the Chamber a number of times. What I will confirm is that they have been verified by the Government Actuary's Department. The House of Commons Library has been through them and reached the same conclusion. The Office for Statistics Regulation has welcomed the Government's approach and said that it is in line with intelligent transparency, and the Office for Budget Responsibility also confirmed separately to it that the discount rates were correct. I have given the hon. Gentleman four good reasons and the costs. However much Opposition Members bandy about the costs, it is simply unhelpful.

I will move on to the other amendments. Lords amendment 6 would introduce an ongoing estimates and supply scrutiny process for expenditure under the treaty, including parliamentary approval for future payments and supplementary estimates. The agreement has undergone intense scrutiny, and the treaty provides robust mechanisms for dispute resolution under article 14. It is normal practice for payments under treaties to be made under the prerogative power and charged on the Consolidated Fund under the authority of the Supply Acts. Furthermore, the amendment would infringe on the financial privilege of the Commons and affect the Commons' arrangements for authorising expenditure. These are long-standing practices that members of the former Government will know. The same applied under them, and it applies under this Government, too.

Finally, subsection (4) would infringe on the prerogative power to make and unmake treaties. It is not wise to impose any immovable requirements about a hypothetical set of circumstances that might arise in the future. This provision risks requiring the Government to breach the UK's obligations under a treaty. It is clearly preferable for all options to be open to a future Government, so that they can deal with whatever the future may bring and act in the UK's best interests, taking into account all the circumstances.

I am conscious of your exhortations about time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I know that a number of right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak. The previous Government recognised that there was a problem. They engaged in 11 rounds of negotiations, but failed to reach a deal that was in our interests and those of the United States. We secured this deal. It protects the base, and the interests of the United States and our Five Eyes partners.

5.45 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before I call the shadow Foreign Secretary, for the benefit of the House, and to provide a fuller response to the point of order raised by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), it is Lords amendments 2 and 3, which relate to the referendum, that will be disagreed to under Standing Order No. 78(3). The expenditure necessary for a referendum has not been authorised by this House. Lords amendments 5 and 6 are within the scope of the debate. Although amendment 6 engages the financial privilege of this House, it does not in itself involve any expenditure. I hope that helps colleagues.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I only want to clarify that point slightly. Those amendments are mentioned on the Order Paper, but cannot be voted on because of financial privilege, yet they are on the Order Paper, so surely they can be debated and discussed, without us having a vote at the end. Otherwise, they should not have been put on the Order Paper.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The advice I am getting from the Clerk is that that is incorrect because the amendments were disagreed to in the Lords, so we must continue with the debate in hand, as on the Order Paper.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Labour's Chagos surrender Bill is back, and this House has its last chance to act in the national interest, defend the rights of the Chagossian community and protect the money of hard-pressed British taxpayers, who are being expected to foot a colossal bill of £35 billion, which is being given to a foreign Government to—guess what?—cut their taxes, while our taxes rise.

I put on record the thanks of Conservative Members to the other place for their scrutiny, and their diligence in once again holding this Government to account. When Labour plotted to deny this House a debate and a vote on the surrender treaty during the 21-day process under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, it was Conservatives in the House of Lords who forced a debate and a vote. When Labour limited the time for this House to give the Bill the line-by-line scrutiny it needed, it was the House of Lords that stepped in and made time available. When this Labour Government ignored and neglected the views of the Chagossian community, it was the House of Lords and the International Relations and Defence Committee that came to the rescue and organised a survey, giving important insights into Chagossians' concerns about the Government of Mauritius and the future of their ancestral home. When Labour refused to accept any amendments to modify and improve this £35 billion surrender Bill, it was the House of Lords that made important changes, which we are debating today.

Let me be clear: this is a Bill that the Conservatives have fought against at every single stage. We will not accept this deal to surrender British sovereignty; it is a deal that we will continue to oppose and challenge Ministers on. Every vote today is a vote to kill this Bill. We will keep on voting against this Bill and opposing it until the Government—and, one would hope, the Prime

Minister—see sense, withdraw it and tear up the treaty. We are not the only ones vociferously opposing this, because we now know that the President of the United States is against it; he says that it is being done "for no reason whatsoever", and that China and Russia will

"have noticed this act of total weakness."

Esther McVey: I asked the Minister what the reasons were for the Government signing away the Chagos islands. He could not give any reasons. The President of the United States says that the Government are giving the islands away "for no reason whatsoever", so can my right hon. Friend give us any reason to sign off this deal today?

Priti Patel: Let me remind my right hon. Friend exactly what the President of the United States said. He has said that this is being done "for no reason whatsoever", and that

"There is no doubt that China and Russia have noticed this act of total weakness."

The previous Foreign Secretary, now the Deputy Prime Minister, is on the record as saying:

"If President Trump doesn't like the deal, the deal will not go forward… they've got to be happy with the deal or there is no deal",

so why has Labour continued to press this Bill?

In the light of the President's comments, can the Minister tell us what will happen to the status of the 1966 exchange of notes between the UK and the United States, which states clearly that the British Indian Ocean Territory

"shall remain under United Kingdom sovereignty"?

What is the impact on that agreement? Is it being changed?

Simon Hoare: When I and other colleagues intervened on the Minister, we seemed to get a rather la-la land answer about the Government's response to what the President of the United States has said. In terms, the Minister said, "I'll go and have a word with him and put him straight." Well, good luck with that! The Government, having prayed in aid for so long the unalloyed support of the United States, have now lost it. Is my right hon. Friend as confused as I am to see that they are pretending that the incident never happened? It is like the "Bobby in the shower" moment in "Dallas".

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. The Opposition are completely against this deal, and the President of the United States has said that it is going ahead "for no reason whatsoever". It seems to me that the Government are still on hold to the President of the United States.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I am too young to have seen that scene in "Dallas", so that went slightly over my head. Does the right hon. Member agree that we cannot read too much into a social media post? After all, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) has said about the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick):

"Jenrick is a fraud. I've always thought so",

and

"Don't believe a word that he says".

Is it not true that we cannot always stick with the same mindset on social media?

Priti Patel: Let me say, for the benefit of everyone in this House, that the United States of America is our strongest ally when it comes to the national security of our country, and rightly so. When the President of the United States raises concerns, we should listen to them, and I would like to think that this Government will act on them.

Let me turn to the details of Lords amendment 5, which would introduce new provisions on transparency about the costs that British taxpayers are being forced to pay. It is vital that this House sees the full costs, as Labour has never acknowledged or accepted the financial costs and burdens of this Bill for the taxpayer. As the House knows, the Conservative party had to force the information out of the Government through freedom of information requests. Labour Ministers have had the bare-faced cheek to come here and give us their valuation of £3.5 billion, whereas the Government Actuary's Department tells us that it is £35 billion.

In most areas of Government spending, Labour likes to brag about how much is being spent—welfare is a familiar theme that it likes to go on about—but on this issue, it is using a valuation technique to downplay the amount. We have heard the Prime Minister claim that this is

"how the OBR counts the cost".

However, the Office for Budget Responsibility has said:

"The OBR does not hold any information on the costs or financial impacts of the specific treaty over the future sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago. We can confirm that we have not been contacted by HM Treasury, MoD or the Governments Actuary's Department",

so what is the truth? This amendment would help to bring about more openness and transparency on the costs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Minister and the Conservative party on this amendment, which is crucial. The key is whether the British Government have fully briefed the US about the risks to the Pelindaba treaty that will result from Diego Garcia becoming sovereign to Mauritius, because if they have, President Trump will be very glad to comment on that. Does she agree that the thing to do now might be to contact President Trump?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right that that treaty relates to nuclear weapons coming on to the base at Diego Garcia. That is why our emphasis must be on the strength of the relationship between our two countries when it comes to our national security—this House will not disagree on that—but it is deeply concerning that the President of the United States has explicitly expressed his disapproval of this entire process and this giveaway. To address the hon. Member's point about the nuclear treaty, we should absolutely be engaging with our closest ally, the United States of America.

Stuart Anderson: It is not as if the President of the United States has not expressed disapproval; he says it is an "act of great stupidity" to do this deal. Does my right hon. Friend think that it is ironic that the Secretary of State for Defence made the first statement to the House on the subject last May, but with less than

[Stuart Anderson]

12 hours to go until what could have been the final stage of the Bill, the President has absolutely trashed the deal?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right, and what he says speaks to it being complete nonsense for the Government to have proceeded with the Bill. It is an act of gross self-harm and, to quote the President of the United Sates, an "act of great stupidity" that will have significant consequences for this Government.

Sir Julian Lewis: Has my right hon. Friend noticed that the Minister, who is, shall we say, a flexible friend in the cause of the Government's policies, has been relying on the fact that, in the past, other Members of Donald Trump's Government in America have been saying supportive things about the Bill? Would she like to cast a wager with the Minister, as I would, that 24 hours after Donald Trump changed his tune, the Government will change their tune in exactly the same direction?

Priti Patel: If the Government wish to U-turn and scrap the Bill, we would welcome that and support it; there is no question about that.

I turn to amendment 1. It is not just when it comes to money, which is addressed in amendment 5, that the Government's claims lack any credibility; amendment 1, which deals with the surrender of British sovereignty, leaves us weaker and, as we have heard from my right hon. and hon. Friends, will compromise the long-term operations of the base.

We are required to give notice to the Government of Mauritius about a range of activities taking place on the base. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, Mauritius is a signatory to the Pelindaba treaty, and if that applies to Diego Garcia, it would prohibit the stationing and storage of nuclear weapons there. This is very serious. While the Prime Minister has claimed that China, Russia and Iran oppose the surrender, we know that they back it; they publicly endorse it, and they will seek to gain from this lack of sovereignty.

These points are all relevant to amendment 1, as it requires the Government to renegotiate article 11 of the treaty, so that payments cease should the use of the base for military purposes became impossible. Obviously, we hope that that scenario does not materialise, as we believe that Diego Garcia is a vital cornerstone of our national security and defence, and should remain so. However, as the treaty stands, if we stop using the base, the UK is still bound to make pretty significant payments over the 99-year lease period; it is a huge cost. Amendment 1 is therefore a vital point of contingency.

We would like the whole agreement binned, but we believe that it is reasonable and practical for the Government to accept this change. When he sums up, will the Minister explain why he is not prepared to consider the amendment, and to renegotiate parts of the treaty?

Graham Stuart: Does my right hon. Friend, like me, feel some sympathy for the Minister? He has rested his whole case on the support of the United States of America. The Deputy Prime Minister said that the Bill would not go ahead if the American President did not support it. We all remember the great mystery about who shot J.R., but there is no mystery about who shot the Minister's fox—it was the President of the United States last night, and the Minister's whole case has crumbled.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is spot on. This is the critical moment when the Government should tear up the Bill and scrap this disaster. It should not proceed at all.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend noticed, like me, that all the military veterans in the Government and on the Labour Benches—with one notable exception—seem to have abandoned their post today? I have counted about nine veterans on our Benches. If more veterans had been on the Labour Benches, perhaps they could have told the Front Benchers about the forlorn hope. The forlorn hope were the people who were sent out either to defend the indefensible or to go on suicidal attack missions. They were in search of either promotion or pardons for sins of the past. Does she agree that the Front Benchers have been sent out here to defend the indefensible?

6 pm

Priti Patel *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I correct the record? The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) says that there are not any veterans. I have served this country as an Army reservist, and I am very proud to have done so. We have many other Labour Members who have served and are veterans; they absolutely defend the national security of this country and have done so at many different stages. That comment is not accurate and needs to be corrected.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank—*[Interruption.]* Order. I can make a decision; I do not need any help. That was not exactly a point of order, Minister. It was much more of an intervention, which may have been taken by the Member who was about to rise to her feet. However, the Minister has got his point on the record. We need to move at a pace; otherwise, we will not get speakers in.

Priti Patel: Although Lords amendments 2 and 3 have not been selected, I will briefly comment on them for members of the Chagossian community watching this debate. Owing to the actions of the Conservatives in the House of Lords, the Government were forced to slow down the ratification process for a brief moment while a survey was undertaken in the other place by the International Relations and Defence Committee. That was very important, because something like 3,000 respondents gave a view. They gave a very clear statement as to the direction of travel on the Chagos Islands—their ancestral home—and they want them to remain British.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Priti Patel: I will very briefly give way—this will be the last intervention I take.

David Simmonds: If this is such a good deal, why does my right hon. Friend think that one of my local authorities is having to house hundreds of Chagossians who are fleeing to the UK to escape its consequences?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am aware that his local authority is under a range of pressures from Chagossians who are basically fleeing to the United Kingdom. They have raised many serious concerns about the Government of Mauritius and expressed a clear wish for the Chagossian community to be respected, engaged, stood up for absolutely and to have their voices listened to.

The Chagossian community has been treated appallingly. There is a sense of betrayal of the community, and that is absolutely wrong. Although we cannot vote on Lords amendments 2 and 3 today, it is still in the gift of the Government to see sense and take action to facilitate the Chagossians' right of self-determination. That is absolutely vital.

This entire surrender Bill is wrong, which is why we on the Conservative Benches will keep on opposing it. I have said this before, and I will say it again: to all the Labour MPs who have been whipped and commanded to enter the Division Lobby to back the surrender Bill and support the Government's plan to remove the Lords amendments, I say, "You are being used to service the interests of your Prime Minister, rather than your country and your constituents. You are being forced to vote through paying billions to a foreign Government who are allied with our enemies and growing closer to them, while your councils and schools see their budgets squeezed and cut. You are being forced to be complicit in the betrayal of the Chagossian community, but tonight you have the chance to do the right thing and join us in the Division Lobby."

The Conservative party will continue to stand up for our national interest, British taxpayers and the Chagossian community. That is why we will keep opposing Labour's £35 billion Chagos surrender Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Back-Bench Members are on a five-minute speaking limit. That will drop further as the debate continues.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): In answer to the intervention by the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), there is more than one veteran on the Labour Benches. I wonder what the veterans from the Conservative party who went through 11 rounds of negotiations under the previous Government were saying; they clearly supported this decision at that point, and there were clear reasons for doing so.

This is not an exercise in process; it is about whether this House chooses to protect on firm, enforceable terms an overseas base that is fundamental to British security and our closest alliances. Diego Garcia is a critical asset for the UK and our allies. It supports counter-terrorism, monitors hostile state activity, and enables the rapid deployment of UK and US forces across regions that matter deeply to our national interest. Those opposing the Bill need to be clear about what they are opposing. They are opposing a treaty that secures the base for 99 years with full operational freedom, one that is backed by our allies and was negotiated substantially under the previous Government.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman be supporting Lords amendment 1, given that he has just specified that the base needs to be used for military purposes? If that use becomes impossible, because the islands go under water, for example—which is a real risk—would he want to carry on paying for the deal?

Alex Ballinger: I will not be supporting Lords amendment 1, because it would require renegotiation. We already have a joint commission to deal with issues that arise, and international treaty law would provide routes to termination if we were in that sort of situation, so the amendment is not necessary at all. I will come back to this question later in my speech.

If we refused to comply, others—international organisations and partners—would not ignore any provisional measures that were put in place, undermining the practical operation of the base. That is the same reason that negotiations were started under the last Government, and the treaty contains safeguards that are not decorative, but operationally vital. The UK will control installations and the electromagnetic spectrum; we will control a buffer zone of 24 nautical miles, within which nothing can be built without UK consent; and there will be a strict ban on any foreign military or security presence on the outer islands. Those are precisely the kinds of protections that make the base secure, usable and resilient against interference.

As we are in the Chamber today to consider the Lords amendments, I will go through each in turn. Lords amendment 1 would require renegotiation so that the UK can stop payments if it cannot use the base. On the surface, as others have mentioned, this may sound prudent, but it is a recipe for uncertainty and delay at the very moment that we need clarity. The treaty already establishes a joint commission to deal with issues as they arise, and international treaty law provides routes to termination if an indispensable object for execution permanently disappears. The amendment adds risk, not security, undermining confidence in the treaty framework that we need to keep the base operational.

Lords amendments 2 and 3 were rejected by Mr Speaker. Lords amendment 4 deals with the procedure for orders under clause 6 of the Bill. It is a Government amendment; responding to the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, it provides appropriate parliamentary procedure. It strengthens scrutiny and is a sensible refinement to how the Bill operates, and this House should support it.

Lords amendment 5, which deals with the publication of the total costs and methodology, is duplicative. The Government published full details of the financial arrangements on the day that the treaty was signed, including the relevant explanatory material. The methodology is clear: it uses the Office for Budget Responsibility's inflation forecasts to calculate the average annual figures, and those figures have been verified by the Government Actuary's Department. The House of Commons Library reached the same conclusion, and the Office for Statistics Regulation has welcomed this approach. The amendment is not about transparency; it is about rerunning an argument we have had time and again in this House, including through I do not know how many urgent questions.

Lords amendment 6 deals with Commons votes to cease payments if Mauritius breaches the treaty. This would require additional parliamentary steps on anticipated expenditure.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the costs of the deal. Can he just set them out for the House? I do not think anyone has done so in today's debate so far, and he is speaking with such expertise. It would be great to hear from him exactly what this deal is costing.

Alex Ballinger: I will happily outline that to the House. The Minister has already outlined it: it is approximately 0.25% of the defence budget, which is tiny in comparison to the base in Djibouti that the French operate. If we compare it with the operation of an aircraft carrier or something of that size, it is very good value for money.

Lords amendment 6 would cut across long-standing constitutional practice on treaty payments, and would infringe Commons financial privilege and established arrangements for authorising expenditure. More importantly, it would send a damaging signal that the UK is building an exit ramp into primary legislation, weakening our hand and injecting instability into the very agreement designed to secure the base. The treaty already contains robust dispute resolution mechanisms, which is the right way to deal with such issues.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to intervene one more time?

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Oh, stop giving him extra time! He is not going to trouble the scorer, is he?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Would the hon. Gentleman like to continue?

Alex Ballinger: Yes, I will continue.

The strategic logic is straightforward. Diego Garcia's location, infrastructure and operational utility are indispensable.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): On the security of the base, does my hon. Friend recall the visit to Washington DC that I think we both went on last year as members of the Foreign Affairs Committee? We spoke to many American interlocutors, including State Department officials. Over the course of an entire week in the US capital, not a single US interlocutor disagreed with or opposed the deal before us.

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This treaty has been through the interagency process in America and has support across the system. Colleagues may have mentioned the President changing his position, but the US system is much wider than that, and I do not think we should we should base our long-term strategic and security interests on Truth Social posts.

This House should reject Lords amendments 1, 5 and 6, support the Government's sensible procedural amendment 4, and pass this Bill in a way that protects national security, rather than gambling with it.

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—never has a point of order been greeted with such joy from the Chair—you have rightly pointed out, as has Mr Speaker, the Lords amendments that engage Commons financial privilege. We guard that privilege jealously and exercise it with caution. How is the House supposed to exercise that financial privilege in an informed way when, despite several probes to the Minister to come up with a figure for what this deal will cost the public purse, those right hon. and hon Members attending the debate this afternoon have not been given that figure? We have had a lot of theory about how a figure had been arrived at, but no figure. How do we exercise—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Hoare, I am worried that the longer you speak, the longer you will disappoint other colleagues who are hoping to contribute later in the debate, and I would not want to ruin your reputation on that front. This feels like a continuation of the debate. The Minister may or may not wish to respond to that point during his closing speech, but my job is to make sure that as many Members as possible who have sat through this debate get to put their voice on the record.

I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Please forgive my slightly croaky tones today, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Please keep your speech short.

Dr Pinkerton: I will do my best, having received that cue from you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This Bill returns to us from the other place with amendments that raise serious questions about the governance, cost and durability of the treaty concerning the future of Diego Garcia and the wider Chagos archipelago. For decades, decisions about the Chagos islands were taken without the consent of the Chagossian people. That was the defining feature of the injustice that they have experienced. My concern, shared by many across this House and others in this place, is that unless the Government properly consider the Lords amendments, Parliament risks giving statutory effect to a framework that lacks the safeguards necessary for accountability, legitimacy and long-term sustainability. That is precisely what the Lords amendments seek to address.

In the things that they have proposed, the Government have acknowledged the historic wrongdoing to the Chagossian people. They have recognised the right of return in principle and proposed a £40 million trust fund to address the harms caused by forced displacement. The framework before us today provides limited assurance, however, that the Chagossian people will have any meaningful agency over the decisions and structures that will shape their future. That matters, because legitimacy is not derived from intergovernmental agreement alone. It rests on whether those affected can participate meaningfully in decisions taken about their homeland.

At the core of the United Nations charter lies the principle of self-determination. Article 1.2 could not be clearer. One of the purposes of the United Nations is:

> "To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and the self-determination of peoples".

We reasonably expected to have the opportunity to vote to reaffirm our commitment to the UN charter and, crucially, our commitment to the right of Chagossians

as a distinct, albeit displaced people to self-determine their future. It is therefore deeply regrettable that Members across this House have been denied that opportunity today.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I am very sorry about his throat. I suspect that he, like me, is keen for Greenlanders to have the right of self-determination. Time and again, we have sat through the speeches of Ministers who have harped on about the need to defend their right to a say in what happens to them. Will the hon. Gentleman compare and contrast that with the situation faced by the Chagossians, and explain why the Danes can put into law the right for their people to have a say in their future but we are about to rule it out for people to whom we owe a duty of care?

6.15 pm

Dr Pinkerton: If the right hon. Gentleman will bear with me for two minutes, I will get to precisely that point.

It is shameful that a meaningful referendum was not the starting point of this Government's approach, which left Opposition parties to insist on it through amendments. It is equally shameful that this principle has today been rejected on the grounds of cost. What price do the Government place on self-determination? Among Chagossians, this will be received for what it is: justice layered upon injustice.

This Government, and Governments before them, have routinely defended our overseas territories in the international arena on the basis of the self-determining rights of their citizens. Today, this Government rightly defend Greenland on that same basis, asserting the right of Greenlanders to determine their own future. It is therefore with deep regret that I speak in support of that right and of that principle as expressed through Lords amendments 2 and 3, knowing that we will have no opportunity to vote in favour of those amendments when a Division is called.

In respect of accountability and oversight, Lords amendments 5 and 6 would reinforce Parliament's role in scrutinising the financial commitments of this agreement. They would ensure that the House is not asked to authorise long-term expenditure without clarity on its scale, duration and assumptions. The amendments would require transparency in the way in which costs are calculated, and ensure that Parliament retains control over future payments. That is not obstruction; it is a proper exercise of parliamentary responsibility, and one owed to future Administrations and to the public. The amendments would also give the Government a mechanism to terminate the deal and all future payments to Mauritius should Mauritius fail to honour its obligations.

In May, the Prime Minister said that the deal would cost up to £3.4 billion over 99 years. However, freedom of information disclosures suggest an initial estimate closer to £34.7 billion, a figure that we have already heard today. That disparity risks further undermining trust in this Government, and confidence in their wider approach to public spending. At a time when families across Britain face cost of living pressures, Parliament is entitled—indeed expected—to demand clarity before committing taxpayers to potentially vast long-term liabilities that will endure well beyond any of our lifetimes.

In respect of security and durability, Lords amendment 1 addresses the strategic importance of Diego Garcia, and would ensure that the United Kingdom is not locked into ongoing payments should the military use of the base become impossible. Given the rapidly shifting nature of the United Kingdom's relationship with the United States, particularly under its current President, the amendment is essential to ensure that we are not bound into a long-term lease without a similarly long-term tenant. No one in this House or the other place disputes the strategic importance of Diego Garcia to our national security, and to global security more broadly. The amendment reflects that reality, and raises legitimate questions about the long-term viability of this deal.

Let me now return briefly to Lords amendments 5 and 6, which together form a coherent and, in my view, proportionate package. They would reinforce parliamentary oversight, protect the public purse, and hold the Government's financial commitments to account. The other place has not sought to frustrate the Bill; it has asked whether Parliament is prepared to proceed without sufficient safeguards on cost, governance and legitimacy concerns.

I again place on record my disappointment that Lords amendments 2 and 3 were not selected for today's debate. They would have provided the Chagossian people with a referendum, allowing them a direct and meaningful say over their future—something that remains conspicuously absent despite repeated assurances about consultation.

The Chagossians are not, and should not be, diplomatic collateral. They are not a note in the marginalia of an agreement between Mauritius and the United Kingdom. They are a people who have been treated badly by our country and are now deserving of agency, dignity and justice. For those reasons, the Liberal Democrats urge the Government to accept Lords amendments 1, 5 and 6. More than that, however, we urge the Government to pause, to reflect on the changing geopolitical circumstances in which we find ourselves, and to think again about whether this is the right approach for us, for the Chagossian people, and for our future security.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): It has been said that some hon. and right hon. Members have come to the debate on Chagos late in the day. That is right. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has been banging on about Chagos for decades, and I admire him for doing so. I first became concerned when I saw how much it would cost the United Kingdom to pay for something that we own. As a litmus test, I asked myself whether I could explain to my constituents why we are going to pay an island nation that has no direct connection with Diego Garcia.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. Fundamentally, I spoke about Diego Garcia and the Chagos islands for many years because of the injustice that was done and the islanders' right of return. The whole point has been to gain the right of return, which has been won through this Bill for the outer islands and, in a limited form, for Diego Garcia itself.

Graham Stringer: That is at the heart of what has gone wrong, and the right hon. Gentleman has been talking about it for a long time. The Chagossians were

[Graham Stringer]

treated as itinerant workers in the 1960s, so they did not get the basic rights that people got in other British protectorates. They were discriminated against, and we are discriminating against them again by giving Mauritius the power to determine what goes on. The only solution to the central issue is not a survey, which the House of Lords is doing in good faith; it is to have a referendum, which has been ruled out of order today, for good reasons in procedural terms. We should give the Chagossians a say in a referendum on whether they want to return or not. Otherwise, it is all speculation.

I do not think the Minister explained why we should not take notice of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. That is fundamental, because the Committee goes back to the 1960s decision, and it sees what happened then, and what is being perpetuated now, as racial discrimination, and we and the Mauritians are perpetuating that. My hon. Friend the Minister did not really respond to that point, just as he did not really address what has changed. I have listened to many of his statements in this House, when he has said in good faith that the United States supports us. Regardless of whether it did so in the past—it probably did—it certainly does not support us now. Those are two reasons for pausing and thinking again: becoming compliant with the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; and talking to the United States, because it has changed its position.

The amendments before us would not affect the core of the Bill, because that was dealt with in a very short period of time on Second Reading, on Report and in Committee, but they are important in as much as they ask for information. We are going to pay for something that we did not used to have to pay for. It will have consequences for our ability to look after our defence interests in the Indian ocean, and we do not know how much it will cost. Amending the Bill to give us an exact figure for those costs is important. Lords amendment 1 is also important if for some reason Mauritius changes its view or the islands disappear under water. I do not have the opportunity this evening to vote for what I would like to vote for, but I will vote for the amendments that the Lords have put before us.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I rise because in the previous debate we had on this, a question was posed to Ministers, and it has been asked again now: what are the reasons for this Bill? First, Ministers rested on one idea, which was all about how we had somehow received a binding judgment from the International Court of Justice, and this was therefore important because we had to stand by that. I remember it became clearer and clearer during that debate, particularly for some Members, that this simply was not correct. There is no binding judgment; it is an advisory judgment, because we have an opt-out for all matters to do with Commonwealth Governments. That is very clear, and it has been said by many judges and other learned legal people.

Some of my right hon. Friends, one of whom I see on the Front Bench, have raised other reasons in these debates. Beyond the ICJ judgment, we were told there were other issues, and that somehow if we did not do this we would face challenges under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea and by the International Telecommunication Union, which stands steadily. What is most interesting about all this is that, when pressed throughout, bit by bit Ministers' arguments fell apart. These issues are very detailed, so I will not go into them now, but they will have to be raised in much more detail later.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I do not think I will get any extra time, so I am not sure it is such a good idea, to be honest. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member wants to give me some extra time, I will give way.

Dr Arthur: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because I know this subject is very important to him. He has carefully explained why he does not think the Government have to act, but he has not explained why his Government were negotiating a deal if they did not have to act, at great cost and with a great consumption of time.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It does not really matter to me who is in government because I am in opposition. I was opposed to this then, so if the hon. Member does not mind, I am not going to try to defend any of that. I can tell him that I was far more opposed to it than many of his hon. Friends on the Back Benches are now. I hope I have now expunged any dishonour on my part.

On the two critical areas—UNCLOS and the ITU—we discovered that certain articles exempted us from any legal challenge in any way, and therefore they were not binding. I say that because today is a matter of intense sadness. As the Minister knows, I am a massive admirer of him for his steadiness and determination, often on unpopular matters. However, I have to say to him on Lords amendments 2 and 3, and the Liberal Democrats say the same, that this is a matter of sophistry. If we believe in free speech and free debate, and if we believe in voting on what we believe or what we oppose, I genuinely ask why we cannot do so on Lords amendments 2 and 3.

Sitting in the Gallery are people who will be utterly depressed by the idea that this Chamber has shut itself out from debating the rights of the Chagossians and to vote on those rights today. I know it was clever to get that done, and I know the Speaker's Office was under pressure to do that, but I simply say that this is not right. It is not right that this House cannot decide on those rights, particularly given that the UN committee mentioned by the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) has made it very clear that the Government should stay this legislation, because of its fears with regard to race relations.

I simply say that this is a sad moment for this House, because this horribly flimsy piece of legislation completely casts away any rationale. Then this morning we heard from the President of the United States, who was previously prayed in aid in all this; it was said that we should somehow motor through this because he was in favour of it, and if the American Government are in favour of it, we should stand with them. A previous Foreign

Secretary said that if America did not want it and did not agree with it, we would not do it, but here we are rushing through with it.

Why are we rushing? Why do we not stay this Bill, wait to hear exactly what America thinks about it and make a decision about whether we carry on? Surely, that would make more sense and be more rational. Through all of this, I just do not get what the unpalatable haste is all about—to dismiss the Chagossians, to dismiss the logic and the reasons why we have to do this, and to head towards paying billions and billions of pounds of taxpayers' money for no reason at all. I think somebody else said that today.

Meanwhile, China is looking at this and laughing, as are Russia, Iran and all the other nasty states. Honestly, this is a bad day. This is badly done. It is a bad day for us and for the concepts of dispute, debate and liberty. We should hang our heads in shame, because the House of Lords is better at debating things than we are, and it has much better rights.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The time limit on speeches is now four minutes.

6.30 pm

Tom Hayes: My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) has said much of what I was going to say, thankfully, so I will try to be brief. The shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), made a set of arguments predicated on the case for national security. It is therefore important to take on the question of how secure we are. Look at the economic security that this Government inherited: 15 years of slow, weak growth, the lowest business investment in the G7, and wages that had grown at a consistent 2% a year flatlining. Look at the impacts of the Brexit deal negotiated by the Conservatives: in early 2025, the UK's GDP was between 6% and 8% lower than it would have been without Brexit, and we lost between £180 billion and £240 billion of output. This is important, because it relates to the credibility of the Opposition when they make their case on the basis of national security.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Hayes, this debate is about the issue in hand, not the credibility of the Opposition. Let us get to the point quickly.

Tom Hayes: Moving forward three pages—those pages were a condensed history of how our country was left completely insecure by the Opposition—to look at Diego Garcia, it is a critical UK asset for national security. We all agree on that in the House. It supports counter-terrorism, monitors hostile states and enables rapid deployment of US and UK forces worldwide. That is, in large part, why the US Administration have backed what this Government have been pushing forward. Recent operations against high-value ISIS targets show its vital role in keeping global trade routes and the British people safe.

With this deal, we have full operational freedom. We have control of installations, communications, logistics and land use with strict safeguards, a UK-controlled electromagnetic spectrum, a 24 nautical mile buffer zone and a ban on foreign military presence on the outer islands. In the interests of giving a briefer speech, I am going to put down the two pages that further explain the way in which the treaty reinforces the UK's relationship with the Chagos islands and supports our national security.

We have talked about this issue at great length. There have been many urgent questions, statements and debates in the House. The Opposition talk about the importance of national security. This country is facing some of the gravest threats to our national security. We are repelling Russian cyber-attacks and disinformation daily. Our security services are having to fight against Russian spying and sabotage of our infrastructure.

Dr Luke Evans: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not sure which amendments are being addressed. There are at least five on the amendment paper to be talked about. I just wondered if Russia is relevant to any of those amendments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Dr Luke Evans, you need to stop using points of order to continue debates. No doubt Mr Hayes is going to get right to the point and then conclude very quickly.

Tom Hayes: I always listen to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans). As I said at the outset, I support all of what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen, who went into great detail about the amendments. The point I am bringing us back to is that Conservative Members need to put country before petty party politics. They are acting in a childish way and they are overexcited about this debate. This treaty protects our national interest. It safeguards British interests. The Opposition have a cheek, when they were responsible for at least 85% of the negotiations that led to this debate.

