

Thursday
22 January 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 22 January 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Thursday 22 January 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Emergencies: Rural and Coastal Areas

1. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help improve resilience to emergencies in rural and coastal areas. [907395]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend when I visited Cornwall last week, and to meet the local leaders and first responders who have been working tirelessly to keep their communities safe. In response to Storm Gorette, the Government issued two emergency alerts reaching approximately 500,000 people and urging them to stay indoors due to the severe weather. The resilience action plan outlines how we will strengthen local resilience, which includes better integrating voluntary, community and faith organisations into emergency planning.

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the Minister for his answer. Storm Gorette was a wake-up call for Cornwall and nationally. It tested the resilience of rural and coastal Britain to these extreme weather events. In Cornwall alone, we lost over 1,000 trees and thousands of people were left without power and water. It exposed vulnerabilities, particularly in our communications in rural areas, where mobile and internet connectivity is fragile, hard to restore and not backed up. Would the Minister lead discussions with Science, Innovation and Technology Ministers on how to shore up communications in such circumstances, and consider in his own Department how to advise and make individuals and communities more resilient generally to the increasing number of storms?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, my hon. Friend is right, and I will do that. She knows at first hand the importance of hyper-local resilience planning, and I pay tribute to her work supporting her constituents in recent times. The gov.uk Prepare website already provides advice on steps people can take to prepare for emergencies, including storms and power outages, as well as on some of the points she made. I have heard and understood the points she has raised both today and previously, and I will give them very careful attention.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As I have said many times, I represent one of the largest rural constituencies in the United Kingdom, and Eskdalemuir is one of the most rural parts of that constituency. Constituents there remain extremely concerned about BT's proposal to switch off analogue lines, given that the area has very poor mobile reception and frequent power cuts. Will the Minister and the Cabinet Office more generally satisfy themselves that the arrangements in place for this switch-off will not impede resilience and will ensure communities such as Eskdalemuir are not cut off during extreme weather events?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for the important points he raises, and I completely understand and agree with his point about rurality. I have heard the point he made about BT, and I know that the Department has been engaging closely with the company. I will look carefully at what he has to say and come back to him.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I recently met representatives of Cumbria Council for Voluntary Service and ACTION with Communities in Cumbria to discuss community resilience in Carlisle and north Cumbria. One of the challenges we face in geographically remote areas such as mine is the speed with which local authorities and other agencies are able to deploy staff to close floodgates and shut roads when we have an area affected by flooding. Will the Minister set out what steps the Government are taking to encourage statutory bodies to train and equip community emergency volunteers to carry out those vital tasks?

Dan Jarvis: I can do that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it. I know that her constituency has suffered from significant flooding in the past. The Environment Agency, local risk management authorities and the local resilience forum have worked hard to deliver new flood schemes, and improve the warnings and information to communities so that they are better prepared. The Government are considering both regulatory and non-regulatory options to integrate the vital work of the voluntary, community and faith sectors and statutory emergency responders. I will soon be meeting the flooding Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), to discuss this further.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am very grateful to the Minister for coming to Cornwall last week and visiting my constituency, which was noted and very much appreciated. He will know that west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly took the brunt of Storm Gorette, and we have many lessons to learn, not least the point made by the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) about our—I think, evangelical—faith in modern systems and technologies, which have made us more dependent and less resilient. When we are learning such lessons, will the Minister make sure that it is not simply left to local authorities to do so, but that they are learned across the UK?

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely will. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to spend quite a lot of time with the hon. Gentleman in his beautiful constituency, and

to meet his local council colleagues as well as many other stakeholders. I agree with the points he has made. I think the response overall was an effective one, but I am working with Ministers across the Government to ensure that we learn all the lessons from Storm Goretti, and I am keen to work with him and other Members in that endeavour.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): My constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle is 624th out of 650 constituencies for resilience in mobile communications. It cannot be right that a constituency such as mine is exposed in the way that it was during Storm Goretti, meaning that villages such as Mawnan Smith were completely cut off. Does the Minister agree that we need to review those constituencies where mobile communications are inadequate at the moment?

Dan Jarvis: I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend at the Eden Project on Friday of last week, along with local leaders, to discuss these matters. I agree with his points and I give him an absolute commitment that we will work closely with Government colleagues, local authorities and other stakeholders to ensure that, where there are lessons that need to be learned from this storm, we will learn them.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I can tell the Minister that the promises made by telecoms companies about the withdrawal of copper landlines have not been kept. A recent power outage that covered both Caithness and Orkney left my constituents without any landline connectivity or mobile connectivity, as there was no power to the mobile masts. As well as talking to BT, will the Minister speak to the mobile phone operators and find out why there are not doing what they promised they would do?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, I will. I am looking forward to meeting the right hon. Gentleman soon to discuss these things. It is important to say that we worked closely with mobile phone operators and National Grid Electricity Distribution to get more than 900 engineers out and about reconnecting homes in the south-west, but I have heard the right hon. Gentleman's points and I look forward to discussing them with him soon.

Erasmus+ Programme

2. **Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help increase the number of education and training opportunities for young people through the Erasmus+ programme. [907396]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): I am delighted that the Government have negotiated associate membership of the Erasmus+ programme from 2027. That could open up opportunities for more than 100,000 young people from all backgrounds to learn, train, study or volunteer abroad. It is good news for further education colleges, universities and businesses, and is just one example of how this Government are building a strong new relationship with the EU that is in our national interest.

Matt Rodda: I thank the Minister for his answer and warmly welcome the Government's new commitment to this scheme. It is hugely important to my residents in

Reading, for families and young people, for employers and for science and technology. Could the Minister say a little more about how this wonderful scheme will help employers and growth in the Thames valley and help our local Reading University and the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts?

Chris Ward: I know that the scheme has been welcomed at many universities, including Reading. I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned on this for a long time. In my constituency, Sussex University was home to the first Erasmus student. When I visited last week, the university was delighted that it will have more students soon. I want to point out, though, that this is not just about universities; it is also about apprenticeships, FE colleges, youth workers and sports professionals. It is a huge opportunity for 100,000 people, so quite why the Conservatives and Reform oppose it is beyond me.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister has mentioned apprenticeships. Does he agree that there should be opportunities through the future town funding that the Government have announced? Coleraine and Londonderry, in my area, should enable young people to take advantage of the opportunities and ensure that local employers offer more training and apprenticeships.

Chris Ward: As I have just said, this is about apprenticeships as well as universities. The hon. Gentleman should write to me and the Minister for the Cabinet Office about how we can roll this out. It is a UK-wide programme that will benefit all parts of the United Kingdom. The Minister for the Cabinet Office met the devolved Governments yesterday to discuss that and other matters.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): In his statement last month, the Paymaster General promised us that he had secured a great deal for the first year of the Erasmus programme. It is a technique that will be familiar to mobile phone and satellite TV customers around the country. Can the Minister tell us what the Paymaster General could not tell us in that statement: what will it cost in the second and subsequent years?

Chris Ward: It is a one-year agreement, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and we have negotiated a 30% discount. That is a good deal. It will be reviewed after 10 months, as he knows. At its heart, the programme is about opportunities for young people from all backgrounds—youth workers, sports professionals, universities and so on. If the Conservative party really wants to fight the next election promising to take that away and to narrow opportunities, I am afraid that it is making a big mistake—on this, as on so much else.

Mike Wood: I think the Minister has given the game away: he has just said that it would be wrong to walk away from that. He will know, as the whole House knows, that any negotiation is successful only if you know, and more importantly your negotiating partners know, that there is an alternative to a negotiated agreement. Can the Minister assure the House that, if the European Union is not able to offer similar terms and similar cost for second and subsequent years, he would be prepared to walk away from the negotiations?

Chris Ward: The cheek of the hon. Gentleman to talk about unsuccessful negotiations! The Conservatives had years to negotiate and they left a Brexit deal that narrowed opportunities, harmed our economy, harmed businesses and made it tougher for young people. We are very confident that this is a great deal for the British people. It will be reviewed after 10 months. If the hon. Gentleman wants to put himself in a position of narrowing opportunities for young people, he is making a big mistake.

UK-EU Relations

3. **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [907398]

6. **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [907402]

12. **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): What steps he is taking to help strengthen the UK's relations with the EU. [907409]

20. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What steps he is taking to help strengthen the UK's relations with the EU. [907419]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Government agreed a new strategic partnership with the EU in May last year, delivering for UK jobs, easing the burden on bill payers and strengthening our borders. Whereas we are making significant progress, it seems the Conservative party and Reform would rip it up. Given that Reform has just recruited that well-known remainer, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who knows what its latest position is.

Yuan Yang: The inflation figures out yesterday show that despite the Government's good progress on energy prices, food inflation remains stubbornly high. Even the price of a Tesco meal deal is stuck at £4.25. The Government need to make food and life more affordable, so will the Minister update us on his negotiations over agrifood trade with the EU?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The sanitary and phytosanitary agreement removes export health certificates and routine border checks, slashing costs and red tape for agrifood trade. For example, businesses will save up to £200 per shipment, making trade cheaper and easier. The Conservative party wants to put those costs back.

Callum Anderson: My right hon. Friend will know that the UK and EU financial systems are closely linked by cross-border capital flows that support jobs on both sides of the channel. Regulatory co-operation is beneficial for financial stability, but our ability to diverge from some of those regulations can also support our competitiveness. Will the Minister set out a bit more about how he is working with the Treasury to ensure that the UK's engagement with the EU on financial issues balances our strategic sovereignty and autonomy with our economic prosperity?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: That is precisely why the Government take a pragmatic approach. We choose to align in areas where it makes sense to do so. Where it makes sense to diverge, we will also continue to do so. We are always driven by our national interest.

Victoria Collins: Given the strength of power shown by the EU to the US, not only is the relationship with Europe more strategically important than ever, but it matters because of the £90 billion black hole in our economy and to people such as Hazel from Tring, whose medical devices family business has been cut by costs and bureaucracy since Brexit. When will the Government finally start taking seriously negotiations on a new EU-UK customs deal?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the hon. Lady's first point, we agreed the new strategic security and defence partnership with the European Union in May last year, which is absolutely crucial. On the point about the food and drink agreement, we agreed just before Christmas that that will be completed by the time of the next summit.

Alison Bennett: A close and strong relationship with our European partners is vital to our interests. Mid Sussex is home to high-tech life sciences companies such as CSL Behring and Roche Diagnostics. The regulatory and trade barriers put up after Brexit have made business harder for them. With a mercurial Administration in the White House, as evidenced this week, surely it is time for the Minister to get behind Liberal Democrat calls for a bespoke customs union with the EU.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Our democratic mandate from the general election is clear: we will not rejoin the single market or the customs union, or go back to freedom of movement. However, what we do, and what I do every single week, is negotiate that closer UK-EU relationship, which is in our national interest. The hon. Lady and her colleagues should support that.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): This week the Prime Minister hit the phones again to protect our interests; meanwhile, the Leader of the Opposition risked undermining those efforts, acting almost like a Trump Trojan horse in this Chamber. Diplomacy is paying off: tariff threats are receding and Greenland solutions may be emerging. Does the Minister agree that we must always put country before party and work with the US and our European allies, and that our efforts should command cross-party support?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Leader of the Opposition should have risen to the occasion yesterday in a profound moment for the nation. She chose not to do so.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for travelling to Belfast later today for the East-West Council. As he knows, the council was created to strengthen ties within the United Kingdom, and one of the impediments to those economic ties is the Windsor framework. Knowing that punitive measures are still to be implemented, including customs required on parcels moving from one part of our country to another for ordinary consumers, does the Minister recognise that in

building a better relationship with the European Union more pragmatism is required when it comes to Northern Ireland?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I look forward to visiting Belfast later today. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the East-West Council is an important part of our “Safeguarding the Union” arrangements. I certainly take a pragmatic and proportionate approach to the Windsor framework, which is one of the reasons I am so keen to get the food and drink agreement with the EU implemented as soon as possible, which, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, will mean we can reduce the levels of checks in the Irish sea.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Since the Paymaster General was last in the Commons, the Health Secretary has said that Britain should rejoin the customs union, the Deputy Prime Minister has suggested rejoining the customs union, 13 Labour MPs have gone against the Whip and voted with the Liberal Democrats in favour of a customs union, 80% of Labour voters at the last election have said they want to rejoin the customs union, and the Business and Trade Secretary has said that it would be “crazy” not to join the customs union. It would seem that the only people in Labour opposed to the customs union are the Prime Minister and the Paymaster General. The right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that in this one regard, I do not think he is crazy at all—I think he is doing the right thing. Will he tell the House why he thinks all the other members of the Labour party are so wrong?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: There is a real issue of democracy here, in the sense that we won a general election with a mandate to negotiate a closer UK-EU relationship. It is in our national interest to do so, and we have set out the red lines within which those negotiations are taking place. Listening to what the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is saying, it seems he has suddenly pivoted to supporting my approach—how welcome that would be.

Alex Burghart: I certainly support the right hon. Gentleman in telling the rest of the Labour party that they are wrong, although, given the success of the Labour Back Benchers in forcing U-turns on the Prime Minister recently, I wonder how long that position will hold.

Earlier this month, the Prime Minister told the BBC that he wants “closer alignment” with the single market—a serious policy development on which we have had no statement in the Commons. I hope that will be addressed very soon. Closer alignment will, of course, mean dynamic alignment, which will mean Britain following rules over which we have had no say. The Opposition will respectfully oppose such a move. In November, Downing Street sources told journalists that it was accepted that the UK would have to pay billions of pounds for closer alignment and market access. Will the Paymaster General confirm to the House that that is his understanding?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To clarify, there are no access fees in regard to either the emissions trading system linkage or the food and drink agreement that is being

negotiated. That is absolutely clear. In terms of moving forward, we take pragmatic decisions in the national interest in various sectors, which is why we opened negotiations on electricity trading before Christmas. The hon. Gentleman has crystallised the choice at the next general election: this Government are negotiating a deal that will bear down on food and energy bills, give law enforcement more tools to keep our country safe and create jobs; the Conservatives, for ideological reasons, are setting their face against those things. I would welcome that debate with them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): We expect an EU reset Bill in the coming months to update the arrangements around our relationship with our European neighbours. Following the terrible Brexit deal delivered by the Conservatives and cheered on by the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), which trashed our economy and our international standing, a reset is essential, and we welcome it. Does the Minister agree that Parliament should have the ability to fully scrutinise the legislation to ensure that the Government deliver the change that we need and that we can hold Ministers’ feet to the fire as they set up new structures or committees as needed? To that end, will he assure the House that the Bill will contain enough detail to allow meaningful democratic accountability and that the specifics will not be kicked into secondary legislation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Well, on the basis of my exchange with the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, I thoroughly look forward to bringing the Bill to the Commons and debating it fully. I can assure the hon. Lady that what we will be debating is why the Government’s approach is good for jobs and how it will bear down on bills for consumers. Members should not just believe what I say, but look at what the supermarkets said about the deal that was struck last year. I will also welcome a debate about how we will reduce trade barriers and costs for businesses. It is the Conservatives who want to put red tape and costs back on businesses. Good luck to them with that argument.

Lisa Smart: Yesterday, the Trade Secretary was the latest senior Government figure to break ranks by saying that it would be “crazy” not to look at a customs union with the EU. That position is already supported by the Prime Minister’s economic adviser, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Health Secretary. Since leaving the EU, many businesses including those in my constituency have found it harder to trade with our neighbours, which is having an obvious impact on the economy. The Government have changed their mind on many things since the last election, having said that they definitely were not going to. Does the Minister accept that it would save us all a lot of time, be the single biggest lever that the Government could pull to generate growth, and give those on his own Benches something that they are crying out for if he just agreed to crack on and start negotiations for a bespoke customs union with the EU?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: No, and the situation is not as the hon. Lady has described. The work that the Government are doing in building a closer EU-UK relationship is crucial, and we can do it alongside a trade deal with India and an economic deal with the

United States that is saving jobs at Jaguar Land Rover. The Government's position is in the national interest, and we will continue to pursue it.

Digital Identity Scheme

4. **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): What recent steps he has taken to establish a digital identity system. [907400]

7. **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on implementing a digital ID scheme. [907403]

18. **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on the digital ID scheme. [907416]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons): A new digital identity system is a vital part of the infrastructure that the UK needs to transform public services and accelerate digital government. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister said this week, our goal is simple: to make government work better for people by joining up public services so that people do not have to fight to get the support that they need. It will be inclusive, secure and useful, and will give people more control over their data and public services than they have now.