I will close with this. In this House, we speak through the Chair, because doing so tempers debate. When I speak with schoolchildren about the House, they remark upon the fact that we are in an old building, and that shows our continuity over many years of history. In this place, we make decisions in a sombre, sober way. We do not make them in the same way as the President of the United States did last night, in the form of a rash tweet. Let us not take that social media post at face value. Let us do the reasonable thing and debate this matter properly.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Some "very tiny islands". That is how this Government's National Security Adviser described Diego Garcia and the Chagos islands. I am afraid that that contempt is consistent with how they continue to treat those people. The former Foreign Secretary never once met Chagossians. There is no evidence that the current Foreign Secretary has ever met Chagossians. I am afraid that the Minister at the Dispatch Box met Chagossians only on 30 September and 3 October, after the deal was done, and refused to discuss the deal with them—unless he is saying that those who are here today are lying. By contrast—before anyone starts to heckle—I have had many meetings with representatives of the Chagossian community and organised roundtables with them.

We urgently need Lords amendments 1, 5 and 6 on financial oversight of this £34.7 billion bill the British people are about to have to foot. The clawback option is the bare minimum the Government should accept for

[Alicia Kearns]

the eventuality that Mauritius breaks the conditions of this appalling deal, because it is quite likely that we will see mistreatment of the Chagossian people. It is also important that the clawback is there because we will need to review and understand the surge of Chagossians who came to the UK after the deal was announced. The Government tried to dismiss it, and claimed that the increase had nothing to do with the deal. That is wrong and we will continue to see that.

This is a bad deal. The agreement is legally illiterate: there was an ICJ opinion, not a ruling. It is historically illiterate, because the Chagos islands have never belonged to Mauritius. This is a bad deal, ceding territory not to those hailing from those islands, but to a country that has consistently mistreated Chagossians and legislated to criminalise their views. The Bill cements the shameful treatment of the Chagossian people into law.

Anyone who votes against the clawback tonight should be ashamed of themselves, because they should want to put in place the minimum protections for the people of the Chagos islands—those people who have come this evening to hear us debate, because their voices have not been heard in this Chamber and they have been denied by a Government who would not meet them, a Government who have no interest in supporting them, and a Government who tonight will vote against the only protections that might make sure that their voice is heard.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I align myself with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger).

In South East Cornwall, we may be geographically removed from Diego Garcia, but we are closely connected to the realities of our national defence. Torpoint has the third highest number of veterans of any community, with over 14% of people having served. Residents across the area have written to me about the importance of this issue. His Majesty's Naval Base Devonport is the largest naval base in western Europe and a key part of our national defence capability, so we are an area that understands the importance of national defence and its complexities. We know that it requires long-term thinking and joint working with multiple allies, each of whom understandably has its own national interests in mind.

Does the Minister agree that this matter is about not just international law, but securing Britain's ability to defend itself, including control over key capabilities such as berthing submarines, electromagnetic defence and force mobility? Given that 85% of the Chagos negotiations took place under the Conservatives, does the Minister know why the Tories started negotiations when they were in government if they did not think there was a threat to the crucial base?

As well as defence, South East Cornwall has deep ties to our marine environment, with many local livelihoods dependent on the sea. Our local economy relies on a healthy and resilient marine environment, so it is important to recognise the role of that environment. The Chagos marine protected area was established in 2010. Through the Blue Belt programme, the UK has continued to play a leading role in enhancing marine protection across the overseas territories. For Members who may not be aware, this is a brilliant programme that works with local communities to understand biodiversity, manage impacts and build a deeper understanding between people and nature. The marine protected area is home to extraordinary marine life. Research has shown that it contributes to climate resilience at a global scale.

Mauritius has committed to protecting that marine environment, which I welcome. However, as an island state located miles from the base, I have concerns about the practicalities of monitoring and enforcing protections against harmful activity. What provisions in the Bill and the treaty will safeguard the existing marine protected area and ensure that effective enforcement remains in place to prevent harm to the ecosystem and the species that depend on it?

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): This Government's handover of the Chagos islands is nothing short of a disgrace. British taxpayers are being asked to stump up billions of pounds to pay for the privilege of giving away something we own—a strategically vital territory—to a close ally of the Chinese Communist party. And why? All because of an entirely advisory opinion issued by politicised judges in the International Court of Justice.

People across the country are rightly asking why on earth any British Government would agree to a deal that diminishes our strategic capabilities and costs us billions in the process, particularly when the Government are already putting the squeeze on people's finances in so many ways. The Government's arguments for doing so were already thin, and they become even thinner when we consider the amendments before us today.

Tom Hayes: Another question that might be asked is why the Conservatives started the negotiations in the first place.

Katie Lam: The question that we are voting on today is the deal that the Government have agreed to. It is an appalling deal, and it should be opposed.

The Government's arguments for putting the deal forward become even thinner when we look at the amendments and how the Government have responded to them both here and in the other place. If, as the Government claim, the deal will make us safer, why not support Lords amendment 1, which would ensure that payments are made to the Mauritian Government only if our armed forces retain access to the Diego Garcia base? We have already heard that the Government will not support Lords amendments 2 and 3, but if, as the Government claim, the costs of the deal are proportionate, why not support Lords amendments 5 and 6, which would provide much-needed transparency about why taxpayers are being asked to stump up so much for the privilege of handing away territory? We hear no such support for those amendments, so the Chagos handover cannot really be about our security, the Chagossians or self-determination.

So what is it about? The truth is that this so-called deal is motivated entirely by ideology. We have heard from the Government's Attorney General that "almost every aspect" of the British empire was "deeply racist", echoing the language used by the Mauritians at the International Court of Justice. Of course, when Britain has done something seriously wrong, we should be honest about that, but in the case of the Chagos islands, there was no original British sin. Mauritius never had sovereignty over the Chagos islands, and practically no

Mauritians have ever lived there. The islands have been under British sovereignty since 1814, before which they were occupied by the French. Before that, they were uninhabited. This is no decolonisation; it is a surrender.

Our history is complex. It contains cruelties, yes, but also enormous contributions to human health, wealth and flourishing around the world. The darkest moments in our history were hardly unique, yet many of the most virtuous moments in that history were truly exceptional. I believe that we should be proud of the contributions that our country has made to the world. However, the Government's position on the amendments lays bare the truth: they simply do not agree. Instead, they believe that it is their responsibility to go around the world flagellating themselves and righting imagined wrongs on behalf of and at the expense of the British taxpayer. To their minds, this country is indelibly stained by the actions of those who came before us. The Chagos surrender is one such example, but it is not the only one, and I fear it will not be the last. To attempt to right the wrongs, real or imagined, of the distant past by squeezing the taxpayers of today is divisive madness.

If the Government ever want the British people to believe that they are motivated by anything other than deep shame about our history, they would do well to accept the amendments before us today or—far better—to scrap this deal entirely. The British people are owed a Government who stand up for their interests today, not punish them for the imagined sins of our ancestors.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This is a sad day for the United Kingdom. The Government have not been prepared to stand up for the interests of the United Kingdom. Indeed, they seem to be willing to surrender when any challenge is made to its interests.

Let us look at some of the arguments that the Minister has made against the amendments. First, the Minister said that nothing has changed since the Bill was originally brought to the House, but of course we have seen that the American attitude has changed. The United Nations says that we are not giving the protections to the people we should be giving them to—in fact, we are more interested in the rights of the Danes who live in Greenland than the Chagossian population. The UN has actually said that we should stay this. So there have been changes, and the changes have been substantial.

The second argument we heard is that the base was under threat and we therefore had to make changes. I noticed what the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) said about the marine protected area and the environmental requirements on the Mauritian Government, but there is no legal requirement in this treaty for the Mauritian Government to protect the marine protected area. Indeed, they have made it quite clear that fishing will be allowed in the marine protected area. What is the danger there? It is of course that Chinese ships can come into the area, and we know that in the South China sea, the Chinese have used commercial ships as their eyes and ears, so the base is under threat as a result of this change.

Alex Ballinger: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise the 24-nautical mile exclusion zone that the Government negotiated in the treaty? It will prevent many of the things that he referred to.

6.45 pm

Sammy Wilson: It is not just a question of ensuring that the 24-nautical-mile exclusion zone prevents spying and everything else; the area would still be left environmentally damaged, and there would still be a threat to the military base.

Thirdly, the Government have refused even to consider the Lords amendment about cost. At a time when we are looking for every penny, so that we can supply the citizens of this country with the services that they require, the Government are turning their nose up at an amendment that would ensure that if the base cannot be used, we will no longer pay for it. The Minister has talked about the cost. He has told us all the mechanisms by which the cost has been calculated, but he has not actually told us what the cost is. Is it £3 billion? Is it £10 billion? Is it £37 billion? The difference between those figures is significant to our constituents.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The £35 billion figure has been cited the most today. This is taxpayers' money that should be funding schools, hospitals and other much-needed infrastructure. The deal is not only a shameful surrender of national sovereignty but a waste of taxpayers' money.

Sammy Wilson: Most people listening to this debate, even if they do not know a great deal about the Chagos islands and the base, will understand that we have handed over the islands when there was no necessity to do so, only to use taxpayers' money to lease them back. That is one of the scandals of the treaty.

The Minister talked about building a relationship of trust with the Chagos islanders. What way is this to build trust? The Government have refused to give them a say on whether this treaty reflects their interests and deals with their concerns and the despicable way in which they have been treated in the past. The cost is wrong. The way in which we are treating the people who are affected by the treaty is wrong. The Government's position on the long-term security of the base is wrong. This is a bad deal for the United Kingdom, and we should be ashamed that the Government's majority is being used to push the deal through when it is so clear that it is full of flaws and problems for our future.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Bill goes to the very heart of our national security, the safety of the British people, our global reach and our operational effectiveness in two of the most volatile and unpredictable regions of the world: the Indo-Pacific and the middle east. It also raises serious questions about the cost of this deal to the British taxpayer, which amounts to £34.7 billion.

Even in the short time since the Bill was first brought to the House, the world has become even more unstable, yet the Government remain content to press ahead with the Bill. I struggle to see how it makes us safer, considering the requirement "to expeditiously inform" Mauritius of operational activity, and considering that Mauritius is a signatory to the Pelindaba treaty. The implications of the Bill for the basing of nuclear weapons, which are vital to our security and to our deterrence, and which have been deployed to Diego Garcia in the past, should concern every Member of the House. We need further clarity and assurance from the Government on that point.

[Aphra Brandreth]

That brings me to the £28 billion shortfall in the defence budget that the Chief of the Defence Staff recently presented to the Prime Minister. It does not take a mathematician to see the point that I am making; indeed, the maths is so basic that I suggest that even the Chancellor could work it out.

Alex Ballinger *rose—*

Tom Hayes *rose—*

Aphra Brandreth: I will make progress, because we are nearly out of time. Instead of pursuing the Bill, the Government could withdraw it, and redirect the vast sums involved towards addressing that shortfall and genuinely strengthening our national security.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Aphra Brandreth: We are short of time. Ultimately, the Lords amendment is about accountability to Parliament and to the electorate. There is no mandate for the Bill. If the Government choose to force it through using their majority, they must, at the very least, be accountable for the cost.

British Chagossians are the forgotten people of this Bill. They may have been forgotten by the Government, but they have not been forgotten by Conservative Members. We continue to oppose the Bill with them firmly in our minds. The Prime Minister has rightly stated that Greenland's sovereignty and right to self-determination rest with the people of Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark. The question is simple: why is that same right not afforded to the British Chagossians?

The Bill has profound implications for our national security and public expenditure. The amendments tabled by Opposition peers are there for a reason: not for political gain, but to make a bad Bill slightly less damaging, to introduce safeguards, to offer some reassurance to the British taxpayer, and to ensure that the voices of the British Chagossian people are finally heard.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Time is tight, and interventions should be taken with caution. I call Sir John Hayes.

Sir John Hayes: I am immensely grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. The best laws begin as Bills that metamorphosise during their passage and are improved through scrutiny. However, that depends on Ministers listening and learning. The amendments before us from the House of Lords are measured and reasonable. They are not wrecking amendments, but attempts to save the Government from their worst instincts. They provide greater scrutiny, greater parliamentary oversight and more checks and balances, yet they are rejected by the Government.

I will not speak, in the brief time available, about the cost of the deal, although it is wholly unpalatable that we should give away a treasured possession and then rent it back from a foreign place. I will not speak about the strategic cost of doing just that, although I will draw on Lord West's remarks. That former Labour security Minister, who sits on the Intelligence and Security Committee with me, said:

"surrendering sovereignty over the Chagos Islands would be an irresponsible act, which would put our strategic interests—and the interests of our closest allies—in danger."

That is wholly unwise.

I will speak, however, about the interests of the Chagossians, who have been ignored throughout this process, who were uninvolved in the negotiations from the outset, whose voice has not been heard, and whose future has been disregarded. That seems to me to be wholly unethical.

This is unwise, unpalatable, unwelcome, unethical, and fundamentally wrong. The Lords amendments would make some improvement to something that is woeful. I implore the Government to accept the amendments. More than that, I implore them to abandon this sorry mission, which is not in the national interest, and certainly not in the interests of the Chagos islanders.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): If it were possible, one could almost feel sorry for the Minister. This is the Minister who, during previous stages of the Bill, batted away every criticism by telling us, "Oh, but the Americans support this deal." He gleefully told us that they were our strongest and most important ally, and if they were enthusiastic and supportive of the Bill, what was the problem? Today, the emperor has no clothes.

The President of the United States has talked about the great stupidity of this deal. He describes a country giving away its own sovereignty as

"an act of GREAT STUPIDITY".

Today the Minister has been forced into some indelicate gymnastics, as he tries to deal with the fact that the peg on which he hung all his defences has snapped out of place.

The Minister's gymnastics have been equally on display when it comes to dealing with his party's manifesto. Contrary to what he says, it is very clear that when the manifesto declares that Labour will always

"defend… sovereignty and right to self-determination",

it is referring not only to Gibraltar and the Falklands, but to all British overseas territories and Crown dependencies. It says

"including the Falklands and Gibraltar",

but not "exclusively the Falklands and Gibraltar".

Alex Ballinger: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Allister: I do not think that there is time for the hon. Member to remedy his speech at this stage.

The Minister is hoisted on the petard of his own manifesto, of which he is in blatant breach. He can hardly look the people of the Chagos islands in the eye, as he denies them what his manifesto promised them. They are the people who are hurting here. They are at the heart of this. They have not been treated well over decades by this nation, and now we are betraying them by denying them the right to any determination of their future. That is shameful. It is something that this House should be running away from, rather than embracing. I say to the Government: it is not too late to do the right thing. It is time they did, and I trust that they will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the final Back-Bench contribution, I call Andrew Rosindell.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): This has been fundamental to everything I have ever stood for in this House as a Member of Parliament. This Bill did not have its origins in this Government; these were originally the proposals of the previous Conservative Government. No Government have ever given the right of self-determination to the Chagossian people. Shamefully, we have treated them differently from all the other overseas territories. We sent a taskforce to rescue the Falkland Islands. Margaret Thatcher would never have given one inch of British territory away to a foreign country, let alone have paid billions of pounds to do so. This is a shameful day for our country. We are giving away the King's islands. Rescuing the Falkland Islands was the right thing to do; betraying the Chagossian people is absolutely the wrong thing to do.

My former party went along with this for years, ignoring everything I ever said to every Foreign Minister and every Foreign Secretary. Over and over again, I raised this issue, and warned that it would lead to this catastrophe. I was ignored, and now we see the betrayal of the Chagossian people, our national security is being threatened, and we are paying billions for it. I say to all colleagues on both sides of this House—including those in my new party, but particularly those in my old party —that this is a humiliation for this country, and a betrayal of the loyal British people sitting in the Gallery today who should have the right of self-determination. I am ashamed of what this Parliament is voting on today. I will speak up for the rights, democracy and self-determination of all the British people in all the overseas territories.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Francois, the speech has finished. We now come to the Minister for the wind-up.

7 pm

Stephen Doughty: With the leave of the House, I will close the debate. Hon. and right hon. Members have raised important questions and points during the debate. Once again, I must reiterate that for those who engage in genuine and constructive debate, the Government are willing to find compromise where that is reasonable and proper, and that debate is welcome, as it has been in the other place.

The deal sits at the cornerstone of the defence and security of both the United Kingdom and the United States. It plays a crucial role in defending our interests, our countries and our people and ensures that we remain equipped to face an increasingly complex and dangerous world.

I have to challenge one of the points that has been made repeatedly and falsely throughout the debate. We have heard the same nonsense that this deal puts the base at threat from Chinese interference. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There appear to be many side conversations taking place. If Members wish to leave the Chamber, they can do so. Otherwise, we should focus on what the Minister is saying.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I was referring to the claims about Chinese interference. I doubt that those on the Opposition Benches have actually seen or read the op-ed by the Chinese ambassador to Mauritius on 14 January criticising the Chagos deal, which again very much underlines the point that I have been repeatedly making.

Just last week, the United States military signed a new contract worth $85 million for base operating support services. Before the treaty was signed, it had been rolling over previous contracts due to the uncertainty, but because of the certainty provided by this deal, it has now entered into a new long-term contract, which delivers strength and certainty for the United States, the United Kingdom and our allies, because national security is the priority for all of us.

While securing our national security, we have taken steps throughout the Bill to ensure that we have the measures in place, including the full control of Diego Garcia; the 24-mile nautical buffer zone where nothing can be built or placed without our consent, meaning that we can protect our interests; a rigorous process to prevent activities on the wider islands—some over 100 nautical miles away—from disrupting base operations; a strict ban on foreign security forces on the outer islands, whether civilian or military, without UK consent; and a binding obligation to ensure that the base is never undermined. These are robust provisions, and they defend the national security of ourselves and our allies, including the United States.

Many important points have been raised about the Chagossian community. I absolutely acknowledge and respect the Chagossians who are here today. I also acknowledge and respect that there are many views within the Chagossian community. I was disappointed by the tone of the remarks from the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who I have good engagement with. I can tell her that I met Chagossians on 30 September 2024 and 3 October 2024. On 22 May 2025, she claimed that the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), had not met the Chagossians; in fact, he met them with me. On 2 September 2025, I was at the first meeting of the Chagossian contact group. Officials regularly engage with Chagossians. Indeed, I engaged with Chagossians long before I took this position as a Minister and did so in opposition, along with many hon. and right hon. Members, to listen to the range of views.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: No, I will not give way. I am conscious of time—I need to respond to the points made.

Of course, many groups support the deal, including the Chagos Refugees Group, the Chagos Islanders Movement and the Seychelles Chagossian committee.

The shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), made many criticisms. We have heard and been through them a number of times. I remind her that, of course, it was her party that started the negotiations in the first place. She supported this when she was in government. The Conservatives have demonstrated absolute naked opportunism, ignoring the national security issues and jumping on the political bandwagon. They talk

[Stephen Doughty]

about defence and national security, but in 14 disastrous years in office their party hollowed out our armed forces. Our Government are investing at levels not seen since the cold war, and 85% of the negotiation rounds took place—

Graham Stuart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I hope this is an actual point of order.

Graham Stuart: I fear the Minister may have inadvertently misled the House. The only public statement by the Chinese Government on this subject was on 29 May last year when they welcomed the Chagos deal.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. Can we prevent the debate from continuing in points of order? If colleagues wish to intervene, they can try to do so, and it is up to the Minister whether he wishes to respond to those interventions. We can keep going until 7.18 pm when the time will cut off.

Stephen Doughty: I was referring to an article published on 14 January by the Chinese ambassador to Mauritius.

The former Government had access to the same legal advice, the same security briefings and the same threat assessments as we do now, including on threats to the operations of this crucial base, and senior figures raised no objections in Parliament, filed no critical questions and voiced no concerns on social media. It is only after leaving government that they have done so. That is not principled opposition; it is opportunistic.

Many questions were raised about the finances. I must be clear that the higher figure of £34.7 billion that was released by the Government Actuary's Department was a nominal amount and was not adjusted for inflation or the social time preference rate, so it is deeply misleading to cite that figure, given the changing value of money over time. A pound today is not worth the same as a pound tomorrow. Quite frankly, I am baffled at hearing these complaints about the finances, given the billions that the Conservatives wasted on defective personal protective equipment, the festival of Brexit and who knows what else.

There were some very sensible and I think legitimate questions raised about the costs. The Government have always sought to be transparent on these matters. We set out the forecasts at the time of publication, and the documents that we published at the time of the treaty set out that the net present value of the treaty was £3.4 billion, calculated using the Green Book methodology —I have set that out on many occasions before. Of course, I would expect forecasts to change over time, given the changes in the OBR's forecast inflation rate and other matters. We were transparent then, and of course we will continue that transparency in the usual ways before the House. Indeed, the TaxPayers' Alliance, no less, has confirmed that the use of a discount rate to give NPV is a standard concept in finance, and that it is reasonable for the Government to use an inflation assumption and a discounting rate to give an NPV of the cost. If we use its suggestion of 2.9%, the annual payments would be £96 million on average, which is £5 million less in today's money than the Government's forecast at the time of the treaty's publication.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am not going to pursue the Minister down that line—I did that last time—but I do want to ask a simple question. This morning, we had a very clear statement from the President of the United States. The Deputy Prime Minister was also clear previously when he said that if America says no, then this does not go ahead. Are his counsels in any way discussing or thinking about waiting to find out whether that view from the President today is clear and for good? In other words, will they then stop this Bill?

Stephen Doughty: That is a very reasonable question from the right hon. Gentleman. Of course, we engage with the United States as our closest defence and security partner every single day. Conversations are ongoing. We are always engaging with them on these matters, and I am sure we will continue to do so over the coming days. I have set out the clear position that the United States set out on many occasions—this went through a detailed inter-agency process—and of course we will continue conversations with the United States, as we have done before.

I was rather baffled by the complaint of the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who is not now in his place—*[Interruption.]* Ah, he is at the Bar of the House. It was his Government who established the citizenship route for Chagossians, which rightly gives them the right to come here, and local authorities can engage in the usual way with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about their needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) raised the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This is very important, so let me be clear: it does speak on behalf of the United Nations or member states. Indeed, the UN Secretary-General and the African Union chairperson both welcomed the agreement, so it is simply not the case that those concerns were raised by the United Nations, and it is important that the record be corrected.

There were concerns about the reasons. I was clear about the operational impacts on the base of not securing this deal, which include overflight clearances, securing contractors, declining investment and degraded facility. We would also be unable to prevent—this is a crucial point that Members have reasonably raised—China or other nations from setting up installations on the outer islands or carrying out joint exercises. I have set out the legal reasons for that on many occasions, which include the litigation that could be brought quickly by Mauritius against the UK, including under annexe VII of the UN convention on the law of the sea. A judgment from such a tribunal would be legally binding.

The shadow Foreign Secretary raised the Pelindaba treaty. The United Kingdom and Mauritius are satisfied that their existing international obligations are compatible with the agreement, and we are very clear that we comply with our obligations under international law.

Mr Francois: I refer the Minister to article 298 of the UNCLOS treaty, which means we have a complete opt-out on military bases, but may I take him back

to costs? The Government Actuary's Department, whose whole raison d'être is to calculate long-term spending commitments, stood up the £35 billion figure—in fact, it said it might be more. Who should the House believe—people whose whole life's work is to calculate long-term costs, or this Minister?

Stephen Doughty: I regret the right hon. Gentleman's tone. I have respect for him normally, but if he had been listening a moment ago, he would have heard me explain this exact point. It is a nominal amount. It is not adjusted for inflation or the social time preference rate. The value of money changes over time; £1 today is not worth the same as £1 tomorrow. This is very clear. I set out the multiple ways in which this has been verified, and it is even agreed by the TaxPayers' Alliance.

We have discussed these issues at great length in this House on many occasions. Let me be clear: this deal secures this base for the national security of the United Kingdom and the United States, and it secures it for our allies. It is vital, and this is an important point to end on. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South asked why this matters to our constituents. It matters because the capabilities on this base matter for the national security of this country, our allies and our citizens in preventing terrorism and the activities of adversaries with hostile intent towards us, the United States and our allies. It secures this base into the future, and we urge the House to reject the Lords amendments and agree with Lords amendment 4.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 344, Noes 182.

Division No. 411] [7.11 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon

McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, rh James
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jade Botterill and Gregor Poynton

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamb, Peter
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David

Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Harriet Cross and Mr Andrew Snowden

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As the House was informed earlier, Mr Speaker is satisfied that Lords amendments 2 and 3 would impose a charge on public revenue that has not been authorised by a money resolution in this House. In accordance with paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 78, Lords amendments 2 and 3 are therefore deemed to be disagreed to.

After Clause 5

COST OF THE TREATY

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 5.—*(Stephen Doughty.)*

The House divided: Ayes 347, Noes 185.

Division No. 412] [7.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema

Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, rh James
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jade Botterill and Gregor Poynton

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamb, Peter
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie

Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Harriet Cross and Mr Andrew Snowden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 5 disagreed to.

After Clause 5

PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT AND APPROVAL OF EXPENDITURE

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 6.—*(Stephen Doughty.)*

The House divided: Ayes 347, Noes 184.

Division No. 413] [7.38 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia

Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, rh James
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jade Botterill and Gregor Poynton

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamb, Peter
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Mathew, Brian

Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Harriet Cross and Mr Andrew Snowden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 6 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 4 agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendments 1 to 3, 5 and 6.

That Stephen Doughty, Imogen Walker, Catherine Atkinson, Jessica Toale, Chris Curtis, Priti Patel and Zöe Franklin be members of the Committee;

That Stephen Doughty be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Government (Exclusion of Non-commercial Considerations) (England) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 2 December 2025, be approved.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

5G Connectivity: Telford and West Midlands

7.54 pm

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): It is good to see the Minister in his place. He is a man with great knowledge of, and passion for, this agenda, and I know he will take it forward in Telford, west midlands and further afield. I also want to place on record my gratitude to the Department for how helpful and proactive it has been with me since I raised this issue both in this House and outside of it. I am also grateful for the opportunity to raise in Parliament something I have been talking about for some time, but which my constituents have been putting up with for even longer: 5G connectivity in Telford and across our region—or the lack of it.

Debates on this subject often focus on connectivity in rural areas, and rightly so, but I want to start out by reminding anyone who is unaware that, despite our beautiful nature and green spaces, Telford is no village. It is a town with more than 185,000 people. Our borough is predicted to reach 200,000 people by 2032; that represents12.5% growth from 2018. We are just a half an hour drive from Wolverhampton and 40 minutes from our second city, Birmingham, but despite our size, population and proximity to major cities, we have very patchy 5G connections. In fact, constituents tells me that getting a 4G reception is often a challenge.

Telford is a cultural and economic hub, bustling with industry. I cannot tell people to come and employ people in our great town, or to visit our wonderful world heritage site, when connectivity in whole areas across our town are, frankly, in the dark ages. This problem feels all the more sharp because we are in the heart of a region—the west midlands—which, according to the West Midlands combined authority, has the best 5G in the country. The combined authority is doing excellent work, led by Mayor Richard Parker. He is harnessing technology to reduce congestion and pollution, and to improve the local economy and the services it offers. Telford is run by a forward-thinking council that would be very keen to innovate in similar ways, if we were only given the opportunity.

Constituents have been raising this issue in conversations with me for a very long time, but I wanted to get some numbers so I ran a survey of my constituents. The results were stark: almost 100% of respondents told me that they have no 5G connection whatsoever. For many, that was the experience in their homes, their workplaces and even in our town centre. One constituent, Bill, told me that his connection both at home and work has got worse in the last five years. Another, Joanne, said her signal with O2 has deteriorated even in the last few months, although O2 denies this. Two other constituents, Waz and Phil, both said they had changed providers multiple times but found them to be "all the same". One former constituent, Peter, who now lives in Europe, told me that the contrast between us and our international partners is "shocking". I could go on with the results of my survey, but if the Minister would like to hear directly from my constituents he is very welcome to visit them, or I can share the survey results with him.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and a really good point, which applies equally to urban and rural areas. Mobile network operators do not have minimum standards of coverage and quality of signal. At some places where there was good coverage before, that now no longer appears to be the case because the signal quality is so poor. Does he agree that we need to look at a way to ensure mobile network operators provide a good quality signal to everyone?

Shaun Davies: I agree with my Shropshire neighbour. This is a rural issue and an urban one. A mobile signal is very much like a utility; people expect it to work for both their personal life and their work-related life.

Telford and Wrekin council kindly shared with me a report containing research by the River Severn Partnership. Between 2024 and 2025, it found a "significant difference" between what Ofcom estimated 5G coverage to be and real-world experience. The survey found that 28% of Telford postcodes did not have a good phone signal, but Ofcom claims there is not a single postcode in Telford where the signal is poor. Again, that is in direct contrast to the lived experiences of our residents. This goes to the heart of the problem and it is exactly what our residents are saying: what Ofcom and the Government say just does not live up to the real-life experiences.

In an answer to a written question last January, the then Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), told me that 99% of all premises in my constituency have 5G available. I am not in any way attributing blame to that Minister, because I know that the Government get their data from Ofcom, which in turn gets its data from the network providers, and those network providers told me in a meeting this week that their data is provided through computer generation and analytics. The real-life experiences of residents are not taken into consideration.

The Local Government Association—an organisation with which I am very familiar—authored a report with the all-party parliamentary group on digital communities. That report was very validating for my constituents. It said that residents who make complaints are not imagining things, and the association took the same issue with Ofcom's data, confirming that

> "while Ofcom's regulatory oversight has supported progress in expanding digital infrastructure, significant concerns remain about the accuracy of coverage data. The current system relies heavily on operator-supplied modelling, which often fails to reflect the lived experiences of residents."

I want to make it clear that there are two sides to this problem, but they are connected. We need better reporting of 5G coverage, although obviously my constituents care more about improving the coverage itself. The path to better 5G infrastructure in my constituency and other constituencies across the west midlands requires an acknowledgment that there is a problem in the first place.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made some excellent points. Tettenhall in my constituency is a significantly populated suburb of Wolverhampton, where residents face similar problems to those highlighted by my hon. Friend. Constituents say that they have little or no signal and they struggle to

make contact with family and friends. The other day, a constituent told me that he had difficulty contacting the emergency services because there was no mobile phone connectivity.

My hon. Friend is right to say that very often the problem is considered to be in rural areas but that more densely populated areas, such as Tettenhall, have similar problems. Does my hon. Friend agree that in this day and age we need to ensure that there is connectivity everywhere?

Shaun Davies: I completely agree. My hon. Friend makes the excellent point that this issue is not just about economic growth and access to public services, though that is important; it is also about access to lifesaving services in an emergency.

In case I have come across too negative, at this point I would like to acknowledge the progress that is being or will be made. I recently had the chance to meet officials and Baroness Lloyd who is a Minister in the Department for Science, Innovation and Skills, who informed me about Ofcom's reporting tool—a map that enables my constituents to show Ofcom where they are not getting 5G signal—but I gently point out to the Minister that the expectation cannot simply be on our residents to report problems, when network providers are making millions in profit.

I have written to Ofcom and providers, including O2, EE, 3 and BT. I found them all to be responsive, and I met some of them this week and will do so again. It is so important that we seek action. Although what they say sounds great in principle, I hope that providers will forgive me and my constituents for saying that we will believe it when we see it, because ultimately the test is whether, in 2026, people can connect to a 4G or 5G signal.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a compelling speech. I should declare that in a previous role, I advised a mobile phone company on communications. There have been occasions in the past when mobile phone companies and other digital companies have made very grand promises about things like video calling, as happened when they rolled out 3G, and then 4G and then 5G, but unfortunately those promises have not always matched the expectations of the public, who watch the adverts and buy the devices. Does my hon. Friend agree that while companies are going to great lengths to improve services, we must implore them to match the reality of their service provision with the things that they are advertising and promising?

I want to emphasise that I am not asking the Government and the providers for charity; I am asking for an opportunity for us to contribute. Telford is a wonderful town, Shropshire is a wonderful county and the west midlands is a fantastic region, and those consumers are a market opportunity for this ever-growing network. If we want Telford to continue to grow as we have done for the past 60 years, we need to be in the 21st century, and when it comes to 5G, we simply are not. Businesses need to know that they can operate; people need to know that they can work from home and access online GP appointments; and, crucially for a town that is impacted by flooding, especially around the famous world heritage site at Ironbridge gorge, we must be sure that we can contact the emergency services in a crisis. That resilience and connectivity must be there. Telford has so much to offer the Government, the private sector and anyone who wants to live, visit or invest in our town. In return, we need modern 5G infrastructure.

I have both a national and a local ask of the Minister. Nationally, I echo the call of the digital communities all-party parliamentary group, which is chaired by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), for an independent review of the UK's digital connectivity framework and the integrity of the data in reporting. It is frustrating for me and my constituents to be hit with the "computer says no" answer when sharing our lived experience of something that is a real problem to so many people. The Ofcom reporting tool is welcome, but I ask the Minister to go further, so that we are not just starting with an inaccurate map and making individual residents responsible for correcting it.

My local ask is this: will the Minister visit Telford with his officials and see for himself what my constituents and I are dealing with? Will he help me to convene the relevant providers and lend his voice to my call for better 5G, or at least 4G, connection, so that my constituents can rely on it to access public services and to make our economy grow, both in Telford and the wider region?

I know that digital connectivity is a priority for the Government, and I welcome the steps that they are taking, including through project gigabit, to revolutionise our infrastructure. Bill, Peter, Waz, Phil and Joanne, as well as hundreds of other constituents, have contacted me about this issue. Will the Minister reassure them, as well as the hundreds of thousands across this country who are affected by this issue, that they will be connected to a world-class network that provides them with access to digital services?

This Government's priorities are clear: economic growth, reforming public services and change. I say this to the Minister: this is a grand opportunity for me to demonstrate to my constituents that the economy mission is being met and that the mission relating to access to reformed public services can be met. Every one of my constituents who has a phone in their pocket will feel change and be benefited through this measure. I thank the House for allowing me time to explore this issue.

8.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): First and foremost, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) for securing this Adjournment debate. Throughout his entire tenure as the local MP, he has been a relentless champion for the people of Telford on the question of 5G and mobile coverage. He has listened closely to those he represents in person and through surveys. He has represented their voices in the media and to my hon. Friend the Minister for the Digital Economy in the other place, and he has done that again in this debate with both an impressive speech and a deep understanding of Telford.

Mobile coverage is an extremely important topic, which is reflected in the amount of interest shown across from the House in any parliamentary activity on the subject. Access to high-quality, reliable and secure mobile connectivity is critical for people to participate effectively in the modern digital economy. It is essential for day-to-day life in many cases. Whether it is to run a business online, to access essential public services,

[Kanishka Narayan]

to manage finances online, to contact GP surgeries or to stay in touch with loved ones, we all need reliable mobile connectivity.

The Government have an ambition for all populated areas to have access to higher-quality stand-alone 5G by 2030. That of course includes Telford and areas right across the west midlands. It is true that Ofcom currently reports that stand-alone 5G is available outside of only 1% of premises across my hon. Friend's constituency. That is clearly unacceptable. I am also conscious that the picture has slightly updated in recent months, and I will take the opportunity to shine some light on that. The published coverage stats were last collected in July last year, and there has been some improvement in the picture since then. We expect that the figure will further increase significantly in the next report published by Ofcom as reporting catches up with network roll-out.

Mobile network operators are investing significantly to improve coverage and I know that progress continues at pace. I have been assured that that is leading to coverage improvements in many areas, including Telford. The operators' significant investment plans are public. VodafoneThree has committed £11 billion as a result of the merger, BT has an ambition to deliver stand-alone 5G to 99% of the UK population by the end of financial year 2030, and Virgin Media O2, as part of its mobile transformation plan, committed £700 million of further investment in its mobile network nationwide.

In preparation for this debate, officials have engaged with the operators to understand their specific coverage improvement plans in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the west midlands. BT has confirmed that, in line with its announcement of October of last year, 99% of residents across the Telford constituency can now access stand-alone 5G. I will come to points of dissatisfaction between that claim and the wider experience of people in Telford imminently.

VodafoneThree has confirmed that stand-alone 5G coverage will increase in the Telford constituency to 100% by its first reporting milestone in 2028, in line with its merger commitments. Virgin Media O2 has made strides to improve mobile coverage across the west midlands, including boosting 4G and 5G capacity across Coventry and deploying stand-alone 5G small cells in Birmingham city centre in 2024. That feedback from operators starts to show the significant progress being made in rolling out stand-alone 5G across Telford and the west midlands region. I encourage all Members to contact the operators if they too would like to understand plans for their constituency.

I am deeply sorry to hear of the difficulties that my hon. Friend reports about the reliability of services in the region. I recognise that in our modern economy and way of life, services need to be reliable for everyone in all parts of the country. Communications providers have legal obligations to ensure that their services are appropriately resilient, as overseen by Ofcom, and I recommend that if customers are having continuing difficulties, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, they can contact their provider and, in the instance of serious and repeated failures, also report to Ofcom.

At this point, may I raise the particular issue that my hon. Friend has highlighted about the discrepancy between people's lived experience and the reported data? It is an experience familiar to me, both from my constituency and more widely, and Government recognise that there are discrepancies in cases between the lived experience of people and the level of coverage that Ofcom reports.

The launch of our Map Your Mobile tool in June last year was a positive step forward, but the work of our Government does not stop there. We have restated in our proposed statement of strategic priorities for Ofcom the importance of continuing to improve the reporting of mobile coverage, for example, by building on the launch of the tool through the exploration of measured and crowdsourced data. Alongside that, I also point out that the Streetwave coverage checker is a tool available on the River Severn Partnership website which has also been funded by Government and the 5G Innovation Regions project. I am conscious that that, in particular, includes my hon. Friend's constituency in Telford.

I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about flooding in his local area. I know he has brought that up with the Department. There are potential safety risks arising when flooding is combined with a lack of mobile signal, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. Clearly, it is right to raise the risk to public safety so that it can be looked into and addressed accordingly. In relation to mobile signal, I hope that some of the information provided starts to give him some reassurance on what is available in the local area and what is planned for the future. I am happy to work with him and colleagues from both the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency so that the matters that he has raised can be investigated by the correct authorities.

As I know my hon. Friend will be aware, satellite services can provide another new means of connecting residents in otherwise hard-to-reach areas. I am pleased that the rapid advance of low Earth orbit technology for satellites means that the performance of services is also increasing through that measure. As well as satellite services offering home broadband that are already on the market, Vodafone and O2 have both announced that direct-to-mobile device services will launch and be available to consumers this year.

To help operators achieve their ambitious roll-out plans, we continue to work closely with them to identify and remove barriers to deployment where it is practical to do so. That includes implementing the remaining provisions of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022 and launching a call for evidence to see where planning rules can be relaxed to support the deployment of mobile infrastructure. Alongside that work at national level, we have also provided funding to both the west midlands and Shropshire as part of our 5G Innovation Regions programme to increase the uptake of 5G services and to drive investment in networks.

I know that we need to do more to ensure investment in high-quality mobile connectivity. That is why we are undertaking a full mobile market review. We want to understand better the factors impacting investment in widespread high-quality mobile connectivity and what more the Government can do to support it over the long term. We will soon be publishing a call for evidence to support our assessment and we encourage all relevant parties to engage with this process. I also encourage all Members of the House to be champions of digital

infrastructure deployment. It is only through working in our constituencies, with constituents and with the local planning authority, that we can together champion digital connectivity.

Finally, I would like to repeat my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford for securing this debate on such an important topic, and to all Members who have intervened and contributed to the debate today. It would, of course, be remiss of me not to end on a note of acceptance of his kind invitation. I will be very happy, either directly or through my hon. Friend in the other place, to visit him and to support his hard work for the people of Telford.

Helen Morgan: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I just highlight that I did not declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on digital communities, which I should have done?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Fantastic; that is now on the record. I shall just remind the Minister that he is also more than welcome to come to my constituency of Sussex Weald to deal with any 5G connectivity questions.

Question put and agreed to.

8.15 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 January 2026

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

Domestic Abuse-related Deaths: NHS Prevention

9.30 am

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of the NHS in preventing domestic homicides and domestic abuse-related deaths.

It is a pleasure to serve under you, Sir John. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to open a debate on the role of the NHS in preventing domestic abuse and dealing with it when it presents to the NHS. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), who, since we secured this debate, has been appointed as the violence against women and girls adviser to the Department of Health and Social Care. I think we shall hear from her later. I also place on the record my thanks to Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, IRISi, Respect and, from my own constituency, Stroud Women's Refuge, which have really helped me with this speech. I declare an interest: I am a working GP and sometimes need to deal with these issues.

On average, five people a week die as a result of domestic abuse in this country. Now, there are actually more suicides related to domestic abuse than homicides. Behind each of those statistics is a life lost and a family devastated. In far too many cases, there has been repeated contact with health services and there have been moments when the health service could have intervened. The NHS is the most consistent point of contact for people living with abuse. Each year, about half a million people seek support from the NHS in relation to domestic abuse and 85% of them ask at least five times before they receive effective support. That is not because clinicians do not care. It is really about recognition of domestic abuse and getting referral services that are easy to understand and well known in practice. If we are serious about preventing domestic abuse, we must be serious about the role of the NHS—not just in primary care, but across all mental health services, across maternity services, through emergency departments and through community care. It has to go right across the NHS and not just primary care. This is really a debate about making sure that we do not miss chances and that we provide meaningful intervention when people present with signs of domestic abuse.

The Government have committed to delivering on our promise to halve violence against women and girls by 2029, and I welcome the comprehensive strategy to tackle that. For too long, support services have been unable to support victims and survivors effectively. They have been without sufficient resources and, in too many cases, women and girls have not been able to access the support they need. Therefore I welcome the Government's supporting victims through the largest ever investment of £550 million in victim support over the next three years and an additional £5 million each year from the Department of Health and Social Care.

I would like to say a few things about how GPs specifically are often the first port of call, and how presentation to GPs is incredibly important for recognition of this issue. I shall quote from Killed Women, an organisation for bereaved families of women who have been killed by men in the UK. It says about one woman:

> "She had gone to the GP a few days before her death as she couldn't take any more. She was only offered antidepressants. On the day of her murder when I spoke to her, she said they are not helping and she had had enough. She said the GP knew her situation but yet again she was failed there."

That shows that simply giving out antidepressants is not the right strategy. We need to build support around women subjected to domestic abuse. Often, they present with mental health issues and will not give any details of their abuse. One thing that I teach GPs in training is that there is something called a hidden agenda. Women particularly will present to the GP but they will not say that they are being abused; they will have other symptoms. We must recognise that presentation straightaway, and there are ways we can recognise it. Sometimes the woman in question will present with a partner and not feel comfortable talking about the situation. I often ask the partner to leave the consultation and I speak to the woman individually, which can be an effective way to find out exactly what is happening. We need to be aware that women in this situation are often nervous and walking on eggshells. We also have to recognise that often there are physical injuries, often of different ages. We sometimes see women presenting in sunglasses to cover up a black eye, for example. The health profession must recognise all those symptoms.

As I have said before, there are very high rates of mental health problems. Women who are being abused often present with symptoms of depression caused by domestic abuse, so we need to ask those women whether anything is going on at home. Female survivors of domestic abuse are three times more likely to develop mental illness. There are also other high risk periods, such as when women are pregnant and they often have poor outcomes in those situations. We must also be aware, across the health service, that women might disclose domestic abuse. Health visitors are in an ideal situation to hear about that type of thing and must be aware of that potentiality.

In A&E, women often present with overdose, and underneath that there is domestic abuse. Midwives are often presented with this, as are mental health workers, and even gynaecology services as well as social services. Often women present to the health service with different symptoms, but that is a cry for help, which we must recognise.

What do we need to do to support those women? One thing I am delighted about is the concept of steps to safety. The Department of Health and Social Care will roll out a domestic abuse and sexual violence referral service across integrated care boards, giving GPs the tools and ability to identify and refer victim-survivors to support. What is important is that it is a simple service with one number. If it is not simple, it will not be used by health services, and that is incredibly important. It is also important that we make use of existing resources. I visited the sexual abuse centre at Gloucestershire Royal hospital recently. It is a fantastic resource with really well-trained staff who are available 24/7.

[Dr Simon Opher]

It is really important, particularly in practices, to have a safeguarding or domestic abuse lead who is totally up to date with what is available, because quite often services change and GPs themselves are not on top of that. So that is important as well. Can I also stress the importance of women's refuges? In Stroud we have a fantastic refuge. It does not advertise itself, for obvious reasons, and the people working there are simply amazing, supporting women who have difficulties, and often their children as well. It is inspiring to see the work they do, and it is important that those services are available immediately if women feel in danger.

Can I also make a plea for support for the perpetrators of abuse? It is usually men that perpetrate abuse and they often abuse at least five times, so it is important to catch them the first time and institute really good treatment and management for them. There are often drugs, alcohol or mental health issues behind their problems, so we must deal with that before they continue to abuse. Although that is controversial, I think that is incredibly important as well.

What do we need for the whole of our health strategy? We need things to be co-ordinated. There is a suggestion that we have domestic abuse co-ordinators for a group of GP practices. As I said, I think we need to have leads in general practice, with one person leading who can keep up to date and keep reminding the other members of staff that that is really important. When we are training in primary care, it is important to train everyone. For example, the receptionists in primary care are often aware of the people coming in. They need training to detect domestic abuse so that they can inform the doctors. It is a whole team approach, with pharmacists, nurses and physiotherapists also needing to be trained and aware of the signs and symptoms of domestic abuse.

That training should be essential for everyone, but I want to step back from mandatory training. Many people in the health service find that irksome and a tick-box exercise. I do not want domestic abuse training to simply be a tick box where someone goes on an hour-long course every year and that is it. We need a more integrated approach and it needs to be part of an appraisal process so that every doctor, nurse and healthcare worker is aware and trained in domestic abuse—but without it being made mandatory so that it does not simply become a course that people must go on, but is instead properly integrated into the service.

Last of all—and this seems incredible in this day and age—we need to share data between all of the health services, for example, A&E, GPs and mental health. We often do not get any information from mental health. It is important that we get that data sharing up to speed because domestic abuse can present in many different situations in the NHS and it is important that everyone is aware of the risks. In terms of funding, the £5 million a year from the Department of Health and Social Care is a good first step, but we need quite a lot more than that to bring this service to the fore.

In conclusion, if we are serious about preventing domestic abuse and the deaths that so often follow it, then the NHS must be properly equipped to play its full role. There are three points that I would like to make. The first is on funding, and around training and investing in services that will really help in domestic abuse. Those steps to safety are key because it must be simple for women to access those services. It is also important that wherever a woman presents to the NHS, that the person they present to is trained to detect domestic abuse and aware of what is available for that woman. Finally, we must have a comprehensive whole-health plan for the NHS and tackling domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. That must cover primary care, mental health, maternity and accident and emergency services—and I would like it to be published by 2027 at the latest.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. At the beginning of this debate my hon. Friend mentioned suicide. As we are talking about NHS services, and when we have women trying to take their own lives, I wanted to highlight the devastating impact of the deaths of two people from Portsmouth who took their own lives because of coercive control. Does my hon. Friend agree that all of the agencies across the NHS, our wider health service and our police need to be joined up to stop the loss of lives and that that is a public health issue?

Dr Opher: I know that my hon. Friend is invested in trying to help women subject to domestic abuse. Coercive control is very important as it often stops women presenting to healthcare workers. As I have said before, one key thing as a clinician is that we have to be brave and ask the man to step out so that it is possible to have a proper conversation. They can often resist that and can get violent as well. It is important that we take a brave view on this to protect women in general.

To conclude, if we get those three things right—funding, recognition, and a comprehensive and integrated care service—we can move forward to a service that repeatedly sees and recognises abuse and immediately steps in to stop it. That is the shift I am calling for in this debate, and it is one that could save many lives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I remind Members that they need to bob to catch my eye— although I can see they already know that.

9.44 am

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this important debate. He is a real champion for the NHS, and it is a benefit to all of us that he brings his former experience as a GP to bear in this debate.

The NHS has more contact with people experiencing domestic abuse than any other service and, therefore, it is vitally important that staff feel adequately equipped to comfort and reassure victims who take that brave step of reaching out for support, often for the first time. In turn, it is essential that victims can feel confident that when they confide in the NHS, the staff that they speak to have the knowledge to properly support them.

While NHS staff do receive the statutory general safeguarding training, it can be easy, as the hon. Member for Stroud has detailed, to miss the signs of abuse and the cries for help, especially when staff are tired from working extensive and difficult hours. As a country, we

have so much to thank our NHS for—whether it be for the sacrifices that staff made during the pandemic, or for working additional hours to take care of our loved ones—so my speech is intended to ensure that staff have the tools they need at their disposal to help the most vulnerable, rather than critique their best intentions.

Victims are often hesitant to ask for support; they feel trapped by their abuser and fear the repercussions. The extent to which domestic abuse and sexual assault is known to the authorities is somewhat unknown. It is estimated that only 16% of people report their experiences to the police. One reason is mistrust of the authorities, which emphasises the importance of ensuring that those who treat victims' injuries are prepared to provide them with the help and support they need. Of the 16% of people who do report an assault, only 2.6% of alleged offenders are charged or receive a summons. Even in cases where the offence takes place in public, the percentage of reported sexual assault offences that receive a charge is disproportionately low; fewer than 5% of reports on public transport resulted in a charge in 2025.

While death is tragically the end result of too many domestic abuse cases, there will have been a point in almost every single case where a step could have been taken to better support the victim. A report commissioned by Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse underscored that fact; of the 47 reviews of deaths related to domestic abuse published in 2024, 89% contained reports of an instance in which our health service had the opportunity to step in and do more to help. While domestic abuse training is mandatory in the social care system, the same training is not always made available to other NHS frontline services. That is clearly something that could be rectified, so I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about how the Government might ensure that domestic abuse training is stepped up. Will they release the funds to ensure that every NHS frontline member of staff has access to mandatory domestic abuse training?

9.47 am

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this debate on such an important issue.

In 2022, 44% of victims surveyed by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner said that their first disclosure was to a healthcare professional. Unlike the criminal justice system, health spaces focus on wellbeing and recovery and are therefore a crucial front door for identification and referrals into specialist services, not just for the many women affected by domestic abuse, but the 105,000 children who, right now, live in homes where there is high-risk domestic abuse. We know that victims who reach out to police are just the tip of the iceberg, given that fewer than one in five ever contact the police about their abuse. Getting our response to violence against women and girls right in healthcare is key to unlocking our ability to properly tackle domestic abuse. For that reason, I was delighted to be asked by the Health Secretary to become his violence against women and girls adviser.

I worked for six years at the domestic abuse charity SafeLives and saw first hand the huge role that health could play. In the report "A Cry for Health", we found that nearly a quarter of victims at high risk of serious harm or murder had been to A&E as a result of domestic abuse injuries in the year before they were able to get help. We also found that staff were worried about asking, even though it is required under National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, because they felt they would open a can of worms and, in some cases, make the situation worse. In some cases we found victims visited A&E 15 times before getting the help they needed. Health professionals were patching victims up and sending them back into the violent and controlling arms of their abusers.

Research from Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, as we have heard, has shown that in 2024, 89% of domestic homicide reviews had at least one recommendation for professionals in the health system—professionals who could have helped save the life of the woman who had been murdered. I have met families whose relatives were killed after repeated contact with health services. In SafeLives' report on health in London, a survivor who was interviewed and who did disclose at A&E said:

> "When I went to A&E the doctor told me we only do bones here, not that 'relationship mental health stuff'. But didn't offer to refer me to somewhere that did."

This has to change.

In 2018, Elena was killed by her partner, Razvan. The month before her murder, she was treated in hospital for abdominal pain after using crack cocaine, but she left hospital with Razvan before she could be discharged. As a result, a child and family assessment was conducted, and they were visited at home together the day before she was killed. She was not seen alone. She was never seen alone. She was pregnant. Razvan was with her and never, ever left her side, and no one thought to question her on her own or spotted that she was subject to an extensive range of domestic abuse as well as sexual exploitation.

There are, of course, thousands of hard-working health professionals who do safeguard their patients, but it is clear that there is much more to do. I will always remember a senior GP who told me, honestly, after I asked why health did not share information when a patient was at clear risk of serious harm, "Well, I care more about the thud of an envelope with a GMC logo on it, than hearing that one of my patients has been murdered." That is why the co-location of specialist domestic abuse professionals in all health settings is so important.

The "A Cry for Health" report found that when independent domestic violence advisers are located in hospital settings, they make a net positive saving of £2,050 per victim in health costs. They also lead to 84% of victims feeling safer, with 73% seeing an improvement in their quality of life. It is about their health and their wellbeing, which makes them both safer and more likely to recover. Hospital-based IDVAs also identify victims earlier, on average. It is a preventive measure, with their victims on average experiencing six fewer months of abuse than those engaging with local services. We can prevent abuse through the co-location of specialists in health settings.

We also know that co-location works in primary care settings, as the IRISi— identification and referral to improve safety—programme has demonstrated for decades. That is why Steps to Safety, announced in the VAWG

[Jess Asato]

strategy just before Christmas, as we have heard, is so welcome. The programme aims to ensure that by 2029 any victim or survivor in England can get the help they need through their GP. It will also ensure that each GP practice is linked to specialist support workers who can support victims to access their local specialist support services. It is crucial that the support is independent from statutory services and sits within those local specialist services, not generic services, if it is to be trusted by victims.

As well as supporting the Department to roll out Steps to Safety and to look at other areas and neighbourhoods to locate VAWG expertise, I will also be focused on improving VAWG commissioning in the NHS and on exploring links between alcohol and violence against women and girls. I am clear, as is everyone, that alcohol does not cause VAWG, but it can be a factor in escalation and serious harm.

There is much that I have not shared: mental health, maternity, links into family hubs and other community health settings, where we need to be exploring the role of health. We need to treat this as a public health epidemic if we are to reach our goal of halving VAWG. If anything, health has a bigger role to play than the police and courts in identifying perpetrators and in identifying and providing lifesaving support for adult and child victims. I am clear that the DHSC is serious about doing just this, and I am personally committed to doing everything I can in my role to help.

9.54 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this debate, setting the scene incredibly well and giving us all an opportunity to participate.

As always, I want to give a Northern Ireland perspective of what is happening. Unfortunately, the things happening in Northern Ireland are replicated, as shown in what other Members have said and what others will say after me. In some ways, things in Northern Ireland are even worse—the numbers of women being killed are at such a high level in proportion to the rest of the United Kingdom, and outpace what is happening elsewhere.

The Minister, who I am always pleased to see in her place, has a special interest in Northern Ireland, and because of that she will be aware of the stats, which are incredibly worrying. In Northern Ireland, the Police Service recorded almost 30,000 domestic abuse incidents in the 2024 to 2025 period, translating to roughly 85 incidents daily. Almost 18,500 of those became crimes, although many incidents do go unreported. Call volumes, particularly around Christmas, highlight a consistent challenge for victims seeking help. There are about 15 incidents and 10 crimes per 1,000 people, which puts the stats into perspective. Although that is a decrease on the previous year, those numbers are still incredibly jarring.

One of the worst times of the year, as we all know as elected representatives, is Christmas and the new year. There is a strain on relationships, whether it is a combination of financial and emotional pressures, or everything just building up at that time of year. The Police Service of Northern Ireland received 1,407 calls in the period from 20 December 2025 to 2 January 2026, seeing a peak of 116 reports on new year's day. There is pressure on the PSNI back home, and on the police here, to respond to quite difficult issues. I know the Minister always tries to be responsive to our requests, so has she had the opportunity to speak to the relevant police in Northern Ireland, to get an idea of what they are doing and how we can help each other?

In June, we had the absolutely heartbreaking murder of a young mother of two, who was pregnant with her third child; the ripples are still felt in our community. Young Sarah Montgomery's murder simply should not have happened, and more has to be done in those cases. Sarah was the 27th women to be murdered in Northern Ireland since 2020, and the level of domestic abuse calls indicate that this remains a central problem.

In Northern Ireland, health and social care is a very important partner in the domestic and sexual abuse strategy for 2024 to 2031, which designates domestic abuse as "everyone's business"—and it is everyone's business. Health settings are often the only safe and trusted environment where a victim can disclose abuse, as the hon. Member for Stroud mentioned. When a victim goes into a health setting, people run to support to them, and there is nobody looking over their shoulder or listening to what is going on, and they may have an opportunity to disclose what has happened. It is really important to have that strategy in place, and we have it in Northern Ireland.

I will underline the particularly worrying trends from the Christmas and new year period. At that time of year, accident and emergency units are under incredible pressure. Back home, we have had problems with hospital wait times and ambulances queued outside hospitals, and the domestic abuse issue is clearly in the middle of that.

Roughly 30% of domestic abuse starts during pregnancy, so midwives and health visitors are trained to conduct routine inquiry and ask about safety at home. They do that, and it has enabled the issue to be raised incredibly. To catch abuse early, we need to empower those workers to report any concerns and ensure that support is offered. It is essential that NHS departments work together, but the pressure on workers to fulfil their calls and do their paperwork is immense. So I believe that time must be factored in for staff to be able to smoothly report any suspicions. We must know that, in these awful cases, the Government and their Departments have done all that they could.

I want to be clear: murder by domestic abuse can never be the fault of anyone other than the perpetrator. However, in our communities we must all ask ourselves, "Was there something more that we could have done?" I support a UK-wide review by the Minister to ascertain how we can know that we have done all we can, to our utmost and even a bit more.

10 am

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this important debate.

Too often, domestic abuse is framed solely as a criminal justice issue when, in reality, it is one of the most urgent public health crises that we face. The NHS encounters victims and perpetrators far more frequently than any

other service, yet the system consistently misses opportunities to save lives. As the *British Medical Journal* highlighted, fewer than 24% of domestic abuse crimes are reported to the police, meaning that the health service—not law enforcement—is the front line.

A recent review of domestic abuse-related deaths revealed that 89% of domestic homicide reviews contained at least one recommendation for the NHS—recommendations that occur again and again across cases, showing a pattern of missed signs, inconsistent responses and staff who suspect something is wrong but lack the training, systems or confidence to act on that.

NHS staff are uniquely placed to intervene in suspected domestic abuse. In my own career as an operating department practitioner working in theatres, I can recall many instances when we treated patients with what looked like run-of-the-mill injuries, but all was not as it seemed. A young woman came in for manipulation under anaesthesia of her nose after breaking it in a fall, but she became inconsolable when we told her that she could go home after the operation. "Can I not stay overnight?" she cried. As I talked to her more, we discovered that she was being abused at home by her partner.

I also want to highlight honour-based abuse; sadly, I encountered that many times in my career—from extreme female genital mutilation, to the woman undergoing an endoscopy for severe oesophageal pain, which turned out to be from her family poisoning her with battery acid, stripping the lining of her oesophagus and stomach.

Those suspicions are not always explored, despite clinical teams being highly skilled, compassionate professionals. The opportunity to intervene can easily be lost. Mandatory standardised domestic abuse training is essential. Experts estimate that delivering consistent training across the NHS would cost just £2.6 million per year, which is a tiny fraction of the entire NHS budget but has the big potential to save lives.

We also know that poor co-ordination between agencies is repeatedly cited in death reviews, with 35% of them calling for multi-agency working. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has stressed that domestic abuse deaths require accountability across entire systems—particularly the NHS, which must implement lessons from domestic abuse-related death reviews and participate fully in the new national oversight mechanism.

Preventing domestic abuse deaths also means understanding the complexities of coercive control—something that survivors, including the domestic abuse campaigner from my constituency, Samantha Billingham, have worked tirelessly to highlight. Coercive control is often invisible, yet it is one of the clearest predictors of escalation to serious harm and homicide. If professionals do not understand coercive control they cannot identify the danger. That is why social workers must receive mandatory specialist training in coercive control: they are often the first professionals to see patterns emerging across family, mental health, housing and safeguarding contexts, but too often their training does not equip them to recognise or challenge the dynamics of manipulation, isolation, surveillance or financial control that underpin domestic homicide.

The NHS must also embed specialist domestic abuse support directly into clinical settings. The Government's upcoming measures, including the Steps to Safety initiative, aim to ensure that every part of England has dedicated NHS referral services for victims and specialist support workers linked to GP practices. These reforms are welcome, but they must be implemented at pace and be fully resourced if they are to prevent future deaths. Domestic abuse deaths are preventable when we train our workforce properly, when agencies work together, when we treat domestic abuse as a health issue, not just a crime issue, and when we equip professionals to understand the controlling patterns that escalate into lethal danger. It is the responsibility of all of us and the NHS to ensure that no victim is left unseen, unsupported and unheard.

10.5 am

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this important debate, which has crucially focused on the important fact that prevention has to work across the NHS.

When domestic abuse escalates towards serious harm or death, what can the NHS do to stop it? For too long, we have talked about domestic abuse as if it happens outside public services—as if it starts and ends behind closed doors—but the truth is that the NHS is already in the story; it just has to connect the dots. The moment someone sits in a GP waiting room trying to keep their voice steady, the moment that someone turns up at A&E with an injury that they cannot easily explain, the moment that someone finds out they are pregnant at a maternity appointment and are terrified of going home, or wants to ask for help but cannot because their perpetrator is sat there with them—those are moments of contact with the NHS and crucial opportunities to save a life.

The NHS absolutely has a duty of care to its patients: it must not just treat injuries but respond when someone is at risk. In domestic abuse, risk is not theoretical. The most recent national figures show that there are 108 domestic homicides a year. For the first time, suspected suicides linked to domestic abuse have overtaken intimate partner homicides. That is a flashing warning light for the health service. If suicide is preventable, domestic abuse-related suicide must be treated as preventable too.

A duty of care is real only if staff are trained and equipped to carry it out. If someone reaches out in the NHS and gets silence or disbelief back, or if a note is taken but there is no action, that can be the moment that they stop asking for help. In domestic abuse, missed moments can be fatal.

For the majority of victims and survivors, health professionals are the first—sometimes the only—person they disclose to. People often assume that a victim's first call is to the police, but the first brave step for many survivors who disclose is often telling a GP, a midwife, a nurse, a health visitor or even their pharmacist. Our healthcare system is the frontline of support for victims of domestic abuse. Tragically, too many survivors are forced to seek help again and again before the system even responds. In fact, 85% seek professional support about five times before they finally receive help.

In Bolton, we see both the challenge and one of the solutions. We operate a system called Identification and Referral to Improve Safety, a specialist training programme that links GP practices directly with domestic abuse support services. IRIS is delivered by Fortalice, a local domestic abuse charity—I am incredibly grateful to Gill

[Kirith Entwistle]

and her team for their hard work. Since it began in 2014, nearly 3,000 victims have accessed support, and 274 healthcare professionals were trained in the last year alone. That training matters, because it changes what happens in the room. It helps clinicians ask safe questions, spot warning signs and act so that when someone says, or their face or demeanour tells us, that they are not safe, the response is not panic or paperwork but support. We need that consistently, because Bolton has seen what happens when the system does not join the dots.

One case that has stayed with local services is the domestic homicide review of Margaret—not her real name: an 80-year-old woman killed by her husband in 2019. While the husband was in hospital, Margaret disclosed fear and abuse and said that she did not feel safe. Those concerns were discussed in a meeting between hospital staff and social workers, yet once her husband's physical health stabilised, he was discharged home. Days later, Margaret was dead.

If a patient can say, "I am not safe," and the NHS cannot act, the NHS is not yet safe enough. So how do we make it consistently safe? I have three practical asks. First, we need proper and consistent domestic abuse training—not a one-off e-learning module but trauma-informed training, refreshed over time for the whole team, including reception staff, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, who are often the ones who see the warning signs first. The Government have said that they will launch a mandatory safeguarding and learning programme that covers domestic abuse. That is welcome, but it must be embedded in day-to-day NHS practices.

Secondly, there must be sustained funding for evidence-based pathways, such as IRIS and the specialist services that it relies on, because referral routes work only if support exists and exists safely. The Government have set out an ambition that by 2029 there will be dedicated referral services for women and girls affected by abuse in every area of England. That is exactly the direction we should be travelling in. However, those routes must cover the whole NHS.

Finally, the NHS should establish a universal codeword scheme, so that a victim can ask for support just as easily as we can at pharmacies, a bar, a pub or even a restaurant. The NHS is our frontline and it absolutely needs to be well-equipped to spot, safeguard against and deal with domestic abuse, as it should have been doing for decades.

Domestic abuse thrives in silence and isolation. The NHS can be the opposite of that: a place where someone is seen, believed and connected to safety. Bolton has shown what is possible when services work together—when we connect the dots. Now we need our NHS to match that with consistency; every week we delay, more families will be left asking the most painful question of all. They reached out for help, so why were they still not safe?

10.10 am

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), not only for securing this debate but for all the work that he does in the NHS as a GP on the issue of domestic violence and abuse.

The NHS has opportunities to safeguard against domestic violence and, in the most serious cases, domestic homicide. Domestic homicide can be a consequence of honour-based abuse, which is particularly grounded in lived experience in my constituency in Leeds. Honour-based abuse is widely misunderstood, meaning that hundreds of victims are not being helped and perpetrators are escaping justice; I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) for highlighting it in her speech and in the work she did when she was in the NHS.

Honour-based abuse, a form of domestic abuse, is motivated by the abuser's perception that other persons have brought, or may bring, dishonour or shame on themselves, their family or the community. It can take many forms and be complex to identify, but perpetrators of honour-based abuse often use methods of coercive control to force their victims to behave in certain ways, or to subscribe to certain beliefs. For some people, the concept of honour is prized above the safety and wellbeing of individuals, and to compromise a family's honour is to bring dishonour and shame. That can be used to justify many types of abuse and even disownment or physical harm.

Honour-based abuse is frequently missed or misidentified within health settings. It is often framed as family conflict, particularly when it involves multiple perpetrators, rather than being recognised as domestic abuse and a form of violence against women and girls. This is particularly concerning because victims of honour-based abuse often have repeated contact with the NHS, including GPs, A&E departments and other hospital services, sometimes over many years. Those touchpoints present critical opportunities for early identification and intervention.

The point is tragically illustrated by the story of Fawziyah Javed, a constituent of mine who was a victim of domestic homicide. She had regular, ongoing contact with GPs and hospital services prior to her death. Fawziyah's case highlights how risk can be present and escalating without being fully recognised or responded to within health settings, particularly where honour-based dynamics are not understood.

Fawziyah had such a beautiful and vibrant character that she could fill a room with joy just by her presence. She was full of life and soul. Helping others was so central to her being that she was well-known in the charity sector within Yorkshire. In December 2020, she married Kashif Anwar, but the marriage quickly became a prison of abuse. Despite reporting her husband's abuse to police on two separate occasions prior to her murder, Fawziyah was failed on multiple levels.