Susan Murray: I welcome the Government's U-turn on digital identity cards, but they must go further. We are now looking at a largely redundant system that is expected to cost nearly £2 billion. Will the Minister explain why this is the best use of public money and whether he agrees that the resources would be better directed to tackling organised crime rather than building a system that primarily monitors compliant citizens?

Josh Simons: We are building a digital ID system because it is the infrastructure that we need for the foundation of the British state and better public services in years to come. I am proud that we as a Government are investing the time and resources to improve government and make it work better for people so that it is easier to access public services. We are doing the hard work that Government should do rather than expecting people to do it for themselves. I hope that hon. Members from Opposition parties will come to see the force of that argument for their constituents.

Graeme Downie: At the beginning of the year, I visited Estonia to see how 100% of public services are delivered via its digital ID system. It is done safely and securely, and as the Minister said, citizens now have better access to and control over their data, including over who sees what, when and where. The system also saves Estonia about 2% of GDP, which has allowed it to re-energise its system and continue to evolve for the future. Will the Minister reassure me that, despite the news last week, we will continue to press forward strongly with a digital ID system and show the people of the UK that it can be beneficial to their lives and make things much better for them?

Josh Simons: Absolutely. By the end of this Parliament, every UK citizen who wants a digital ID will be able to get one free of charge. To deliver that, we will launch a

huge digital inclusion drive across the UK, and I look forward to working with hon. Members from across the House on that, including my hon. Friend. Like Estonia, we will build the UK system to earn citizens' trust, adhering to the principles of data minimisation and decentralisation with strong safeguards in place. We will consult imminently on how best to design that system.

Dame Meg Hillier: I had the privilege of chairing the Public Accounts Committee for nearly a decade, and in that role I saw the challenges caused by how poor data often is across Government. In one hearing, for example, we learned that Government Departments have 13 different ways of recording an individual's address, and there are many other issues around data. Is the Minister alert to those issues, and how will he tackle them to make sure that this system is watertight?

Josh Simons: My hon. Friend has deep experience of these challenges, and she is absolutely right: the reason why digital ID is so vital to the future of our public services and government is all about data. That will become ever more important in the future age of artificial intelligence. When I worked in AI, we had a saying: "garbage in, garbage out". Bad data management produces bad public services, and that is why my colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology have a massive programme across Government to upgrade and secure data for the benefit of ordinary citizens.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): With the 100 in, one out deportation scheme having had the same impact as the Prime Minister's many resets, compulsory digital ID was billed as the next magical answer to illegal migration. Now that it has been U-turned on, what is plan C?

Josh Simons: It has not been. Digitising right-to-work checks is a vital part of how we will toughen up our illegal labour market enforcement regime. It will mean that this Government are cracking down on illegal working, reducing the pull factors and delivering on one of our key commitments, which is to crack down on illegal migration.

Government Decision Making: Transparency

5. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve transparency in Government decision making. [907401]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Prime Minister has given the independent ethics adviser the independence to initiate his own investigations, which is just one of the measures the Government have taken to improve transparency and standards. The high standards the Prime Minister expects of all of us who have the privilege of serving in high office are set out in the ministerial code.

Ian Lavery: With public trust in politics at an all-time low, I am grateful that the Government are implementing the Hillsborough law, and clearly the duty of candour should be extended to all public servants. Speaking truth to power is central to our democracy and to global democracy. Does the Minister agree that when the so-called leader of the free world stands up in public

and lies with impunity about our great country and our allies at every opportunity he gets, there is no law or legislation that will ever restore public trust?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the first point, I met the families of the victims of the Manchester Arena bombings and the Hillsborough families only last week. It is critical that we get the balance right between allowing our intelligence services the secrecy that is essential to their work and having proper oversight. That is exactly the work the Government will engage in. On the wider point, the Prime Minister made it absolutely clear yesterday that he would not yield on the question of Greenland's sovereignty. While I was proud to see our Prime Minister take that position, what a shame it was that the Leader of the Opposition could not rise to the moment, too.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): In the interests of improving Government transparency, will the Cabinet Office now publish the details of how the Government reached the decision that allowed Lord Mandelson, the man who described the convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein as his "best pal" and who then urged him to fight for his early release following his conviction, not just to retain his place in the House of Lords but to keep the Labour Whip and his Labour party membership card?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Prime Minister made his position clear with regard to Lord Mandelson's position when that additional information came to light. With regard to the House of Lords, Lord Mandelson is currently on a leave of absence. The revocation of a title requires a bespoke piece of primary legislation and is separate from the rules related to suspension and expulsion. Frankly, there is no alternative formal mechanism for a title to be revoked.

Cyber-crime

8. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle cyber-crime. [907404]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): The Government are absolutely committed to using all available tools to disrupt cyber-threats and to keep the public safe. Our new national cyber action plan will address the evolving cyber-threat and technological opportunities. We are working with partners across Government and law enforcement to deliver real-world impact against cyber-criminals. Through the Crime and Policing Bill, we will introduce measures to empower police to suspend IP addresses and domains being used for serious criminality.

Nick Smith: There has been a tendency to offshore much cyber-support, but we are producing excellent cyber-security talent at Ebbw Vale college to protect our digital infrastructure. Will the Minister please outline what is being done to develop our home-grown workforce and security resilience to help reduce the risks from cyber-attacks in future?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right, and I am very interested to hear about the course at his local college. Skills are the foundation of the UK's cyber-security, and the Government are investing £187 million in the

TechFirst programme. That initiative will bring digital skills and AI learning into classrooms and communities, and aims to reach 1 million students by 2026 and provide a thousand annual scholarships. Those skills projects will help bridge the gap in our cyber-resilience.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I thank the Minister for his answers? They are always very helpful. Cyber-crime and fraud are now the most common crime in the UK, accounting for some 50% of all offences and costing the economy billions of pounds per year. Will he please discuss with Cabinet colleagues providing additional funding to ensure that our universities and colleges can provide high-level training in cyber-security, and to ensure—if he does not mind my saying so—that Belfast's title of cyber-security capital is retained?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as I always am, for the important points that he raises. I think he knows how seriously we take these issues. He is right to raise the point about skills and education. We are doing a lot of work to support the victims of cyber-crime and providing free guidance, tools and incident response advice through the National Cyber Security Centre, alongside targeted awareness campaigns. I give an assurance of the seriousness with which we take these matters.

Government Insourcing

9. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Government's insourcing policies. [907405]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): The Government are committed to delivering the largest wave of insourcing in a generation. As part of that, we have consulted on plans to introduce a public interest test before any further services are outsourced and we will publish the results soon. Let me be clear: this Government will end the decade-long drive to outsource our public services and we will do so to deliver better value for money for taxpayers and better services.

Graham Leadbitter: The Minister repeated the promise that was made nearly 18 months ago when the Labour party came into power. We are not seeing a massive amount of insourcing at the moment. I have constituents in Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey who work on three different military bases as contractors. Many used to be civil servants and they have lost considerable pension benefits as a result of that outsourcing. There are many others in a similar position in Department for Work and Pensions offices, the Cabinet Office itself and other Government offices throughout the country. When can those workers expect to see some fairness in their contractual arrangements?

Chris Ward: I know that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point about workers in his constituency before. We are making progress. The Employment Rights Act 2025 will make some progress, particularly by reinstating the two-tier code. We have consulted on a public interest test. I will bring forward our conclusions and proposals on that very soon, but as I say, the central point is that this Government will reverse the decade-long drive to outsource and bring more powers and resources in-house to deliver better value for taxpayers.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): When the Government finally bring the in-sourcing process to fruition, they will have a lot more purchasing power over the services they buy and the goods they procure. Can the Minister give the House a categorical assurance that every penny of British taxpayers' money spent using these new powers will be spent with British companies and British industries, so that we are supporting our own British economy?

Chris Ward: That is one of the Government's goals. Prime Minister Carney said he thought that Canada should be Canada's best customer. I think that Britain should be Britain's best customer, and we should work towards that. As I say, we will publish the proposals soon and I hope that we can make progress quickly.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I have been trying to get records from the Cabinet Office of a meeting held between Peter Thiel of Palantir, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings on 28 August 2019. I am getting conflicting data back. Is it in the public interest that the management of this information is being outsourced to Palantir?

Chris Ward: My understanding is that that has been dealt with by way of a reply to a written question that we have already put in the public domain.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that too many retired civil servants are waiting too long to be paid their pensions and lump sums. Seventy thousand people are still caught up waiting for past discrimination to be addressed under the McCloud remedy, and there are already concerns about Capita's management very early in its new contract period. Does the Minister share my concern that this is completely unacceptable and that urgent action, as called for by the Public and Commercial Services Union, is required? Can he provide the House with a full statement on Capita's performance in administering the civil service pension scheme at the earliest opportunity?

Chris Ward: I know that this issue is affecting a lot of constituents who are former civil servants. I have had a lot of letters on it; I am sure everyone else has as well. The Minister for the Cabinet Office met PCS about the issue recently. He has also, I believe, met the chief executive of Capita. We are committed to holding Capita to account. We will do so, and if it is okay with my hon. Friend, the Minister for the Cabinet Office will write back to him with a fuller statement.

Local Authorities: Business Investment

10. **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to enable local authorities to invest in local businesses. [907406]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): The Government are putting power, opportunity and resources in the hands of local communities and local businesses. Just last week, the House approved measures to reserve around £1 billion of contracts a year for local businesses in the UK. That will make a big difference to

businesses in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend. We are consulting on further steps and will bring them forward soon.

Tristan Osborne: I thank the Minister for that answer. Under the last Government, social enterprises were decimated by cuts to their budgets during austerity. We have many good social enterprises in my constituency, such as Medway Community Healthcare, Emmaus and Medway Voluntary Action. What more can be done to support social enterprises after 14 years of austerity?

Chris Ward: I agree that social enterprises are the backbone of many communities. I pay tribute to the ones my hon. Friend mentions, and there are some in my constituency as well. I agree that we need to do more to open up procurement and to support social enterprises, as well as SMEs and the voluntary sector more widely. We published a procurement statement last year to help to address that, but we will go further on it soon.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): East Sussex county council has launched a scheme to fine East Sussex Highways when its roadworks overrun and cause disruption to local businesses. A clear case is that of Victoria Place, where businesses such as Gianni's, Qualisea, Gr/ea Greek Cuisine and many more were disrupted by overrunning works to pedestrianise the street. Does the Minister agree that the fund should be used to help compensate those businesses for the disruption, and can the Cabinet Office support East Sussex county council to do just that?

Chris Ward: As half of my constituency is in East Sussex, I am always happy to support East Sussex county council. I think we are slightly off beam with the broad thrust of the topic, but I get the hon. Member's point about the frustration that constituents, including mine, have with overrunning works. We will follow up with him if there is anything further that the Cabinet Office can do.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

11. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the delivery of the infected blood compensation scheme. [907407]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The consultation on the compensation scheme closes today. I am grateful to all who have shared their views. The Government will consider the consultation carefully and respond within 12 weeks. I am pleased to tell the House that, as promised, the first payments to affected people were made by the end of 2025, and that as of 13 January, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has made over £2.4 billion in compensation offers.

Jeff Smith: I have a number of constituents affected by the infected blood scandal. Justice for them and for the other victims is long overdue, so I am pleased that the Government are making progress on this issue. May I ask how many interim £100,000 payments have been made to date to the estates of people who have sadly passed away?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am more than happy to write to my hon. Friend with an up-to-date, precise figure for interim payments. I should also mention that, as was raised with me in the House on a number of occasions in the autumn, inheritance tax bit on secondary beneficiaries, and I was pleased that this Government dealt with that issue at the Budget.

Government Use of Technology

13. **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made with Cabinet colleagues on improving the use of technology to implement Government priorities. [907411]

Mr Speaker: Welcome, Minister.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I am here to earn my salary. I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The Government will be taking a “digital first” approach to modernising public services. On Tuesday, I highlighted that we are expanding the No. 10 innovation fellowship programme to bring more specialist digital skills into Government. On everything from justice to health, people with those skills will be working on building in-house digital solutions to create more efficient, value-for-money public services.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my right hon. Friend for making sure that he is earning his keep. I welcome the written statement from the Minister for Digital Government and Data on the plan to use artificial intelligence to boost productivity in public services. It is right that we look at all avenues, but I am concerned about the gender and racial bias in artificial intelligence, which many studies have shown, particularly as regards health outcomes. My right hon. Friend may be aware of a King’s College London study, which showed racial bias in AI when it comes to heart scans. The data shows that black and minority ethnic people have worse health outcomes, but we want them to engage in these programmes, so that they are not left behind. What steps is he taking to help identify and, most importantly, resolve these biases, so that our public services and AI work in step to make sure that no community is left behind?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important question. These AI solutions are only as good as their ability to serve the public fairly; equality should be built in at the start. The AI Safety Institute and officials at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology work across Government to ensure that those values and ethics are built into programmes as they are developed by the Government.

Emergency Preparedness

14. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to provide households with information on emergency preparedness. [907412]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): The Government’s Prepare website provides emergency preparedness advice to the public, including information about signing up for emergency alerts and warnings and preparing their home for emergencies. By using this

advice, including the downloadable household emergency plan, people can improve their emergency preparedness, regardless of the cause of the emergency.

Caroline Voaden: As the Minister will know, a recent gas outage in my constituency left thousands of people without power, many for several days, and Cornwall has recently seen huge disruption from storm Goretti. Those incidents highlight how vulnerable households can be when essential services are disrupted. Given impending climate breakdown and the increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment, will he outline whether the Government are considering any kind of personalised, nationwide information campaign to help people prepare for a crisis? Not everyone will look at the gov.uk website. The Dutch Government have recently sent a 33-page booklet on emergency preparedness to every home in the country, so that people know what they need to do in a crisis.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the points the hon. Lady raises. We look very carefully at what international allies are saying about these matters. I am concerned to hear about the situation in her constituency. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero works closely with industry, regulators and other stakeholders to improve and maintain the resilience and security of energy infrastructure. When incidents occur, as they have in her constituency—even exceptionally disruptive ones—industry has tried and tested response plans to minimise disruption to customers as quickly as possible. That said, I am keen to further increase our resilience, so if she would like to write to me, I will look closely at what she has to say.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The advice from the previous Government was that households should stockpile three day’s-worth of non-perishable food and water. This week, *The Guardian* has reported that other European countries are looking at creating strategic food reserves. Can the Minister tell us a little more about his thinking on these issues?

Dan Jarvis: I could, and I welcome my hon. Friend’s interest and expertise in this area. The Government’s Prepare website includes a suggested list of supplies to improve household resilience, including non-perishable food. I take a close interest in the messaging of our partners in Europe on this subject. The Government are committed to ensuring that the whole of society—particularly the most vulnerable—are best prepared for and supported during crises.

Topical Questions

T1. [907420] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): This week, I gave a speech recognising the public’s frustration with our public services. I rejected the Conservative party’s offer of continued cuts and decline, and I rejected the offer of the populist parties, which just want to tear everything down and leave people on their own. Labour will build public services anew, so that accessing services in the future will feel more like online banking or online shopping, and so that public services are there when people need them most.

I have tabled a written ministerial statement about other changes in how we perform our duties in government. There will be new taskforces; the expansion of the innovation fellowship scheme; the new national school of government and public services; and reforms to the recruitment criteria, bonuses and performance management of the senior civil service. All of those are spelled out in the written ministerial statement, and I am happy to answer any further questions today.

Sarah Olney: In his speech this week, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out his plan for the future of the civil service, in which he envisioned further sackings in a digital transformation. Last week, we saw the untested and potentially dangerous nature of artificial intelligence when the chief constable of West Midlands police admitted that his force had used AI to come to its verdict that Maccabi Tel Aviv fans should be banned from attending their European game away to Aston Villa. As Government Departments are already using AI to make critical and life-changing decisions, can the Minister clarify whether he plans to replace diligent civil servants with artificial intelligence?

Darren Jones: In the first instance, I am trying to put in place computers that work. Before we even get to artificial intelligence, we need to build some pretty basic services—services like those that the public are used to using in the private sector, but that are not used for public services because of 14 years of austerity from the Conservative party.

T2. [907421] **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): In Scarborough, British electric bus manufacturer Alexander Dennis employs more than 700 people and is vital to our local economy. Tax-funded bus procurement should support UK industry, rather than fund international competitors. However, with the social value requirement in public procurement set at only 10% and price still weighted at 70%, social value has little to no real impact. Will the Minister look at increasing the social value requirement in public procurement to support our great British—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a very important question, and I fully support it, but we have to shorten the questions to get others in. The Minister will give a good example in his reply.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): My hon. Friend raises a really important issue that affects her constituency. As I said earlier, we need to do more to support great British businesses like Alexander Dennis. In the consultation, we are looking at reforming social value. I think it needs to go further; there should be meaningful social value that really helps local communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): At the risk of overworking the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, I would like to ask him a question. It is boring but important; my last boring question was to the Paymaster General. The Opposition have found that his Department often refuses to release information to Members in response to parliamentary questions, but then releases it in response to freedom of information requests. Does he agree that, in principle, that is wrong?

Darren Jones: I do, and I am happy to take a look at that.

Alex Burghart: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that reply; I really appreciate it. In his role as chief of staff to the Prime Minister—

Darren Jones indicated dissent.

Alex Burghart: In his role as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, will he please write to all other Government Departments to make sure that the good example that will now be set by the Cabinet Office is followed by other Departments?

Darren Jones: Mr Speaker, you will know that I take accountability to Parliament very seriously, as do the whole Government. As I said in my first answer, I am happy to take a look at that.

T3. [907422] **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): The SNP Government dropped the ball on an £11 million investment, led by Rolls-Royce, in building a specialist welding centre on the Clyde—a vital opportunity to support the Royal Navy. It is only thanks to this Labour Government providing £2.5 million of support to the programme that it is going ahead. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that, at a time of rising global uncertainty, my constituents deserve better than the flaky student union politics of the SNP Government?

Darren Jones: I could not agree more, and I thank my hon. Friend for making such an important case for his constituency, as he did yesterday at Prime Minister's questions. Whether on defence, nuclear energy, or fixing public services, the SNP have failed Scotland for far too long, and only with Anas Sarwar as leader of the Scottish Government from May will things start to get better.

T6. [907425] **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): May I please push for a clearer answer to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart)? Will the Cabinet Office set up a European relations Select Committee?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): That is a matter for Parliament, not for Government. There is certainly a European Union relations secretariat in the Cabinet Office, with some absolutely excellent civil servants, and I am very proud to work with them on leading the negotiations.

T4. [907423] **Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): It was great to be at the headquarters of what3words for the speech by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster about moving fast and fixing things. Three words to describe the previous Government are: total utter shambles. Does my right hon. Friend agree that public services must be not only value for money, but delivered quickly, and must have Labour values at their very heart?

Darren Jones: I could not agree more. Perhaps with those what3words, more Tory MPs can find their way to the Benches next time.

T7. [907427] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Last week, the Government briefing suggested that the security services were “relaxed” about the proposed Chinese mega-embassy, yet this week, we have learned that MI5 has been asked to reroute sensitive financial cables because of it. Will the Minister for Security explain how both those statements can be true, and tell the House which one reflects the Government’s assessment of the security risk and threat from that embassy?

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): As I made clear in a lengthy and detailed statement to Parliament earlier this week, we will not get into the technical detail of the mitigations. I was reassured to see the letter from the director general of MI5 and the director of GCHQ, in which they pointed out that there are clear security advantages from the proposal. I also sought to make the point that we have agreed with the Chinese Government that there will be a reduction in their current diplomatic footprint from seven sites down to one.

T5. [907424] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): While Opposition parties fight over who can promise the biggest cuts to our vital public service, Labour believes in an active state, working alongside British businesses to drive growth. Does my hon. Friend agree that we can do more to ensure that British companies are prioritised in procurement?

Chris Ward: I absolutely do. As I have said previously, Britain should become Britain’s biggest customer. We have a procurement budget of £400 billion a year. In my opinion, we do not use that well enough to support British companies, but I am working with the Chancellor and colleagues across the Government to make sure that we do so in future.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Last year, in their UK-EU trade deal, the Government sold out British fishermen, giving away 12 years of access to our fishing waters, and we have seen that the Government have form in using our fishermen as pawns in negotiations. Will a Cabinet Office Minister please confirm that, in any trade negotiation or sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, no part of our fishing industry will be returned to the common fisheries policy?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We are not returning to the common fisheries policy, and the hon. Lady is completely wrong in what she just said. The medium-term stability that we have delivered for our fishing industry will mean a £360 million investment in upgrading our fleet and in our coastal communities. If she opposes that money going into our fishing communities, she should say so. Secondly—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Harriet Cross: Sorry, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. We got there. I call Jim Dickson.

T8. [907429] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): Residents in Dartford regularly tell me that they want every pound of public spending used to best effect. Will the Minister update the House on the progress that is being made on cracking down on fraudsters and ensuring that UK taxpayers get back the money they are owed?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons):

As with so many things, the previous Government gave up, accepted fraud as inevitable, and stopped tackling it properly. By contrast, this Government are delivering the most significant package of measures to tackle fraud and error in recent history. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast that those measures will deliver £14.6 billion of savings by 2030.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the delay to the pension payment of civil servants who left employment under the voluntary exit scheme? A number of constituents have complained to me that they have been left without any income, due to the delay by the pension administrator Capita. Will the Minister take personal control of the situation, and will he update the House at some point on contingencies and a new escalation process for people who are affected?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. If he writes to me on those specific points, I will be happy to look at them. I have seen the chief executive of Capita and have made clear the standards that I expect. Capita should be in no doubt about the contractual tools available to me, which I will employ to drive performance.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): As chair of the Labour rural research group, I continually hear about the challenges facing rural communities, including access to education and transport infrastructure. Will the Minister set out the specific steps that the Cabinet Office is taking to ensure that rural voices and rural communities are meaningfully represented throughout Government decision making?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for the great work that she does in Parliament and within the Labour party as a leading voice for rural communities across our country. On Government action, I point her to the rural taskforce, a cross-departmental group looking at how policies taken across Government can have a positive impact in rural communities while recognising the unique risk that we want to mitigate.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Paymaster General has told the House this morning, on more than one occasion, just how wonderful his new EU deal will be for British food and drink manufacturers, so why is he refusing to appear in front of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee to discuss the matter in more detail?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To be frank, when we have the final negotiation and the legal text I will of course be willing to appear before the Select Committee at the appropriate moment. If the hon. Gentleman looks at how many Select Committees I have appeared before, in this place and in the Lords, he will find that it is a very high number.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): The 10-year bus pipeline is yet to be published, and a media report about the investigation by the National Cyber Security Centre and the Department for Transport into kill switches suggests that 700-plus Chinese buses on British roads

have remote disabling technology. Can the Minister confirm whether the Government are delaying the publication of the 10-year bus pipeline until the report on Chinese kill switches is concluded?

Dan Jarvis: I believe that my hon. Friend has had a meeting with a Transport Minister to discuss these matters, but I would be very happy to discuss them with him further.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill is still under consideration in the Scottish Parliament and has not been passed, contrary to the views of a number of Members of this House. This week, a number of measures had to be removed from the Bill because they were not compliant with the powers of the Scottish Parliament, but Scottish Ministers suggested that they were in an ongoing discussion with the UK Government about a future section 104 order. Can Ministers update the House on the current discussions with the Scottish Government? And do they agree with me that ultimately—

Mr Speaker: Order. These are topicals, David—you have had your go. Come on.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Government take a neutral position in relation to that Bill. It is also important, both recently and going forward, that we work sensitively with all the devolved Administrations.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): On Tuesday, the Chief Secretary set out plans to “promote the doers” across the civil service by establishing the new national School for Government and Public Services. Will he tell the House what steps he plans to take to ensure that Whitehall is focused on delivering services that actually work really well for my residents in Exeter?

Darren Jones: My assessment is that government conflates policy and delivery. That is why we will be promoting people from the frontline into the more senior levels of the senior civil service, to make sure that we understand the customer experience and how citizens expect their services to work more than has been the case in the past.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I questioned the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), earlier about the U-turn on compulsory digital IDs. Much to our confusion, he said that there had been no U-turn. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster clear this up? Is digital ID going to be compulsory—yes or no?

Darren Jones: There has been no U-turn—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member has asked the same question twice and has had the same answer. If he would like, I will write to him in plain English and he can read it a third time.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): North West Leicestershire is home to East Midlands airport, which carries the highest volume of small parcel

air freight in the UK. In the light of the new trading agreements with the EU, can the Minister update me on how we will ensure that small businesses can make the most of these additional trading benefits, for current and future agreements?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The deal that we struck at the UK-EU summit will cut costs and red tape for businesses that import and export to the EU. This Government are committed to removing barriers to trade; it is a shame that the Conservative party is not.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the Chief Secretary for meeting me to discuss the £20 million Pride in Place money awarded to Portsmouth. To boost and expand those funds in my city and make investment lasting, will the Chief Secretary tell me and my constituents more about his work with the new Office for the Impact Economy, collaborating with social investors and philanthropists so that we can boost funding and create much-needed change in local communities?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for the brilliant work that she is doing in her constituency with this historic money from Pride in Place, whereby local people get to decide how to spend money on their own communities. As she has alluded to, the Office for the Impact Economy will work with social investors, philanthropists and other organisations to match up funding in order to increase that money even further and have a longer-lasting impact on local communities.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Government for their work on cutting the cost of living. Can the Minister say how the Cabinet Office is supporting other Government Departments to continue this work?

Darren Jones: As part of the Growth and Living Standards Cabinet Committee, the Cabinet Office co-ordinates Ministers across Government to ensure that we are working as hard as possible to get inflation and costs down and make a real difference to the living standards of the public across the country.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Boots has stores in Castlepoint, Southbourne Grove and Boscombe high street in my constituency. I met Boots in Parliament to hear about what it is doing to tackle shoplifting. In London, it is working with the Metropolitan police, who plug into Boots’s own reporting system to avoid the need for duplicate reporting. I am calling for the same to come to Bournemouth, but plugging all businesses into all police forces will take a lot of work. Will the Government consider having a national police app that is opt-in, like the national health service app, so people do not have to go through the faff of reporting their demographic information and so they can get on with reporting crime faster? That would be a lot of help to Karl, the store manager at Aldi in Boscombe.

Darren Jones: That is a very good idea—I have had similar issues in my own constituency. I will make sure that that idea is passed on to the Home Secretary. Police reforms will be coming to the House shortly.

Business of the House

10.36 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 26 January will include:

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

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

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

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

FRIDAY 30 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 February will include:

MONDAY 2 FEBRUARY—If necessary, consideration of Lords message on the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill.

TUESDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Universal Credit (Removal Of Two Child Limit) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (17th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition; subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 5 FEBRUARY—General debate on road safety, followed by a general debate on obligation to assess the risk of genocide under international law in relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 6 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House for that update.

The House will know that I am obsessive about improving education, skills and life opportunities for young people; I know that the Leader of the House, with his own background, shares that passion. I cannot let this week pass without noting that on Tuesday our new specialist technology and engineering university in Hereford, the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering, formally launched its new autonomous robotics degree, which is sponsored, designed and delivered in collaboration with the British Army. I thank the Defence ministerial team, and in particular the Minister for the Armed Forces, for coming up to Hereford and supporting that. I believe that it is the UK's first undergraduate drones technologies degree. It starts in September 2026, which is light speed compared with the normal progression of these things in higher education. It will be of inestimable value not only to young people up and down the country, but to the defence of the realm and in a host of other sectors, including food and agriculture, infrastructure and energy.

Otherwise, what a week this has been! Rising international tensions, heated public disagreement, desperate attempts at diplomatic solutions—and that is just Brooklyn Beckham's Instagram account. Talking of elites, we have had the amusing spectacle this week of that self-proclaimed friend of the people, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), hoovering up the free food and glugging down the champagne with the global bullshitterati in Davos.

Mr Speaker: Order. No, no, no, no.

Jesse Norman *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No, I have not even spoken.

Jesse Norman *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am going to speak first. I want temperate language, and I am sure you would love to withdraw that little message you had for us.

Jesse Norman: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to exercise my quadriceps on several occasions. Yes, of course I unhesitatingly withdraw that appalling term from the record.

All this, I should say, comes from the hon. Member for Clacton after a lifetime spent denouncing Davos as a hub of evil globalist elites where, in his words, there is “no space for the little man”.

At least we know that that is not true any more. Oh, the irony of it all, Mr Speaker! A wildly anti-establishment figure and long-time member of the Reform club—no relation—now joining the globalist elites. Can it be long before he aspires to join the Garrick club, or indeed joins the Prime Minister in professing publicly that he prefers Davos to Westminster?

Amid all this nonsense, other, very serious changes are under way. Last week, the Government published the results of the latest auction for renewable energy, which set a floor price for renewables of £91 per kilowatt-hour. No one in this House disputes the importance of green energy, or the importance of renewables in the energy mix—[*Interruption.*] Few sane people dispute the value of green energy, but energy prices are already unfeasibly high for British businesses and, despite the Government's promises, are set to go higher still, especially once the cost of new nuclear is added in. The effect of the policy will be to punish taxpayers, and of course bill payers, but it is also a form of corporate welfare, because the only benefits will come to the better-off.

Meanwhile, the Government have decided to ignore North sea oil and gas, gravely damage the north-east of Scotland, undermine the employment of thousands of skilled workers, in disagreement with their own unions, and import gas from overseas at greater cost, with more carbon and more carbon miles. In its own way, this is a repetition of the private finance initiative scandal of 30 years ago, in which the country paid tens of billions of pounds more than it should have for public infrastructure, and a lot of wealthy people in the City of London—now resident in overseas countries—made out like bandits.

In 1919, John Maynard Keynes wrote a little book called “The Economic Consequences of the Peace” about the disastrous effects of the treaty of Versailles and the demands that it made for payment from the

other side in the first world war. I am not suggesting for a second that there is any comparison between these times and those, in Weimar Germany and the rest of it, but I will say that we are facing severe economic constraints as a result of energy prices. I therefore ask the Leader of the House whether we can have a debate on the economic consequences of the Energy Secretary.

Sir Alan Campbell: The shadow Leader of the House has clearly had his Weetabix this morning.

Through you, Mr Speaker, may I wish everyone well who is celebrating Burns night this coming Sunday? This weekend is also the annual Big Garden Birdwatch, when the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds asks people to observe their garden for an hour and count the number of birds they see. I understand, however, that Members on the official Opposition Benches have been warned not to take part by the Leader of the Opposition, who says that they should be spending less time watching the bird table and more time watching the shadow Cabinet table. There is clearly concern about more migration from her party to join the lesser spotted Member for Clacton, but surely there is a limit to the number of cuckoos that will fit into the Reform nest.

Before I get on to the remarks of the shadow Leader of the House, let me turn to some other things that have happened this week. We have announced a consultation on further measures to keep children safe online. It will consider the options of banning social media for children below a certain age and raising the digital age of consent. We are committed to keeping children and young people safe online, and colleagues from all parts of the House will have heard from their constituents on this matter, and the Government are listening to those concerns.

The Government also published the water White Paper, setting out a new vision for water and transforming the water system for good. It sets out clear powers for a new regulator, delivering tougher oversight and stronger accountability for water companies, which is consistently raised with me at business questions. We also published the warm homes plan, and we are doubling down on support for home upgrades. We have set out our plans to help households and support thousands through more clean energy jobs.

In response to the shadow Leader of the House, I certainly congratulate his constituency on the developments in higher education. He is a man who hides his light under a bushel—perhaps not quite so much this morning—because he has played a huge role in those developments in higher education in his constituency, and we should recognise that.

The shadow Leader of the House said that no one disputes the importance of green energy, but I think he is stretching the point a bit. It is not simply Members of Reform; there are still Members in his party who dispute the importance of green jobs. He talks about the benefit to the better off, but I remind him that every household will benefit from the £150 cut to energy bills, and it is not just households that will benefit. The other side of it is the thousands of green jobs, not least in my constituency and my region. Finally, I welcome his conversion, perhaps belatedly, to Keynesianism. It is perhaps another sign of his not quite fitting in with the mainstream of his party.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): For the past nine years, the church of St Chad and St Mark in my Wolverhampton West constituency has welcomed Iranian refugees into its congregation who have fled the persecution of the oppressive Iranian regime. Last week, we heard the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister speak about the total abhorrence of the killings, the violence and the repression to which protesters in Iran have recently been subjected. That has mainly been by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, who have also intimidated and harassed dissidents abroad. When will this Government proscribe and ban the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, as other countries have done already?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. As we have said before, we will not hesitate to use the most effective measures against the Iranian regime and the IRGC. We have already implemented 550 sanctions against Iranian-linked individuals and organisations, and we placed Iran on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. The Foreign Secretary made a statement this week, and my hon. Friend may wish to attend Foreign Office questions next week to make his point directly to Ministers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Before I begin, I have to pull the Leader of the House up, because he did not respond to one of the critical points that the shadow Leader of the House made. I, for one, would like to hear what the Leader of the House has to say about the feud in the Beckham family.