The abuse of Fawziyah escalated. Ultimately, her abuser pushed her off the cliff at Arthur's Seat while they were on a trip to Edinburgh. She died at the scene in the presence of female allies, who would later confirm that her dying words pointed to Kashif being her murderer. When Fawziyah died, she was 17 weeks pregnant with her baby boy.

Fawziyah had contact with the NHS during her pregnancy. Her family feel that there were missed opportunities to protect her during that time. A risk assessment was begun by one member of staff but completed by another, meaning that vital information might have been missed. Handing that assessment over

when it was only partly complete undermined the seriousness of both the process and Fawziyah's case. Her mother told me:

> "This was a clear example of how systematic failures, lack of accountability and poor safeguarding practices can leave vulnerable women at risk. It is exactly why mandatory, trauma-informed Domestic Abuse screening and better training for NHS staff are so urgently needed."

It is vital that healthcare professionals support and encourage the early identification of signs of domestic abuse. Routine sensitive questioning could help to protect people and potentially save lives.

When Fawziyah was pushed off Arthur's Seat, at no point did her abuser dial 999. Instead, his first reaction was to call his father, showing how the family's complicity helped enable the abuse. The failure to recognise the dynamics of honour-based abuse, and the involvement of multiple perpetrators, played a significant part in the tragic loss of a life. If her case had been recognised as the multilayered abuse it was, along with the honour dynamics involved, Fawziyah might have had a chance to escape the violence.

Domestic homicide reviews consistently identify health as a key agency, with recurring recommendations around improved identification of abuse, better information-sharing, professional curiosity and escalation pathways, especially in cases involving honour-based abuse and coercive control. I thank those at Karma Nirvana, based in my constituency, for their essential work on the issue, tackling misconceptions. I also thank Fawziyah's family for sharing her story with me over many years, ensuring that we will strive for it not to be repeated and never to be forgotten.

Fawziyah's story is a tragic reminder of why we must do more to recognise and address honour-based abuse and the impact it has on victims. Recognition, training and support in the NHS for victims of honour-based abuse are vital. I look forward to hearing the steps that the Minister intends to take to improve the situation.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): For the benefit of the large number of visitors in the Public Gallery, I say that we now move to the wind-up speeches. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

10.16 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this vital debate.

In November 2025, Surrey police recorded 45 incidents of domestic abuse in my constituency, an average of 1.5 incidents every day. Let us be clear, those are not just statistics. Those numbers represent real people: mothers, daughters, sisters and children, experiencing some of the most harrowing abuses imaginable. I have met local organisations such as North Surrey Domestic Abuse Service, the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre in Guildford and East Surrey Domestic Abuse Services to understand the support available to survivors.

What I learned is deeply troubling. The overwhelming number of women whose lives have been shattered by domestic abuse is staggering. Many victims face financial hardship, debt and isolation. Children grow up in fear, forced to endure violence in silence, their innocence stolen. Yet for some escape never comes. Gemma Devonish, a much-loved teacher at a local girls' school in Epsom, was found with 54 stab wounds in her home in December 2024. Her boyfriend was due to stand trial for her murder but justice remains delayed, as the trial is yet to begin.

Aliny Godinho, a mother of four, was stabbed to death by her estranged husband in front of her three-year-old daughter while picking up her children from school in Ewell. Despite emergency accommodation having been arranged for Aliny in Streatham, her children remained at a school in Surrey. An examination of her husband's computer revealed that he tracked her phone, accessed her emails and knew her new secret address.

Those tragedies are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of systemic failure. Recorded incidents are only the tip of the iceberg, because less than 24% of domestic abuse crimes are reported to the police. The NHS, however, has more contact with victims and perpetrators than any other agency. That places healthcare professionals on the frontline of the domestic abuse epidemic, not just for identifying and supporting victims but for monitoring potential abusers.

Let us consider the case of Emma Pattison, the beloved headteacher at Epsom college, and her seven-year-old daughter, Lettie. Both were shot and murdered by Emma's husband and Lettie's father, George Pattison. George legally owned a shotgun and held a valid licence. Before his last licence renewal, which requires a letter from a GP, he used an online consultation service to obtain antidepressants. The online doctor had access to his medical records but they were unaware that he held a gun licence, and the medication was never declared to his GP.

If medical professionals are a line of defence against abuse, it is unacceptable for them to be left in the dark about who owns a firearm. Mandatory medical markers would ensure that any health professional with access to a patient's records could see if the patient held a gun licence. If necessary, the health professional could immediately notify the police.

That measure is overwhelmingly supported. A survey by the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners found that 70% of existing certificate holders in England and Wales believe that a marker should be placed on the medical records of gun holders. Among the wider public, support rises to 86%. Will the Minister commit to exploring the benefits of mandatory medical markers with colleagues in the Home Office?

The previous Government's guidance for health professionals states:

> "Domestic violence and abuse is so prevalent in our society that NHS…staff will be in contact with adult and child victims…across the full range of health services."

Too often, however, staff feel ill equipped to support victims, and training opportunities vary widely across the country.

Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse looked at all domestic homicide and abuse-related death reviews published in 2024 and found that 89% had at least one recommendation for health professionals or the health system. Its analysis also revealed that delivering training for healthcare workers at scale could cost as little as £2.66 million per year. Will the Minister review those recommendations and consider including them in the long-delayed workforce plan?

[Helen Maguire]

I welcome the Government's announcement of the Steps to Safety initiative, which aims to better equip GP surgeries to identify and respond to domestic abuse and sexual violence. However, any initiative must be grounded in lived experience. The IRIS programme, a specialist domestic abuse training support and referral programme for general practices, has shown remarkable success; practices with IRIS are 30 times more likely to recognise and refer domestic abuse victims to specialist support than those without. Will the Minister review the IRIS programme to ensure that Step to Safety mirrors its success?

Finally, it is clear that we are missing a critical opportunity to use the NHS to detect and help victims of abuse earlier. Will the Minister set out a national plan to ensure that NHS staff across the country are sufficiently trained to spot the signs of domestic abuse? For Emma, Lettie, Gemma, Aliny and all other victims of domestic abuse, it is time to tackle this national crisis once and for all.

10.21 am

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this important debate and his characteristically well-informed speech. His passion and knowledge as a GP bring a real benefit to this Chamber. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) on her appointment as the Government's adviser on violence against women and girls, and her excellent and impassioned speech. I am sure her ideas will be of great benefit to the Department and the Government as a whole.

This is a necessary debate, but it is also uncomfortable. The figures before us describe not merely a system under strain, but a system that is unfortunately failing too many women and children. If we are serious about change, we must be honest about responsibility and delivery. I thank the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) for the experience she brought to her speech. Her discussion of honour-based violence, alongside the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), was very prescient.

I also thank the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) for telling us about her experiences. We were all interested to hear more about the IRIS system she mentioned in her constituency. As ever, I welcome the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) giving us a perspective from Northern Ireland. Sir John, despite the fact that you have not spoken in this debate, it is worth noting your campaign on Holly's law, which would implement a mandatory register of abuse against domestic animals, because that abuse is often a precursor to or goes alongside the abuse of humans. Thank you for your work on that.

Abuse happens across this country, and none of us is untouched by it. In my Farnham and Bordon constituency, I think of the horrendous case of Alan Jermey, who strangled his partner Kirsty Wilson to death and set her alight as their two small children slept upstairs. Cases like that bring this issue home to all of us.

The Minister will know that the NHS has more contact with victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse than any other public service, which puts it in a unique position to intervene early. It also gives it a responsibility to deliver. The Department has set out ambitious plans around alcohol harm, neighbourhood health services and better access to support, and those ambitions are welcome, but ambition must be judged against outcomes. Unfortunately, there is a growing gap nationally between ministerial intent, which is welcome, and the frontline reality.

The Office for National Statistics found that 6% of women aged 16 and over were victims of domestic abuse, and the police recorded more than 1.35 million domestic abuse-related crimes and incidents last year. The consequences are often fatal. There were 108 domestic homicide victims that year, 83 of whom were women. Among adult female homicide victims, six in 10 deaths were the result of domestic homicide, almost all at the hands of a male partner or ex-partner. Domestic abuse is also a significant driver of suicide, as we have heard: between 2020 and 2024, 98 suspected suicides, including of children, followed domestic abuse. This is not a marginal issue; it is systemic.

The Government's freedom from violence and abuse strategy is welcome but its impact will be undermined by persistent failures in delivery. Training remains inconsistent, referral pathways are unclear and staff lack the time and capacity to act. The evidence is clear. As mentioned by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), in June 2025, Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse looked at domestic abuse-related death reviews published in 2024 and found that 89% contained at least one recommendation for healthcare professionals or the wider health system. Time and again, as the hon. Member for Stroud mentioned, opportunities for intervention within the NHS were missed.

Yet, at precisely the moment when that learning must be embedded, the Government are reorganising the NHS, abolishing NHS England and cutting integrated care board budgets. Standing Together has warned that these changes risk weakening domestic abuse and sexual violence protection work at the local level, including in training, co-ordination and follow through. A system that is being restructured, distracted and under financial pressure cannot deliver the prevention we all want. In Surrey, the police receive around 19 domestic abuse calls every day—domestic abuse is now more prevalent than shoplifting—so these systematic failures play out in real time in our communities.

I want to briefly speak about a young woman who lived in my constituency, Skye Nicholls, who died in 2023 at the age of just 22 after nearly two years of coercive control and abuse by her ex-partner. I have spoken to her family and friends, who are campaigning for mandatory psychological injury assessments following a police report of domestic abuse. One of them told me that, too often, the focus remains on visible injuries while psychological abuse is underestimated or dismissed, even though its effects often last far longer than physical harm. For family and friends, mental health support is frequently fragmented or absent, despite them often being the first to spot the warning signs.

Prevention does not begin at the point of crisis; it begins with early, trauma-informed intervention. NICE guidance clearly sets out how NHS staff should respond to domestic abuse, but guidance alone does not save lives. Women's Aid's 2025 report found that just over half of referrals into community-based domestic abuse

services were rejected—nearly a quarter because services could not even contact the victim. When support is reduced to just phone lines and signposting, women unfortunately fall through the cracks.

Detection is really important. Accident and emergency is where the physical signs of this abuse are seen but, as the hon. Member for Stroud mentioned, primary care is often the first point of contact. We must use the expertise of GPs and other primary care services and give them the time to effectively identify, intervene and support those victims.

The NHS cannot act alone. The justice system must also command public confidence, which is why the early release scheme for serious offenders, including rapists and murderers, is so damaging. It sends entirely the wrong signal to victims and undermines trust in the institutions meant to protect them. We as the Conservatives will continue to oppose that policy.

Under the previous Conservative Government, we introduced a statutory definition of domestic abuse through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, recognised children as victims in their own right, published violence against women and girls strategies, and invested significantly in victims' services, mental health and suicide prevention, but we are honest enough to say that legislation alone is not enough. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has shown that only 6% of police-recorded domestic abuse cases result in a conviction, and only one in five victims feel confident reporting abuse. That demands competence and delivery, not the constant structural upheaval we are going to see in both the justice and health systems.

We made good strides in this area and I genuinely believe that the current Ministers in the Department are doing their level best to move it forwards. I think we all agree that there is much more to do, but where the Government are making those strides, we as the Conservatives will support them full-throatedly. I close with three questions to the Minister.

First, I welcome the Government's announcement of a 5% funding uplift, but given rising costs and national insurance increases, how much of that is a real-terms increase and how much will go directly to frontline services for victims? Secondly, when will mandatory safeguarding and domestic abuse training for all NHS staff formally begin? What will its roll-out look like and when will the entire workforce have completed it? Finally, what assessment has the Department made of the case for mandatory psychological injury assessments following a police report of domestic abuse, to ensure that victims receive early, trauma-informed support?

We will not prevent violence against women by abolishing institutions, cutting local capacity and releasing dangerous men early. We will prevent it by enforcing the law, backing the frontline and putting victims, not systems, first.

10.30 am

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this morning, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing the debate and, as others have said, for sharing his direct experience as a practitioner—he is still a jobbing GP, among his other roles. His expertise was apparent throughout his speech.

As a Member of Parliament I have long talked about this issue, which is massive for me personally and as a constituency MP. All colleagues will be aware, through our casework, of how widespread domestic abuse is. It is one of the biggest issues for me in Bristol South. The number of women who fear injury or worse at the hands of their partners should keep us all up at night.

The Office for National Statistics estimates that well over 2 million women have experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales in the last year alone. Year on year, domestic homicides are present in all our constituencies. There were 108 domestic homicides in the year ending March 2024. Getting the right support early could help to prevent these needless and tragic deaths.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud asked the Government to publish a comprehensive plan for health. We now have a clear agenda for officials, as set out in the commitments in the violence against women and girls strategy. I will personally ensure that we make progress on that throughout 2026.

My hon. Friend asked for the Department's contribution to the VAWG strategy to be increased in future budgets. I am happy to confirm that we are doing that over this spending review period. As well as the £5 million annual investment for victim and survivor support services, we are committing up to £50 million over the next three years to the roll-out of the child house model. In addition, the Department will provide dedicated funding for the Steps to Safety referral service for those affected by domestic abuse. I will address both those points later in my speech. My hon. Friend was also right to emphasise the importance of specialised NHS training on domestic abuse, which I will also pick up later.

Tackling domestic abuse has to become everyone's business, as we have heard today, so the whole of Government are behind the agenda to prevent abuse and save lives. We saw before Christmas—if people had not recognised it before—the Prime Minister's personal commitment to this agenda.

I spoke plainly from the Opposition Benches about how the cost of living crisis was impacting women, and I will not now sugarcoat that fact from my Government position. Many women face the impossible choice of staying in an abusive situation or destitution. My right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary is doing everything he can to support people back to work more generally, and particularly to help women to gain financial independence and keep them free of coercion.

While this work is all necessary, it is not sufficient. NHS staff will play a vital role in helping victims and survivors to access health, housing and justice. As we have heard, healthcare workers are often the first point of contact, offering support, treatment and rehabilitation. They have their eyes on those at risk. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud made an excellent point about fragmented services, and I take the point made by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), that with recognition comes responsibility for delivery. We absolutely recognise that.

The support we offer must be consistent, responsive and easier to reach. As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), said, the incidents we have heard about from colleagues this morning are not isolated; this is a systemic issue.

[Karin Smyth]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) said in her excellent speech, we need to join the dots.

Like all our public servants—teachers, social workers and the police—NHS workers already play an essential role in safeguarding. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) said, that includes dealing with so-called honour-based killings. For instance, partners are often asked to leave the room before a midwife asks a mother whether she feels confident that no one will try to hurt her or her baby. We take our duty of care towards survivors of abuse extremely seriously, because violence against women and girls is, as we have heard, a public health emergency.

GP surgery staff are at the frontline of our commitment to safeguard lives. Since we came into office, we have supported primary carers and GPs as the front door to the NHS, and we have recruited over 2,500 more GPs. We have since seen patient satisfaction improving, with the recognition that access is improving, and online consultations are ending the morning scramble for appointments, thereby supporting that frontline.

This year, we will work with all ICBs to help staff in GP surgeries to identify and support victims and survivors of domestic abuse and refer them into wider support services. As we have heard, the Steps to Safety strategy will, first, introduce training for all staff in GP surgeries, to help them to spot the telltale signs of abuse and give them the skills and confidence to offer support to affected people. Secondly, a specialist worker will advise GP practices on supporting victims and survivors to take their first steps to safety by linking them with local support services. Thirdly, we will learn from the excellent practice that is already happening locally—for example, in places like Devon, Cornwall, Birmingham and Solihull.

Support services could help women to escape their abusers and get back on their feet, whether by helping them to find housing, to get back into work or to put the perpetrators behind bars. We are rolling out this initiative from April, starting with 10 ICBs in the first year, and by 2029 any victim or survivor in England will be able to get the help they need by talking to staff at their general practice.

We are determined to ensure that services do not become a postcode lottery. It is a shameful truth that some of the most alarming health inequalities are those faced by victims and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), who made an excellent contribution to the debate, to advise the Government. She will look at how we reduce the impact of alcohol on violence against women and girls, how we commission services to ensure that the right support is in the right place, and how we embed support into neighbourhood health services so that women and girls can be connected to the specialist support they need.

A lot of colleagues talked about training, including the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles). We need to remember that health professionals are trained to identify and respond to all types of violence and abuse, using blended learning methods including e-learning, in-person training and supervision. National mandatory safeguarding training is being strengthened for launch in late 2026. We recognise that that needs to be done.

The training will reinforce to staff their safeguarding responsibilities and support them in identifying and responding to victims of abuse. It will include training on the importance of recognising the impact of trauma and the cultural barriers to discussing abuse. It is the responsibility of employers to ensure that staff complete the mandatory safeguarding training. The Care Quality Commission assesses compliance with that requirement. The NHS England safeguarding team oversees this work, and has audited integrated care boards on completion rates. We will strengthen that work.

It takes immense bravery for survivors, not least the survivors of child sexual abuse, to come forward and tell their story, and we are doing everything possible to end the trauma of children and young people having to relive their ordeal over and over, by bringing a range of specialist support services under one roof in every NHS region in England. This is called the child house model. We have started to recruit the extra mental health workers we want by the end of this Parliament, to help survivors who still carry the scars of their abuse, and we are more than halfway towards our target. Whenever and wherever a victim or survivor contacts the NHS, it must be there for them with compassion, care and dignity.

The changes we are making to NHS England are to resolve many of the problems outlined by the Opposition spokesperson. We have huge problems with pathways as a result of layer upon layer of provision and bureaucracy have been introduced to the system over the last decade. There are confusing pathways, confusing levels of accountability, and massively increased costs with no improvement to the services received at the frontline. We need to support local delivery, where people present, and that is our intent with the changes. I was not aware that the Opposition were against the abolition of NHS England, but we will obviously make sure that we focus on service delivery as we go through the changes.

Our starting point is that women and girls who are victims of abuse are never responsible for the abuse. The perpetrators are responsible for it, but tackling it is everyone's problem. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has started to deploy domestic abuse experts in 999 control rooms, building on best practice across the country, including in my own Avon and Somerset police area. It is why my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary has introduced new measures to protect victims of stalking, and why my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is taking steps to challenge misogyny in the classroom.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted the really shocking levels of killings, as well as abuse, in Northern Ireland. It is good to have that voice in this place. As he knows, I take a great interest in Northern Ireland, but we do not often hear about that particular situation there. I assure him that the Home Office, as the lead Department, has been working with all devolved partners to produce the strategy, and the Department of Health and Social Care is sharing learning, but we absolutely need to keep an eye on that to ensure that we support colleagues in Northern Ireland on this agenda.

We are working across Government, which is why I am determined that the NHS will do its part in halving violence against women and girls by the end of the decade. However, our strategy is not just a Government plan; it is a national endeavour. Everyone in this room or watching on screen has their part to play.

I want to end by speaking directly to survivors and anyone who may be trapped in an abusive relationship. This Government are on your side—and we have heard this morning a willingness across all parties to make this work. We have not forgotten you. You can get in touch with the Refuge national domestic abuse helpline, Women's Aid or Respect—an organisation that works with male victims and perpetrators of abuse. Please get in touch with those or other specialist charities, or contact your local sexual assault referral centre. The Government are determined to make the strategy work and I am really grateful to have had the opportunity to respond to the debate.

10.41 am

Dr Opher: I thank the Minister and all those who spoke and brought their fantastic experience of this really difficult problem. Let me say two very simple things. We need to imprint on healthcare workers the idea "Think domestic abuse", so that we do not miss it. If someone presents, we must have in the back of our minds the question, "Is this domestic abuse?" That will help to identify victims much earlier. After that, we need to enable them to be referred in a simple and effective process that brings them support immediately.

I thank everyone here, and you, Sir John, for chairing the debate.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Thank you for winding up. This has been a really important debate and I am so pleased that everyone was able to contribute. I hope that, had I spoken in the debate and not chaired it, I would have spoken with the same passion and insight that everyone has shown.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role of the NHS in preventing domestic homicides and domestic abuse-related deaths.

10.42 am

Sitting suspended.

Temporary Accommodation: Out of Area Placements

11 am

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I will call Josh Babarinde to move the motion, and then call the Minister to respond. Other Members may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge. There will not be an opportunity to wind up, sadly, as it is only a half-hour debate.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered out of area placements in temporary accommodation.

Thank you so much, Sir John; it is great to serve under your chairship. I have deliberately avoided the green suit that I know is not your favourite from my wardrobe, so I hope that you will afford me good grace in this debate. *[Laughter.]*

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): It is a private joke, don't worry!

Josh Babarinde: I am grateful for the opportunity to spotlight the challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness who are placed by their local authorities into temporary accommodation outside their local authority areas.

In many cases, out of area placements are both necessary and an appropriate means to safeguard vulnerable individuals. A clear example is survivors of domestic abuse, who may be forced to relocate to ensure their own safety. But too often, for placing authorities, "out of area" becomes shorthand for "out of sight and out of mind". A scandal has unfolded across our country, in which homeless people are dumped from one place to another without the proper assistance that they need to address the causes of their homelessness, or other support that could help to get them back on their feet.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am absolutely incredulous that any authority should send a family way out of their area. I was shocked when I read about an example of this issue in my constituency, with a family whose child attended a special school being offered accommodation in County Tyrone, which is three hours away from where they live and from where their child goes to school. There is absolutely no way that that family could cope with that. The disruption to their children's routine would have been severely detrimental. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that special consideration must be given for family units, and particularly to those with children who have particular educational needs?

Josh Babarinde: The hon. Member is absolutely right to highlight the scandal that families face in his own constituency, but what is even more scandalous is that that is not the exception; it is happening in too many places. Due consideration is not given for families with children with special educational needs. That consideration does not go far enough, and too many councils are not just failing when it comes to making those kinds of assessments but failing to uphold their wider duties of care, communications standards and accountability in following those people and their families wherever they are placed.

[Josh Babarinde]

In Eastbourne, this issue particularly grew during the pandemic following the introduction of the last Government's "Everyone In" directive, under which people who were experiencing homelessness were rapidly—and rightly—placed into temporary accommodation, including hotels and bed and breakfasts, in order to protect their health and public health more widely. Although that approach was formally stepped down by the Government after the first lockdown, many local authorities have continued to use that model.

While "Everyone In" was extremely well intentioned, it has since become an embedded, informal and unregulated practice that contributes to the sustained use of out of area temporary accommodation without the necessary support in place. Over the last couple of years, out of area placements in Eastbourne have increased fourfold, to the 209 that Eastbourne hosts today. As I have said in this very room before, out of area placements now account for 46% of all temporary accommodation placements in Eastbourne, with the majority being from Brighton and Hove city council. There are currently 178 placements by Brighton and Hove city council in Eastbourne, and 31 from other neighbouring districts, such as Hastings, Worthing and Rother, and a small number from London.

To the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), this is not just a local issue but a national one. At the end of June 2025, 42,080 households were living in temporary accommodation outside their home local authority. That represents an increase of more than 10% since 2021. London accounts for a significant proportion of such placements, reflecting the acute pressures in the capital. I recognise the scale of the challenge there, but that pattern has clear consequences for other towns and cities across the country, which are increasingly expected to meet these needs without the resources, co-ordination or accountability that should accompany that expectation.

After years of sustained pressure and negotiation by Eastbourne borough council, our town has finally secured somewhat more consistent notifications from placing authorities when individuals are moved into the borough. Although that progress is welcome, serious information gaps remain. Too often, notifications are incomplete, with receiving authorities not provided with information on key risk factors such as histories of domestic abuse or other serious vulnerabilities. That leaves frontline services without the information that they need to keep those individuals, staff and the wider community safe. If a duty of care is to mean anything, it must include the timely sharing of appropriate and proportionate case details across local authority boundaries to ensure that safeguarding responsibilities can be properly discharged.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): This is a really important debate. One element that is often not told is the number of out of area placements for 16-year-olds. Last year, 1,000 care-experienced children were moved away from home during the three months around their exams. Does the hon. Member agree that we should do everything in our power to ensure that people are able to keep their local connections as far as possible, and particularly those in that vulnerable group?

Josh Babarinde: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the plight faced particularly by care-experienced young people. All the evidence tells us that such placements can have a scarring effect on individuals, pervading way into later life, which can set them up for disadvantage before they have even had a proper chance to begin.

Another issue is that local authorities do not routinely notify the receiving authority when a placement has ended. That, again, gets in the way of achieving a proper picture of the temporary accommodation landscape. The impact of that dysfunction is profound. Some people placed in Eastbourne from Brighton, who have gone on to live in Eastbourne, have had to make a 50-mile round trip to access support from their local authority, taking sometimes more than three hours by bus. Those people are often ripped away from their GP, mental health support, addiction services and schools, as has been mentioned already by hon. Members.

Tragically, we have seen the fatal consequences of the broken system. In January 2023, a 25-year-old man placed in Eastbourne by Brighton and Hove city council was found dead in the accommodation in which he was placed. In the month before his death, no welfare checks had been carried out by Brighton and Hove city council—a scandal. Last year, two more people died in Wilmington Square in Eastbourne within days of each other. In Newhaven in the neighbouring constituency represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), 10 people have died in similar circumstances. That is obscene. It is immoral and it is not fair on anyone.

There is also a wider out of area homelessness issue in Eastbourne that is important to acknowledge. Alongside formal placements, Eastbourne has seen individuals arriving from outside the area voluntarily, including cases of people travelling from as far as the Isle of Wight to reside on the streets in Eastbourne. Those people often move in search of safety, support and services that they believe will be available to them. The reality, though, is that unmanaged and unsupported movement across local authority boundaries places additional strain on receiving councils and charities, particularly when there has been no co-ordination, information sharing or support from the originating authority.

I am very proud that Eastbourne borough council has been at the forefront of responding to the challenge. There are amazing officers like Jaime Wainwright-Jones who has pioneered person-centred, preventive and proactive models of support that are delivering extraordinary results. I am also proud of charities and initiatives such as Eastbourne Salvation Army, Matthew 25 Mission, Kingdom Way Trust, Eastbourne food bank, Warming up the Homeless, Feedbourners, Eastbourne Street Pastors, Change Grow Live in Eastbourne, Southdown, Citizens Advice Eastbourne, YMCA Eastbourne Foyer, BHT Sussex, Absolute Angels and Food4Thought. Those are just some of the organisations that have stepped into the breach.

I saw the work at first hand as recently as yesterday when I went to Matthew 25 and spoke with Andrea, Maria and Andrew from the team and volunteers about the impact of out of area placements on the town, on their services and, most importantly, on people. I spoke there with one gentleman who had been placed in

Eastbourne by Brighton and Hove city council without the support that he needed. As we were having the discussion he piped up:

"They ended up dumping me here".

It is inhumane. And I am concerned that that the issue at national level still lacks the urgency that it demands.

I raised the issue in a letter to the previous Minister who committed

"to further define where out of area placements are acceptable and expectations on placing and receiving local authorities."

I am profoundly concerned that, despite the amazing work that the Minister has done to bring forward the national strategy to end homelessness, the commitment that the last Minister made has not been not met. I therefore call on the Minister to do four things: first, will she set out a clear timetable for clarifying and strengthening the guidance on out of area placements so that local authorities know what is expected of them, and so that people experiencing homelessness have the dignity and support that they deserve, as hon. Members have mentioned in their remarks?

Secondly, I appeal to the Minister to directly consult local government, especially Eastbourne borough council, so that the real experience of receiving councils when it comes to this scandal informs the guidance to come. Thirdly, I call on the Minister to clarify what sanctions exist to course-correct councils who fail in their duty of care and in their duty to co-operate with receiving local authorities. Fourthly, in the meantime, I ask the Government to make it clear to placing local authorities who, I believe, are failing people experiencing homelessness—such as Brighton and Hove city council—that their responsibilities do not end at the point of placement. The duty of care must follow the person. It cannot stop at an arbitrary local authority boundary.

Ultimately, this is about fairness to councils, empowering our support services and, most importantly, protecting the dignity of individuals experiencing homelessness. It is on those principles that I urge the Government to act further without delay.

11.14 am

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship in this debate, Sir John, on such an important issue. I was unaware of your views on green suits, so I shall try not to err in future. I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for securing this debate. He and I have discussed this issue a couple of times, and he has written to the Department. I congratulate him on working hard to make sure this issue gets the attention it deserves. It is complex, but we set out our national homelessness strategy before Christmas, as the hon. Member mentioned, and we can make a difference. I will run through some of those areas and come to the points that he has raised.

As a Government we inherited a homelessness crisis, with both rough sleeping and the number of households in temporary accommodation more than doubling since 2010. Those pressures stem from years of underinvestment in affordable housing and overstretched local homelessness systems, and I am sure the hon. Member would recognise that. Insufficient truly affordable housing means that councils in England too often have to rely on poor-quality, high-cost options to house homeless households. That has a huge impact on families in temporary accommodation, which is at record levels. As of June last year, 132,000 households, including 172,000 children, were living in temporary accommodation. It is shocking to hear those numbers and that is why we are determined to put it right. Our national plan to end homelessness sets out how we will do that: committing to record investment in homelessness and rough sleeping services, and giving a huge boost to social housing because, in the end, the cause of all of this is not having enough homes that people can afford. Even though it will take time, our commitment to £39 billion of investment to build the social housing we need must be at the root of our response.

The scale of the crisis means we will need to make progress over time and there will be a transition period as the situation stabilises and services are able to move toward longer-term prevention, rather than moving to some of the crisis responses that the hon. Member set out. In our plan we set out that sustainable change to tackle the root causes of homelessness, including the delivery of 1.5 million new homes. In the medium term, while we are building the homes that we need, we are investing £3.5 billion in homelessness and rough sleeping services over the next three years, which will help councils intervene earlier, keep people in their homes and reduce the number of households entering temporary accommodation.

In the short term, we are taking immediate action to increase the supply of good-quality temporary accommodation through the £950 million local authority housing fund and, where it is needed, we are working to improve the experience of people living in temporary accommodation. I mention that because two important new goals in the national plan to end homelessness will help the situation that the hon. Member faces in Eastbourne. First, I want to see local authorities prevent homelessness and not end up in the position where they have to place people at all, never mind place them out of area. We will not be able to do that overnight, but if we can stop people becoming homeless in the first place, that problem will not arise.

Secondly, too many places that are using out of area placements to fulfil their homelessness duty have poor access to good-quality temporary accommodation in their own areas. Addressing that is a way to prevent the problems arising, before I get to the reasonable points that the hon. Member has made about what happens when authorities do need to place out of area.

On out of area placements, as of June 2025, 42,0000 households in temporary accommodation were placed outside their home district, with the majority placed in nearby regions. London boroughs accounted for the vast majority of those moves—placing 34,000 households out of area—and also received the highest number of inward placements from other boroughs. As a proud northerner, I sometimes hear from colleagues in the north of England about whether London is the cause of all of our problems. That is just not true; London is dealing with significant issues related to poverty itself. This is a huge amount of disruption for the individuals and families who are affected. We cannot accept it as inevitable, as I have said. We think our plan will help us get to the root cause of it, but we must act now to address poor practice in managing out of area placements to ensure that they are not used where closer, more suitable accommodation is available, and

[Alison McGovern]

that, where they are used, there is collaboration between the placing and receiving authorities. That comes to the heart of the points that the hon. Member for Eastbourne has made.

The homelessness code of guidance makes clear that all temporary accommodation placements, including those out of area, must be suitable. That includes minimising disruption to schooling, healthcare, support networks and other essential services. The household's circumstances, safeguarding and support needs must be considered, with links with schools, doctors and social workers retained wherever possible. The guidance does what I think the hon. Member for Eastbourne is arguing for; the question is why it is not working, if the guidance is already there. He mentioned a commitment to strengthen the guidance made by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali). That is restated by the homelessness strategy, and we will be engaging with councils. He has already written on behalf of Eastbourne, and I am in touch with councils week in, week out—including Brighton, which he also mentioned, on a number of occasions. I will be on the hunt for the areas where we need to strengthen the guidance in all my conversations with local authorities, which he will know are very regular at the moment because of the funding settlement.

Josh Babarinde: I thank the Minister for her response. I am heartened that a review of the out of area placements guidance is still on the cards, but I am disheartened not to hear a timetable for that. It feels as though not much has progressed since my letter and the response that I received in the summer. I wonder if she can share a timetable for when that review will take place and be concluded.

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Member for his point, but I disagree that not much has progressed because we have published a national plan to end homelessness. As I set out before, the point of that plan is to increase prevention and, in the short and medium term, get better quality placements closer to home. We are working on that action plan now. I do not want to give him an arbitrary deadline for work on the guidance, but I am sure we will speak again on many occasions. It will be part of the action plan and the steps that we are taking, coming out of the strategy. I am happy to update him as we move along.

Let me make some progress in responding to some of the other points the hon. Member for Eastbourne raised. For example, we already require the authority to consider the suitability of the location for all members of the household. Housing authorities should, wherever possible, seek to place homeless households in their area, except where there are clear benefits for the person seeking assistance. I am pleased that the hon. Member mentioned those who are experiencing domestic abuse—we would all obviously see the benefit of an out of area placement, and I am sure he did not mean to imply anything other than that.