St Helier hospital is older than the NHS itself, is sited in the heart of my constituency and is crumbling. It was placed within the new hospitals programme set up by the Conservative Government, but they totally failed to deliver on it. This Government put it on a new timetable, stretching out delivery over the coming decades. Last week, the National Audit Office published an assessment of how the Government have performed so far. There is some good news for the Government: the NAO said that they have put the programme on a firmer financial footing for the long term, but the NAO warns of potential further delays, particularly to those hospitals with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, which look set to miss their deadline in 2030.

I have also heard that some of the phase 1 schemes have not kept pace with the programme and not drawn down on all the capital allocated to them. That could present an opportunity for other trusts perhaps to do smaller projects in the interim, such as the extension of the emergency department that my local NHS trust is asking for, or possibly even to move our scheme from phase 2 into phase 1, if the trust can prove that it is ready to go.

It has been about a year since we have had a substantive update from the Government on the new hospitals programme. The National Audit Office report last week raises lots of questions, so will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Health Minister to come to the Dispatch Box to answer them?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman acknowledges, the RAAC replacement scheme has been folded into the new hospital programme—a major Government plan to rebuild and refurbish NHS hospitals. We believe that

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this will give a greater return on investment, enhance digital technology and improve emergency performance. Patients and staff deserve safe, modern hospitals and an NHS that they can rely on. As the hon. Gentleman has said, the reality is that plans were announced by the previous Government without the money ever being there to pay for them. I can offer him a meeting with Ministers to raise his constituency matters, if that is what he wishes, but I will also draw to the attention of Ministers his remarks about the recent NAO report. I am sure they will be willing to update the House.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Jono, Sam and the rest of the team at the GOAT sports bar in Nantwich have breathed new life into the town. Unfortunately, last month Jono's stepdad suffered a cardiac arrest while in the bar and tragically passed away. The team at GOAT are now leading efforts to turn that tragedy into something positive by fundraising for defibrillators in the town, having already raised enough for six defibrillators and having had a further defibrillator directly donated. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending their efforts, and will he encourage people and services across Crewe and Nantwich to support this effort to save lives?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in commending the GOAT sports bar's fundraising efforts following that tragic loss. Our community automated external defibrillators fund has recently delivered thousands of new AEDs to local communities, but as always, local communities are best placed to take the lead in providing them where they are most needed. I think this would be a very good topic for a Westminster Hall debate, because I am sure that colleagues from across the House share my hon. Friend's concerns.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As you will know, Mr Speaker, reform occasionally moves very slowly in this House, so I thank the Leader of the House for confirming that the experiment on dealing with estimates day debates, which started in 2018, will now be confirmed going forward. I would be grateful if he could give us early warning of when the estimates day debates will take place this year, so that we can begin the process of allocating the debates.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, there will be a Westminster Hall debate next Tuesday on UK bus manufacturing. On Thursday, there will be a debate on non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, followed by a debate on protecting and restoring river habitats. On Tuesday 3 February, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on town and city centre safety. On Thursday 5 February, there will be a debate on secondary breast cancer and a further debate, which we will announce next week.

We now have a queue of debates for the Chamber, which will take us to the summer recess. We have a queue of Westminster Hall debates for Tuesdays, which will take us to the Whitsun recess, and we are processing those debates as fast as we can. We will fill any time that the Leader of the House can allocate to us.

It has been drawn to my attention this week that a company called Al-Masirah has been operating a TV channel in this country for 10 years. It is owned by the Houthis, a proscribed organisation in the United States, and there is a risk that these people are using the opportunity to avoid our visa system, to launder money and to encourage terrorist activities in this country. This is obviously a serious concern for national security. I ask the Leader of the House to encourage the Security Minister to come and give us a statement on what action will be taken to make sure that the company is in compliance with our rules and regulations. If it is not, it should be removed from the UK so that our country is made safe.

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his update and for the work of his Committee. I will confirm the estimates days as soon as I can, and I have heard his request for more time. As he knows, we endeavour to comply with such requests as best we can.

On the issue of the Al-Masirah TV channel, we keep all evidence and potential designations under close review. We will consider targets, guided by the objectives of the relevant sanctions regime and the evidence that is provided. We do not presently proscribe the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, but the situation remains under constant review, and we continue to use our full diplomatic toolkit, including sanctions, to constrain their activities. I will make sure that the relevant Minister hears the hon. Gentleman's concern and that he gets a response.

Mr Speaker: I call Perran Moon.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. In the 2021 census, despite the disturbing absence of a tick box, over 117,000 Cornish people registered their identity by having to click "Other" and then typing in "Cornish". With the current consultation on the 2031 census due to close on 4 February, does the Leader of the House agree with me that this farce must end, and that the Office for National Statistics must add a Cornish identifier tick box to the 2031 census?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a stalwart campaigner for his Cornish heritage. He consistently raises the profile of the Cornish language in this House, and I commend him for that because it is an important part of the identity of his constituents. I support him in calling for those who wish to respond to the consultation to do so before it closes next month, and I am sure that those at the ONS will have heard his words this morning.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Like so many Members of this House, I am blessed with the amazing canals criss-crossing my constituency that are maintained by the Canal & River Trust. Sadly, two bridges in the villages of Brewood and Penkridge have collapsed, and local residents cannot use them or access them, which is causing a great deal of inconvenience. Could we have a debate in this House about the funding that the Canal & River Trust receives, because it quite simply does not go far enough to maintain these amazing heritage assets that are used every day?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join the right hon. Gentleman in praising the fantastic work of the Canal & River Trust. I am trying to work out exactly where its funding comes

from, but when I have done that, I will raise this with the relevant Department. Because of the proud heritage of canals in our country, that sounds to me as if it would make an excellent topic for a debate—perhaps an Adjournment debate—so that other Members can contribute on this very important matter.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Replacing Oxford's Kennington bridge would secure critical transport links and unblock the Oxford flood alleviation scheme. Having OFAS named in the Government's infrastructure strategy would protect jobs, homes and people. How can we ensure that Departments work with each other, including on the forthcoming structures fund, to support such projects that have positive outcomes for a range of Government priorities, and can we have a debate on this subject in Government time?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her award in the new year's honours, which was extremely well received and very well deserved. I thank her for raising this matter, and I know she has been very vocal about the replacement of the Kennington rail bridge. She has already raised this matter with Ministers, but I would be happy to facilitate a meeting with them to allow her to continue to make her case for her constituents.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The matter of West Midlands police and the Maccabi Tel Aviv football match has rightly been raised in this place, but does the Leader of the House agree that when police conduct falls well below acceptable standards, as it did in the west midlands, elected police and crime commissioners really should take full responsibility and show leadership, and must be held to account for their actions?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Home Secretary has been absolutely clear about the failure of leadership that has harmed the reputation of and eroded public confidence in West Midlands police. The ultimate responsibility for the failure rests with the chief constable, but although we have given a commitment about their future, we would expect police and crime commissioners to step up to the mark as well. The Home Secretary has been very clear about seeking the power to intervene so that chief constables can be held directly to account.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Liberal Democrat-run Hertfordshire county council has been looking at closing several village schools in my constituency, with a decision due soon on Albury primary school. I will not ask the Leader of the House to comment on a particular cases, but from speaking to parents and local communities, it is absolutely clear that these schools not only provide a fantastic education, but are right at the heart of rural life. Can we have a debate on the importance of village schools and what more we can do nationally to support them?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. He is a very keen campaigner on behalf of his constituents. There is an opportunity to raise it directly with Ministers during question time on Monday or perhaps to seek an Adjournment debate on the matter. His local authority funding has increased by

8.1%, so it is important that local schools are prioritised. I will also ensure that the relevant Minister hears his concerns.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Changes to income tax reporting from April mean that childminders need to claim tax relief on specific purchases, rather than the current 10% wear and tear allowance. Deanne, one of my local childminders, points out that wear and tear is a daily reality for the few professionals who face very young children in the stages of potty training, sickness, and learning to eat with a spoon and fork and drink with an open cup. Those clients can put carpets and furniture through their paces! Could the Leader of the House speak to his Treasury colleagues about reinstating the wear and tear allowance or introducing an alternative mechanism to recognise the real costs of providing home-based childcare?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady raises a very important matter. I give her a commitment that I will speak to my colleagues in the Treasury to see what further support we can give to people working in that sector.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): My constituent Katie Brett's little sister was brutally murdered when she was 16 years of age. Katie is campaigning for Sasha's law to give victims' families longer to apply to the unduly lenient sentence scheme. It is a duty of a Labour Government to make sure that the rights of victims and their families always come first. As the Victims and Courts Bill progresses through the other place, will the Leader of the House help to ensure that the Government listen to those who, like Katie, are fighting for justice for their loved ones?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important case and I commend Katie's campaign. The murder of Sasha Brett was a tragedy, and my thoughts are with Katie and the rest of the family. We have invested a record £550 million over three years into specialist services to support victims and witnesses, but we are also clear that a lot more needs to be done. My hon. Friend is right to say that the Victims and Courts Bill is making its way through the House of Lords, and I will make sure that the Ministers responsible for the Bill, and the Ministry of Justice, have heard her today.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Since the Budget, the hospitality industry has been very anxious. We have heard from the Treasury and the Chancellor that a package is coming forward. I spoke in the Budget debate asking when it will come forward, we have had urgent questions about it, and we have had an Opposition day debate. Even when debating the Finance (No. 2) Bill, we directly asked the Minister when the package is coming forward. We still need those answers for pubs, restaurants, cafés and hotels; they need to know who is in and who is out. Will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come to the House next week to make a statement on exactly this subject in order to end the anxiety in the hospitality industry?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman will know the seriousness of this matter for every constituency. The Chancellor has made it clear that we are looking at this, and I shall put it this way: in the coming days, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will get what he asks for.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): My constituent Mary plans to retire next week. Despite applying to resolve her civil service pension in early summer last year, it has still not been resolved. I wrote to Capita about this immediately, but currently there is little prospect of Mary's pension being resolved before she plans to retire. We are seeing too many of these prolonged delays cropping up. Will the Leader of the House support me in calling on Capita to spell out clearly an urgent resolution to this and all other cases at serious risk of being prolonged?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is not the first Member to raise this important matter. I understand that Capita has recognised the scale of the issue and is recruiting additional staff to deal with it. Like my hon. Friend, I urge Capita to get on with it. I know that this will bring little comfort to Mary and many others, but I hope that there can be progress. Should my hon. Friend seek a meeting with a Minister to discuss these matters, I will arrange it for him.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): When I make inquiries on behalf of constituents about delays at the Child Maintenance Service, I, too, often face a long wait—a wait for a response—despite chasing. The longest delay is currently four months and 20 days. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on this issue, so the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions can hear about the harm this is doing?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady raises a concern that is felt by Members across the House. I will ensure the Secretary of State is aware of her concerns and, if necessary, brings forward an update on our plans for improvement.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Last week I visited the YMCA centre on Aylsham Road in Norwich, which is doing incredibly work to address youth homelessness. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating 170 years of YMCA Norfolk this year, and make time for a debate on how best to support vulnerable young people to access safe, secure and affordable housing?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to champion the work of the YMCA centre in her constituency. I think we could echo that in every constituency where the YMCA has a presence; it does an absolutely fantastic job. We are committed to ending homelessness and have invested £3.5 billion over the next three years. I encourage her to apply for an Adjournment debate to highlight the important work the YMCA is doing, and the other measures necessary to support vulnerable young people to access safe, secure and affordable housing.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): The Leader of the House will remember that nearly a decade ago, on 17 November 2016, I asked a question on the subject of the resettlement and subsequent self-determination of the Chagos islanders. The then Minister, Sir Alan Duncan, shamefully said:

“we do not consider that the right of self-determination actually applies to the Chagossians.”—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 386.]

Given that that position was taken by the previous Conservative Government, and that the current Labour Government have gone further still by surrendering

their home without consent, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the right of self-determination for the Chagossian people, and end the bipartisan failure and injustice that has left an entire people without a voice for 60 years?

Sir Alan Campbell: I would gently point out that Alan Duncan was a Minister in the Government that the hon. Gentleman supported. On the Chagos deal and self-determination, the base is vital for our intelligence and defence. Our deal provides certainty going forward and is supported by allies. It is also going through this House, so there is a chance that it will come back for further discussion and debate, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be able to make his case when that happens.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): WASPI women are still waiting for justice and closure. The out of court agreement reached in December between campaigners and the Government saw the Department for Work and Pensions agree to a time-limited period to conduct a review. However, the parliamentary ombudsman investigation took six years alone before reaching its findings and recommendations on compensation. Given how many constituencies and constituents are affected, may we have a debate in Government time on the impact of this issue and urge the Government to come forward with a firm proposal?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Secretary of State has made it clear that he is looking at this matter as a matter of urgency and will bring forward his proposals at the earliest opportunity. My hon. Friend will have the opportunity to comment at that point.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The news has broken that overnight the first asylum seekers have been moved into Crowborough barracks in Sussex. The Minister for Border Security and Asylum stood at the Dispatch Box and told me that the Stanwell hotel in my constituency would not be kept open as an asylum hotel for a minute longer than necessary. Will the Leader of the House please use his good offices to encourage the Home Office to come here on Monday to make a statement, which I am sure would be of interest across the House, to find out where the asylum seekers that have been moved into Crowborough barracks have been drawn from?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's concerns to the attention of the relevant Minister. It is important that we make progress on this matter, and that does involve change, but it is also important that Members are kept up to date. I will get the hon. Gentleman an update.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): The House will be aware of the horrific case of sexual abuse that took place in one of my local nurseries. The parents involved, who have shown amazing resilience, feel very strongly that if the nursery had had CCTV, the perpetrator, Vincent Chan, would not have been able to get away with his horrific crimes for seven whole years. Will the Leader of the House help me to persuade the Government that we need mandatory CCTV in local nurseries, with secure local monitoring and restricted remote access for parents, in order to safeguard our children?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. She is doing an excellent job advocating for her constituents in this appalling case. The Secretary of State for Education will be appointing an expert panel to inform new guidance for the sector on the use of digital devices and CCTV in relation to safeguarding and to consider whether the use of CCTV should be mandatory. The Department will welcome Member engagement in that review.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Residents in Sutton and Cheam are seeing the very real impact of the cost of living crisis. It may sound like a cliché, but they are seeing the impact on their energy bills, their rent and particularly their food and grocery prices. Staples such as eggs, milk and butter have increased exponentially, as has the price of treats like chocolate—it is now 45p for a Freddo bar, which shows the scale of the crisis more than anything. Will the Government schedule a debate to discuss how we can tangibly bring about solutions to the cost of living crisis, including consideration of measures such as negotiating a bespoke customs union deal? I am sure the Leader of the House will tell me that is not in the Government's mandate, but it is definitely in mine, having stood on a Liberal Democrat manifesto to push that matter if elected.

Sir Alan Campbell: Tackling the cost of living is a priority for this Government. It is not just a matter of picking out one particular aspect; it is about ensuring that every Department has a role to play in reducing the cost of living for our constituents, and that they get on and do that. As well as Freddos, the hon. Gentleman mentioned energy bills; I remind him that we have reduced energy bills by £150 for every household, including his constituents. The Government's position on a deal with the EU is very clear; the Minister for the Cabinet Office spelt it out earlier today. There will be ample opportunity going forward to discuss the merits of that deal.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I recently visited Community Dental Services in my constituency, which is supporting the roll-out of our very welcome supervised toothbrushing in schools programme. As we know, dental decay is the leading cause of hospital admissions for young children. Despite that, a number of schools in my area are declining to take part. I therefore ask the Leader of the House to find Government time for a debate on how we can improve the uptake of this vital policy.