Where an out of area placement is suitable and necessary, good communication between authorities is vital, as we have heard. Section 208 of the Housing Act 1996 requires councils to notify the receiving authority when they place a household out of area. We know that, across the country, notifications are not always made and, where they are made, the information provided is limited. That is not good enough; I expect all local authorities to ensure that placements and notifications align with duties under the relevant legislation. The hon. Member for Eastbourne asked about sanctions and so on. There are clear ways in which local authorities can be held to account for the decisions they make, such as the ombudsman, Parliament and other means. We will not succeed in our goals in the national plan to end homelessness without local authorities, so my role is to support them. Through the funding settlement and other things, that is what I am trying to do. If there are areas where local authorities have fallen down, there are clear routes through which they can be held accountable.

All services have a role to play in providing the right support, and I am delighted that we recently introduced an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill requiring local housing authorities to,

"notify…educational institutions, GP practices and health visiting services…when a child is placed in temporary accommodation".

Consent would have to be provided. That will ensure that schools and health services have the information they need to provide proactive, practical and pastoral support where needed.

The amendment a part of our strategy, as is our commitment to introducing a duty to collaborate, to ensure that notification and co-operation is happening as it should. To be honest with the hon. Member for Eastbourne, I can imagine a number of reasons why they may not operate as they should, not least a decade and a half of austerity where local councils were stripped of the resources that they needed to do the job. That is the reality they face, but our job collectively is to provide the systems and processes to help them do it, notwithstanding the point I just made about accountability.

Amanda Hack: Could the Minister clarify whether that duty to inform also includes the 16 to 18-year-olds, who may well be placed by social services, rather than by homelessness teams?

Alison McGovern: My very dedicated civil servants are just mouthing to me that they might be in care, and therefore there might be requirements from that point of view. If it is okay with her, I will write to my hon. Friend with a detailed and full response, because the legal situation surrounding 16-year-olds is particularly important.

To conclude, temporary accommodation challenges are different across the country. Therefore, as I said, we need to respond to the realities that councils are facing. As part of that, in boosting the capacity that local authorities have, our emergency accommodation reduction pilots, backed by £8 million of investment, have effectively reduced the number of families with children in bed and breakfasts for more than the six-week limit by working with areas experiencing the highest pressures. That is the approach that I want to take on this issue. Receiving authorities must of course be able to work collaboratively with placing authorities, as we have said.

In the end, the heart of this problem is the people who are affected. I was disheartened to hear the hon. Member for Eastbourne report that somebody had said to him they had been "dumped"—how awful. We want

people to feel that councils are there to support them if the worst happens and make sure they get back on their feet. That is why our emergency accommodation reduction programme, with a £30 million funding increase through the homelessness strategy, will help tackle poor practice and get us on the right road.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne for raising these issues. As I have said a number of times, out of area placements should be a last resort. When they happen, they must be handled properly with full notification, safeguarding referrals and collaboration between councils. Overall, we are committed to tackling the drivers of homelessness, improving standards and ensuring that vulnerable households get the support they need.

This is a shared challenge, and I look forward to working with all local authorities, charities and Members across this House to deliver the long-term solutions we want to see. On behalf of all of us in this House, could the hon. Member for Eastbourne pass our sincere thanks to the charities, organisations and individuals he mentioned? It sounds like they are doing a very important job.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Water (Special Measures) Act 2025: Enforcement

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: Second Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Priorities for water sector reform, HC 1001; Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 9 September and 15 July 2025, on Reforming the water sector, HC 588.]

2.30 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the enforcement of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Dr Allin-Khan, and to open this debate on the enforcement of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025.

Like many Members across this House, I welcomed the introduction of the Water (Special Measures) Act last year. After years of public anger over pollution, rising bills and declining services in the sector, the Act promised a tougher approach to a failing water industry. It pledged to ban bonuses for failing bosses, bring criminal charges against persistent law breakers, impose meaningful fines and introduce independent monitoring of every sewer overflow. On paper, that sounded like progress. In practice, the Act has proved to be little more than a drop in the ocean.

The Water (Special Measures) Act was meant to turn the tide, but right now the sewage is still flowing and so are the excuses from water bosses. The Act was intended to strengthen regulation and restore public trust, yet in the months since its introduction we have seen companies complying with the letter of the law while confidence continues to drain away. When regulation is drafted so narrowly it can be complied with but the purpose is undermined, it is quite clearly not fit for purpose and not strong enough. That brings me to a central question of this debate: how do we ensure that the principles of the Act are properly enforced, and that water companies are genuinely held to account?

Nowhere is the failure of the current system clearer than the performance of Yorkshire Water, which supplies water to my constituents in Harrogate and Knaresborough. The problems they face mirror those across the country, from poor customer services to rising bills and the persistent sewage pollution we see in our rivers.

Yorkshire Water was classified by Ofwat as "lagging behind" but my constituents are having to pay that price upfront. In October 2025, the Environment Agency gave Yorkshire Water a red rating for serious pollution incidents. Those incidents had almost tripled in 2024, leaving the company with one of the worst pollution records in the country. Despite this performance, customers have repeatedly been asked to pay more while receiving less. One constituent described their experience as:

"Probably the worst consumer experience I have had in my life".

Against that backdrop, many were rightly shocked by comments from the Yorkshire Water chief executive when she suggested criticism of the company reflected

"a level of expectation from customers that's much higher"

[Tom Gordon]

than it had been. With water bills expected to rise by as much as 41% over the next five years, and a hosepipe ban that was imposed from July to December, my constituents are entitled to ask how low does she think their expectations should be? If expectations are too high, then perhaps the problem is not the public but the leadership of Yorkshire Water.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Liberal Democratic party for all they do on water issues. That cannot be taken away from them: they are to the fore. Other parties may be a wee bit annoyed at that, but they are so active it is incredible. Well done.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the private companies do not appear to be tied to doing the right thing for the public as a whole, but to doing more for their investors? The ability to freeze bonus payments as a penalty should be used, and the consultation with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must allow this measure to be implemented in a quick and cost-effective manner, as a matter of urgency. Does he agree that is one thing that could be done?

Tom Gordon: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. It is a pleasure to take an intervention from him, as always. I completely agree with what he has outlined and the characterisation of the way that the water sector is, frankly, morally bankrupt. There is no interest in the public good. That is why my party has long been calling to see these companies reformed, where they have to put public benefit interest first rather than corporate shareholder responsibilities.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member and alongside him I wish to put on record on behalf of my constituents what an absolute disgrace Thames Water is. In a desperate attempt to secure their investments, avoid special administration and keep the company within the private sector, Thames Water's creditors are trying to strike a deal with Ofwat that would see them polluting our waterways for up to 15 years. That is a shameless attempt that proves that they cannot be trusted to put the best interests of their customers or the environment ahead of their own purses. Does the hon. Member agree that Ofwat ought to reject that deal and use the powers it has been granted through this Act and put Thames Water into special administration?

Tom Gordon: The hon. Lady hits the nail on the head. Water companies are trying to get away with doing grubby deals by the back door. Across the board—it is not just Thames Water and Yorkshire Water—the sector is not operating as it should, so we need proper wholesale reform of the water companies' models.

If the expectations are too high, it is perhaps not the public who have the wrong end of the stick, but the leadership of Yorkshire Water. Clean water is not an unreasonable demand, but the bare minimum that we should be able to expect. My constituents can see the consequences of Yorkshire Water's failure at first hand; they need only to go out into our wonderful countryside across Harrogate and Knaresborough, where the River Nidd, Crimple beck and Oak beck have all been affected by sewage outflows and overflows.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): In my constituency, the River Avon and its tributaries are central to our natural environment and to leisure and tourism—the visitor economy. It is a disgrace that our waterways are still being polluted. Does my hon. Friend agree that water management data must be transparent, and that the Government must introduce monitoring of the volume, not just the duration, of sewage overspills?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for that very pertinent intervention. I have been to Stratford, and it is a lovely place. No community should be blighted by sewage at the hands of these water bosses. The point about volume, and not just hours of sewage dumping, is key.

The River Nidd, which once brought joy to families in Harrogate and Knaresborough, is now treated as a health hazard. Every year, kids are taken to hospital after playing and swimming in it. Dogs routinely fall sick and have to go to the vet if they dare go swim in the lido. That is not progress, but decline. Things are not getting better; they are still getting worse.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. In 2024, storm overflows at Harbertonford waste water treatment works discharged into the Harbourne river for more than 3,500 hours. In other words, raw sewage was pumped into the river, which flows into the glorious River Dart, for 40% of the year. As of this morning, the same storm overflow has been activated since 11 January. Does my hon. Friend agree that South West Water must not be allowed to get away with that?

Tom Gordon: That is another fantastic example of how poorly water companies across the length and breadth of our country are performing. It is entirely unacceptable. My hon. Friend and many other Liberal Democrat colleagues have done a fantastic job of holding the water bosses to account. Her constituents are very lucky to have her, and I am sure she will continue to do that.

Last summer, I took part in the Knaresborough bed race, which ends with participants crossing the River Nidd after running around town, up and down hills, with kids on beds. It is a fantastic event. If Members have not seen it, they should google it—even better, they should come and watch it. Hopefully, I will get a place to do it again this year. But in recent years the river crossing at the end has become contentious. There was talk of scrapping it altogether because of the danger of having to cross the river when sewage overflows have been pumping. Locals advise those competing in the race to drink a can of full-sugar Coke at the end in the hope that it will kill off any bacteria and nasty things that they may have swallowed during the river crossing. When that is the best piece of advice that people can give to those competing in a sporting event, something has gone very wrong. The regulation of the water sector is completely failing. No one should have to fear sickness from their local river in 21st century Britain, but that is Yorkshire Water's legacy in my constituency.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is making an impassioned speech about Yorkshire Water, which also serves Dewsbury and Batley. In 2024, there were at least 346 sewage dumps in local

waterways in Dewsbury and Batley, lasting over 1,000 hours. That equals 1.5 months of continuous sewage discharge. Discharges around Batley beck, the River Calder and the River Spen are blighting our waterways and our community. In addition, sewage is backing up into streets and people's homes because of a failure to maintain pipes or design the system correctly. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that water companies have been getting away with almost murder for too long and must be held accountable? Customers must not have to pay any longer for their failings and their profiteering.

Tom Gordon: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of Yorkshire Water. All too often, we hear that there will be investment and improvement, but it is frankly too little and often too late. There has been a lack of investment in infrastructure over decades, which has left the system creaking at the seams. I completely agree that we need to get a proper grip of the issues that I have outlined.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I will add another name to the catalogue of water company disasters: Southern Water. In Rudgwick in my Horsham constituency, residents have complained for almost 20 years about effluent backing up into bathrooms, footpaths covered in soiled loo paper and having to keep children and pets indoors. Yet over the last decade, average Southern Water bills have shot up from £262 in 2016 to £702 today. Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that residents are paying vastly more with absolutely nothing to show for it?

Tom Gordon: That is a damning indictment of the state of water companies across the length and breadth of this country, especially at a time that is hard financially, when people have to tighten their belts more than ever before and are struggling with the cost of living crisis. That is what jars people: when they see their water bills going up more and more but they still have to deal with the grim situations that my hon. Friend outlined so eloquently. That is not an isolated story; it is a reflection of systemic failures across the industry and our country.

Since the introduction of the 2025 Act, Thames Water's financial position has, as we have heard, continued to deteriorate, while sewage discharges persist. In the south-east just a few weeks ago, we saw repeated outages that left households without even the basic service of being able to turn on the taps. When water companies repeatedly fail and nothing visibly changes, the message to the public is clear: accountability is missing.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous. As the Member of Parliament for Tiverton and Minehead, I represent two water companies, Wessex Water—who are no angels—and South West Water—who I have been chasing for several months in order to get a meeting on behalf of a constituent whose bakery was flooded to such an extent that she has now had to shut up shop and go home. I am supposed to be meeting them on Monday, but it has taken at least four days to get a time out of them. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a disgrace that these companies are able to literally stick their fingers in their ears when people raise concerns on behalf of their communities?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I do not envy her having to battle just one water company, but two. She has her work cut out for her—some of us are now breathing a sigh of relief in comparison. The problem is, as she outlined, that there is no accountability. It often takes public pressure, campaigning or us in this place banging the drum to talk about these issues to get those meetings set up and problems fixed when it is a basic obligation that water companies should already provide.

Since the introduction of the 2025 Act, we have seen issues across the country. The failure of water companies is a source of frustration and distrust in politics. People feel that the legislation that was passed is simply not working, or that we got it wrong. One of the most high-profile elements of the Water (Special Measures) Act was the commitment to block bonuses for executives at failing water companies. Water companies are upping their game and thinking about the way that they structure their payments to try and circumvent these measures and the bonus ban. Ofwat investigated Yorkshire Water last year, but said that it did not breach the legislation or regulatory guidance on executive pay. The payments made to the chief executive of Yorkshire Water, Nicola Shaw, through the offshore parent company Kelda Holdings were what they called "fixed fees" for group-level responsibilities and funded by shareholders. While technically that might not constitute a breach of the ban, it is a demonstration of how open to exploitation the system and the legislation are. Rather than a bonus ban, we have ended up with a bonus rebrand.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech on behalf of his constituents. Last year, it emerged that Thames Water was planning an enormous additional compensation package under the guise of a management retention plan. After being grilled by those of us on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and an understandable public outcry, it announced that it would no longer go ahead with that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that any water company setting its moral bar lower than Thames Water should take a long, hard look in the mirror?

Tom Gordon: I completely agree with the hon. Member. I thank him and the Chair of the EFRA Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who is also here today. The work that they have been doing in highlighting the issues endemic to water companies across this country could not have come sooner. The fixes that they have highlighted in their reports are important for driving this conversation as we look towards the future.

Turning back to Yorkshire Water, in the past two years, those payments—which were apparently not bonuses but rather "fixed fees", or whatever Yorkshire Water called them—totalled more than £1 million, on top of the near £700,000 annual basic salary, at a time when pollution incidents were rising and trust was collapsing. Yorkshire Water's chief executive has since said that it was a "mistake" not to disclose those payments and not to have been more transparent. Well, that is too little too late when Yorkshire Water has been caught with its hand in the cookie jar. My message to Yorkshire Water is simple: it can rename a bonus to a "fixed fee" and apologise for getting caught out, but the stench of sewage still clings to it, and to the bosses at Yorkshire Water.

[Tom Gordon]

I remain concerned about the overreliance on fines as a primary enforcement tool. In recent years, we have seen Yorkshire Water and many other companies facing record-breaking fines, but the problem remains: the lack of accountability that they face, even when such astronomical penalties are imposed on them. Simply put, we cannot fine our way out of failure when customers end up footing the bill.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for his impassioned speech on this very important subject. My constituents in the South Cotswolds will be deeply disappointed by this White Paper. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to get literally upstream of this question, and address the question of water company ownership? When we look to Europe, we see models such as mutual or public-benefit ownership working much more effectively. Does he also agree that the profit motive does not sit well with an essential public utility?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for putting across that argument, and I completely agree with her. She has outlined the case and the reasoning very well.

Moving on to today's water White Paper, it is right that we recognise that the current regulatory system has failed, that Ofwat has not provided the hands-on oversight required, and that prevention must replace crisis management. Proposals for a new regulator, stronger inspections and greater transparency are a step in the right direction—if long overdue—but a White Paper and those new proposals will only be as strong as their enforcement.

I want to press the Minister on three specific points. First, will the Minister confirm that the new regulator will have an explicit duty to close remuneration loopholes, so that executives cannot simply comply with the letter of the law while undermining its purpose? Secondly, will the Minister commit to ensuring that criminal liability for water bosses is not merely theoretical but actively pursued where there is evidence of serious or repeated environmental harm? Thirdly, will the Minister set out how enforcement action will target decision makers, not just balance sheets, so that customers are no longer left paying for failure through higher bills? Those are the tests that will determine whether today's White Paper represents a genuine reset or simply another missed opportunity.

Ultimately, this debate is about accountability. Pollution on this scale is not an accident; it is a result of decisions, incentives and failures of leadership. When executives are rewarded while rivers are polluted, that is not mismanagement; it is environmental vandalism. Nicola Shaw remains in post despite rising bills, collapsing trust and one of the worst pollution records in this country. In any other industry, that level of failure would end in resignation. So today I say clearly: Nicola Shaw, do us a favour and go.

A new regulator must come into post and go further than we have seen with Ofwat. Water bosses who preside over illegal pollution should not just have their bonuses blocked; they should face criminal consequences for their environmental damage and harm. No more hiding behind corporate structures, no more excuses and no more polluting with impunity: if they poison our waterways, they should answer not just to shareholders but to the full force of the law.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. Timings-wise, we will stick to approximately five minutes per person at the moment, which should make possible one or two interventions as well.

2.49 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, as always, Dr Allin-Khan. I join colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing such an important debate on a crucial topic, which concerns people across the country.

I am grateful to take the opportunity to speak today about the River Tyne, which holds great sentimental value to me, as I know it does to so many people who call both Northumberland and the wider north-east home, and have been raised in the area surrounding it. I, along with many of my constituents, have deeply fond memories of exploring and enjoying the astonishing diversity of nature that the River Tyne has to offer. It is a natural landmark, central to community life, to local economies and to the identity of the region, along with some of Northumberland's other great rivers.

With that in mind, I will take a moment to highlight the incredible work of the Tyne Rivers Trust and the Wylam Clean Tyne organisation, both of which are dedicated to improving the wellbeing of the region's rivers and communities—from Alston up to Kielder and beyond—through education, practical conservation and environmental activism. The protection and development of the Tyne's waters establish it as one of the best salmon rivers in England. It houses a diverse range of animals and plant life, and it is worth millions to our local economy. Importantly, it also acts as a third space for local communities looking to access the positive effects on wellbeing associated with spending time in and around nature.

It is a devastating fact that the previous Government allowed our river to be flooded with an unregulated torrent of sewage. They were a Government who saw environmental protection as an inconvenience, not a responsibility. They underfunded regulators, scaled back monitoring and weakened the enforcement of environmental standards. They allowed water companies' profits to soar, bosses to accept hundreds of thousands of pounds in bonuses, and household bills to increase. They left my constituents with a River Tyne that is unsafe and in decline, not because of natural change but because of political failure and political choices.

I strongly welcome the measures in the Water (Special Measures) Act, which reflects our mission to clean up our rivers and bring accountability to water companies. I agree that, in order to bring about the necessary long-standing reform, it is fundamental that the plans are effectively enforced, and that funding and resources back regulators so that they can apply the new legislation consistently and effectively. I would like to hear from the Minister how rural communities, including those in my constituency, can be supported by the Act specifically. Northumbrian Water must be held accountable, having made over 3,000 sewage dumps into the Tyne in 2024 alone.

It must be held responsible for what must be significant investment in the infrastructure of overflows and the rebuilding of public trust.

I also want to emphasise, as often as I can, the importance of working in partnership with communities across my constituency, particularly rural communities. The expertise of the organisations that I mentioned will be crucial to the conversation that Northumbrian Water and local government could have if they are serious about understanding and tackling the problem. They, alongside farmers and land managers, are vital stewards of our environment. Supporting sustainable land use, reducing run-off and improving soil and water management must be done collaboratively, with practical support, funding, clear guidance and long-term certainty. This Government understand that environmental recovery and economic growth go hand in hand. Clean rivers do not just enrich our environment; they support tourism, angling and farming, and they build a sense of local pride. Protecting the Tyne is not a barrier to prosperity; it is part of building a greener, fairer and more resilient future.

I will touch on the impact of the clean river on young people. Tyne Green in the town of Hexham or the banks along Wylam and Prudhoe are all venues for young people to get to know the river and enjoy it. There have been some fantastic initiatives on river safety pioneered by my friend and comrade, Angie Scott, who is a Northumberland county councillor for Prudhoe. As we try to clean up our waterways, it is important to ensure that young people maintain not just access to them but an understanding of them. I should be grateful if the Minister would speak about that.

2.53 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing this welcome and—particularly in my constituency—timely debate on regulation, public trust and customers' experience.

I am participating on behalf of my constituents in East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages. Many people will know that Sussex and Kent were at the epicentre of the recent outages, despite the guidance we had on the Friday before the taps were turned off that it would be elsewhere. Today is another opportunity to welcome the new powers in the White Paper and talk about how we hold the regulator, Ofwat, to account. I put on the record my huge thanks to the Minister and her team in DEFRA for listening to me on behalf of my constituents and holding these companies to account.

What has happened over the weekend is clear. I will go through my list of experiences. Before the boundary changes, in August 2020, hundreds of homes were affected in my patch and in East Sussex. In November 2022, 30,000 people were affected, including in my part of the world, and in Kent. In December 2022, in Uckfield and in Crowborough in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sussex Weald (Ms Ghani), 16,000 households were affected. In June 2023, thousands of homes were affected again across the Mid Sussex district. In January 2024, Sussex and Kent homes were affected by the impact of Storm Henk. Then Sussex and Kent were again affected in November 2024, and again in January 2025.

Dr Allin-Khan, you will be interested in this. I met today with Karen McDowell, the head of Sussex integrated care board, to consider the impact on the Queen Victoria hospital in East Grinstead. I thank its leader Abigail and her team for their stoicism during the outage. In the midst of the sanitation issue, with a norovirus crisis and a flu crisis in our local NHS, when we did not have water across my area, people from Surrey, where they declared an emergency, were being sent to my local hospital for treatment. It is absolutely outrageous.

People are now turning to the point of compensation. If this is caused by a storm and an act of God, that is one thing. The Minister knows that this is about a bulk supply issue linked to South East Water. Ultimately, if there is any break in service and if licence conditions are broken, it is ultimately my constituents who cannot function.

Today's written statement mentions the need for a

> "joined-up regional water planning function and framework to improve local decision making and delivery."

I recognise the need for a broader debate on the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, building on the Environment Act 2021, to make sure that there is a proper answer.

My constituents are turning at the moment to what this means in terms of compensation. The break in service is absolutely front of mind. As I have spelled out, this is not the first time. Unless there is leadership and structural change, I truly believe it will not be the last.

Let me give the example of the Ashdown Park hotel. There are 50 staff members living on the site. It was closed for days, with no response from the Saturday of the outage through to the reopening. Birthdays, spa days, treats and celebrations were all destroyed, with frontline staff left trying to explain.

I urge my constituents and those watching today to sign up to the priority list. Many vulnerable people, particularly in our villages, were left waiting for water. I know that is an issue that both the shadow Minister and the Minister are particularly worried about.

There are also the needs of livestock. Horses need to drink 5 to 8 gallons of water every day. This situation has been tearing out people's hearts and souls. They have been so worried. For me, these outages are a moment of crisis in the water sector. I have people cancelling their direct debits at the same time as larger bills are falling on their mats.

I am conscious that many people want to speak, so I will come to a conclusion. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on something that matters to me deeply. I ask the Minister to work with me on behalf of my constituents to hold the leadership—the chair, the chief executive and the team—to account. I hope that this new vision, with this White Paper, turns into action, change and accountability.

Colleagues have spoken about the opportunity for shareholders to do what they can. NatWest Group holds a large stake in South East Water. In today's *Telegraph,* it notes that it wants the company to be held to account for supply issues, and for those issues to be "fully resolved with urgency". Other shareholders also say they want this addressed and they want resilience in the services. So do we, so do our constituents, and so should everyone.

2.59 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan.

Cleaning up our rivers is one of my top priorities, and I am delighted that the Government agree and have introduced more legislation and action on enforcement in 18 months than the previous Government did in 14 years. I was incredibly pleased to serve on the Bill Committee for the Water (Special Measures) Act—the subject of this debate—with some of the other Members present. The Act sets out, for the first time, a ban on water company bosses' bonuses, and will ensure that the CEOs of water companies can even face criminal charges and imprisonment.

In Wales, Dŵr Cymru is our not-for-profit water company. However, I am afraid that being not for profit has not stopped it dumping sewage into our much-loved rivers. In 2023, we had a massive 2,383 sewage-dumping incidents in Monmouthshire. In 2022, the then chief executive took home £332,000, and a further £232,000 in bonuses. More recently, Ofwat stepped in and stopped the company paying out £163,000 in bonuses from customers' money, so that was a step forward.

Caroline Voaden: In May 2024, an outbreak of cryptosporidiosis in my constituency left 17,000 properties under a boil water notice for as long as two months. Although the incident is the subject of legal investigation, I would like to highlight my constituents' frustration that the then CEO, Susan Davy, later picked up a share bonus of £191,000, bringing her total package for that year up to £803,000. Ofwat banned six water companies from paying executive bonuses, but I was shocked to see that South West Water was not one of them. Does the hon. Member agree that that is a clear illustration of why Ofwat must be replaced without delay, as it clearly fails to adequately protect the public interest?

Catherine Fookes: Our White Paper, published today, deals with the reform of Ofwat, so hopefully we will see an end to that kind of behaviour. In fact, I was just about to say that a total of £9.7 million was paid out in executive bonuses and benefits to water and sewage company executives between 2022 and 2023. The Act will stop bonuses for poor performances.

Let me move on to my favourite topic: our wonderful rivers, which we seek to protect with the Act. I would argue that in Monmouthshire we have some of the finest rivers in the UK. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), but they are much nicer than the River Tyne. The majestic Wye—the birthplace of tourism in the UK—the babbling Usk and the meandering Monnow are all wonderful rivers. They give us our sense of place, they provide recreation in the form of walks, kayaks or swims, and they are a magnet for tourism. They are the backbone of our local economy.

I will never forget the awe I felt when I first saw a flash of blue go past me as I was kayaking down the River Wye, as I saw my first ever kingfisher. It was an incredibly exciting moment. Rivers know no borders, and the Wye runs through four counties and two countries, so we must co-operate to manage it across borders. Fortunately, that is now possible given that we have two Labour Governments working together.

When I was growing up, my parents had no problem with letting me go and cool off by dunking myself in the chalk streams near my house. The only issue was the mess that I made when I came back inside. Now, though, parents have to be fearful of letting their children go in the river. The only thing on which I really agree with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) is the fact that dogs are now getting seriously ill in our rivers. A wonderful, usually bouncy, sprollie named Tess recently fell seriously ill with E. coli after swimming in the river, only recovering after many weeks of antibiotics.

We all want waterways that we can swim in, and water that is safe to drink and available to us, and we want it at an affordable price, so I am delighted that our two Governments in Cardiff and here in Westminster are working together. I am so grateful to the Minister for all her work and for supporting me in a meeting with the Wye Catchment Partnership and the Welsh Government, which resulted in £1 million for the River Wye action plan, which is just the start of the Wye's recovery. I also thank all the non-governmental organisations and citizen scientists—the Welsh Rivers Union, Friends of the River Wye, Save the River Usk and the Wye and Usk Foundation, to name but a few—for all their work to help to clean up our rivers.

I am pleased that as well as the Water (Special Measures) Act, the White Paper has been published today, and it aims to overhaul the water system and strengthen regulation. It is the next piece of the jigsaw puzzle. The Deputy First Minister has confirmed that, following the Cunliffe review, the Welsh Government will publish their vision for water reform in Wales later this year, setting out the next steps and inviting views from others. I welcome the fact that there will be a shared transition plan, co-designed with the UK Government, that sets out the route to a new water system in Wales, and that interim arrangements, including a strategic policy statement for Ofwat and other regulators, will provide clarity during the period of transition.

I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for all their work so far on this vital issue. I hope the Minister can assure me that the UK and Welsh Governments will continue to work closely on our water courses as, of course, rivers do not heed boundaries.

3.5 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this important debate and giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of my constituents, who are utterly fed up with Southern Water and a system that is failing them at every level.

My constituents are being hit with a 53% increase in their water bills—the largest rise of any water company in England or Wales—at a time when household finances are already under enormous pressure. What are they getting in return? Outages, sewage dumping, hosepipe bans, leaks and a provider that can act with impunity but cannot get a grip of its failed services.

Against that backdrop, my constituents were rightly furious to learn that the CEO of Southern Water received a £1.4 million annual pay package last year—nearly

double what it was the year before—despite the company being banned from issuing bonuses, and after zero improvements in service delivery or environmental performance. It beggars belief and is frankly indefensible. My constituents should not have to pay for Southern Water's failures, yet that is exactly what is happening. Bills go up and services do not get better.

There are repeated sewage leaks into the River Itchen, the precious chalk stream that runs through my constituency. In the latest Environment Agency assessment, Southern Water was handed a two-star rating after causing a shocking 269 pollution incidents in 2024, including 15 that were classified as serious.

Meanwhile, water outages in my constituency have become commonplace. Just before Christmas 2024, residents in Chandler's Ford and Eastleigh were left without water after a massive outage, with almost 60,000 homes across Hampshire affected. I raised the issue of outages at Prime Minister's questions last April and was assured that action would be taken. What exactly has changed? That is why I am so disappointed that the Government's water White Paper, published today, does not go further and fails to deliver the fundamental change needed to protect rivers such as the Itchen.

People in Eastleigh are fed up with tough words from the Government while bills rise, sewage continues to flow and water company executives continue to cash in. We need a new ownership model in which water companies are mutually owned by customers and professionally managed, with full transparency, including the publication of the volume of sewage dumped into our rivers, not just the duration of spills, and a new regulator that can finally get to grips with this crisis.

3.8 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan.

I would like to start by thanking the Minister for all her support. I do not think we realised that we would spend so much time on the same Zoom calls with a vast collection of characters from across Kent and the water sector. I also thank the Secretary of State, who came to Tunbridge Wells last Wednesday to announce an unprecedented review into South East Water's licence.

It has been interesting to hear Members talk of their local water companies and how surreal it is that they are able to continue with such appalling performance while patting themselves on the back and rewarding themselves with eye-watering sums of money. I have news for everyone here—hold my beer—because South East Water is the worst in the entire country.

At the end of November, the water went out in Tunbridge Wells, and South East Water got off to a good start by setting up a bottled-water station in another town. When we pointed out that Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells are different towns, bottled water stations were then set up in the right town, although we had to point out where they should be. That outage lasted about two weeks, with a week of no water and then a week of a boil notice.

South East Water handled the communications so poorly that, naturally, my constituents were quite fearful of the quality of water and whether they would be able to drink it. That space was then filled by bad actors and we had to ask the Cabinet Office to intervene to help us with the disinformation. South East Water's crisis management and communications during that outage were absolutely appalling. The Minister will agree with me that through all of the Zoom meetings we had daily, the qualities on display among the representatives from South East Water were extremely poor. Yet when they were called to the Select Committee in January, they gave themselves an eight out of 10. *[Laughter.]* I did mention to Members that these are literally the worst people. They are gangster capitalists, as I will go on to explain.

While the CEO was at the EFRA Committee giving himself an eight of 10, the water was going off again in Tunbridge Wells. At the exact moment he was saying there was a plan and everything was going to be okay, I got a text from my mother-in-law, who lives at one of the highest points in Tunbridge Wells. We are all water experts in Tunbridge Wells now, and the water goes off first on the high ground, because South East Water cannot pump it uphill. I immediately rang South East Water and was asked where I had got that information, so I was informing the water company that there was a major outage in Tunbridge Wells.

I then picked up the phone to the borough council, which picked up the phone to Kent county council, which runs the resilience forum. That was the chain of the passage of information to get the local resilience forum stood up, rather than South East Water understanding, knowing what was going on, getting a grip of the situation and communicating effectively to local partners.

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman is making a speech that I feel I could make. I feel deep sorrow for him and for his constituents. Given the amount of outages, it is very surprising that the crisis communication does not get any better. Water companies should be experts in it, but are clearly not. My concern is that even when we give them information that we believe is true, when they offer information back it very often is not true. I have asked, "Has the water station that you've said has been set up in my patch actually opened?", and got the answer, "Yes." I then told people in good faith but it turned out it had not. That is a fundamental problem, is it not?

Mike Martin: I offer two examples—surreal is the only word for them. I was standing at a water station in Tunbridge Wells, speaking to South East Water, and I was told, "The water station is open." I looked around, and it definitely was not open. The problem is that South East Water has a contractor that sets up the water stations that either is incompetent, is mendacious or lies—or all three—so the company does not have a grip of what is going on.

I have another utterly surreal example. I think the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) was in the meeting with the Minister when the Minister said, "There seems to be a problem in Cranbrook, according to my briefing. Dave Hinton, could you speak to that?" For Members who do not know, Cranbrook is in the borough of Tunbridge Wells but not in the constituency. Alongside me was the chief executive from the borough council, who said, "What's the problem in Cranbrook?" He immediately thought he had a problem to deal with. Dave Hinton, the CEO of South East Water, said, "Oh no, there's no problem in Cranbrook. I think it's absolutely fine. Where did you get that information?" The Minister asked her official where the

[Mike Martin]

information was from, and in a moment worthy of the best episode of "Yes Minister" the official said dryly, "Minister, we got that information from South East Water."

These people are utter gangsters. They gave evidence to the Select Committee, which is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and immediately afterwards the chief water inspector for England and Wales—God, he warms your heart if you are in the middle of a water crisis, I can tell you—came and rubbished their evidence. South Easter Water said the crisis was unforeseeable; the chief water inspector said, "No, not only was it foreseeable but we told you what you needed to do in the weeks and months preceding the outage. Had you done that, the crisis wouldn't have happened." To my mind, that is negligence. In the first crisis in December, people had to receive lifesaving treatment because a dialysis centre got knocked out. South East Water is a hair's breadth away from a corporate manslaughter charge. These people are gangsters.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): The disasters involving South East Water in my hon. Friend's constituency are frightening. In my constituency, Thames Water managed to put water in the wrong town, and the residents of the small town that was affected could not go and find it because they had no transport. Thames Water did not tell anyone that the water was there. In fact, had it not been for the local supermarket telling people that there was water in the car park, no one would have known. What I find really scary about my hon. Friend's comments—I am sure he will agree—is that gangsters seem to be acting in my area as well, because Thames Water seems no different from the company he highlights. We need to look at this more seriously.

Mike Martin: My gangsters are worse than my hon. Friend's. She makes a powerful point.

Mr Carmichael: All this talk of gangsters makes me think my hon. Friend must be styling himself as the Eliot Ness of the water industry. His point about the Drinking Water Inspectorate is particularly important today, as we hear about the changes proposed in the White Paper. The DWI does exceptionally high quality work. Does he agree that we must not lose that output when we fold it into the new super regulator?

Mike Martin: I am well over my time, and I need to get to the point of my speech, but I get incredibly passionate when defending my constituents' interests and their right to clean water. The White Paper is out today. My challenge to the Minister, whom I count as an ally in this fight, is this. What measures contained in the White Paper would have prevented the outages in Tunbridge Wells? She will, of course, give me an answer from the Dispatch Box, but I ask her to reflect honestly on that.

I also ask her to think about debt, which the Government do not speak to in the White Paper. About £70 billion of debt is held across the water industry, much of it by shareholders in water companies that pay out 10% interest. Financial engineering got us into this mess, and we need a bit of financial engineering to get us out of it and to lower interest rates on that debt. I ask the Minister to speak to that.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): The passion is very welcome, but in the spirit of trying to be fair and make sure everybody gets at least five minutes, we are now on a strict time limit, with no more than five minutes for the final two speakers. I call Josh Newbury.

3.18 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this debate and giving those in positions of power in our water industry a chance to hear hard truths and take accountability. Although the state of the industry and the morally questionable behaviour of many companies is a talking point for some, I know that he has been a dogged campaigner on this for many years. In fact, I am sure I saw a photo somewhere of him wading in the River Nidd, such is his commitment to getting up close and personal with the issues.

Speaking of getting up close and personal, those of us who are members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have had—I hesitate to say the pleasure—the task of grilling the bosses of nine water companies as part of our inquiry into reforming the water sector. We have dived into many of the issues that we are hearing about, such as sewage overflows, compliance with environmental laws, support for vulnerable customers, the impact of flooding and outages, and, of course, the atrocious corporate culture and disconnection from the principles of delivering an essential public service that has taken hold in much of the water industry. That work has reinforced for me just how bad things have got, how far public confidence in the water industry has been damaged and how necessary robust reform has become.

What I have heard from my constituents is echoed across the country: a sense that accountability is an afterthought, that communities are left to pick up the pieces when things go wrong, and that bosses can get additional compensation regardless of how their company performs. That is precisely why the Water (Special Measures) Act is so important. It rightly strengthens the powers available to regulators and makes it clear that persistent failure—environmental, operational or corporate—must carry real consequences. It reflects a clear Labour principle that essential public services must work in the public interest and not simply for shareholder return.

Crucially, the Act marks a decisive shift away from the regulatory complacency of the past. In the year from July 2024, criminal prosecutions of water companies rose by 145%—a clear sign of meaningful progress. However, enforcement needs to be felt not just at operational level, but at the top. It is impossible to justify the need for customers to tolerate sewage in our waterways, botched responses during outages and poor communication, while senior executives still receive substantial payouts with impunity. That disconnect is corrosive. It undermines confidence not only in individual companies, but in the whole system, regulators included. That is why I believe that the true test of the Act and the newly released water White Paper will be whether they drive a genuine shift in the industry—one in which transparency and consumer trust are central to how success is measured.

Some companies, as we have heard, have sought to repackage rewards under labels such as "retention payments". The public do not distinguish between a bonus and a retention payment. They see only failing senior execs continuing to be rewarded. The boss of South East Water is set to receive a £400k bonus just for staying in his job, despite, as we have heard, the company leaving thousands of households in Kent and Sussex without water for days and issuing some of the worst crisis communications I have ever seen. Last month, the BBC picked up on the comment I made on social media that David Hinton should do his job or go. Having heard him in front of the EFRA Committee, I absolutely stand by that.

Ofwat is currently responsible for enforcing the Act. Enforcement has often been too slow and remote from customers' lives, and that cannot be separated from how the regulator has operated. The Committee took a long, hard look at Ofwat and found a regulator that was too cosy in dealing with water companies and too bureaucratic in dealing with customers. A regulator that is slow to act, overly procedural and reluctant to challenge company behaviour will never deliver the cultural change that the Government are determined to secure.

It is important to recognise that not all regulators have failed. During a recent Committee session with South East Water and the drinking water inspectorate, the response from the DWI was, as the Chair of the Committee has said, incredibly useful. It was clear that it is doing very effective work, despite having fewer than 60 staff. As we move towards a new single regulator, we have to preserve the DWI's culture, expertise and robustness. I hope that, in responding to the debate, the Minister can set out what the Department will do to make sure that the few examples of where the current regulatory system is working well are preserved rather than thrown out with the bathwater.

I welcome the measures set out in the new water White Paper, such as an end to companies marking their own homework. An MOT-style regime for water assets will finally move us from crisis response to prevention. The new water ombudsman, with its legally binding powers, will be customers' advocate when things go wrong. Our communities want action. They want to know that when rules are broken, consequences will follow. The only way to change behaviour in a broken system is to change the law, and I am confident that we will continue to see tough action from this Government where the last failed so miserably.

3.23 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on bringing to the Chamber an issue that has sparked vivid examples of the complete and abject failure of our privatised water companies. I welcome this debate, although the news that it brings is very disappointing, is it not? Our rivers are, of course, precious. The Tone runs through and unites almost all parts of Taunton and Wellington. It is a lifeline for biodiversity, for families and countryside lovers and for the whole natural world. When rivers are healthy, our communities and our nature flourish, but when they are polluted, we all suffer.

That is why the recent revelations about Wessex Water are infuriating. Just a few weeks ago, we learned that the company's former chief executive officer, Colin Skellett, received a £170,000 bonus from the Malaysian parent company, YTL Utilities. Despite a Government ban on bonuses, the current CEO and chief financial officer received £50,000 in additional payments through the same route. Those payments came after Wessex Water's criminal conviction in November 2024 for pollution that killed more than 2,000 fish, and after the company was fined £11 million for additional sewage failures. That is all in the context of the £4.25 billion paid out by Wessex Water to private shareholders since privatisation. I cannot think of a more graphic failure of the Conservatives' privatisation programme. Imagine if that £4 billion had been invested in our rivers and infrastructure over that time. That is exactly the kind of behaviour that the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 was meant to prevent, but companies are getting around it by using parent company fee payments, fee payments generally and complex corporate structures to circumvent the rules.

In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) warned that that would happen and pushed for a stronger regulator. We called for Ofwat to be scrapped and replaced with a regulator with real teeth. We also called for a new ownership model for water companies, for the public to be brought in through public interest companies, and for mutual ownership so that customers have a stake in the ownership and profits are reinvested in the company rather than going to private shareholders on the other side of the world. Many bill payers in the Wessex Water area would be surprised to find that that is where the money they pay ultimately ends up.

The fundamental problem is that while executives are exploiting loopholes to line their pockets, rivers are getting worse and dying. Customers are paying through higher bills, and communities are watching their local rivers fill with sewage. I checked just before coming to the debate, and north of Bradford-on-Tone and in Heron Gate and Lower Henlade in my constituency, sewage works are pumping sewage into the River Tone right now. Water company bosses should not be rewarded for that kind of behaviour through whatever corporate sleight of hand they are attempting to use. That is as real in my constituency as it is anywhere else.

As so often happens, volunteers have come to the fore. They banded together, and the Friends of French Weir Park and I applied for and got bathing water status to try to improve the water quality of the river, but we need investment.

Tom Gordon: My hon. Friend highlights the involvement of the fantastic community groups that have had to pick up the pieces of this broken system. Does he agree that, in an ideal world, we would not need organisations such as the Nidd Action Group in my constituency, even though the work they do is fantastic?

Gideon Amos: That is absolutely right. Water companies should be run in the interest of the public, not of the private shareholders' pockets. That would be a welcome reform for communities in Taunton and Wellington and, no doubt, across the country.

[Gideon Amos]

In Taunton and Wellington, Wessex Water needs to reform and put this right. I welcome the action it is beginning to take, but we need real investment in the River Tone to improve bathing water quality, and water quality generally. Our sewage works must get the investment that they need. The Government must close the loopholes whereby bonuses are paid in all but name, and we need to ban the parent company payments that circumvent those rules. We need to strengthen enforcement powers, give regulators teeth and hold companies accountable so that communities such as mine can have confidence that the water they pay for comes from a company that is set up and run in the interest of the public, not private profit.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Tim Farron. I thank everyone for keeping to time.

3.28 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is as privilege to serve under your guidance, Dr Allin-Khan. I say a big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this debate and leading it so ably. I also make a little apology to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for clearing my throat while he was speaking. I was not doing so to make him shut up and sit down—I am not the Speaker. I genuinely had a frog in my throat.

I remember the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 well. I genuinely enjoyed being on the Bill Committee with Members here and others. There are lots of good things in it, but overall the Liberal Democrat view was that it felt like incremental change when more radical reform was needed. All the same, it included some real positives, including provision to ban bonuses for the senior executives of failing water companies. Yet, as we have heard from multiple sources, water companies are now making a mockery of that legislation.

We have heard about some of those already, but let me run through some examples. Southern Water's chief exec's pay has doubled to £1.4 million via a "two-year long-term incentive plan". Wessex Water's chief exec and chief financial officer both got an extra £50,000 undisclosed from its parent company. As we have heard, Thames Water tried it on—21 senior managers were set to be paid a total of £2.46 million in retention payments. In perhaps the most explicit example, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, the chief executive of Yorkshire Water received £1.3 million from the holding company, Kelda Holdings.

Those are clear and obvious examples of water companies trying to perhaps abide by the letter of the law, if they can get away with it, while completely and utterly flouting the spirit of it. It is totally predictable. Outrageously, Ofwat have either signed off many of these cases or just shimmied and said, "None of our business. We've got no powers to do it"—a reminder that it is high time it was abolished and replaced with a more powerful regulator.

Mr Carmichael: Thames Water first paid out bonuses it said it would not recoup, and has subsequently said only that the payment of bonuses is paused. My hon. Friend knows that I am a nasty, suspicious and cynical person, but I am pretty sure the senior management, the chief executive and the chair of that company are heading for the door one way or another at some stage. I suspect that one of their last acts before they leave the office will be to press "pay" on those bonuses. Does my hon. Friend agree that if that happens, we can agree that whatever the good intentions behind the Water (Special Measures) Act, they simply have not worked, and we need to build a consensus on how to regulate these things more effectively?

Tim Farron: My right hon. Friend is neither nasty nor cynical; he knows Thames Water only too well. Well intentioned though the Act may be, it is clearly full of holes, and the water company chief executives and others are finding ways through them.

We contrast all of that with the fact that in 2024—the last time we had comprehensive figures—the water companies between them dumped sewage in our waterways for a duration of 3.6 million hours. My patch of Westmorland is now the third hardest-hit constituency in England for duration of sewage spills. In 2024 alone, there were over 5,000 sewage discharge incidents, amounting to more than 55,000 hours of raw sewage released into our rivers and lakes, from the Eden to the Eea and from the Kent to the Crake. In just the first 20—no, 19 and a half—days of 2026, there have already been 424 hours of sewage discharge into Westmorland's precious waterways.

At the same time, water companies across the country are shamelessly slithering around the bonus ban. Their bonuses and dividends are being paid, for the most part, by bill payers. Indeed, water companies are wading in colossal debt, often incurred to pay those bonuses and dividends. In just 2024, £1.2 billion was paid out in dividends, mostly out of debt. In my communities in Westmorland, 11p out of every pound we pay on our water bills goes just to finance debt. Thames Water is even worse: customers are paying over 30p in the pound simply to service the company's debts.

My message to industry leaders is this: bonuses are meant to be paid to folks who do a good job. If you are leading a company that actively pollutes our lakes, rivers and seas, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you are not doing a good job.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): My hon. Friend is right to discuss the problems of sewage in our waterways, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) and I, and the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), have all experienced in recent weeks, it is not just about sewage in waterways; it is about freshwater supply. Does my hon. Friend agree that the chief executive of South East Water should also go for failing to deliver tap water to our taps?

Tim Farron: I imagine that that is item 1—indeed, probably items 1 to 6—on the job description. If they cannot fulfil that obligation, then go they should.

The Government brought in the Act to stop bonuses like this being paid, but they are clearly not effectively enforcing that ban in practice. Although I am critical of the Government, my main criticism is reserved for the

water company bosses themselves, who have the nerve to go looking for ways to get around the bonus ban to enrich themselves, often out of bill payers' money. I tell water industry bosses this: your customers see you, our constituents see you and your hard-working frontline employees see you. Your authority is diminished because your integrity is diminished. That proves the Liberal Democrats right: we need far more radical change in our water industry.

So we come to the White Paper released by the Government this week. Having rejected our 44 amendments to what is now the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, the Government soon conceded that they needed to do more and launched the independent commission into the water sector, chaired by Sir Jon Cunliffe. The commission reported last July, and this week's White Paper draws from its report. It is meant to be a step towards a more far-reaching water Bill, perhaps in the coming parliamentary Session, and there are welcome elements in the Government's trailing of it. For example, it is good that they want to borrow the Liberal Democrats' plan for a single unified regulator to bring financial and environmental oversight together.

I want quickly to add to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and others that the Drinking Water Inspectorate is doing a good job. We should not level it down to the level of the rest of the regulatory sector, but level the sector up to the inspectorate's level.

It is good that the Government want to make regulation more proactive through the work of a chief engineer. However, the disaster in Kent and Sussex over the water supply, the financial failure of Thames Water, the failure of all water companies to prevent sewage dumping and the decision of water industry leaders to stick two fingers up to bill payers and Parliament by dodging the bonus ban all tell us that we will never solve this crisis while we maintain the current ownership model. The Liberal Democrats demand that our water companies be transitioned to being mutually owned public benefit companies, so that money raised in the water industry is reinvested in our infrastructure, and the main motivation is not the profiteering of people who are often probably not even resident in this country, but the quality of our water supply and sewage removal systems and the benefit to the customer. We are therefore bitterly disappointed that the Government have no plans to change the ownership model at all. As a result, the White Paper looks like yet another missed opportunity.

Water UK has welcomed the White Paper, which ought to really worry the Government because it is the water companies' trade body. Of course it is delighted that the Government continue to protect the water companies from the fullest scrutiny. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) pointed out, we are measuring the duration, not the volume, of sewage. I said that sewage was dumped for 3.6 million hours in 2024, and that is all I can say, because the duration of spills is all we are allowed to know, but the volume of sewage going into our waterways is surely even more significant. There can be long trickle or a swift deluge, yet the Government refuse to enforce the measurement of volume, despite Liberal Democrat amendments to the Bill that would have allowed them to do that.

It feels like the Government, in failing to enforce the 2025 Act and stand up to the water companies in their new water White Paper, are content merely to make tentative steps to be better than the dismal record of their Tory predecessors—which is not a high bar. The British people need this Government to be a lot more than just a bit better than the Conservatives. They need radical reform of this failed ownership model and of inadequate regulations and enforcement. The Liberal Democrats will offer that reform.

3.37 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan, and to speak in this important debate on the enforcement of the Water (Special Measures) Act. I thank the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this debate and for his opening remarks. We have heard many powerful contributions from across the Chamber.

Today's debate once again reinforces what everyone here and the public know: the water industry needs fundamental reform—work that the Conservatives started. Because of the Conservatives, 100% of storm overflows are now monitored, compared with just 7% in 2010, when the last Labour Government left office. We now know the scale of the problem and can start holding water companies to account more transparently and, importantly, with an evidence base for incidents such as illegal sewage spills.

Our landmark Environment Act 2021 delivered our plan for cutting plastic pollution and holding water companies to account. We had our ambitious plan for water, and strong action on water companies that were illegally dumping sewage into our waters. The last Government brought in measures to ban executives from receiving bonuses where water companies are found to have committed serious pollution incidents. That is why it was so disappointing to see the current Government simply recycling and repackaging some of those measures, while leaving out major improvements, such as the water restoration fund, when they introduced the Water (Special Measures) Act.

Existing measures to allow Ofwat to change the conditions of water company licences in the Environment Act 2021 were already sufficient to ban bonuses for executives where that was deemed necessary. Although the Opposition supported and constructively scrutinised the Water (Special Measures) Act, that primary legislation, despite the measures it included, was not necessary to enforce a ban on bonuses in the first place. During its passage, we tabled many sensible amendments, including ones to ringfence funding from enforcement fines to a dedicated water restoration fund, to guarantee that companies fixed locally the environmental damage they caused; to require Ofwat to create rules on financial reporting in its remuneration and governance rules, on which MPs would have been given a vote; to reduce consumers' bills if their companies were hit with enforcement fines; and to ensure that companies did not leverage too much debt. Sadly, the Government failed to support those amendments, and very much missed an opportunity to increase accountability through them.

I am sure the Minister, for whom I have great affection and respect, will reassure us that the Government have set out all their plans to improve accountability in the

[Dr Neil Hudson]

water industry in the water reform White Paper published today—although I have to say that that is nearly six months after the water commission published its final report, which the Minister said the Government would respond to promptly.

We need only look at the example of Thames Water, which we have heard about a bit today, and which is still in a precarious financial situation, to see that we really cannot afford to delay wholesale reform much longer. It has been wrung dry of capital, and it has failed to invest to expand its supply and clean up sewage spills. Alarmingly, the interim financial report showed that between the end of March and the end of September 2025 its debt, as a percentage of company equity, increased by £833 million—a 5% increase. All of that is only heightened by the fact that Thames Water has had £123 million pounds of enforcement fines because of Ofwat's findings last May.

His Majesty's official Opposition have been clear: we do not want to see Thames Water fold, because although water supply would continue, there would be a serious risk of higher bills for consumers and the issues facing the company would not be solved. Strangely, the third party led legal action that could have sunk the company, and both they and Reform seem happy for the company to go under, exposing taxpayers to billions and pushing consumer water bills sky high. Can the Minister reassure the House that the Government are taking action to help find a market-based solution for the Thames Water rescue deal?

When it comes to water supply, we need only look at recent events in the south-east, which we have heard about today, to see directly how urgently customers need changes to regulation. In recent days and weeks, we have heard powerful testimony from my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) and other colleagues. Communities across Sussex and Kent have faced terrible impacts, with tens of thousands of homes left without water supply, medical procedures cancelled, some hospital appointments moved online, schools and libraries shut, hospitality businesses having to close their doors, and farmers and horse owners fearing they will not have enough water for their livestock.

On the subject of animals, water companies have been saying that they have no duty to provide water for them. As a medic, Dr Allin-Khan, you will be very familiar with the fluid requirements of a person, but to put it in perspective, the average 500 kg horse needs 25 litres of water a day, and a lactating dairy cow needs upwards of 100 litres a day. That is a hell of a lot of water that the companies are not providing when we have outages, creating animal welfare issues and pressing local communities. Farmers, animal owners and local communities have had to step in, roll their sleeves up and help each other out—it should not be like that.

Given the clear need for wholesale reform and accountability for water delivery and quality, can the Minister provide any clarity today as to when we will actually see tangible, beneficial changes to the quality, but also quantity, of fresh water supplied to households, medical establishments, schools and businesses? One aspect the Government have articulated is that the regulatory system will see reform, with some of the current bodies abolished and merged into one. The Opposition accept that that is necessary to improve the current state of the water industry, but can the Minister confirm that the Government are working at pace to provide a new regulatory structure that genuinely improves regulation and delivery; to provide clarity as to how that regulator will be organised to efficiently deliver its responsibilities; and, as we have heard from colleagues, to ensure that standards that are currently working better—such as in the Drinking Water Inspectorate—are not worsened by regulatory reform?

His Majesty's most loyal Opposition have always maintained that we will support serious efforts to continue the last Government's work in holding water companies accountable and improving our water sector. Ministers have said that they will not tolerate any attempts to work around the ban on bonuses and will instruct Ofwat to enforce fines and other penalties if it finds the rules have been broken. Ofwat has said it is considering updating its company reporting requirements for next year's performance-related executive pay assessment to ensure that there is greater transparency around exactly what renumeration companies receive and, as we have heard today, why they are receiving that payment.

The Opposition fully support the Government in seeking to enforce the law and ensuring that executives do not receive unfair bonuses where water companies have been found to commit criminal breaches and are not delivering a good service. We would also support genuine efforts by the Government to hold water companies to account and build on the work of the last Conservative Government to improve water quality. I urge the Minister to use this opportunity to outline exactly how the Government will ensure existing laws are properly enforced. I am sorry to say that, so far, the meaningful reform that they have promised, and that is rightly expected, has under-delivered when it comes to the change that we need. Their response to the Cunliffe review, although slow in coming, is now their biggest opportunity to make sure they get this right. We need not just words, but action, and sensible measures that the whole House can get behind.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this debate. I am particularly delighted he has done so today—great timing—since today we have published our new vision for water.

These are once-in-a-generation reforms to our water system, delivering tough oversight and real accountability, and putting an end to water company excuses. This Labour Government are doing away with water companies marking their own homework and are holding them firmly to account. From an MOT-style approach for water companies' pipes and pumps to no-notice inspection powers, we are creating a system where customers get the service they deserve and bosses have nowhere to hide. We have already taken tough action on the worst performing water companies, while protecting customers by doubling compensation for those impacted by supply interruptions.

There are a few more treats included in today's White Paper, among them a new chief engineer to bring technical expertise to the new regulator for the first time in 20 years; new performance improvement regimes, so that any water companies falling behind in finances, environmental standards, drinking water quality or operations will face tough consequences; and dedicated supervisory teams to replace the current one-size-fits-all approach and give the new single regulator a thorough understanding of how each company operates; no-notice inspections; mandatory water efficiency labelling; accelerated roll-out of smart meters; regional planning to bring together councils, water companies, farmers and developers to deliver joined-up plans to tackle river pollution, water resources and housing growth; and senior accountability to ensure water bosses are directly accountable for the service that customers receive.

Mims Davies: My constituents, particularly businesses, want clear understanding around compensation, but the area that interests me is the chief engineer role. The guidance that was given to her fellow Minister, the hon. Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh) before the recent 16,500-property outage in East Grinstead and the villages was that it would affect Sussex Weald and Crowborough. How can this new chief engineer help us to get South East Water to be clear about what is already going on?

Emma Hardy: I have huge sympathy and support for the hon. Lady and her constituents in the situation that they have faced in the last few weeks and I understand the urgent need for compensation, not just for her residents, but many of the neighbouring constituencies. She mentioned that it is the first time that Ofwat has ever done an investigation into whether a company is still complying with its licence to operate. It is looking at the customer part of the operation licence to see whether or not the company is complying; that is the first time that has ever been done. The Consumer Council for Water is visiting the Tunbridge Wells area to hear direct testimony from people about how they have been treated and how the situation has impacted them. I share the love expressed in the Chamber for the Drinking Water Inspectorate, particularly for Marcus Rink and all the work he does, and the inspectorate is looking carefully into that matter as well.

One of the things that we promised in the Water (Special Measures) Act were powerful new customer panels to ensure that customers are at the heart of company governance. Some first accountability sessions will be held in spring 2026, requiring customers' views to be taken into account in company decision making and allowing those customers to hold companies to account—one of the many things that was in that Act.

While we are on the situation that the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) faced, I will mention the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin), whom we spent rather a long time with over the last few weeks. It is outrageous; my heart sank when I saw Tunbridge Wells and its residents being impacted again after the awful situation that businesses faced in the run-up to Christmas. I am keen for them to receive compensation as quickly as possible. He is right to point out the concerns that we all had about the disinformation that was put out. The need for clear communication to everybody about what is happening is incredibly important.

There are many things from the water White Paper that I would like to highlight. I hope we get a chance in Parliament over the coming weeks to look at some of that in more detail. There is a section on debt at the bottom of page 26 of the White Paper that states:

> "We will therefore consider how the regulator can work with companies and investors to ensure companies do not accumulate unmanageable levels of debt".

There is a direct reference to debt in the White Paper. It is also worth pointing out what it says in the section called "Putting Customers First". Page 31 mentions

> "increasing public access to water for recreation and wellbeing"',

something that I know my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) is really interested in. That is because of the love that there is for the Tyne and how beautiful it is—we want to see people having access to it.

The White Paper mentions the powerful new customer panels as well, and also looks at regulators strengthening the "customer measure of experience". That is one of the metrics used to judge water companies and we want to strengthen that metric of experience.

Another thing that comes up in debates on agricultural pollution is the effect that it has on the beautiful and stunning River Wye, and which I know is a huge source of concern for my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes). On page 35, we talk about how we will

> "consult on reforms on how sewage sludge use in agriculture is regulated and whether this should be included in the Environmental Permitting Regime.."

One of the big focuses and challenges is what the difference would be, if these measures were all in place. One of the many key things is about prevention rather than cure—I know you will understand that analogy very well, Dr Allin-Khan. It is about getting companies to fix things before they break. Around the country, we have too many examples of things breaking before companies recognise that they should be fixed. The MOT work, the engineer and the resilience standards are all about understanding where the problems are and getting in there and fixing them first. Fundamentally, that is cheaper and better for customers, because it costs less to fix something before it breaks and creates a disaster somewhere.

Mr Carmichael: I am interested to get the Minister's view on this subject of the relationship between the Department and companies. She may be aware that the Department is currently appealing to the first-tier tribunal a decision of the Information Commissioner requiring them to disclose information to Democracy for Sale, an organisation run by investigative journalists. DEFRA's defence is that they have to have a safe space when talking to water companies about these things. I am not expecting her to comment on live legal proceedings, but will she reflect on that, and interrogate her officials when she returns to the Department about whether it is appropriate for the Department to defend such cases where, in this case, the party receiving the obvious benefit is Thames Water?

Emma Hardy: As the right hon. Gentleman has noted, I cannot speak about live investigations, but I will reflect on what he outlines.

[Emma Hardy]

The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) mentioned livestock and its importance, something that came up a lot during our many calls. Yes, we need adequate water for people, but there have also been many animals in distress.

We will carry out pilots across the country to look at the new regional regulatory structure and how we are going to make it work. That is a massive opportunity for Members across the House to get involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) was talking about rural communities being supported and ensuring that we have emergency provisions for livestock. In relation to the River Tyne in particular, I encourage him to speak to his water company and find out exactly when it will upgrade those storm overflows, so that he can see tangible progress in his area.

We have also doubled the funding for catchment partnerships, which is great news where we have those, particularly in rural areas. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire for her work on the Bill Committee and for the work that she continues to do in championing the River Wye. She is quite right that rivers do not obey geographical boundaries, so we have to work together. I put on record my thanks to the Welsh Government for all the work they have done. We have worked together on many different measures and will continue to do so.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase for his work on the EFRA Committee. He is right that there should be clear consequences for failure, and he will be pleased to know that following the Water (Special Measures) Act, the Environment Agency is on track to deliver 10,000 inspections in the year '25-26. That is a massive increase on the previous year's 4,600 inspections; we are more than doubling inspections of water companies. We are also doubling compensation because, sadly, we have seen that the doubling of compensation for customers who face supply outages or receive boil notices is desperately needed.

I would like to be in a situation—as we will be when we implement all these measures—where we do not need to compensate customers because we are not continually seeing failure. But until that moment, I will continue to work hard, push on and deliver the changes that the industry so desperately needs.

3.57 pm

Tom Gordon: Thank you, Dr Allin-Khan. It has been a privilege to hear from Members from across the House and the country. They have shared examples about their water companies, and the failures and systemic issues that are pervasive across the sector.

In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for his determined campaigning on this issue over the years and in the run-up to the general election; it came up time and again when we were candidates, and those Liberal Democrats who were elected to this place owe him a great debt of gratitude for banging the drum. I also thank everyone who intervened—I cannot rattle through everyone in the time I have, but I look forward to seeing the water White Paper and to chewing it over in depth and with more time, hopefully in the main Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the enforcement of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025.

County Durham: Cultural Opportunities

[Valerie Vaz *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab):

That this House has considered cultural opportunities in County Durham.

I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to bring this debate to the House. To many, culture is an add-on: a luxury for when times are good or a line item to be trimmed when budgets are tight. In County Durham, we know better. For us, culture is the thread weaving through our communities. It is our history, our pride and our future. It does not just inform what we do; it defines who we are.

To understand why culture matters, one must look to the history of the Durham miners. They did not just extract coal; they built entire communities. They created a welfare state long before 1945: out of their own pockets, through subscriptions and solidarity, they built the institutes, the schools and the libraries that stand today as monuments to self-improvement and collective dignity. They knew that a person needs more than just a wage; they need a sense of belonging. They knew that they had to nourish the mind as well as the body.

That culture lives on in the newly refurbished Redhills—the pitman's parliament. My constituency office is in Redhills and I never fail to be struck by the fact that it was built by the pennies of pitmen. It is a beacon of working-class heritage and culture. That spirit is reflected in the continued success of the Durham miners' gala, the big meeting, which was first held in 1871. It has survived strikes, wars and the closure of pits to remain the largest celebration of trade union culture in Europe. From the blessing of the banners at the cathedral to the brass bands on the racecourse, it is a reminder that although the pits might be gone, our solidarity is permanent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady, who I spoke to before the debate, for recognising the cultural attachments that we all have. I know she is aware that County Durham and Northern Ireland share deep-rooted cultural parallels, largely shaped by their industrial heritage, strong community identity and significant historical migration—many families from Northern Ireland are in Durham, and vice versa. Does she agree that to make the best of such areas' attractions, we must fully fund tourism and investment? That will not only preserve the past, but provide a future for her people.

Mary Kelly Foy: I could not agree more. I will go on to talk about the diversity in Durham, with the Irishmen, those from Northern Ireland and those from Scotland who came to the north-east to work in our shipyards, our mines and our steelworks. We need to remember that heritage and culture—and, yes, it is something for tourists to enjoy as well.

Alongside the proud heritage of the mines, left to us by those miners, we also have the legacy of rail, left to us by the pioneering spirit of George Stephenson and others.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent speech about the rich cultural heritage of County Durham. Does she agree that a key part of that cultural heritage is the history of the Stockton and Darlington railway, of which we celebrated the 200th anniversary before Christmas, and which runs through my constituency? Would she join me in encouraging Ministers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and other cultural partners, to continue to celebrate that heritage railway, so that we can attract tourism and investment in the future, and the industrial heritage that we are proud of?

Mary Kelly Foy: Once again, I could not agree more. Of course, it was the railway that took the coal from Newcastle down to London. That built the wealth of this country, so we have to remember where it started. Those tourism opportunities need to be encouraged by our county council.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am delighted that my hon. Friend mentioned where it started. In Shildon we recently unveiled a world origin site plaque, showing that the world's first commercial railway started in the Bishop Auckland constituency. Does she agree that we should do more to celebrate some of the world firsts in the wonderful place we are lucky to represent?

Mary Kelly Foy: As my hon. Friend knows, I had the privilege of listening to someone from the history group in your constituency—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Lady to address the Chair.

Mary Kelly Foy: I am sorry. They were talking about exactly that. Again, that is an opportunity for people across the country and the north-east to visit the rich culture of our area.

All that heritage has blossomed into our modern culture. In Durham, we see the brass festival blending our colliery roots with global performers. We see it in Durham Pride, which for years has sent the message that everyone is welcome in our county. We see it in the life-changing work of TIN Arts, which tirelessly ensures that disability is never a barrier to creativity.

Let us not forget the talent emerging from our university, schools and streets. Last year, I saw the energy of bands such as Jam Tub, a trio of young lads embodying the DIY spirit typical of the north-east. Beyond the city, our culture thrives at the Bishop Auckland food festival, local fairs and agricultural shows.

Sam Rushworth: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Bishop Auckland. On Friday, we are having a big meeting for people helping to launch our bid to be the town of culture. Does she agree that culture is what people do together? That is what makes County Durham such an incredible and vibrant place: the people who do stuff together. That is why we need Government support to do more together, particularly for the rising generation.

Mary Kelly Foy: That is a valuable point. Last year, Durham applied to be the city of culture but, unfortunately, came second to Bradford, which had a fabulous year as the city of culture. I wish my hon. Friend success with Bishop Auckland's bid to be the town of culture.

[Mary Kelly Foy]

Such events are the social glue that keep our rural and ex-mining communities resilient, yet today it can sometimes feel that culture in Durham is in retreat. We have been told that Lumiere, which transformed our streets into a world-class art and light installation, bringing millions into our economy, has turned off the lights for the last time. We have always been proud to say, "It started here. It started with us," so losing it is a devastating blow to our prestige and our economy.

A few years ago, Rocking Horse rehearsal rooms was unceremoniously turfed out of its city centre location, as the landowner simply wanted to build some more industrial units. Even though the owner of Rocking Horse, Rich, has managed to relocate outside the city, there is now no dedicated recording space in the city of Durham for non-students. What am I supposed to say to bands such as Jam Tub when they tell me that the cost of equipment and space is prohibitive? There is also a huge lack of venues for new up-and-coming bands to perform in. To follow their dreams, they are often left with no choice but to leave the north-east.