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important issue and rightly points out that dental health is vital. We have provided £11 million of funding for local authorities to support toothbrushing programmes starting in April, along with a five-year partnership with the private sector. She raises the issue of schools' involvement; it is ultimately a matter for the schools themselves, but I encourage them to make best use of that funding and to take part in the programme. It is so important to children's health going forward. To add further detail, should my hon. Friend seek an Adjournment debate on these matters, I am sure other Members would join her in expressing their concern.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Has the fish supper had its chips? Fish and chips were so critical to morale during wartime that Churchill insisted

they were never rationed, but now my constituent Romano Petrucci, the proprietor of the Central Café in my hometown of Stranraer, warns that this staple is becoming an unaffordable luxury. I appreciate that the Government do not set the price of fish and chips, but this is none the less a cross-cutting issue for Government, whether it be through fish quotas, energy prices or the cost of hiring. Having tried and failed to get either a Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate on this matter, I ask for guidance on how we might air this issue here.

Sir Alan Campbell: As the Member of Parliament whose constituency has the best fish and chips in the country—[*Interruption.*] That is simply a matter of record, not a matter of dispute. It is obvious that the price of fish and chips has gone up in recent times, and there are many reasons for that, but everyone involved in that food chain deserves to be properly paid for the valuable work that they do. I would gently point out, as a Member of Parliament whose constituency has a fishing fleet, that the price of fish often reflects the very high price for fishermen, who go out and do what is still the most dangerous peacetime job, so let us not undersell the importance of fisheries.

The hon. Member says that the Government have things in their gift that they can do, and I am sure the Government will be looking at that, but should he seek a meeting with the Minister responsible for fisheries, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), to discuss these matters, I am sure I could arrange it.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): It is with concern that I raise the issue of FIFA deepening its commercial ties to the betting industry by letting gambling operators livestream world cup games this year. Will the Leader of the House ask the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Health Ministers to review this matter urgently, given that severe gambling harms directly affect at least 1.5 million adults across the UK?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter; this is a worrying development, given the known link between marketing and gambling participation and the harms associated with online gambling. I will draw that to the attention of the Minister responsible for gambling in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and ensure that my hon. Friend gets a response.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): This week we have seen, at last, the Government's national security assessment and its stark warning that global biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse threaten UK security and prosperity. Given those catastrophic risks, can the Leader of the House explain why the publication of the report was delayed from October? Can we have a debate about what the Government are doing to step up the vital preparedness for these risks and whether they are ensuring that the nature and climate emergency is treated as a major national security priority?

Sir Alan Campbell: Sometimes the delay of reports, which is regrettable but not uncommon, is due to the importance of the matter and the importance of our getting it right. If there has been a delay, it is, as I say, unfortunate, although the hon. Member rightly points

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out that the report is to be welcomed. Once the report has been considered, I will look to find time for Members to debate these matters, given their importance.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Burnley's local bus operator Transdev has increased the price of an under-19s bus ticket from £13 a week to £20 a week, which is a huge increase for kids, students and families. It has now been lowered to £18 a week, thanks to our campaign, but that is not enough. More than 1,000 people have backed my campaign to bring down fares and reintroduce a local Burnley bus ticket. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on the price of bus tickets in Burnley, and will he back my campaign?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner for his constituents, for which I thank him. As he knows, we have capped bus fares at £3 until at least March 2027, but he mentions the reality of what is happening in local areas. I will raise his case with the Secretary of State and ensure that he gets a meeting if he wants one. If not, he will certainly get a response.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): North East Lincolnshire council has just received a planning application for 3,500 homes in the strategic gap between Laceby in my constituency and the west of Grimsby. When developments are proposed, the developer usually says that it will provide a new school and doctors surgery and so on, but that does not guarantee that the teachers or doctors will be available to work in them. Could the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to explain to the House how this can be resolved, given the Government's relaxation of local input into planning applications?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important matter. Planning matters are best resolved locally, but I agree that developers have a responsibility to the wider community. The Government are very keen to ensure that infrastructure is in place, including schools, and we are recruiting more teachers so that we have the people to teach in the schools that are built. I will raise his concerns with the relevant Minister, and if he wants a meeting to discuss these matters, I will help him get one.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Posties deliver our post and keep this country functioning. They do an absolutely tremendous job. It is an essential public service, and at the heart of it is the USO—the universal service obligation, which is a legal duty to ensure the delivery of mail to all UK addresses at the same price six days a week, with next-day delivery by first class. The Royal Mail is failing people in my patch on its USO, and in Blyth and Ashington people are raging at the late arrival of important medical documents about NHS appointments, financial documentation and other important correspondence. It is causing huge distress. The delays are apparently the result of a failure to address staff shortages and the prioritisation of parcels over post. Would my right hon. Friend arrange a debate in Government time to discuss the failings of the Royal Mail and the acute problems it is causing for some of our most vulnerable constituents?

Mr Speaker: That is a late delivery—come on.

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all postal workers for their hard work over the busy Christmas period. I am disappointed to hear that some of his constituents are not receiving their mail in good time. Unfortunately, that is happening across many constituencies, including my own, and the public rightly expect a well-run postal service and their letters to arrive on time. I know that Royal Mail pays close attention to issues raised at business questions and at other occasions in this House, so I hope that it has heard the message, but I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate on this matter, because it is not just a matter for his constituents but for many other constituencies as well.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): My constituents' 11-year-old son perforated his eardrum in July and was referred for paediatric ear, nose and throat treatment, but they were then informed that the waiting time for standard referrals was 12 to 14 months and given no indication of when treatment might start. Understandably, they are very worried that the delay will cause long-term damage to their son's hearing. Surely the Leader of the House agrees that the issue is a real concern and that it is not the service that our constituents expect and deserve from our NHS. It is a workforce issue, so will he allow a debate in Government time on addressing waiting times for ENT treatment?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is a matter of concern not just to the hon. Gentleman but to the family and friends of the young man involved. Overall, waiting lists are coming down, but there are issues in parts of the service, and we are doing our best to tackle them. We are also doing our best to recruit specialists in those services. I will ensure that the Health Minister hears of the hon. Gentleman's concerns to see what further can be done and that if the hon. Gentleman wishes to go into further detail, he is able to do so at a meeting with the Minister.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): This week, I met 19-year-old Jack Billingham, a third-year Derby Rolls-Royce apprentice who won gold at the national welding championships in November and who is representing the UK at the WorldSkills international competition in Japan. I had a go at virtual-reality welding, and I admit that Jack's score was a little higher than mine. At a time when the UK faces a national shortage of welders and of those with other critical manufacturing skills, could we have a debate on how we can strengthen the skills pipeline and support apprenticeships for good, skilled British manufacturing jobs?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend and send my congratulations on behalf of the House to Jack Billingham on winning gold at the national welding championships. We are already making efforts to support young people, such as through investing £1.5 billion to deliver 50,000 more apprenticeships and 350,000 more new workplace opportunities, but a great deal more needs to be done, not least as we seek to improve and renew the infrastructure of our country. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate to investigate further how we can promote highly skilled manufacturing jobs. Should she be unsuccessful in that, I will look to hold such a debate in Government time.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The question to the Prime Minister yesterday from the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) rang a bell with me. Many of my constituents are waiting for their civil service pensions, which are administered by Capita. Sarah Elizabeth Rees had to retire due to ill health in February last year, but a year on, she still has not had her pension and has nothing to support her or pay her bills. We have written five letters to the relevant Department. We have had one reply, which asked for confirmation of name, address and national insurance number. That really is not good enough. I kindly ask whether the Leader of the House will allow for a debate in Government time to discuss fully the issues that have arisen for all our constituents.

Sir Alan Campbell: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) earlier, Capita has recognised the scale of the issue and is recruiting additional staff to deal with it. However, there are issues for particular departments as well. I will draw the case and her disappointment to the attention of Ministers. This would be a popular topic for an Adjournment debate, should the hon. Lady be successful in securing one, because we have already seen that it is an issue not just in her constituency but in many others too.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): My constituent Ahmad, a senior skilled worker at Queen's hospital, has not seen his wife, Israa, for two years as she remains trapped in Gaza. Ahmad applied for a spousal visa, but Israa has been unable to enrol her biometrics because the Gaza visa application centre has been closed since 2024 and no safe route to an alternative centre exists. The original application has expired and the second one faces the same barrier with no access to a visa application centre. Israa's home has been bombed, leaving her without shelter or basic necessities. Will the Leader of the House urge the Home Secretary to consider alternative arrangements, such as deferred biometrics, so that those lawfully working here can evacuate their spouses from Gaza?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important case on behalf of his constituent. I understand that he has already written to the Home Office about the matter, but I am happy to follow up with that Department to ensure that he gets a response. Should he want a meeting with Ministers to see what further can be done, I will seek to facilitate that as well.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A number of businesses, particularly care homes, in my constituency have approached me with concerns about the salary limit for migrants. Migrants already in this country, who have trained and qualified here, are finding it difficult to reach those standards to remain. Is it possible to have a meeting with a Minister from the Treasury team to discuss the impact that that is having not just on those sectors but on the economy?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the relevant Minister so she can take the issue further.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Residents and developers in Portsmouth are facing repeated delays from the council planning department. Despite clear

assurances from the council given to me about the long-promised green light for the Tipner East development, it has stalled again. Those delays are actively driving the growth of houses in multiple occupation, damaging Portsmouth's reputation and holding back action on the housing crisis. Will the Leader of the House tell me what mechanisms are available to Members to hold Portsmouth city council to account, force transparency over the planning delays and secure faster, more effective decision making to build the much-needed homes in my city?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government, as my hon. Friend knows, are dedicated to ending the housing crisis. We have already delivered 231,000 new homes since the election and our reforms will lead to the highest level in over 40 years. However, that has to be delivered at a local level. I will reach out to the relevant Minister to ensure that my hon. Friend receives the information required on the specific issue that she raises and can discuss what further action can be taken.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Sadly, on Boxing day Leicester learned that it had lost one of its finest: Councillor Manjula Sood MBE. Manjula Sood had been a Labour councillor for 25 years, worked for countless charities and worked so hard for community cohesion. In 2008, she had the honour of becoming the UK's first female Asian Lord Mayor, but for me, she will always be known as Mrs Sood, my junior school teacher. Will the Leader of the House commemorate Mrs Sood and also make time in this Chamber for an annual debate where we can commemorate all local champions who truly put the great in Great Britain?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Councillor Sood for her invaluable work, not just for the local community, but in education. I will certainly take away his suggestion of an annual debate so we can mark the contribution of people like Councillor Sood. I will give it some thought.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Last Thursday, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) raised the unacceptable waits for audiology services in Doncaster, with some people waiting years for basic hearing tests and hearing aid support. That goes for my constituents, too, who face long waits, repeat appointments and being left without working hearing aids. It is not right, it is not good enough, and I will not accept it any more. Will the Leader of the House ask Ministers to set out how they are supporting the local trust to speed up assessments and hearing aid provision to prevent people being left without the basics?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I said in a previous answer, audiology is a vital part of healthcare. I will ensure that the relevant Minister is aware of my hon. Friend's concerns and updates him on what plans the Government have to improve these services as fast as we possibly can.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I echo the Leader of the House's Burns night greetings for Sunday. Will he join me, in my position as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nuclear energy, in congratulating the Nuclear Industry

[David Mundell]

Association and all those in the nuclear industry who ensured the success of the fifth Nuclear Week in Parliament this week, which has showcased all aspects of the industry, from new build and supply chain to decommissioning, and allowed numerous engagement opportunities for MPs? May we have a debate on the benefits that the nuclear industry brings to England and Wales in terms of jobs, economic growth and energy security, so that Scottish Members like myself can once again expose the shameful conduct of the Scottish Government in using their planning powers to block new nuclear development in Scotland to the detriment of my constituency and Scotland?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the work of the Nuclear Industry Association and the success of the fifth Nuclear Week in Parliament. As he knows, the Government support the nuclear industry and have committed £17 billion for an ambitious nuclear programme. It is a pity that that ambition is not shared by the SNP, which on these matters seems to care little about the jobs and greater energy security that are associated with projects like these. There will be ample opportunity, as we set out the Government's proposals on these matters, for him to raise his concerns.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): Melvin Hall community centre has served the community of Penge for over 50 years and was home to incredible community initiatives and charities, such as the Beckenham and Penge Gateway Club, which supports adults with learning disabilities and their families. Sadly, just before Christmas, Melvin Hall closed after Conservative-run Bromley council imposed unjust and unaffordable rent hikes. Along with the fantastic Labour councillors in Penge and over a thousand people from across our community who have signed my petition, I am fighting to save Melvin Hall and keep it in community hands. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on Tory-run Bromley council to ensure that Melvin Hall remains a community space, and thanking everyone who has supported the campaign so far?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and for his campaign to save Melvin Hall by keeping it in community hands. Its work supporting adults with learning disabilities and their families is admirable, and I congratulate it on that. It is a good opportunity to remind the House that I often criticise the lack of support from Reform councils for local communities, but we must not forget the often dreadful records of Conservative councils. Our new community right to buy, introduced through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, will give communities stronger powers to take ownership of their vital assets, but I wish my hon. Friend and his campaigners all the very best in his campaign.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): We hear an awful lot from the Government about building sovereign digital capabilities in the UK, and this morning we heard about Britain becoming Britain's biggest customer, yet Government procurement contracts continue to go to giant American providers—in the Ministry of Defence, in the NHS and even in the Cabinet Office. Will the

Leader of the House make available Government time in the Chamber for us to debate the meaning of a sovereign AI capability? How might we change Government procurement to enable British firms to bid for these intensely important elements of Government mechanisms?

Sir Alan Campbell: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to apply for an Adjournment debate, to hear from the Minister directly. I expect he would find that the Government share his ambition for contracts and work to go to British companies. That is at the heart of our industrial strategy.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) mentioned PFI contracts earlier—a particularly pertinent subject as many of them come to an end. That is impacting a number of schools in my constituency, where work is suddenly not being done and costs are going up. One school has carried out a survey that says it will cost £3.5 million to bring the school back up to a safe standard, but it is concerned that the company that should be doing the work will declare itself bankrupt, leaving the school and the local authority with the bill. I suspect that that is not an isolated case and that Members across the House will be aware of similar issues. Can we have a debate in Government time on PFI contracts and their impact on public services?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman has just heard, that concern is shared across the House. I invite him to apply for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, so that he and colleagues on both sides of the House can raise those concerns.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): From the Flying Horse to the Baum, from Vicolo del Vino to the Oxford, from the Spring Inn to the Moorcock, we are really lucky in Rochdale and Littleborough to have some fantastic pubs and bars, but many of them are worried about business rates. Will the Leader of the House give me some assurance that we will urgently get a Government package of support for our pubs and the pub industry, so that we can once again start saying in Rochdale, “Up the Dale and down the ale!”?

Sir Alan Campbell: I know that my hon. Friend is a staunch supporter of local pubs in his constituency—and has a remarkable knowledge of them. As he knows, the Budget included £4.3 billion of support over three years to help pubs, but we recognise that pubs are still worried, which is why the Chancellor is actively considering a pubs support package to ensure that the right support is in place. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), I expect that that will be announced in the coming days.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for all his answers. I would like to turn the House's attention to Mexico, where there have been recent reports of persecution and intimidation of Christians. There have been some 376 incidents of assault or abduction of Christians in Mexico in the last couple of years. That is quite worrying. The reports raise concerns about the protection of freedom of religion or belief. Will he please ask the Foreign Secretary to set out what representations

the Government have made to the Mexican authorities regarding those reports and what steps have been taken to support freedom of religion or belief in Mexico?

Sir Alan Campbell: Our embassy in Mexico monitors the human rights situation very closely, and we continue to engage regularly on human rights matters, including the rights of religious minorities and related issues, with the Mexican authorities. As the hon. Gentleman knows, because we have had exchanges on this matter on a number of occasions, the UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all, and I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary hears of his concern.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Earlier this week, I met colleagues and friends in our sister party in Denmark to express our solidarity with them in the difficult context they face, and to learn from some of their successful social democratic policies that we could adopt here, including on immigration and the economy. One such policy is a change to their pensions context to ensure that those who have worked in manual labour roles are able to take voluntary early retirement schemes, while others have later retirement. Will the Government consider that and other policies that have been enacted so successfully in Denmark to ensure that we are looking after working-class people in working communities such as mine?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a very interesting issue. The Government want to ensure that people can look forward to a comfortable retirement, and there is a strong history of learning from best practice in other countries, not least on old age and employment-related pensions. The Pension Schemes Bill is progressing through the Lords, and I will raise my hon. Friend's concerns with Ministers, because he certainly makes interesting points.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Yesterday, MPs heard from some of the international non-governmental organisations whose Israeli registration to operate in Palestine will be terminated and which from 1 March will no longer be able to provide critical aid. In Gaza, the suffering and the killings have not stopped. In bitter winter conditions, delays are preventing critical food, medical, hygiene and shelter supplies from entering Gaza. Many still face starvation. The birth rate has dropped by over 40% in the past year, and newborns are not surviving.

While Israel prevents the work of aid organisations, the UK continues its membership of the Civil-Military Co-ordination Centre, which is meant to facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza—part of the state of Palestine, which the UK now recognises. Can we have a debate in Government time to explore the exposure of the UK to this restriction via the CMCC and what measures the UK can take, economic and otherwise, to ensure that UK public-funded agencies can continue to deliver aid and help bring this catastrophe in the state of Palestine to an end?

Sir Alan Campbell: We desperately need to get humanitarian aid into Gaza, as my hon. Friend has said not just on this occasion but on many others. I understand his frustration, because he cares deeply about these matters. We continue to press for the crossings to be

reopened and for restrictions on aid to be lifted. We are members of various bodies that can be used to influence these matters. It is much more important that we are engaged in these organisations, so that we can work through the issues and ensure that aid flows as quickly as possible and in the quantities that are required. I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard my hon. Friend's point and that he gets an update on not only what we are doing, but what further plans we have.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I am grateful for what my right hon. Friend has said today in response to a number of Members regarding Capita. Many retirees have not received payments, including my constituent Mrs Costello, a former civil servant who retired in April 2025. Despite submitting all paperwork on time and receiving approval, she has yet to receive any confirmation of her lump sum or her annual pension. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement or debate on this matter, given the unacceptable delays and uncertainty affecting Mrs Costello and many others like her?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue; he is a doughty campaigner for his constituents. As I have said, Capita has recognised the scale of the issue and is recruiting additional staff to deal with it, but I hear the frustration from Members across the House. Although we can talk about making progress, that is of little comfort to Mrs Costello and others who are still waiting. I will arrange a meeting for my hon. Friend and other Members across the House if they seek one with the relevant Cabinet Office Minister, so they can further make the case.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Earlier this week, students in year 11 at Felixstowe school were told that they would not be able to continue their studies at the school beyond year 11 because it is not continuing with sixth-form provision. As Members can imagine, this has caused huge worry for parents and students at Felixstowe school. I have written to the Secretary of State about this matter and the worries I have about the withdrawal of sixth-form education from our town. Will the Leader of the House help to ensure that I secure the meeting quickly, as time is clearly of the essence?

Sir Alan Campbell: May I express my sympathies to concerned parents and students? From time to time, similar issues have arisen in my constituency, and I appreciate the concern and uncertainty that they create. My hon. Friend knows that this Government are committed to opportunity for all, and education, which is of vital importance, is central to that. I will ensure that she gets a meeting with a Minister, so that she can follow up on this issue as a matter of urgency.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Councillors across Scotland are preparing budgets and considering options, put forward by officers, that will mean cuts to vital public services. In Grangemouth, local residents are rightly worried about proposals to end maintenance of the beautiful Zetland Park, and for the closure of Grangemouth sports complex, which would remove swimming and leisure facilities. The proposed cuts would be awful for Grangemouth residents

[Brian Leishman]

of all ages. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising my constituents as they stand up for our communities, and agree that the only thing that should be cut in Grangemouth is the grass at Zetland Park?

Sir Alan Campbell: I praise the efforts of local people in Grangemouth. As my hon. Friend knows, council funding in Scotland is a devolved matter, but as I have said on a number of occasions, the UK Government delivered the largest spending review settlement in the history of the Scottish Parliament, so there is nowhere for local authorities, and indeed the Scottish Government, to hide on these matters. Residents in Grangemouth should expect that record funding to deliver the services that they need and enjoy, and I wish my hon. Friend and his campaigners luck in their efforts.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I recently visited Hawthorn Housing Co-operative in my constituency. It has been a registered social landlord since 1987, and it provides homes and services to around 364 tenant members. Given the Government's strong support for the co-operative movement, and the work that housing co-operatives such as Hawthorn do in communities like Possil in my constituency, will the Leader of the House consider dedicating time to a debate on the importance of support for the co-operative housing sector?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for championing the work of Hawthorn Housing Co-operative. As we have said, housing is about balance, and co-operative housing undoubtedly has an important role to play in that. We are considering opportunities to establish a formal framework for co-operative housing, and we have provided £20 million in support for community-led housing. If my hon. Friend seeks further detail, he could apply for an Adjournment debate on the matter. If he does, I hope that he will be successful.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Pilgrim Hearts Trust has been lifting homeless and vulnerable people in Bracknell Forest out of poverty, and supporting them in rebuilding their lives, for 25 years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that local charities and organisations like Pilgrim Hearts must be at the heart of our plan to tackle street homelessness, and will he set out what the Government are doing to cut rough sleeping and poverty?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Charities such as the Pilgrim Hearts Trust are the golden thread that runs through our communities, and I thank Elaine and everyone at Pilgrim Hearts for their 25 years of service to the local community. Homelessness is a moral stain on our society, and this Government will not stand idly by and allow it to continue. We are investing £1 billion to give homeless people the security of a roof over their head, to get them back on track, and to end homelessness for good.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): On Monday, Ilkeston's No.1 tourist attraction, the NatWest hole, was cruelly divided in two by a metal pole, which was installed with no explanation. The hole is a beloved part of the fabric of our town, and its defacement caused significant distress to my community. Thankfully, the pole mysteriously

vanished a few hours later, but I have written to NatWest to try to understand what happened. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on the protected status of local heritage sites and quirky landmarks, so that we can discuss whether Historic England might grant the Ilkeston hole listed status?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this interesting matter to the House. The UK is full of incredible quirky history, and I will make sure that the relevant Minister has heard his point. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the issue he raises, and I hope that NatWest has also heard his remarks.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Dunfermline is both Scotland's ancient capital and its newest city, and we are starting to plan for what Dunfermline can become and how it can truly fulfil its potential. I have launched a survey to ensure that local people have a great say in that, and can give me their ideas about what the city should be. Will the Leader of the House visit Dunfermline to see for himself how fantastic it is? Will he allow a debate in Government time on the importance of our towns and smaller cities across Scotland and the UK?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for that tempting offer; I shall see what my diary allows. I join him in recognising the importance of city high streets, which are often at the heart of our local communities. High-street regeneration is a devolved matter, but the Scottish Affairs Committee is undertaking an inquiry on the future of Scotland's high streets, which I am sure he is watching closely. I hope that the inquiry will come up with further measures to improve high streets, not just in his constituency but across Scotland.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): I recently met volunteers from the Yorkshire Air Ambulance charity, which provides a lifesaving emergency service to 5 million people across our region. Last year, it completed an average of five missions a day, which is an outstanding achievement. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the charity on its valiant work, and can we have a debate in Government time on how we can secure the future of such services?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the wonderful work of the Yorkshire Air Ambulance to the attention of the House. Charities and their volunteers are fundamental to communities across the country, and none more so than air ambulances. I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard my hon. Friend's contribution and provides him with an update on what the Government plan to do to further support such services.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): In the last 20 minutes, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council's planning committee has approved the Cherries' plans to enable work to expand Vitality stadium. There is an agreement that there will be staff to marshal traffic and parking, and a council working group to abate the concerns of residents, which were voiced so eloquently by Councillor Sharon Carr-Brown at the planning meeting. Will the Leader of the House welcome this good news, and will he commit the Government to continuing to

support football? There is already the £551 million going into Euro 2028, which England will co-host, and the Football Governance Act 2025.

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly welcome the news that my hon. Friend has delivered about the expansion at AFC Bournemouth. He knows, as do many Members across the House, the importance of football to this country, and the importance of football clubs in our towns and cities. It is important that football gets the support that it needs, and the Government are absolutely committed to that.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): A recent proposal, now dropped, for a merger between two multi-academy trusts in my constituency, the Pennine Alliance Learning Trust and the Trinity MAC, led to me getting over 100 letters, and over 2,000 people signing a petition in just a week. What can we do to ensure that parents' voices are at the centre of such decisions in the future?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is important that the voices of parents and those impacted are heard. It is to the credit of my hon. Friend that he is using his voice this morning to raise their concerns. When trusts explore a voluntary transfer, they are expected to engage with parents and the wider community in an open and meaningful way. I hope that the trust has heard my hon. Friend's remarks, and if he wishes to make his case further, I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Local Government Reorganisation

11.54 am

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): This Government were elected on a promise to repair the broken foundations of local government. In 2024, councils were on the brink financially, while a third of the country was left paying for wasteful duplication as a result of having two tiers of councils in their area. That cannot be acceptable. Years of underfunding has led to a crisis in social care, the decline of our town centres and rubbish piling up in our streets. That visible failure contributes to a decline in trust, and it was caused by Tory austerity and 14 years of economic mismanagement.

This Government will not stand by and let that decline continue. We cannot just snap our fingers and reverse the last 14 years overnight, but we can act now to secure a better future. To get there, we have already announced fairer funding that realigns resources with need, but we also need to eliminate the financial waste of two-tier councils, so that we can plough the savings back into the frontline services that local people care about the most. Today's announcement is part of that.

We must move at pace to remove the confusion and waste of doubled-up bureaucracy. Local residents do not know which of their two councils is responsible for which services. No one would ever design a system in which one council collects rubbish and another gets rid of it. In many parts of the country, residents' hard-earned council tax pays for two sets of councillors, two sets of chief executives, and two sets of financial directors. That is wasting tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

The previous Government sat back and ignored this problem, but this Government will not. We are committed to the most ambitious local government reorganisation in a generation. My priority is cutting out this waste, so that we can invest more in the frontline services that residents care about. That means moving as quickly as possible to the new, streamlined, single-tier councils that can make that happen. I have asked councils to tell me where holding elections this year to positions that will rapidly be abolished would slow down making these vital reforms, which will benefit local people, and I have listened to what councils told me.

In December, the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to 63 councils that were due to hold elections in May 2026, asking to hear their views. I have carefully assessed more than 350 representations from those councils that have elections scheduled for May, and from others interested in the outcome. I have carefully considered arguments made about capacity, reorganisation and democracy, and I am grateful to everyone who took the time to express their views.

I can now confirm my decisions to the House. I have decided to bring forward legislation to postpone 29 elections; I have deposited a list of those in the House of Commons Library. I received one further representation this morning, which I will consider; I will then report back to the House on my decision. In all other areas, council elections will go ahead as planned; many councils offered no evidence that elections would delay reorganisation in their area. That means that of the 136 local elections across England that were scheduled for May, the vast majority will go ahead as planned.

[Steve Reed]

In areas where elections are postponed, councillors will have their terms extended for a short period. Once the new unitary councils are agreed, we will hold elections to them in 2027. I have written to councils confirming these decisions, and I will shortly lay the necessary legislation before both Houses.

I am not the first Secretary of State to seek to delay elections to speed up essential reorganisation. The shadow Secretary of State suggested on Tuesday that the previous Government had not done the same thing, but he has perhaps forgotten the postponements in Weymouth and Portland in 2018; in Aylesbury, Chiltern, South Buckinghamshire and Wycombe in 2019; or in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset in 2021.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): For two years!

Mr Speaker: Order. I have a lot of respect for the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), but I do not expect him to walk in and start mouthing off the moment he sits down. I am sure that he would like to catch my eye, and that is not the best way to do so.

Steve Reed: Indeed. It was the right hon. Member, the self-styled new sheriff in town—now, of course, a member of Reform UK Ltd—who made many of these decisions.

To those who say we have cancelled all the elections: we have not. To those who say it is all Labour councils: it is not. I have asked, I have listened and I have acted—no messing about, no playing politics, just getting on with the job of making local government work better for local people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

11.59 am

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

“This Government have moved seamlessly from arrogance to incompetence, and now to cowardice. Some 3.7 million people are being denied the right to vote. It was the Government who rushed through a huge programme of local government reorganisation, imposing new structures and timetables, and it is the Government who are failing to deliver them. Rather than take responsibility for their own failure, the Secretary of State has chosen to dump the consequences of their incompetence on to the laps of local councils.”—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 57.]

That is what I said on Monday, when I dragged the Secretary of State’s Minister—the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern)—to the Dispatch Box. I say it again today, directly to him.

In his statement, the Secretary of State plays heavily on what he claims is a wasteful system. He has said publicly that he thinks these elections are “pointless”, so it is clear what he thinks and it is clear what he wants. He wants to cancel all these elections, so why does he not simply say so? Why does he not have the courage of his own convictions? Why did he write to councils asking them to ask him to cancel the elections? Why, when they did not give him the answer that he wanted, did he write to them again asking basically the same question? Why was his Department putting pressure on councils to ask for cancellations as late as last night?

I know why. He knows why. We all know why. It is because he wants to shift the blame. He wants to say, “I didn’t make them do it.” He wants a political gotcha.

He is putting councils in an impossible position, squeezing them financially, imposing the costs and disruption of large-scale reorganisation on them, making promises about structures, timescales and funding, and then reneging on those promises. Then, to add insult to injury, he is trying to dump the consequences of his arrogance and incompetence on to the laps of the local councils.

It has always been the Conservative position that these elections should go ahead. The Secretary of State tried to claim in his statement that there were precedents, as his Minister did on Monday, but the scale and scope of these cancellations is totally unprecedented. I ask him directly: what was it about the Labour party’s collapse in the opinion polls that first attracted him to the cancellation of local elections? Is he as unsurprised as I am that the vast bulk of councils asking for their elections to be scrapped are Labour-run councils?

I give the Secretary of State notice that Conservative Members will vote against these proposals. Elections are the foundation stone of democracy, and when his Department puts intolerable pressure on councils, shifting the goalposts or pulling the rug from under them—whichever metaphor one chooses to use—he should have the courage to come to this House and say that it is his decision to cancel elections, rather than passing the buck to local government leaders.

Steve Reed: I have to say that the right hon. Gentleman’s case would be much stronger and would sound less self-righteous if he had not done exactly the same thing, for exactly the same reasons, when he was in government—only, unlike him when his party was in government, I have imposed nothing. This was a locally led approach. [*Interruption.*] He was a member of the Cabinet, and he is trying to claim that Cabinets do not take decisions collectively. He was in the Cabinet that took these decisions and he backed them to the hilt. Now, in opposition, he believes the opposite. He seems to think he has become a Lib Dem. He is supposed to have consistency in what he believes.

This is a locally led approach. I was guided by local councils, which came to me with their views. I respectfully suggest that his argument is with those Conservative councils and leaders who have requested postponement so that they can get on and deliver a reorganisation that will benefit their residents, but which he is now trying to block for party political reasons.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House with his statement. Although he has outlined that there is a clear precedent, from 2019 and 2021, for postponing local elections, he reassured my Select Committee back in November that these elections would go ahead. Residents in those areas will be disappointed that their elections are being postponed.

I want to challenge the Secretary of State on what he has outlined and on his talk about eliminating waste. I agree that we need to respond to local leaders, especially where they have valid concerns about the process of reorganisation. We all knew that this would be a resource-intensive process, and we are aware that all our councils are dealing with many demands—adult social care, children’s social care, temporary accommodation—but our councils should not have to face choosing between frontline services and elections. Democracy is not an

inefficiency that should be cut out. Every council should have the resources to run local elections. Can he assure the House that councils that have applied for their elections to go ahead will still have the resources to manage frontline services?

I also want clarity from the Secretary of State on any potential legal challenge. I understand that the court has given a date on which it will consider a legal challenge. Is there any possibility that the elections will go ahead if the Government lose? That would leave little time for councils, councillors, political parties and the Electoral Commission to go ahead. Can he outline any contingency planning that has been done, should that happen?

Steve Reed: I thank the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for her questions. I reassure her that I have imposed nothing. I took representations and listened to local councils, and today I am merely responding to the representations that I heard. Most councils will go ahead. It is the councils themselves that have reassured me that they have the resources to go ahead with elections and deliver the reorganisation that is so important to improving frontline services for local people. I am acting on the information that they have given me; I am imposing nothing. She will, I hope, appreciate that it is not appropriate or possible for me to comment on legal proceedings.

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

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Today's announcement raises three questions about waste, incompetence and trust in democracy.