Sadly, the new administration at Durham county council views culture through a lens of division. It has grandstanded over Durham Pride, claiming that it has saved money by cutting funding, while branding that key annual event, which brings thousands of people to the city, as "political street theatre"—I do not know about you, Ms Vaz, but I love a bit of street theatre. We cannot let the divisive views of other parties diminish the importance of such events to many people in our communities.

Pride is about dignity and equal rights, self-affirmation and an acceptance of ourselves and each other, as well as a shared remembrance of our struggles and victories achieved together. When events are made to feel like political targets by the council that should be their champion, our communities become less cohesive.

The north-east is populated by people with diverse histories. I think of migrants from Scotland and Ireland who came into the region to work in our shipyards, mines and steelworks, and, more recently, migrants from further afield working in our NHS. We should be embracing new cultures, with their food, music, language and dance, and new traditions. That is how we build community and inspire creativity. Grandstanding and division do not build a culture; they tear it down.

At the heart of the city, we have the astonishing Durham cathedral. It sits atop a stunning peninsula at the centre of the UNESCO world heritage site. We are rightly proud of that jewel in the north-east's crown, but for a resident in Sherburn village or Willington, or someone further afield in Stanley, Crook or Newton Aycliffe, that grandeur can feel a world away if their local community hall is shut or the community group has run out of cash. Those are not simply things that would be nice for communities to have: if centres close or groups struggle for cash, where do we tell people to go for their music classes, art groups or dance classes?

Under the coalition Government, education reforms removed the arts as core subjects in the curriculum. The effects of that are clear: the north-east has the lowest entry rates for music and performing arts, and whole areas of the north-east have schools with no students at all applying for music. If young people cannot access art through schools, and their opportunities in the community are limited, where will that spark of inspiration come from that will produce our next generation of artists, performers, writers and musicians? The answer cannot be, "You can participate if you can afford it." Cultural opportunities should never be left as a preserve of the rich.

I do not want to paint a picture of total decline. I recently heard from Dr Stephen Cronin, chair of the Durham fringe, which was launched in 2021 by volunteers and is now the north-east's largest recognised fringe. By using alternative spaces, it ensures that creativity remains workable and rooted in the community. Stephen is putting together a fringe academy to give young people a chance to learn the trade of the arts.

Stephen's message was clear: culture does not always need multimillion-pound capital grants for shiny buildings. We need to look beyond the usual suspects for funding, and grassroots groups like the fringe do the most with the least. They do not need cathedrals of glass and steel; they need consistent support to keep the lights on in the hall and to feed those shoots of creativity. They need a Government, a region, and a local authority that provide fertile soil—*[Interruption.]*

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. We will suspend for a vote in the House.

4.13 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.28 pm

On resuming—

Mary Kelly Foy: We are delighted that culture in Durham has been backed by our North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness. She shared our dismay at the loss of Lumiere, having backed it with nearly £250,000 of funding. She has long advocated a tourism levy—a small £2 per night charge that could bring £20 million into our region's culture. She has also backed the Women of the World North East festival, celebrating the achievements of women while tackling the inequalities that still exist. But we cannot rely on the mayor's office alone; we need our schools, colleges and local authorities to be fully engaged in offering real opportunity in music, art, performing and sport. Those miners knew that a century ago, and it is reflected in the motto of the newly refurbished Redhills:

"The past we inherit, the future we build."

As the residents of County Durham know today, culture is essential for our wellbeing, but unless we support it, it will die on the vine. What value do we truly put on culture? Does the Minister agree that culture should not be the preserve of those with the deepest pockets? What can we do as a Government to ensure that culture remains a contested space and is able to spring and flourish from the grassroots? What can we do to get young people to see that there is a future for them in performing arts and music, by engaging our schools, colleges and community spaces? How do we make sure that in our communities bands such as Jam Tub have a place to play, that Durham fringe can continue and that the recently rehomed Durham folk festival can survive and flourish?

Finally, will the Minister pass on my invite to the other Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), to come to Durham and see what we have to offer, while also seeing what we need? I am sure that my hon Friend will be left feeling assured that our county is a place to invest in culturally, to help the talented people here chase their dreams without them having to leave for pastures down south.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I thank Sir Nic Dakin for stepping in on behalf of the Minister.

4.31 pm

The Vice-Chamberlain of His Majesty's Household (Sir Nicholas Dakin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairing, Ms Vaz. I am pleased to respond to this debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on securing it.

My hon. Friend has spoken with great passion, conviction and authority about the flourishing of the arts and the challenge to the arts in her constituency. She is right that culture should never be just the preserve of people with the deepest pockets; it is in the veins of all of us. She is also right to identify investing in the future with young people and what happens in schools and activities around them, and in the community, to build the culture of the future. She is right to invite the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock) —she was with us for most of the debate, but unfortunately had to leave us—to visit the city of Durham. I am sure that the Minister will put that in her diary as soon as she is back.

We have heard with great passion about the deep-rooted cultural identity of County Durham—a place where the miners historically did not just extract wealth from the ground, but invested it back into the minds of the community through libraries, schools, halls and community events. Many of those survive today and have been alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham in her speech.

The Government are backing the vision for investment in grassroots arts with more than just warm words. Last year, we announced the £270 million Arts Everywhere fund to support our venues, museums and libraries. In 2024-25, we provided over £500 million in grant-in-aid to Arts Council England. I am pleased to confirm we have increased ACE's core budget for 2025-26 by over £7.6 million.

In County Durham, ACE has invested almost £2.5 million since 2023. That is a massive vote of confidence in local creativity and includes over £2 million of annual funding through ACE's national portfolio programme, which supports eight organisations in the county—including TIN Arts, which my hon. Friend alluded to in her speech. That organisation is doing vital work in inclusive dance for those with learning disabilities. Beamish Museum, a recent winner of the Art Fund museum of the year, is also a joyous and immersive site shaped by the very community stories my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham highlighted.

The support for the national story is mirrored in our investment in the physical health of the county, with £2.79 million provided by Sport England in 2024-25. That has funded everything from a leisure centre in Bishop Auckland to walking football initiatives, ensuring that culture and sport remain visible and valued parts of everyday life.

My hon. Friend raised concerns about the closure of community spaces and the future of local celebrations, and she was right to do so. We recognise that local government is the backbone of culture. Durham county council receives more than £500,000 annually from ACE as a national portfolio organisation. That supports the Durham book festival—vital as 2026 is the National Year of Reading—and the Durham brass festival, in its 20th year. Although I understand that last year was Lumiere's final edition in that format, the council is seeking a "fresh approach". I wish it luck in building on the legacy of 1.3 million visitors. I commend to it my hon. Friend's comments in this debate as a purpose and reason for taking things further and ensuring that that legacy is a true one.

The Pride in Place programme is targeting up to £20 million each for neighbourhoods like Spennymoor, Peterlee East, Stanley South and Crook North and Tow Law. Crucially, we are also investing in the next generation. We have invested almost £1 million for better youth spaces in Durham, £900,000 for a Young Futures hub and Local Youth Transformation, and more than £500,000 for five Durham-based charities since 2024 from the enrichment partnerships pilot.

I heard the concerns about local bands lacking rehearsal space. That is a very real issue—not just in my hon. Friend's constituency but around the country, but she puts her finger on something that needs attention and addressing. Our new industrial strategy includes a music growth package of up to £30 million to support the grassroots sector. We know that a sustainable music scene is the bedrock of the entire industry. Furthermore, through the creative places growth fund, we have provided £25 million to the North East combined authority. That empowers the fantastic local mayor, Kim McGuinness, to turbocharge the creative sector right across the region, including the communities struggling outside the UNESCO site.

Looking to the future and towns and cities of culture, County Durham's 2025 city of culture bid was a remarkable achievement and we gave it, as a runner-up, £125,000 to sustain that momentum. However, we also want our towns to take centre stage. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has said:

> "There is so much for us to be proud of in the towns we're from—from the rich, local history to unique festivals and celebrations. They have shaped our national story for decades. Now it's time they take centre stage and showcase the unique stories they have to tell."

Our new competition for the town of culture is designed for places exactly like Bishop Auckland. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) knows well his area's cultural might—from the Faith Museum to the world's greatest collection of 17th-century Spanish art outside Spain. The other Minister need not go to Spain—she could simply go to Bishop Auckland. We welcome bids from all towns in the country and County Durham in particular. Expressions of interest are due by 31 March 2026.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham pointed to the fact that culture is sometimes seen through a lens of division. It is to her great credit that she has

[Sir Nicholas Dakin]

not done that today. Indeed, she has reminded us of the glue that culture is within our communities. We heard contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) and for Bishop Auckland—and, of course, from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who finds joy in the whole country. I am sure there is something that he particularly enjoys in County Durham.

Areas selected through the Pride in Place programme will receive dedicated support from the communities delivery unit. With the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the CDU will work in partnership with neighbourhood boards and local authorities to provide access to place-specific data guidance and capability support tailored to local needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor drew attention to the heritage railway route, the Stockton and Darlington railway, and I understand that he met my colleague Baroness Twycross, the Minister for Museums, Heritage and Gambling, in December to discuss its potential world heritage status. I welcome his advocacy and support for an important component of local heritage, but I must reiterate Baroness Twycross's explanation that we are not considering adding new sites to our existing tentative list—our pipeline of potential world heritage nominations—outside of the UK's formal review process. The next review is expected in 2033, and I hope that he will be here to see it.

To conclude, from the £400,000 for emergency repairs at Ushaw to the £2.79 million from Sport England for local leisure, we are investing in this part of the country at every level. The culture of County Durham, with its brass bands, mining banners, railways and art—of course, I loved the mention of its steel heritage as well; I would, wouldn't I?—has remained the golden thread binding its communities together. The miners of Durham built for the future. Today this Government are doing the same, ensuring that whether we are in the shadow of Durham cathedral or at the heart of a former coalfield, we have access to a rich, vibrant and inclusive cultural life.

In this debate, we have heard many examples of the vibrancy of that culture in 2026. The opportunities to be seized by the cultural and creative industries across the north-east are vast. County Durham, as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham reminded us and as was reinforced by colleagues' contributions, is a cultural powerhouse that is open for business. We stand ready to work with local leaders and communities to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to experience and participate in arts and culture across County Durham.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I thank you again for stepping in, Sir Nic—what a talented person you are.

Question put and agreed to.

ADHD Diagnosis

4.45 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered ADHD diagnosis.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. This debate is about how pathways to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis might be improved, including by offering screening in schools, so that people can access the right support in good time.

We all have a pretty good idea of what ADHD means, but I am here because a 19-year-old constituent of mine, Matty Lock, took his own life in September 2023. He was diagnosed with autism at the age of 14, but he and his parents, Christine and Richard, who are here this afternoon, did not know about his ADHD until much later. In Matty's memory, Christine and Richard have set up the Matthew Lock ADHD Charity, and they have been part of the independent taskforce. One of the things that the taskforce has done—this has been accepted by the NHS—is to highlight the proven link between suicide and ADHD. The prevalence of ADHD is 10 times higher among men attempting to take their own lives.

Let me say a few words about Matty. I knew him because he was very interested in politics. He had become a town and parish councillor, and he had campaigned hard with me for some time. Those of us who knew him through politics believed that he would be in this place before much longer. It is very, very sad that that was not to be.

Matty was known on television as "The Vac Mat" for his repairs of vacuum cleaners and his advocacy of domestic appliances on "This Morning". He was everywhere in the community of Maghull—clearing up and playing his part. He was a real, strong advocate of the community that he grew up and lived in.

Matty's ADHD was linked to how hyperactive he was. We know that people with ADHD are restless, lack concentration, are impulsive, act without thinking and always talk over others—actually, as I go through the list, I can think of nearly 650 people in this place who have a lot in common with that description.

What is the impact of having ADHD? We know that it leads to a significant number of school exclusions and very high drop-out rates. We know about the link with addiction, and that the prevalence of ADHD among people in prison is five to 10 times higher than among people outside. Sadly, we also know about the link with suicide.

NHS figures suggest that about 700,000 people are waiting for a diagnosis, and that many of them have waited for several years. Nearly two thirds of those people have been waiting for more than a year. The economic cost is estimated to be about £17 billion a year.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech that has affected us all. In November 2025, NHS Surrey Heartlands integrated care board in my constituency paused assessments on the Right to Choose pathway until April 2026, which has caused major disruption. My constituent's daughter does not know when she will be seen or if she will be seen at all. I have talked to the ICB

and I know that there has been a massive increase in referrals for ADHD, so does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must set out plans to improve local NHS provision of ADHD assessments?

Bill Esterson: The example of the hon. Member's ICB is typical of ICBs around the country. The purpose of this debate is to raise the issue with the Minister and highlight how important it is to improve diagnosis and speed up how quickly people can get access to treatment and medication.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate. Last year, a number of constituents contacted me because they were similarly concerned that Coventry and Warwickshire ICB decided to pause new ADHD referrals for those 25 and over so that it could prioritise children on its waiting list, which was at a really critical point. I recently met the chief executive of the ICB, who confirmed that referrals for adults will restart in May. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must get the balance right so that children and adults with ADHD get the diagnosis and support that they so desperately need?

Bill Esterson: It is good news that we are seeing some progress in my hon. Friend's ICB. I profoundly hope that NHS staff in other ICBs around the country are watching this debate and will follow the lead of her ICB in improving the access that is needed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing the debate. He has outlined the waiting lists, which are no better for us in Northern Ireland—they are over a year, and up to six years. The issue about early diagnosis is that every child with ADHD has a different level of ADHD. The diagnosis is really important because it enables the education system to respond for that child specifically. Does the hon. Member agree that for an educational programme to be tailored to a child, it must be absolutely right, which can be done only if there is early diagnosis?

Bill Esterson: Yes, I agree with the hon. Member. It is important to realise that everybody is different and that we all need different support. That is very true in school. When we call for diagnosis, we need to take great care around what we mean. Diagnosis is a means of getting support, getting the right treatment and getting the right medication, if medication is right—it is not right for everybody. ADHD is a spectrum and that individual, tailored support in school, and indeed in adult life, is an important part of what we are discussing.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab) *rose*—

Bill Esterson: I will give way to both my hon. Friends in a moment.

A key element of the discussion is that we have to be really careful what we are calling for. That situation partly explains some of the delays: at the moment, a specialist is the only person who can give a diagnosis because of the complexities that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) just referred to.

Mr Rand: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I met Matty on a number of occasions, like many who sit on the Labour Benches representing the north-west, and he certainly made a lasting impression on me from the few opportunities when we met.

We know that when faced with lengthy waits for an NHS diagnosis, some people with ADHD turn to shared care, receiving a private diagnosis before their care transfers back to the national health service. I have a constituent who tried to do that for her son, but her GP refuses to accept the private diagnosis and provide treatment, meaning that my constituent now faces huge treatment costs, yet just a few years earlier her other son secured a shared care arrangement with the same GP practice. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to address some of the inconsistencies in ADHD care that are caused by long waiting times?

Bill Esterson: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised that point, because one of my asks to the Minister is to iron out those inconsistencies.

Perran Moon: I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate, and thank the parents of Matty Lock for being in the Public Gallery for it. A couple of years ago, my son was diagnosed with ADHD while he was at university. To my shame, I always thought that his behaviour was simply a case of mischief or laziness. Does my hon. Friend agree not only that it is a case of early diagnosis, but that we need to increase awareness of ADHD—and neurodiversity more broadly—among parents, guardians, medical professionals and Government?

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he has made a very good point. My son has been diagnosed with ADHD—belatedly, like so many—but we were told early on that having a diagnosis would not help him. How wrong that was, because the diagnosis was the key to getting support and understanding what we were dealing with, both for him and for us as his carers. There is a lot of misinformation around, and getting that right is key, but yes—

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I am sorry for interrupting the hon. Member. Education, health and care plans are not supposed to depend on or require a formal diagnosis of ADHD but, in practice, that is how local authorities apply them. Families are far more likely to be challenged by the local authority if they do not have that diagnosis but, in my own area of West Sussex, the predicted waiting time for assessments has now risen to four and a half years, which is virtually an entire secondary education. Does the hon. Member agree that that Catch-22 situation requires urgent action from the Government?

Bill Esterson: The hon. Member is making the same point, which is that we need to clarify and have consistency across the country. That is, again, something that I hope will come out of the work that the Department is doing. I know that it is carrying out its own review and drawing on the work of the independent taskforce.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Bill Esterson: I am going to give way. I am conscious that I am at 11 and a half minutes and a lot of people who want to speak. If Members intervene on me from now on, could they please keep it brief? I will give way to the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) first.

[Bill Esterson]

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Based on UK-wide estimates, about 83,000 people in Northern Ireland are likely to have ADHD, yet it is clear that many remain undiagnosed, particularly women and girls. Does the hon. Member agree that there is an urgent need for clear, consistent and properly resourced diagnostic pathways across all health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland, and that a UK-wide source is needed for an even approach right across the United Kingdom?

Bill Esterson: It is a very well-made point, repeating what colleagues have said. I hope that professionals in Northern Ireland will have heard his point too, and will act on it while we are waiting for the Government to get to the UK-wide approach.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I have similar stories of incredibly long waiting lists, my local ICB closing waiting lists and my constituents' general difficulty in accessing support. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have already had a two-part report with recommendations on dealing with ADHD, and that there is plenty in there that could be implemented while further evidence is sought?

Bill Esterson: I do agree. Various Ministers' answers at oral questions last week referred to the ongoing work. I know we are due a response in the summer; this is my opportunity to say directly to the Minister that sometimes, when Governments say they are going to respond in the summer, that is a very loose term. I hope that, in this case, it means early summer. Perhaps the Minister will come back to us with a bit more clarity on when he expects to respond.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous with giving way. Oddly, I was told by a Scottish Education Minister on the BBC recently that a diagnosis was not required in Scotland either to get the right support—we all know from our experiences that that is not the case. In Fife, we have more than 40,000 children waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments and there are no pathways at all for adults. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we get this right across the United Kingdom, and that the Scottish Government also need to get their skates on and take some action?

Bill Esterson: Let us hope that someone from the Scottish Government is listening to the debate and acting on my hon. Friend's request. We were talking before about the importance of supporting children to avoid stigma in education and ensure that support is in place, that staff understand and that they can improve their chances at school and beyond.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this incredibly important debate. He is right to raise the issue of ADHD waiting lists, and the Health Secretary is right to commission the review, which is needed, into rising demand. Does my hon. Friend agree that the right response is to understand and then fix the system with empathy rather than—as I often see in my constituency—blaming parents who are simply doing the best they can for their children?

Bill Esterson: It is a good point, and we have to get away from that very inappropriate approach that I am sure all of us have come across from time to time.

I want to say a few words about alternatives to diagnosis. I mentioned briefly that, at the moment, typically a specialist psychiatrist carries out the diagnosis process, yet there are many GPs and other health professionals who would very willingly step in and be in a position to carry out that diagnosis. I wonder whether—and this comes out of the independent taskforce report—there is a big opportunity to speed up waiting times through the use of GP diagnosis and expanding the role of GPs and other professionals who want to specialise in ADHD. That might also be a way of overcoming the problem we heard before about the shared pathway challenge between private clinics and GPs in prescribing.

There are undoubtedly a number of challenges in moving this forward and addressing the very lengthy waiting lists, and their consequences for people. I hope that the Government will pick up these challenges and address the recommendations of the taskforce in a timely fashion. It makes sense to improve the ability of GPs and other professionals to assess and support the management of ADHD. It also makes sense to improve screening in schools. Another recommendation is to extend training for GPs on to an extended role pathway, and shared care between specialists and GPs. All these changes can enable cuts in waiting times and improve life chances and prospects for many people.

I decided to put in for this debate in Matty Lock's memory, but looking around the room at how many hon. Members are present, I can see that this has touched so many lives across the entire United Kingdom. Whether it is for Matty, for anybody who has been profoundly affected, for the loved ones—for Christine and Richard—or for so many other people, we have a duty to act. We know what is needed and how we can address these concerns. If the Government are minded to respond, we can build a system that supports people living with ADHD, and the people who want to care for them and improve their lives.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I ask hon. Members to remain standing. I will call the Front-Benchers at 5.23 pm. I am afraid I am going to impose a two-minute time limit, but you can do it as Olivia Dean says, by being "nice to each other", or I can put impose a hard limit. We will start with the soft two-minute limit. I call Rachael Maskell.

5.4 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Ms Vaz. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I will be brief. In York, we know that children are waiting for two and a half years to get an ADHD diagnosis. Adults are not even on a waiting list; they are literally in a car park. They fill in a form and then they go no further, although I am assured by services that if people face a crisis, the services will be there—although I am less than convinced of that. In York, therefore, we have been thinking about how we can reconfigure services.

This is my specific ask to the Minister. We know that, over a child's life, the local authority is the controlling mind in providing holistic support for children, particularly

those with special educational needs, yet we have a segregated service in child and adolescent mental health services. The two services are not integrated and, as a result, we are not looking at a child holistically. We are seeing them in two sections: their mental health and their holistic needs. That does not work. Therefore, I ask the Minister: can we bring those services together, at least through a formal partnership? If not that, can we put the controlling mind under the director of children's services, to ensure that they can deliver for that holistic need?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) said so eloquently, we need to ensure that the functional needs of those children are met. A diagnosis, of course, is an important part of that pathway, but when we are talking about people across a whole spectrum of needs, a diagnosis only partially describes the needs of an individual.

If we are able to build the holistic support that a child needs, we can ensure that a child gets the security they need in a timely way, integrate that with the rest of the work being done on SEND by the Department for Education, and ensure that we really see the integration and transformation that this Government can bring.

5.6 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing this debate and for raising awareness of the case of Matty Lock.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for special educational needs and disabilities, and as one of the openly neurodiverse Members of this House: I have dyspraxia, dyslexia and—surprise, surprise—ADHD.

As someone with personal experience, I know how transformative a timely diagnosis and the right support can be—something I unfortunately did not receive as a little girl. I was often considered disruptive and described as having little focus, lazy and not meeting my potential. I was moved to the "naughty boys table", aged seven, away from my friends. Even though my handwriting was atrocious, I struggled to read and I had very difficult emotional dysregulation, a lack of attention and fidgeting, no one would ever have considered back then that I was neurodiverse.

It has been many years since I was at primary school, but I would have hoped that the situation would have progressed. Unfortunately, it is hard to hear, again and again, about parents and children battling a system to get their needs recognised. It is troubling to hear from constituents who are in similar situations to what I experienced in the early 1990s, and about the barriers they are currently facing in accessing ADHD assessments, medication and therapeutic input. Those are not isolated cases, as we have heard. For both children and adults, waiting several years has become routine.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the last few weeks, I have visited two alternative learning projects in my constituency. One is the Wheels Project, which gets children working on restoring cars. The other is Enemy of Boredom, which is a brilliant thing, getting children video gaming while learning at the same time. What is amazing is that they do only half a day a week there, but it transforms their experience of mainstream education. They are much better when they get back to the classroom, because they have had focused attention on something they love doing. Does my hon. Friend agree that we ought to do more of that?

Olivia Blake: Absolutely. Just to go back to myself again, in a very ADHD way, I did art and drama alongside sciences. I became a scientist before I came here, but without the art and drama I would never have succeeded in science. I think it is really important that we work with people's strengths, because the alternative to not doing that is huge. We have heard about suicide rates, prisons and unemployment among young people, and young people being blamed for being unemployed even though they have ADHD and have gone through a system where they are not getting the support they need. The ADHD taskforce has all the answers and should be looked at urgently by the Government.

5.9 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing this important debate.

Delays and problems relating to ADHD diagnosis are not just a marginal administrative issue, but a profound failure of our system to meet medical needs early, effectively and equitably. For too many children and adults, long waits for diagnosis can negatively shape their entire life trajectory, harming their educational attainment, mental health, employment prospects and personal relationships.

NHS estimates suggest that 2.5 million people in England have ADHD, including nearly half a million children and young people, yet demand continues to vastly outstrip capacity. In September 2025, over 60% of both adults and children had been waiting more than a year for an ADHD assessment.

In my constituency of Dewsbury and Batley, Rachel reached out to me rightly outraged at an 18-month wait for ADHD assessment, with Kirklees council working through a backlog from November 2022. Another constituent, Laura, has spoken about her difficulty accessing medication even after diagnosis. The pressure on councils has been increasing on all fronts, with funding decreasing at the same time over the 14 years of the previous Government. I am not blaming the councils, but they do need support.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. He makes the point very strongly that long waiting times mean that children are being left behind. As we have heard, it was revealed last week that many integrated care boards are capping the number of assessments without telling GPs or patients. Does the hon. Member agree that a child's access to diagnosis and support should not depend on where they live or whether their parents can afford to go private?

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely agree. We hear the phrase "postcode lottery" a lot, and we should not have a postcode lottery in our country for access to essential

[Iqbal Mohamed]

healthcare and educational services. Everybody should have equal access to the support that is available to other people, without having to go private.

The consequences of these delayed assessments are stark. Families are pushed towards private assessments they cannot afford, entrenching a two-tier system that makes a mockery of the NHS's spirit of free care at the point of use by rendering access contingent upon income.

The Justice Gap also reports that around 25% of prisoners have ADHD, with many entering the system having not been diagnosed. They are more prone to reoffending.

I will conclude to give time for other colleagues to speak. I urge the Government to look at this issue holistically, as mentioned by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and provide support for children, adults and offenders. I believe that investment would render a greater return.

5.12 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I rise to speak as chair of the APPG on ADHD. As someone from a neurodiverse—or, as we call it, neuro-spicy—household, I understand the difference that support can make and the consequences when it is missing.

I want to address an elephant in the room, because there has been a lot of talk about the overdiagnosis of ADHD. I understand why that question is asked, but the evidence does not support it. The NHS ADHD taskforce has been clear that ADHD is "under-recognised, under-diagnosed and under-treated". Diagnosis rates are well below what the prevalence suggests, and some trusts are so overwhelmed that, as we have heard, they have paused new referrals, not because demand is inflated but because services cannot keep up. When ADHD goes undiagnosed, it does not disappear; it shows up elsewhere, including in health services through higher rates of co-existing conditions and crisis-driven care. Untreated ADHD costs more than £13,500 per affected person each year. Early diagnosis and treatment save money and reduce the burden on the NHS.

ADHD shows up in our schools, and children with ADHD are more likely to be excluded, miss school or face bullying. Many have literacy challenges and other conditions that compound when support comes too late. It also shows up, as we have just heard, in the criminal justice system. One in four people in prison have ADHD, compared with one in 20 in the general population. Without support, people are more likely to develop risky coping strategies, including substance misuse. Diagnosis is not a magic bullet, but it is a starting point. It shifts people from blame to understanding, and it only works when followed by support across education, workplaces and public services.

That brings me to the key issue: we still do not have a clear national picture of how long people are waiting for an NHS diagnosis, and I would like to put that to the Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I now have to impose a hard two-minute limit.

5.15 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing this debate. He knows my links to his constituency, and I am certain that his moving tribute to Matt will be appreciated by Matt's family, his Labour family and everybody that knew and loved him.

ADHD affects people of all ages, backgrounds and communities, yet too many are stuck on waiting lists for years, during which time their needs go unmet and their wellbeing deteriorates. In the limited time I have, I want to make three points. First, on barriers and gatekeeping, I have received so many cases of schools refusing or postponing referrals, adults reporting GPs minimising symptoms, and community paediatrics increasingly rejecting referrals even when evidence is clear or a private diagnosis exists. Such gatekeeping practices do not protect services; they merely protect delay and lead to wider mental health problems in the long term.

Secondly, on the right to choose, I am sure we all have cases in our mailbags where constituents have been forced to obtain a private diagnosis because of waiting list delays, only to find that the NHS rejects the assessment, will not provide the medication they need or will not play fair on the shared care agreement. That is wholly improper.

Thirdly, I assisted an individual whose referral to adult services was not made before community paediatrics stopped prescribing as he transitioned from childhood to adulthood. Due to excessive waiting lists, this person has been without ADHD medication since March 2025, which is indicative of a system that is not working properly. Will the Minister address the systemic barriers to the ADHD pathway?

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I am so sorry.

5.17 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for highlighting this hugely important issue.

My inbox, like many people's, is full of parents with children who are struggling, especially those who have comorbidities. Their combined conditions make them doubly disadvantaged, and their unmet needs cause significant harm to their physical and mental health, hugely increasing their complexity and meaning that their years of education are not used to maximise their potential.

In Warwickshire, there seems to be a Catch-22 with ADHD waiting lists. Coventry and Warwickshire ICB's waiting list now stands at more than 7,500 children—a 10-year waiting list for some. The ICB often does not accept ADHD referrals for under-sevens, despite the evidence showing that this early period is when interventions are most impactful. Potentially, the earliest a child can expect a diagnosis is at 17, after their entire educational career.

The adult waiting list, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), has been closed since May 2025. It is due to reopen this year, which we very much welcome, but this provides a very narrow assessment window for when a child can get through the waiting list and not be considered an adult. To further complicate issues, for children who have been referred for general neurodiversity assessments, there is difficulty in ensuring a consistent pathway back to ADHD assessments and the waiting list. I would welcome a defined pathway so that children and professionals have certainty that they will receive the support they need.

5.19 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): A number of colleagues have spoken movingly about the individual circumstances of their constituents. I want to speak about individual circumstances, as I was diagnosed with ADHD last year.

I recently bumped into a friend at an event who had also been diagnosed. I am one of those people with ADHD who takes medication, and she asked me, "When you first took your medication, did you get emotional as well?" The answer was yes, I did. I got emotional for the same reason so many people with ADHD become emotional the first time they take their medication. They realise what so many other people have been able to live like for so many years. They realise that they are not lazy or stupid but just a bit different, needing a little extra support. My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) is correct that diagnosis is a gateway to support, not an end in itself.

When I speak to people with ADHD, I hear that the difference that diagnosis and support make is almost a universal experience. Many describe it as life-changing, and I certainly do. I am keen to make this point. It is so good to hear from colleagues who are willing to share their experiences. In these discussions it is important to recognise that an ADHD diagnosis is not a problem to be managed or a game of numbers; it is about supporting people, identifying a challenge and finding resolve and support for something that otherwise might have been treated as disruptive behaviour. Instead, we can support them to be their best and most productive selves.

Briefly, in the time I have left, I want to turn to the number of young people with ADHD not in employment, education or training. Will the Minister touch on whether the independent review of mental health conditions, ADHD and autism prevalence will interact with the review from the Department for Work and Pensions on NEET rates?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Getting in the two remaining speakers will squeeze the wind-ups. Mr Esterson, you had a fair bit to start with. Maybe the Front Benchers could not use their full time.

5.21 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Ms Vaz, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. Too many people in Warrington South are being failed by the system that is meant to help them. Demand for ADHD assessments has risen sharply, with waits of up to six years. As someone whose ADHD was diagnosed when I was an adult, I know at first hand how difficult it can be to navigate a system that often does not join up or listen properly.

Ahead of this debate, I asked constituents to share their experiences of seeking an ADHD diagnosis. Adults told me that they waited years for assessment, only to be pushed through mental health pathways that did not fit and prescribed medication that made things worse. While waiting, some self-medicated with alcohol or drugs, not to escape but simply to cope. Years of masking, burnout and misdiagnosis have taken their toll. Parents told me that their children were identified early in nursery or reception, but support stalled because schools are restricted in what they can do without a diagnosis. By the time the referrals are finally made, children are already struggling, falling behind or believing they are lazy or stupid.

I heard from women diagnosed in their 40s, 50s and 60s, after a lifetime of being treated for anxiety or depression that never quite made sense. Teachers contacted me too—experienced, committed professionals who want to help but are trying to meet complex needs in classes of 30 or more children, with limited support and resources. They told me that diagnosis means very little if there is no capacity to act on it. In Warrington, concerns about waiting times came up again and again. Misdiagnosis, problems in education, workplace breakdowns, mental health crises and families forced into private care, if they can afford it, while others are simply forced to cope until they cannot cope any more.

When Ministers point to frameworks and data improvements, I say that those things matter but do not help the child struggling in school today or the adult in crisis being told to wait until the next decade. This is not about ADHD being over-diagnosed; it is about a system that consistently under-treats and under-supports those who have it. We desperately need more specialists, more appointments, more assessments, and waiting lists that are measured in months not years.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but time is up.

5.23 pm

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing this important debate. He spoke powerfully about the long and agonising waits that many people have to endure to get an ADHD diagnosis, but I want to focus on what happens next. For many people, receiving a diagnosis is not the end of the fight; in many cases, it is the start of a new one.

Time and again I hear from people who, after finally securing that elusive diagnosis, encounter a set of new barriers that prevent them from accessing the treatment they are entitled to. In January 2025, local medical committees in Suffolk and Essex advised GPs to stop delivering ADHD treatment under shared care agreements. A survey by Healthwatch Suffolk of people's experience of the changes to shared care found that only 40% had received prescriptions or monitoring from their GP. Of those, 69% said that their GP had already stopped or would soon stop providing support.

[Jack Abbott]

Most received only two or three months' notice that their shared care agreement was ending; some had no notice at all. Patients are left in limbo: they have been diagnosed, and maybe even stabilised on medication, and they are suddenly told that their shared care agreement is ending. In some instances, people are left with no access to medication whatsoever. I have received letters from terrified parents and families, panic-stricken at the prospect of being left without the medicine that they need to function every day.