First, on waste, councils across the country have already committed significant public money in good faith to preparing for these elections, which the Government repeatedly assured them would go ahead. Cancelling them at this late stage is not cost-free. Will the Secretary of State commit today to reimbursing councils in full for every pound spent as a result of these cancellations, or are local taxpayers now expected to pick up the bill for ministerial indecision?

Secondly, on incompetence, will the Minister—who repeatedly told hon. Members, including at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 11 November and during oral questions in the Chamber on 24 November, that elections scheduled for May 2026 would go ahead—explain why a U-turn happened a few weeks later, in December? What new information came to light between November and December that prompted that change of heart?

Finally, on trust in democracy, councillors in West Sussex will serve for six instead of four years. That is not the “short period” stated by the Secretary of State. In 2021, the world was a very different place. We were at the peak of the Boris bounce. The electoral map and the world have changed dramatically since then. When public trust in politicians is low, it can never be right for those who are up for re-election to decide whether they want to face their electorate. Today's decision undermines trust in elections and in democracy. Surely the Secretary of State can see that this plays into the hands of those who want to undermine our democratic institutions.

Steve Reed: I remind the hon. Lady that these postponements, which are at the request of councils, affect only those councils that will shortly be abolished anyway. They are happening so that we can more quickly have elections to the new councils that will replace them. I respectfully suggest to her, as I did to the shadow Secretary of State, that her argument is actually with those Liberal Democrat councils and Liberal Democrat council leaders who have requested postponement so that the reorganisation can go ahead on schedule. I have imposed nothing; I am merely responding to them. I suggest that she go away and perhaps have a cup of tea with some of them, so that they can explain to her how what they have requested does not damage democracy.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I should make it clear that local elections will be going forward in full in Milton Keynes and that I look forward to continuing to work with my brilliant, hard-working Labour councillors locally. One of the reasons for delaying the elections is the time it is taking to go through the local government reorganisation process. That affects elections, but it also affects the creation of the new combined authorities, which is happening in parallel. Given the delays, will the Department look at the fast-track programme for the combined authorities, and at whether it is worth adding areas that do not face the reorganisation challenges, such as Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes?

Steve Reed: This is the biggest reorganisation in a generation, and it is very important that it be delivered with as much speed as we can muster, because of the benefits to local residents, who will see more money available to spend on things like fixing potholes and caring for older people—rather than paying for two sets of councillors, two sets of chief execs and two sets of finance directors, which the Conservative party was happy to see continue for all the 14 years it was in power. Of course, I will listen to my hon. Friend and others if they have suggestions about how we can further speed up the process and renew local democracy across the country.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's confirmation that elections in Essex are going ahead; indeed, they should have taken place a year ago. However, he will be aware that elections have also been proposed for new unitary authorities next year, although we in Essex do not even know what the unitary authorities will be. Will he say whether it is still his intention that we should have elections for the new authorities next year?

Steve Reed: As I said in my statement, it is my intention that the elections to the new unitaries will go ahead next year.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I have to say that I find the bleating from the Conservative party—which delayed elections in Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire and Somerset, as well as in several other areas named by the Secretary of State—pretty astounding. As welcome as the reforms are, they are taking up considerable time and capacity for local authorities, including Oxfordshire county council. The council is prioritising, among other things, economic growth, which this Government have said is their No. 1 mission. I urge the Secretary of State

[Sean Woodcock]

and his team to look at picking up the pace of these reforms, as welcome as they are, so that local areas and the councils that emerge from them can get on with delivering for their local residents.

Steve Reed: I completely agree with the thrust of what my hon. Friend says. We want to go ahead with this reorganisation precisely so that we can improve public services and let councils get on with what they should be doing. Growing local economies and putting more money in the pockets of local people, including his constituents, is our priority.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I was very interested to hear what the Secretary of State said. I represent a two-tier local authority area, and I live in a two-tier local authority area, yet I seem to pay considerably less council tax than people living in neighbouring local authority areas that are Labour-controlled and single-tier. Can the right hon. Gentleman explain how?

Steve Reed: As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, his party fiddled funding to councils so that areas voting Labour were less likely to get funded. He does not have to take my word for it: the former Prime Minister was captured on video standing in a garden in Tunbridge Wells and boasting about how he was ripping money away from poorer communities to give it to wealthier communities. Perhaps it has something to do with that.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, I am a very strong supporter of local government reform, especially for cities such as Exeter. It is not just about waste; it is about being held back within a two-tier system. It is also worth pointing out that all parties represented on Exeter city council are in favour of unitary status for Exeter. Can the Secretary of State confirm that we are moving full speed ahead with local government reform and that unitary status for places like Exeter will improve services, reduce waste and deliver the sustainable jobs and growth in living standards that we desperately want in our city?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are proceeding with this reorganisation in order to eliminate duplication and the cost of that waste, so that the money can be spent on frontline services instead. I have asked councils for their views on whether postponement would speed up their ability to carry out the reorganisation and get the new, streamlined councils off the ground, and I have responded to their representations.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Somerset underwent local government reorganisation during the last Parliament, with an independent report citing that the Conservative administration's business case was marked by poor decision making, while its reckless decision to freeze council tax for six years has seen over £330 million in lost revenue. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that new unitary councils, such as Somerset, are put on a fair financial footing? Will he reconsider the decision to remove the remoteness uplift, which will force councils to consider cuts to vital services?

Steve Reed: The fair funding review that we have announced is intended to ensure that, unlike under the previous Government, funding follows need. We took on board the new indicators on deprivation, and funding is now much more closely aligned with them. That is as it should be, because those are the areas that need extra funding. The hon. Lady will find that rurality is still taken into account in funding for social care, and given the distance that people may need to travel, it is important that such services remain available to them.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): The Secretary of State's Department issued very clear guidance on 6 February last year, which said that

"we expect local leaders to engage their Members of Parliament, and to ensure there is wide engagement with local partners and stakeholders, residents, workforce and their representatives, and businesses on a proposal."

My constituents are concerned that the proposal by Nottingham city council for reorganisation in Nottinghamshire fails to meet that test. Can the Secretary of State give me and my constituents in Gedling an assurance that his Department will firmly apply the guidance that he set on 6 February 2025?

Steve Reed: Yes, we will apply that guidance. Of course, we will listen to all representations about proposals for reorganisation, including my hon. Friend's proposals for Nottinghamshire.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): A year ago, the then Deputy Prime Minister assured us and promised us that none of the delays would be for more than a year, yet five of the current 29 that are going to be delayed are from last year, and 21 of the 29 are Labour-controlled councils. The Secretary of State is aware that we have a judicial review that is due to be heard in February. I obviously do not want him to comment on the case, but can he confirm that, as this Government believe in the rules-based order, they will adhere to and comply with the rulings of the judge?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that I cannot comment on legal proceedings—it would be entirely inappropriate. I think the best response to his question is to quote the "new sheriff in town", the right hon. Member for Newark, who is sitting directly in front of him and who took exactly the same decision in exactly the same circumstances. This is a direct quote from him:

"Elections in such circumstances risk confusing voters, and would be hard to justify when members could be elected to serve shortened terms."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 23WS-24WS.]

For once, he got it absolutely right.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I take issue with the absolute brass neck of the shadow Secretary of State, who talked about the Government putting pressure on local government finances and then devolving the blame. Nothing could better describe the destructive austerity policies of the last Government, who devastated local councils across the country.

On the matter in hand, I welcome the decision to go ahead with elections in Hampshire and Basingstoke. That was the will of local councillors, though I accept that different areas have different circumstances. Are we

still on track for the local government reorganisation process in Hampshire and Basingstoke? Can I impress upon the Secretary of State the importance of reaching a decision that endorses the proposal from Basingstoke, Hart and Rushmoor councils for a north Hampshire authority?

Steve Reed: I am seeking to ensure that we remain on track by responding to the comments I have had from councils, and ensuring they have the resources so that the process goes ahead as everyone intends it to.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I support unitarisation and the efficiency savings it brings, but may I caution the Secretary of State a little on his language? A lot of the waste he is talking about is people's jobs. Many hard-working council workers, who have huge uncertainty about what will happen to them over the next couple of years, will be concerned to hear that sort of language used as we discuss this in the Chamber. What support is he giving local authorities to help those council workers find new jobs once the LGR process is complete?

Steve Reed: The hon. Member makes a very important point, and he is right to be concerned about people working for councils. Of course, the overall increase in funding for local authorities means they have more resources to support their staff members, who may be concerned about their jobs in these circumstances, and I urge affected councils to focus on precisely the issues to which he has brought to our attention.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As a former leader of Worthing borough council, I pay tribute to my councillor colleagues, who did not come to the decision they have made lightly. They were informed by the officers, and they have had 15 years of underfunding on the south coast. Pockets of deprivation in coastal towns have long been ignored, and I very much welcome the fairer funding formula, which now recognises that. As we are on the fast track in Sussex, could the Secretary of State please reassure us that unitary authority decisions will be announced as soon as possible, and that the boundary commission will make sure we have the right sized wards for our new unitary authorities at the earliest possible opportunity?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is of course a very pugnacious champion for her constituents and her constituency. She has had conversations with me about this very issue, and made her point very clear. We intend to make those announcements as soon as we can so that there is certainty, and we can move ahead to the new structures.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Having served as both a district and a unitary councillor, I actually support the Government's move towards unitary authorities. My Brigg and Immingham constituency is served by two unitary authorities—North Lincolnshire council and North East Lincolnshire council—both of which want to continue as they are, and that position is supported by the hon. Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin). When the Secretary of State

reviews the two-tier Lincolnshire county council area, can he give an assurance that he will leave the two existing unitaries exactly as they are?

Steve Reed: Unfortunately, I cannot prejudge the outcome of a consultation process, but I can perhaps say that I have been very impressed by the work done by North East Lincolnshire council, with no prejudice to the decision that will follow.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): First, would the Secretary of State stop saying this is a locally led process. The power rests solely with him, and each of these delays is his decision and his decision alone.

Secondly, the real question here is: why are elections to be delayed for a second year? When I was the Secretary of State, the legal advice I received—including from Sir James Eadie, the Government's chief legal adviser—was that it was not legally sustainable to delay for a second year, hence we did not. Even during covid, we kept the elections going and did not delay for two years. What the Secretary of State is doing is almost certainly illegal. If he is so confident of his position, will he publish his legal advice and publish the legal advice that I and the then Prime Minister received when we decided not to delay for a second year? Then we might be able to have faith in what he is saying.

Steve Reed: As I say, the right hon. Member was of course the Secretary of State who failed to act on eliminating the waste that came from duplication and allowed this two-tier system to continue, with millions and millions of pounds of council tax payers' money wasted on duplicate councillors, duplicate chief executives and duplicate finance directors, instead of ploughing that money into frontline services. On those few occasions when he was brave enough to take a decision, he imposed; by contrast, I have asked and I have responded. However, the reasons he gave were the right ones. In his words:

"Elections in such circumstances risk confusing voters and would be hard to justify where members could be elected to serve shortened terms."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 23-24WS.]

He got it right for once. He should be proud of himself.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I do have concerns about the undermining of democracy, not least in that some Members of the House who have always insisted on by-elections after defections now appear to be running away from the electorate. Will the Secretary of State absolutely dissociate himself from the comments made by a Member of the governing party who could not confirm, when asked three times, that the general election would never be delayed?

Steve Reed: There is no question in ordinary circumstances of a general election being delayed. That has only ever happened in cases of national emergency, and that remains the case.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): I agree with the right hon. Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle), who has said that these elections should go ahead. Indeed, democracy delayed is democracy denied. In the past, when there has been a delay to local elections, I cannot remember it ever being for longer than one year. When Margaret Thatcher rightly abolished the

[Andrew Rosindell]

Greater London Council, the term of the GLC was extended by one year only. Any delay has never been longer than one year, and one of two or three years is a complete denial of democracy. It is quite clearly a way of Labour avoiding humiliating defeats on 7 May. As they are going to be delayed, would the Secretary State please consider allowing the people of Havering to have a choice about our becoming part of Greater Essex instead of Greater London?

Steve Reed: I remind the hon. Member that his party did the same thing in the same circumstances—I should say his “former party”, because he walked out on it last week. Proposals about what happens in Essex are currently subject to consultation, and he is more than entitled to make his views known.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He has outlined that the purpose is to save moneys, cut down on waste and improve efficiency. In Northern Ireland, we undertook the reorganisation of councils, reducing their number from 26 down to 11. Councils need only one chief executive, one head of each department and one council headquarters. Two or three councils together have greater buying power than one, so ultimately there are greater savings. However, seven years later, local people still feel disenfranchised from their local council. I am trying to be helpful in asking this question, but can he look at the Northern Ireland experience, and does he acknowledge that restructuring is a very delicate balance and must have public buy-in?

Steve Reed: I do agree with the hon. Member. I think it is very important that we get this right, which is why I was careful to listen to representations from councils due to undergo reorganisation to ensure that we do get it right. I want to see those savings made and to see council tax payers’ hard-earned money spent on frontline services, not wasteful duplication.

Energy Costs

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee. Bill Esterson will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Chair of the Select Committee, not the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may take part in the questioning.

12.28 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): With permission, I will make a statement on the Government response, which was published yesterday, to the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee report, “Tackling the energy cost crisis”, which we published in October.

This issue is very much at the heart of what families up and down the country are dealing with. I stood in the last election on a commitment to bring down energy bills, and I welcome the Government’s decision to reduce them by £150 from April. That £150 is a start on the road to the cut of £300 that was mentioned before the election in July 2024. We should be honest, however, because the solutions to high energy costs are often presented as easy—they are not—although the underlying truth is very simple indeed: bills are too high, which is in large part the legacy of years of under-investment in infrastructure and the lack of long-term planning.

The warm homes plan, which was also published yesterday and which the Government refer to in their response to the Select Committee report, gives encouragement that many people will see their bills fall through the adoption of clean technologies. Insulating homes delivers warmth and health co-benefits in addressing cold, damp and mould, offers security and is an effective way to lower bills. Perhaps the success of the gas safe model over many years provides an idea of how to ensure confidence in the insulation of homes, following the well-documented failures of the energy company obligation scheme. In the Government’s response to our report on retrofitting last year, they promised to update us once the warm homes plan was published. Hopefully, the Minister is preparing—or, probably more accurately, his colleagues are preparing—to do just that.

Our report, published yesterday, offered the Government recommendations on how energy costs for consumers and businesses might be reduced in the immediate term. The inquiry into the cost of energy continues, pressing for answers on why electricity prices in the UK remain stubbornly higher than in countries such as Germany and France, and what energy reforms are needed to help with industrial competitiveness. In our report, we made a number of recommendations about supporting those facing fuel poverty. We recommended that the warm home discount be targeted using a tiered approach, so that funding is allocated based on household need and energy usage, and that value of the rebate be linked to

wholesale prices. We recommended that the cold weather payment be reformed so that the £10 payment is made to eligible households every day that the Met Office forecasts that the average temperature will be 0° or below the following day.

The key to helping those in real need is enabling energy companies to identify properly those customers who need support and relief. We called on the Government to work out how data might be used to target support to those who need it. The Government agreed with us on the importance of data sharing, but believed that their taskforce was already making progress in this area. Sadly, the Government rejected our call for better targeting of the warm home discount and for a social tariff, claiming that the warm home discount was already a social tariff—which is not the evidence that we heard. They also rejected our calls for a fairer approach to cold weather payments.

The level of consumer debt is alarmingly high and growing. We noted that the network companies have recently benefited from flaws in the price control system that overestimated the impact of inflation on their borrowing costs. We recommended that the Government recover the excess profits made and use it to clear much of the debt. We regret that the Government rejected our recommendation, not least as by doing so, they admit that consumer debt will continue to be added to everyone's bills. According to one retailer we took evidence from, that figure is £160 a year. We called for Ofgem to limit the back billing period for customers with a smart meter to six months. The Government referred us to Ofgem and indicated some broad support. We heard that bills fall 3% when households have a smart meter that works, even before trying to maximise the benefits. I am pleased to say that we had agreement from the Government about the importance of a better, more ambitious smart meter roll-out.

We recommended that the ombudsman's job would be more effective if it was placed on a statutory footing and better enabled to enforce its decisions. The Government agreed with us. We also recommended that the ombudsman should cover small and micro-sized businesses, with the ability to make awards up to £50,000. We thought that energy companies should not be able to pursue customer debts that were currently being considered by the ombudsman. The Government told us that they were content to rely on Ofgem rules that companies should only pursue debt in a proportionate manner. It was clear to us, from the evidence we heard, that a complaint before the ombudsman is sufficient to suggest that the retailer is not currently being proportionate in its actions.