I look forward to hearing the Goernment's response to the ADHD taskforce recommendations and I welcome the launch of the independent review into the prevalence of and support for mental health conditions, ADHD and autism. Reducing waiting times for an assessment and diagnosis is critical, but that work will be rendered futile if we do not also address the crisis of timely access to medication and support. For too many of my constituents—and I am sure for the constituents of many Members across the room—the hardest part of their ADHD journey did not end with diagnosis; it simply began there.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Thank you. All colleagues got in. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Adam Dance.

5.25 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I declare interests as vice-chair of the ADHD all-party parliamentary group, and as someone with ADHD. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing this important debate. It is good to hear and see so many Members here today—we have seen that with the time limit; I think we could have spoken for a good two to three hours on this.

The most important thing this debate has done is highlight the importance of ADHD diagnosis. It makes me so angry when I hear the media or politicians talk about a "crisis of overdiagnosis". As the NHS ADHD taskforce report tells us, the evidence is clear:

"ADHD is under-recognised, under-diagnosed and under-treated (including with medication)."

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I think my hon. Friend would agree that the Minister needs to hear that in places such as Dorset whole conditions are being ignored. We have the same situation as Suffolk; shared care agreements for ADHD, bariatric services, eating disorders and gender dysphoria are being cancelled, and whole cohorts of people are not being given GP services. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is outrageous?

Adam Dance: I completely agree. We have seen this issue across the board with lots of conditions, and I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning it.

Higher diagnosis rates over recent years reflect greater awareness, not an overdiagnosis crisis. As someone with severe ADHD, I can tell Members the life-changing difference that an ADHD diagnosis can make. That is why I am standing here today. But I am one of the lucky ones: too many people with ADHD are not having their needs identified or supported. That is the real crisis. As of March 2025, over 500,000 people were waiting for an ADHD diagnosis. In Somerset, the average wait time is around two and a half years, if someone is lucky.

Like many hon. Members, I see first hand the dire consequences of the crisis. A constituent who I cannot name reached out to me about her son who, like many nowadays, went through school without having ADHD diagnosed, despite his family constantly fighting for support. The bright lad recently left school without qualifications, but he was dismissed by his teachers as "challenging." The lack of support left him vulnerable and hopeless. Now he is suspected of getting mixed up with county lines gangs, which is something that we see far too often.

It breaks my heart, because my constituent's case is not exceptional. Around 25% of people in our prisons have ADHD—although, that is probably an underestimation. As I found out in a response to a written question, the Ministry of Justice does not centrally hold data on the number of people in prisons with ADHD. I have heard from so many people, including those who are not able to work or have come out of prison, who said that if they had their ADHD identified and got a little bit of help, their life could have gone so differently.

For those interested only in the impact on state finances, the estimated economic cost of not identifying and treating ADHD is around £17 billion to the UK economy, although I think that is seriously underestimated. That is why it is important that we identify people's needs early, and that is why I have put forward a Bill calling for universal screening for neurodivergence in primary school-age children. That is a cost and time-effective way to identify every child's needs early and put in place non-medical interventions that do not require diagnosis, such as changes to teacher training. It would also provide high-quality data for medical references where necessary. That last point is really important. At my SEND roundtable, a local paediatrician told me that a huge barrier to formally identifying and supporting needs early is the lack of high-quality data, information sharing across the sector and non-medical interventions. I hope the Minister will tell us whether universal screening of neurodiversity will be considered in the important review of ADHD and autism or the schools White Paper.

We cannot just stop identifying needs early. For many with ADHD, a formal medical diagnosis is vital, as it opens treatment pathways, accommodation at school or work, and state support. That is why the Liberal Democrats call on the Government to provide greater funding to integrated care boards so that they can accept and treat new ADHD patients. We especially need greater support for community-based projects and services for those living with ADHD. In Somerset, we are getting new programmes, but we need the funding to roll them out and to recruit and retain more professionals in the NHS to diagnose and support ADHD. Will the Minister reassure us that any reforms to clinical pathways for ADHD will not see communities and the ICBs that serve them lose any funding and support? Will he also update us on the progress that NHS Digital has made on the NHS improvement programme?

5.30 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition. I thank the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for getting so many MPs here to talk about such an important topic. His tribute to Matty Lock was truly epic. The only thing I am sad about is that we could easily have filled a 90-minute debate. Perhaps he can take note of that for the next time that he applies for such a debate.

Time is short, so I will skip to the most important questions. This debate is about ADHD diagnosis, and there is no disagreement among Members on both sides of the House about the challenges that we face. We have seen the numbers go up, so the question is: what are the Government prepared to do about it, and how can the House work to facilitate them in that?

Before the general election, the previous Government worked with NHS England to establish the independent ADHD taskforce, with the aim of developing a data improvement plan. As we have heard, there have been two iterations of that. The Minister confirmed in a written ministerial answer to the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell) on 17 November that the Government are considering those recommendations. Will the Government respond to the taskforce's recommendations today? If not, when will they do so? If so, will they take on all the recommendations, or will they challenge some?

I commend the Government on commissioning their own independent review into autism and ADHD. They are often linked and there can be co-morbidities, which are important to consider. As we have heard, there is no distinct timeline for that—summer is a long period of time—so I would be grateful if the Minister can set out exactly how the Government define "summer". How will that intertwine with the work that the taskforce has already done? Will that work get superseded, or will the two pieces of work dovetail together?

Finally, I want to talk about accountability and delivery. I understand that NHS England has identified reducing long waits for ADHD assessments as a priority in the medium-term planning framework. With NHS England set to be abolished, it is unclear how those priorities will be maintained and enforced. Will the Minister confirm that reducing the long waits for ADHD assessment will remain an explicit national priority for the NHS? How will the Government enforce that, given that NHS England is being taken away, and ensure consistency across integrated care boards?

I welcome the acknowledgement in a recent written answer that data on ADHD waiting times at ICB level is currently not held centrally, but that there is an intention to publish it in 2026 or 2027. That transparency matters, so will the Minister confirm that the plans to publish ICB-level ADHD waiting time data will continue regardless of the structures of the NHS after the change? Will he provide an indicative timeline for the delivery? Is it 2026 or 2027?

Will the Government publish more data about Right to Choose that shows what is and is not successful, and what is good practice and what can be improved? That is one of the ways to deal with the postcode lottery. At the heart of this debate is the fact that behind the numbers is a person, a child or a family seeking answers, support and stability. It is our duty in this House to hold the Government to account for delivering that for all across the nation.

5.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing what is, by all acknowledgement, an important debate on ADHD. I thank other hon. Members for their valuable contributions today, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean), for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Warrington South (Sarah Hall), and the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) for sharing personal experience that has been invaluable to this House. In this debate, we have heard moving testimonies and I want to thank all hon. Members who have shared personal and family experiences. I personally express my welcome and my deepest sympathies to Christine and Richard, the parents of Matthew Lock. I thank them for being in the Public Gallery for this debate, and thank them for all the invaluable work that they have done with the Department and with NHS England to raise awareness of the issues surrounding ADHD and suicide through the charity that they set up in Matthew's memory.

We have learned, through this debate, the intersection between ADHD, other mental health conditions and suicide risk. Every suicide is a profound tragedy that leaves families, friends and communities devastated. That is why, in addition to our approach to ADHD, mental health and autism, we are committed to delivering the suicide prevention strategy for England, which aims to address the risk factors contributing to suicide to ensure that fewer lives are lost. We will work across Government to improve support to those who are suffering, and those who have been bereaved by suicide.

We know that people with ADHD have co-occurring neurodevelopmental conditions. We must not only intervene early but assess people with suspected neurodevelopmental conditions—about which I will say more later—and ensure that, following diagnosis, people have the right support to meet their needs, including their mental health needs. The Government have already taken significant steps to stabilise and improve NHS mental health services but, of course, there is so much more to do. Transforming the system always takes time but we are committed to delivering a new approach to mental health.

The 10-year health plan sets out the ambitious reform that we wish to undertake to make the system fit for the future. In line with that, we will go further to ensure that NHS mental health services deliver the care that people deserve and rightly expect. The publication of the "Staying safe from suicide" guidance in 2025 means that all mental health practitioners must now follow the latest advice in understanding and managing suicide. Associated training is now available to all NHS and non-NHS mental health staff.

Following the tragic loss of their son Matthew, Richard and Christine have been keen to ensure that other families are made aware of the increased risks of addiction and suicide that are associated with ADHD. NHS England has worked closely with Richard and Christine to revise content on the nhs.uk website, and has included separate, tailored content on ADHD for adults, children

[Dr Zubir Ahmed]

and young people. The website also specifically highlights the increased risks of suicide and addiction in those with ADHD, it signposts anyone who might be struggling to find urgent help and support, and has updated wording to reflect lived and clinical experience. I extend my thanks again to Richard and Christine for all their input to that work. I invite them into the Department to meet me alongside my colleague, the mental health Minister, to see how we can go further faster.

We know that too many patients are facing long waits to access services including ADHD assessments and support. I know that such issues are affecting our constituents up and down the country, as has been reflected in this debate, and I understand the devastating impact that that has on individuals and families. Lord Darzi's report laid bare the growth in demand for ADHD assessments nationally. That has been so significant in recent years that it risks completely overwhelming the resource available. I thank everyone who has taken part in sharing evidence for Lord Darzi's report, and with the subsequent ADHD taskforce established by NHS England. We know, from the taskforce's report, that there are quality concerns with assessments. There has been rapid growth in remote assessments and in use of the independent sector. We are urgently looking into those concerns. That is why work is currently underway to improve ADHD services in both the short and long term to meet the needs of those waiting for an assessment, or those needing treatment for a diagnosis.

Dr Evans: On that point, the Minister mentioned the taskforce. It did produce its report, with its recommendations, and the Government have not yet responded to those recommendations. Will the Minister give a timescale for when he is looking to do so?

Dr Ahmed: I have met the chair of the taskforce: we discussed the outcomes, and the need—as the hon. Member mentioned in his remarks—for work on those outcomes to dovetail with the prevalence review. I think that would be the most appropriate way to provide a holistic response. We, of course, respect the findings of the report, which is an excellent scientific piece of work looking at the data underpinning the diagnoses.

Dr Evans: To clarify, if it is going to dovetail, is he suggesting that the recommendations will come out in the report in the summer, all in one lump, or will we see the recommendations of the taskforce come out before we see the full report of the newly commissioned work?

Dr Ahmed: At present, the hon. Gentleman will have to ask my colleague the mental health Minister about the specifics, but my understanding is that the prevalence review will be a wider piece of work that will be partly informed by the ADHD taskforce report. It would be better to respond to them as a combination rather than as individual reports.

The House will know that on 4 December 2025 the Secretary of State announced the launch of the independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, ADHD and autism. It will bring together the most respected researchers, clinicians and voluntary organisations in the country, alongside, crucially, people with lived experience, who will be directly engaged to scrutinise the evidence and support the development of recommendations. Part of that will be about how we address and label reporting, and I would expect that we come up with a better definition and a better way of reporting than we have at the moment.

The Government's 10-year plan sets out the core principle of early intervention and support, and will make the NHS fit for the future. Through the NHS medium-term planning framework, published in October 2025, NHS England has set an expectation that local ICBs and trusts improve access, experience and outcomes for ADHD services over the next three years.

I heard the call from hon. Members for much more integration between community mental health services, GPs and other healthcare bodies. It is our expectation that through the NHS reform Bill and the disbanding of NHS England, as well the production of independent health authorities and strategic commissioning, the health service will be better able to serve the needs of children requiring assessment for mental health conditions and ADHD. We will end up having a helicopter view, which is currently not possible.

Olivia Blake: The review highlighted the lack of cross-Government working, so I wonder whether, for example, Access to Work could be looked at. Self-employed people currently have to wait six months to access it, and it is obviously a form of early intervention that gets people the support they need to stay in work.

Dr Ahmed: I thank my hon. Friend for her very valid point. It is important to mention that we expect that the prevalence review will align with the review that the Department for Work and Pensions is carrying out on employability and other issues affecting disability.

NHS England is working with ICBs that are trialling innovative ways of delivering ADHD services and is using this information to support systems to tackle ADHD waiting lists and provide support to address people's needs. I understand that it is increasingly clear to patients and staff that the current highly specialist ADHD assessment model needs to evolve quickly. Moving to a more generalist service model could improve care and reduce waiting lists. That was one of the taskforce's key recommendations.

Iqbal Mohamed: Approximately a quarter of the prison population—22,000, give or take—have ADHD. Will the Government commit to an impact assessment of what savings the Government could make, and how many people's lives could be improved, by assessing people either before they commit a crime or after?

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The Minister knows that he has two minutes.

Dr Ahmed: As the hon. Gentleman will know, I have a lot of things in my purview, but prisons are not one of them. However, his point is well made. We expect that such sub-groups would be investigated and interrogated during the prevalence review.

I do have only two minutes, Ms Vaz, so I will move on quickly and not test your patience. In the longer term, we recognise the need to understand the factors behind the rising demand for services. We recognise that ADHD

and autism frequently co-occur, which is why it will be important for the prevalence review to look at the conditions holistically as well as individually.

I acknowledge the impact that delays in accessing assessments and diagnosis are having on people, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central for tabling this important and timely debate. I hope that the actions I have set out today, including the prevalence review and how it will dovetail with other reviews and other Departments, will provide some reassurance to my hon. Friend and other colleagues that we are taking these matters extremely seriously, and with a parity of esteem with any physical health condition or issue. I hope that all hon. Members' constituents start to feel that progress very soon.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Bill Esterson, you have a few seconds to wind up.

5.44 pm

Bill Esterson: In that case, I will thank all who have taken part and given their own testimonies and experiences. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) described the benefits of treatment and medication in exactly the same way as a constituent of mine did—mentioning the difference that comes from recognising that they can live their life the way that others do. I thank the Minister for what he said about Richard and Christine: that they have already had an impact. I just make a plea to him for early implementation of at least some of the findings ahead of the final response.

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 20 January 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Industrial Strategy and Global Talent Taskforce

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): Today the Government are setting out the next phase of delivery of the industrial strategy and a major package to strengthen the United Kingdom's position as a world-leading destination for exceptional international talent.

Delivering the Industrial Strategy

We are moving further and faster to realise the vision set out in the industrial strategy to increase business investment in our highest potential sectors and create high-quality jobs across the UK. In a world where geopolitics is not something that happens somewhere else—and what happens across the world shapes the cost of energy, the price of food and the security of jobs—delivering this strategy is essential not just for raising living standards, but for supporting national security and sovereignty.

Today we are announcing a package of measures to support scale-ups, accelerate battery innovation and reduce unnecessary regulatory burdens. This builds on the "Entrepreneurship in the UK" prospectus published at the Budget, which committed to change how the Government work with founders to back firms to start, scale and stay in the UK. Together, these actions mark a co-ordinated approach to ensure that UK businesses feel an immediate positive impact, unlocking investment and supporting innovation to boost economic growth.

Today's announcement follows last week's publication of the latest quarterly update on delivery of the industrial strategy. This was published alongside the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council's 2026 mandate letter, which commissions the council to provide impactful advice and analysis on key delivery priorities. We have also announced three new members to the ISAC—Amelia Gould, Keith Anderson and Dana Strong—to broaden the council's insight across UK industry.

In today's global economy, we must use every tool of Government—domestic and international—to fight for the interests of working people, as well as fighting for British interests abroad.

BBB

The British Business Bank will be making a £25 million investment into Kraken Technologies as part of Kraken's $1 billion demerger from Octopus Energy Group, the bank's largest direct investment to date; and two £50 million scale-up fund investments into life sciences, via Epidarex Capital, and into deep tech, via IQ Capital. The last quarter has seen a step change in the activity of the British Business Bank, committing or deploying £1.03 billion in the last quarter.

UK Export Finance

So far this financial year, UK Export Finance has provided over £9 billion of support to help UK businesses grow, invest and secure new contracts overseas. We have introduced legislation to Parliament that will significantly expand UKEF's firepower from the £80 billion it has today, so that it can back more British firms to seize opportunities in fast growing international markets. Later this month, the Secretary of State will convene major high street banks to unlock additional finance for high growth exporters.

Battery Innovation Programme

The Government are making their largest ever investment in UK battery research and development, with £180 million of battery innovation programme funding going towards supporting UK small and medium-sized enterprises to: secure private capital; accelerate the development of high-risk, high-reward technologies; and commercialise cutting-edge, home-grown battery innovation here in the UK, reducing exposure to volatile global supply chains.

Regulation package

Building on the Government's regulation action plan progress update in October, the Secretary of State and the Chancellor have commissioned all Departments to set out plans by March to meet the 25% administrative burden reduction target, and the Government will update on further progress towards the target in due course.

The Government will also:

Launch deep-dives, working with industry and trade unions on health and safety regulation and farming and agritech regulation, building on the approach and lessons of the Fingleton review;

Launch the competition consultation "Refining our Competition Regime", delivering on the commitment in the regulation action plan. This will include proposals to deliver increased pace, predictability, proportionality and improved processes across the UK's competition regime, such as amending the decision-making model in mergers and markets investigations;

Not proceed with the proposed Audit Bill, avoiding further business burdens; and

Bring forward the consultation on modernising corporate reporting to early 2026, expanded to include virtual annual general meetings.

The Business Secretary and the Chancellor will also ask Ministers to develop and set outcome focused growth goals for key watchdogs that still lack clarity from Government on what growth means for them.

The industrial strategy was never about a single publication at a single point in time. These measures go further and faster, building on existing commitments to ensure that we succeed in ushering in 10 years of stability, growth and investment—the decade of national renewal, even as global pressures evolve.

Talent Package

We have seen competition for top talent around the globe intensify, particularly in research and technology. This is an opportunity for the UK to issue a clear and confident signal: that we welcome the world's best minds to come and help us drive our industrial strategy and wider growth mission, and that they will find the environment, support and opportunities they need to thrive here.

This Government know that attracting top international talent is a catalyst for creating British jobs, boosting investment and increasing productivity. We are continuously working to better welcome top researchers, innovators and entrepreneurs to the UK, ensuring that we respond swiftly to changes in global mobility trends.

Today's announcement follows the launch of the global talent taskforce, a new concierge service to support top talent to lay down roots in the UK; and the Department

for Science, Innovation and Technology's £54 million global talent fund, which sits as part of a wider £5 billion HM Government offer on research talent, and which has already secured the relocation of top researchers and their teams to work in our industrial strategy priority areas.

The 2025 immigration White Paper set out plans to improve and expand key visa routes for talent, making it easier to move to the UK for exceptional researchers, entrepreneurs and future leaders.

And, in her 2025 autumn Budget, the Chancellor also expanded the enterprise management incentives scheme, so that scale-ups can offer more competitive equity, and increased the venture capital trust and the enterprise investment scheme investment limits to help high growth companies raise more capital as they scale.

Today's package continues to build on this work with a series of targeted and practical measures designed to enhance the UK's offer to exceptional talent. We are:

Doubling the resourcing of our global talent taskforce, including bringing in specialist private sector head-hunting expertise and emboldening our concierge offer to the world's elite talent, starting with a dedicated focus on international AI talent;

Reimbursing visa fees in a limited and targeted manner for those with skills that will further our deep tech, innovation, and research and development aspirations, including in AI, quantum and semiconductors;

Expanding the global talent visa to make it simpler and easier for those with a relevant academic or research appointment and those in industry to get their visa, ensuring the UK can access the talent it needs, including those working in cutting-edge industries;

Launching a referral route to fast-track sponsorship licences for high-growth and high-potential firms supported by the global talent taskforce or the Office for Investment; and

Providing new Government-funded scholarships for International Mathematical Olympiad gold medal winners.

We are also adding a new talent pathway on business.gov.uk to provide a single, clear "shop window" for exceptional global talent considering relocating to our country.

This Government remain committed to exploring how we can best attract and retain the world's top talent. By welcoming exceptional individuals through these initiatives, the UK is powering research and innovation that creates jobs, builds our science capabilities, attracts investment and strengthens our economy for the long term. These initiatives form part of our industrial strategy and broader growth mission to strengthen the UK's global competitiveness, and strengthen cutting-edge industries—now and for the future.

[HCWS1254]

UK Trade Envoy Programme

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): The Secretary of State has today made appointments to the United Kingdom's trade envoy programme.

The United Kingdom's trade envoys are important to this Government's growth agenda. They support Ministers to deliver trade and investment outcomes within the industrial and trade strategies and attract foreign direct investment across UK regions.

Working in close partnership with our ambassadors, high commissioners and His Majesty's trade commissioners, trade envoys support deeper bilateral trade relationships, lead trade missions, welcome inward delegations and address market access challenges, to ensure that British firms can compete and succeed.

The role as a United Kingdom trade envoy is unpaid and voluntary, with cross-party membership from both Houses.

The Secretary of State is pleased to appoint:

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Türkiye;

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Pakistan;

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to France;

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Germany; and

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Italy

In addition to their existing roles, the Secretary of State is pleased to appoint:

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to the Republic of South Africa and to Mauritius;

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Ghana; and

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Algeria.

These new appointments are testament to the United Kingdom's commitment to strengthen bilateral trade and support growth across the nation.

Today's appointments mean that there are now 32 trade envoys focusing on 73 markets.

[HCWS1255]

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service: Innovation

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): The British people deserve public services that work for them. I am announcing today changes to rewire the state and jump-start a move to a new model for Whitehall, fixing some of the fundamentals of how the civil service works by learning from the best examples of innovation in both the public and private sector.

The No. 10 innovation fellowship programme is an example of the opportunity to do government differently. A small number of leading technologists and data scientists have been given the freedom to approach public service delivery problems in new ways. From prison security to patient safety, the fellows are working on projects to make the state more productive and more dynamic. We will build on this success and expand the programme this year.

The need to innovate to deliver the public's priorities is urgent. I am therefore also making broader changes to the delivery architecture of government. Supported by teams in the Cabinet Office, we will establish taskforces, working with Departments to drive forward delivery of some of this Government's top priorities. Time-bound and focused on specific outcomes, taskforces will be

granted freedoms to operate outside normal administrative rules so that they are unhindered in tackling high-impact challenges with singular determination.

To incentivise innovation throughout the wider civil service, I am also announcing changes to the performance management and recruitment of senior civil servants. Guided by the principle of targeting bonuses more towards the highest performers, bonuses and a system of pay progression will reward innovation and delivery in critical areas. We will also change the criteria for SCS selection to prioritise candidates with frontline delivery and innovation experience. Under-performers will be held accountable to tougher standards and must improve or face the consequences, including dismissal.

Alongside incentivising performance and innovation, we must build a civil service with the skills it needs for the future. I am announcing that we will establish a new National School for Government, which will provide learning and development for civil servants, while saving taxpayers money by ending current high-cost contracts with external providers.

[HCWS1260]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telegraph Media Group: Proposed Sale

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I wish to update the House on the sale of the Telegraph Media Group. As I set out in my written ministerial statement on 17 December 2025, I received a formal request from the representatives of RB Investco Ltd, the current owners of the call option to purchase Telegraph Media Group Holdings, to allow RB Investco Ltd to derogate from the Public Interest Merger Reference (Telegraph Media Group Limited) (Pre-emptive Action) Order 2024, in order to sell its call option to Daily Mail and General Trust. The 2024 order prevents the parties to the transaction from taking actions which may prejudice a reference to the Competition and Markets Authority and/or Ofcom for them to be able to carry out regulatory scrutiny. I am currently considering whether to grant the request to derogate from the order and will update Parliament once this decision has been made.

Following a thorough consideration of the terms set out in the derogation request and independent research, my Department has today written to the current and proposed owners of the Telegraph Media Group on my behalf to inform them that I am "minded to" intervene on the following public interest grounds specified in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002:

Sufficient plurality of views;

Sufficient plurality of persons with control.

This will enable the necessary regulatory scrutiny to commence. These letters, and other relevant updates, will be published on gov.uk.

I have also considered the new merger under the foreign state influence regime, as specified in chapter 3A of the Enterprise Act 2002, and I am not minded to intervene. As set out in the Enterprise Act, if any new information comes to light which indicates influence from a foreign state, I must intervene.

It is important to note that I have not taken a final decision on intervention at this stage. The "minded to" letter invites further representations in writing from the parties and gives them until 9 am on Monday 26 January to respond.

If I decide to issue an intervention notice, the next stage would be for Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest concerns, and for the Competition and Markets Authority to assess and report to me on whether a relevant merger situation has been created, and any impact this may have on competition.

Following these reports, I would need to decide whether to refer the matter for a more detailed investigation by the CMA under section 45 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

I will update Parliament on my final decision at the earliest opportunity.

[HCWS1263]

EDUCATION

International Education Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): Today I am announcing the launch of the UK's refreshed international education strategy.

Together, the Department for Education, the Department for Business and Trade, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are setting out a vision and road map to economic prosperity and resilience, through promoting the UK's world-leading education system globally.

Unlike the previous strategy released in 2019, this approach removes targets on international student numbers in the UK and, while continuing to welcome international students, shifts the focus towards growing education exports overseas by backing UK providers to expand internationally, build partnerships abroad and deliver UK education in new markets.

By strengthening our international partnerships and leadership, we can help to bring stability and co-operation in an uncertain and changing world. War has returned to Europe, and old certainties have been shaken. The world's population will exceed 8.5 billion people by 2030, and urgent challenges such as climate change are reshaping the skills that people need to thrive. Education equips people to succeed, societies to prosper, and nations to build the participation needed for global stability and growth. It has never been needed more than it is today.

The new international education strategy sets out three ambitions to harness the world-leading quality of UK education:

To increase the UK's international standing through education and make the UK the global partner of choice at every stage of learning;

To sustainably recruit high-quality international higher education students from a diverse range of countries; and

To collectively grow education exports to £40 billion per year by 2030.

These ambitions leverage the strengths of the UK's education system and the trust with which UK education institutions are viewed by global partners.

I am grateful to representatives of the UK education sector for their help during the development of this strategy. They are creating a promotional brochure to set out the UK's offer to the world. We are also grateful to our international education champion, Sir Steve Smith. We will be convening a new education sector action group, chaired by Ministers, with representatives of the sector who will help us steer delivery and maximise the impact of the strategy.

The international education strategy will be available online at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-international-education-strategy-2026

[HCWS1256]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Fuel Supply: Fees for Military Drivers

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The Secretary of State will be using powers under the Energy Act 2013 to increase the hourly rate for use of military fuel tanker drivers paid by hauliers during a deployment of this capability. This programme is a long-standing fuel supply contingency measure jointly managed by my Department and the Ministry of Defence to make trained military drivers available to support fuel deliveries in an emergency.

This is a routine increase to keep the cost in line with inflationary increases since 2021, and in line with agreements signed with industry.

A direction under section 148(3)(b) of the Energy Act 2013 was made to increase the hourly price from £28.51 to £34.44. This will take effect on 20 January 2026. I believe this direction is fair and proportionate as it will now take account of inflationary price increases from 2021 calculated using the consumer prices inflation index and has been agreed with industry. The Secretary of State reserves the right to make further changes to the charging regime if that becomes necessary.

[HCWS1259]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water White Paper

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): Today I am announcing the launch of this Government's water White Paper, "A New Vision for Water".

This paper sets out once-in-a-generation reforms for our water system, putting consumers and the environment first.

For too long, previous Governments have turned a blind eye to record levels of pollution and poor performance.

Companies have been profiting at customers' expense, with vital infrastructure left to crumble and public trust destroyed.

This Government inherited that failure—and we are not shying away from it.

Every family in this country deserves clean water from their taps, seas their children can swim in, and bills that are fair and affordable.

We have already taken decisive action and have:

passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to give regulators the powers to ban bonuses for polluting water bosses, and to take tougher and faster action against water companies.

secured a historic investment of £104 billion of private sector funding to rebuild the water network.

established the water delivery taskforce to get spades in the ground, fast-track delivery of new infrastructure projects and drive economic growth.

We are now going further. This White Paper sets out our response to Sir Jon Cunliffe's Independent Water Commission's final report of July 2025 and gives a clear vision for the reforms this Government will make to our water sector. I would like to reiterate my thanks to Sir Jon Cunliffe for his excellent leadership of the Commission.

We will:

Set out a clear direction for the water sector by revising the strategic policy statements, rationalising planning and introducing a more joined-up regional water planning function and framework to improve local decision making and delivery. There will be new overarching targets for the water environment to enable consistent oversight and alignment. This will increase the long-term stability of the water sector.

Reset the approach to regulation by abolishing Ofwat and creating a new single, integrated water regulator that combines the functions of the four existing regulators. This will replace the currently fragmented system with a proactive and targeted supervisory approach tailored to individual companies. We will create a new performance improvement regime to give the regulator the power to step in and put things right for the poorest performing companies.

Make the water sector more attractive to, and reliable for, long-term low-risk investors by simplifying performance commitments. We will introduce new measures to improve financial resilience and ensure investors receive a fair and stable return that compensates for risk.

Make sure customers are protected by creating a new independent water ombudsman, alongside stronger protections to keep bills predictable, affordable and fair. There will be better access to smarter metering to help those who need it most. New water efficiency labels will be on every appliance, so when customers buy a washing machine or shower, they will know exactly what it will cost not just to buy, but to run.

Protect our waterways from pollution with record investment in storm overflows and waste water treatment, taking action to tackle sewer misuse and introducing a clearer set of standards and enforcement for agricultural pollution. We will also end operator self-monitoring and develop a new, strengthened open monitoring approach, making data accessible to the public in near real time and helping to restore public trust in the system.

Increase the resilience and security of the water system by introducing statutory resilience standards and improving mapping of asset health. There will be new "MOT" checks on water infrastructure to stop water company assets being left to crumble. The new regulator will have a chief engineer and engineering capability so that decisions are grounded in practical understanding. We will improve infrastructure planning with better regulatory oversight to deliver projects more efficiently, attract third-party investment, and protect infrastructure from growing risks.

Several reforms will be taken forward immediately while others will form the foundation of a new water Bill. The Bill will provide the powers necessary for transformation and deliver the outcomes the public deserve.

To help stakeholders manage these changes, we will publish a transition plan detailing the journey to a new system.

This Government were elected with a clear mandate to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas. We remain committed to delivering on that promise.

We will work in partnership with the water sector, investors and communities to drive this sector-wide transformation.

[HCWS1259]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Chinese Embassy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): This statement follows the decision I made today to grant planning permission and listed building consent for a new embassy in London.

The proposal is for the redevelopment of the Royal Mint Court site in the London borough of Tower Hamlets to provide a new Chinese embassy. It would involve the refurbishment and restoration of several listed buildings, and associated works.

The decision was in line with the recommendation of the independent planning inspector who held a public inquiry into this case between 11 and 19 February 2025.

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers making planning decisions must follow a quasi-judicial process. This means they must make decisions fairly, based on evidence and planning rules.

The decision letter and associated inspector's report fully explains the reasons for the decision and is available on the Government's website. The decision letter comprises the Secretary of State's letter, the inspector's report, and the following annexes: annex A (Schedule of Representations); annex B1 (List of conditions for the listed building consent); annex B2 (List of conditions for the planning permission); and annex C (Consolidated Drawing Schedule and revised drawings). Annex C is a separate document. The relevant plans to which these permissions relate are secured by condition. I will deposit a copy of the decision letter in the Libraries of both Houses, including all annexes.

Representations received from parties as part of the reference-back exercise are listed in the decision letter and are available on request. For convenience, I will deposit a full set of the reference-back correspondence in the Libraries of both Houses.

All material considerations were taken into account when making this decision.

The decision is now final unless it is successfully challenged in court.

[HCWS1261]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Mobile Phones and Social Media: Use by Children

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): I will be updating the House via an oral statement later today.

[HCWS1262]

WORK AND PENSIONS

WorkWell Expansion

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Today, together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, we are announcing England-wide expansion of the WorkWell service from autumn 2026 backed by up to £259 million of investment over three years. We have seen great success with the 15 current WorkWell pilots, which provide integrated employment and health support for local working-age people, helping them to get into and on in work. It is a voluntary service which saw over 25,000 disabled people and people with health conditions receive support to stay in and re-enter the workplace, within the first 14 months of launch.

Key to helping local working age people get the support they need to stay in work or return quickly following a period of absence is ensuring local services are joined up to provide an integrated, holistic approach to health and work support. WorkWell is innovative because although funded by central Government it is designed and delivered by our local health systems, who work in partnership with local government, jobcentres, and community and voluntary groups. This allows us to intervene early at the point an individual feels their health condition or disability will have an impact on the work they do or make it more difficult for them to return to work quickly.

Good quality work is a key determinant of health, and that is why keeping people in work is a core priority for the Government. We know that 2.8 million working-age people are now economically inactive due to health conditions, with 800,000 more people out of work due to health problems now than in 2019. There are more people currently in work with work-limiting health conditions or disabilities than ever before, with almost one in four of the working-age population classed as disabled. The £259 million expansion of WorkWell that we are announcing today forms a key part of our wider Pathways to Work offer for working-age disabled people and those with health conditions.

Helping people along their unique pathway to work is what we mean when we say we want an opportunity welfare state. This is why I am pleased to share that, alongside our existing pilot sites, WorkWell will be available to support our working-age population across all of England from autumn 2026.

[HCWS1257]

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