Our main recommendation for businesses and industry follows a suggestion from Make UK to provide an opt-in scheme that would provide businesses with certainty about costs, as uncertainty is almost as damaging as the high prices themselves. I hope that the Government will act on these recommendations, which they say that they will keep under consideration. We also heard about businesses being put on to contracts where the costs might not be as transparent as they should be. We also think that businesses should be allowed to exit energy contracts up to 14 days after their first bill.

My Committee colleagues are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge that we face with energy bills. The Secretary of State spoke yesterday about the potential to use tariffs to cut bills. We identified other

opportunities to cut bills. Over time, we will recommend more. I would just make a plea: that the Government take a look at the evidence behind the recommendations in our report and consider whether they might want to adopt more of what we suggested. It would not be the first time that a Government had rejected Select Committee recommendations only to adopt them quietly later.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): In their response to the report, the Government said that in the clean flexibility road map, they have committed

“to develop measures focussed on barriers to the participation of low-income and vulnerable consumers in using energy flexibly.”

Given what we heard yesterday about the importance of heat pumps and heat storage in participating in flexibility, does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that one important measure could be to make heat pumps and heat storage more affordable?

Bill Esterson: The hon. Lady is on to what we will report on in the second half of our inquiry; we took evidence along those lines in yesterday's session. The House also heard yesterday from the Secretary of State, with the announcement of the warm homes plan, about the support that will be available for the technologies that the hon. Lady mentioned, so I hope that her question has been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is welcome that the Government agreed with the Select Committee that we should be more ambitious about smart meter roll-out, so that household customers can get the best tariffs for them. We also heard evidence that there was a lack of consumer confidence in smart meters. Does the Chair of the Select Committee think that there is more that the Government could do to rekindle that confidence for the benefit of consumers?

Bill Esterson: The low take-up of smart meters is one of the big challenges that faces the energy market. It is very much linked to some of the problems that customers have around the country. I mentioned in my statement that just having a smart meter cuts bills by 3%, before even investigating the access it gives to a range of tariffs. Anything that can be done to improve the roll-out must make a difference. We also heard evidence from Martin Lewis about the importance of this matter. Giving people more access to tariffs is part of what the Government want to do, and it is consistent with the evidence that we heard. How we increase the smart meter roll-out will be key; clearly, it has not gone well so far.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): At the time of the election, the Government promised that the rush to renewable energy would bring bills down by £300. They are now currently almost £200—some 12%—higher than back then. Now the Government are resorting to dipping into general taxation to try to con the British people by reducing bills by some £150; they will still be much higher than the Government's promise. Could the Chair of the Committee confirm—perhaps the Committee has a view, perhaps it does not—when the renewable energy rush is going to bring the bills down as promised, or will the Government have to admit that they misled the British people?

Bill Esterson: That is really looking to the second part of our inquiry, but we have heard evidence on this already. The price cap at the start of 2024 was £1,928. It is now £1,758 and, according to the retailers, is due to come down further over the next few months. It is also important to compare like with like. We have to increase the capacity of generation in this country; comparing gas-fired power stations to renewables, renewables are 40% cheaper on a like-for-like comparison for new generation. Just in the last few days, we saw that Reform's favourite leader, Putin, intervened again and we had an immediate spike in gas prices, so the evidence is very strong that the Government are on the right track. We have the immediate fall in the price cap—the figures I read out—and we have the Government agenda. The Committee will be looking, in the second part of its inquiry, at much of the detail and making further recommendations on how to cut bills in the short term.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): There are two particularly important conclusions in the Select Committee's inquiry: first, that reducing energy costs for everyone should be the top priority; and secondly, that there is no shortage of money in the wider energy system. Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree with me that GB Energy is an important part of the answer? We need publicly owned generation that is about not producing electricity for maximum profit but producing electricity that can be sold at lower prices and drive down costs across the market.

Bill Esterson: As I said in my statement, the years and years of under-investment—the complete opposite of what was promised when the energy system was privatised in 1989—have led us to this place. That has been a very large contributor to the challenge with energy bills that

we face now. The Committee heard evidence from E3G that as much as £500 in profit is made in the private sector from an average household bill. When we recommended that the debt be written off by using the excess profits made by the network companies, we were told that that would cause a chilling effect on future investment. Of course, that problem would not exist if we had not gone down the privatisation route in the way that we have. My hon. Friend makes a good point, but we are where we are, and we are going to have to find answers to the question of how we bring down bills further, in addition to the measures already taken by the Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair and the Select Committee for considering this massive issue. Around 40,000 older people in Northern Ireland—that is over 10% of older people there—live in poverty. Energy is perhaps one of their biggest outlays and it is critical. Did the Committee consider what can be done to protect our elderly against the worst energy crises, which really can be life or death?

Bill Esterson: That is a very important question. It was an important part of what we looked at in the first half of the inquiry. Our recommendations on the cold weather payments are relevant to what the hon. Gentleman asks, as are our recommendations on debt for those very many people who, because of the energy crisis, now face debt. We also made recommendations on the warm home discount, including extending it to all on benefits. The Government chose to stay with the current system, but these were very much recommendations that we supported for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman outlined. As I said when finishing my statement, I hope the Government will return some of the recommendations that they have so far not accepted.

Backbench Business

Fishing Industry

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 16 November 2025, on Fisheries and the marine environment, HC 680; and written evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on Fisheries and the marine environment, reported to the House on 25 November 2025, HC 680.]

12.44 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the fishing industry.

I place on record my appreciation of the Backbench Business Committee for making time available for this debate and for bringing it back to its rightful place here in the main Chamber of the House.

The Prime Minister and his colleagues often tell us, rightly, that food security is national security. The focus of our discussions about food security is often what we farm on land, but we should never lose sight of the fact that we are an island nation and we are surrounded by seas which, if managed properly, can provide us with a source of good quality protein that can be harvested in a carbon-efficient way.

The people who work in our fishing industries often do so in difficult and dangerous circumstances. Still too many of them lose their lives in pursuit of our food and we should record our appreciation for what they do to keep us fed. I say “fishing industries” for a reason. Too often, we talk about fishing as if it were a single homogeneous industry, when the truth is very different. Even in my constituency, the issues facing inshore crab boats are very different from those facing the larger white-fish boats, which are in turn different from the issues facing the pelagic boats. Layer on top of that the interests of aquaculture, and we begin to get a sense of the complexity of seafood harvesting and production.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): As many Members may know, warmer sea temperatures brought unexpected numbers of octopus to the waters around South Devon last year, and my crab and lobster fishermen have seen their catch decimated. They have lost up to 80%, hauling empty pots for weeks on end. That means fleet members are now cancelling maintenance work and having to lay off crew. Our fishing communities desperately need support, whether to enable them to stay in the industry or to help them decommission and leave. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that support is desperately needed from the Government?

Mr Carmichael: It is critically important. I heard that for myself from my hon. Friend's constituents when I visited Brixham not once but twice in the run-up to Christmas. It remains to be seen whether the invasion of octopus will be permanent because of changing water temperature, or whether it is just another of those blips that I think last happened in the 1950s. Whatever the truth of the matter, something has to be done for the industry that is there at the moment when the truth is finally established.

We speak about aquaculture as being all about finfish, but in my constituency and elsewhere the role of shellfish aquaculture is enormously important and deserves more attention, especially as we anticipate the conclusion of a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the European Union.

Fishing is still a predominantly community-based and family-run industry. It may not shift the dial massively in terms of UK-wide GDP, but in those areas where it matters it is nearly always essential. In Shetland, caught and farmed fish account for approximately one third of our local economic product. We have benefited over the years from the presence of oil and gas, and now from a growing visitor economy, but they do not define our community in the way that fishing does. I labour that point because it matters. People would be forgiven for thinking that this is an industry determined to plunder the seas and extract every last living organism from it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fishing is predominantly a family business, and the people working in it want to hand on their business to the next generation. They have more of an interest in ensuring that there is a business to be handed on.

Fishing is an area of Government policy where good co-operation between our Governments makes a difference. That is what the industry needs and expects of us. Sadly, it does not always get it. The recent controversy around the fishing and coastal growth fund illustrates how it is fishers who lose out when that goes wrong. Let us remember that the roots of that fund lie in the decision of the Prime Minister to sign up for a 12-year extension of the catastrophically bad deal that Boris Johnson got us in the trade and co-operation agreement in 2020. Given that the EU was looking only for a five-year extension, it is quite an achievement to have managed to negotiate it up to 12 years. Let us also not forget that the loss of fishing effort traded away by the Prime Minister is worth about £6 billion over the 12-year period at today's prices. If we were able to get half or even a quarter of that, the fund would never have been necessary.

To my mind, it makes perfect sense for the fund to be administered on a UK-wide basis, as was the case with the previous fund delivered by the last Government. That would, in fact, have been an opportunity for Scotland's two Governments to work together collaboratively on the delivery, and might have been more reflective of the fact that Scotland's fleet accounts for more than 60% of the UK fishing effort.

Instead, the Government in Whitehall acquiesced to demands from the SNP Government in Edinburgh to devolve the administration. With devolution, there inevitably followed the application of the Barnett formula, and, as a result, we receive only 8.3% of the fund. Madam Deputy Speaker, I could weep. On one of the rare occasions when they do manage to agree on something, they still manage to do it in a way that works to the detriment of the fishermen in my constituency.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is a matter of considerable regret that the Scottish Government asked for the fishing and coastal growth fund to be devolved without first agreeing the mechanism outside the Barnett formula that would reflect the fact that Scotland has a larger share of the fishing industry?

Mr Carmichael: That would have been perfect sense. It was certainly also regrettable that it was said that the Scottish Fishermen's Federation had asked for this, when they obviously had not. A good, mature working relationship between the two Governments is required, and unfortunately we are just not there at the moment. That may change after May—who knows?

The irony of the fuss created by SNP Ministers about the allocation of the fishing and coastal growth fund was not lost on fishermen in Shetland. As *The Shetland Times* pointed out, Shetland received only 5% of the Scottish Government's marine fund, despite the fact that we account for 20% of Scotland's fishing product. We were assured by local SNP politicians that this was entirely different, as their scheme was "merit based", which presumably means that we got our quota share only because we were not good enough to get the rest.

The relationship between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations is one thing; more important still is the relationship between all Governments and the industry as a whole. When any Government think they know better than the industry, we know that bad outcomes are just around the corner. Never has that been seen more clearly than when the SNP in Edinburgh, along with their coalition partners the Greens, sought to close down vast areas of fishing grounds by designating them as highly protected marine areas, which was stopped only by the most colossal campaign by industry and community organisations around the coast. It should never have been so difficult to make our own Government back down on measures that were so obviously an existential threat to coastal and island communities.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): My colleague is making some very good points about where Governments are misjudging these matters. Charter fishermen in Torbay are extremely worried that the three-bag limit on pollack could devastate their industry. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government need to monitor this extremely closely to see whether it does have this massive impact on the industry?

Mr Carmichael: My hon. Friend makes a relevant point, which goes to the heart of how decisions are made. It is critical that Government are able to take on the infinite nuance and complexity in fisheries management, and that is done by being in the ports and on the quayside, talking to fishermen, processors, auction houses, transporters and all the rest of it.

The signs remain, however, that the same attitude persists in the Scottish Government. Members will have heard me speak before about the difficult situation facing our pelagic fleet as a result of the quota cuts, which are yet to be finalised, from the year-end negotiations. These cuts will put our pelagic fleet under serious pressure. At times like this, it is more important than ever that boats are able to land fish where they will get the best possible price, so the increase in the requirement for pelagic boats to land in Scotland limits unnecessarily their scope to maximise their restricted opportunities. Again, it has not gone unnoticed that nationalist voices in *The Shetland Times* condemn the change, while in the pages of *Fishing News*, Gillian Martin MSP stridently supports her ministerial colleagues.

It does not have to be like this. Our fishing fleets around the coast and in our island communities ask only to be listened to and heard by Government. They do a

difficult and often dangerous job, and they should not have to contend with it being made even more difficult—and yes, occasionally more dangerous—by the people we elect to serve here and in other UK legislatures.

Torcuil Crichton: The right hon. Gentleman speaks about the fishing industry being heard. I hear reports of the SNP saying that Shetland would be listened to if it had a seat at the SNP table. I have a message for Shetland: we in the Western Isles have an SNP MSP, and we have not been listened to for 18 years.

Mr Carmichael: I am sure that message that will indeed be heard with some interest in the Northern Isles. We island communities need to learn from the experience of each other.

There are lessons to be learned from the management of fisheries in different parts of the country. Before Christmas, I visited Brixham with the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee as part of our ongoing inquiry into fishing and the marine environment, and much of what I heard there was similar to what I hear back in Shetland. In fact, speaking to fishermen around the country, the same issue rears its head time and again: spatial squeeze. The salami slicing of access to traditional fishing grounds as a result of other marine and maritime activities now poses a clear and present danger to the viability of our fishing industries as a whole.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The right hon. Gentleman talks about the obstructive nature of some authorities. Does he share my concern about some of the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities? The Eastern IFCA, for instance, has caused grave concern to my fishing constituents in Boston, who are furious about the increasing interference and regulations. It is almost as though they want to stop the whole fishing industry as opposed to enhancing it.

Mr Carmichael: I do not know the specifics around the Eastern IFCA, but if the hon. Gentleman writes to me about it, I will see if I can help him out in any way, shape or form. It comes back to my earlier point: authorities have to listen to and be informed by the fishing industry, whatever their locus. By the same token, the fishing industry has to accept that it is not always going to get everything it wants either.

On spatial squeeze, no single demand is unreasonable: the development of offshore renewable energy, aquaculture, marine protected areas, the laying of cables and pipelines, the use of the sea for leisure and doubtless other purposes—the list goes on. At every turn of the wheel, it is fishing effort that is reduced to accommodate something else. The root cause of the problem is that no one holds the ring to look at the whole picture of how our seas are being used. The policy of compensatory MPAs for damage caused to the seas by development done elsewhere feels particularly unjust and illogical.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Does my co-chair on the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries not think that the marine spatial prioritisation programme, which was introduced last summer, will do exactly the job he is hoping to see delivered?

Mr Carmichael: Well, I hope it will. It remains to be seen. As the hon. Lady knows from working with me as co-chair of the APPG on fisheries, along with our independent co-chair the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), to come up with a fisheries strategy for the whole country—it is that lack of strategy that needs to be addressed—the Government have a bit of a backlog on strategies, and the one she mentions has not even joined the queue yet. That is why we are doing this job: I think any initiative without a strategy is always going to struggle. I thank the hon. Lady for allowing me to junk a couple of pages of my speech there.

The House should be in no doubt that if the spatial squeeze on our fishing industry is allowed to continue, we shall soon risk losing its critical mass as a productive industry—that is true in all four parts of the United Kingdom. Once that critical mass is lost, we may never recover it. For the families and communities affected, that would be catastrophic. Fishing families are hard-working and economically productive people. Take away their ability to earn a living at sea, and they will not just sit idle; they will doubtless move with heavy hearts to do something else, somewhere else. That will forever change the nature and character of our coastal and island communities, and not in a good way. I hope that the Government will hear the warning and act before it is too late.

Finally, I wish to raise a concern that is very specific to my constituency: Norwegian access to our local waters. There are, as I speak, big, powerful vessels appearing around Shetland that were not there in the past. We often speak about the North sea fishing area, but in reality, so much of the international fishing effort has become concentrated around Shetland. Shetland fishermen have called on the UK Government to reduce the reciprocal catch limits in the UK-Norway annual bilateral fisheries agreement, but that appeal has not been heard. This is effectively the one major fishing effort in our waters over which we can still have some annual control.

The official preliminary figures show that the Norwegians caught over 22,000 tonnes of demersal fish in UK waters, while the UK caught just short of 9,500 tonnes in Norwegian waters. That is not a fair or balanced deal. We have long held the view that Norwegian access is a good thing for the Shetland fleet, not because there are many Shetland vessels going into Norwegian waters, but because several larger Scottish vessels go, which takes them and their catches away from our waters. That illustrates well the subtleties and complexity of managing effort in shared waters.

A degree of Norwegian access is welcome, but the current agreement and catch limits clearly favour Norwegians at the cost of our fleet. The stats show that Norwegians' saithe catches in UK waters doubled from 8,000 tonnes to 16,000 tonnes between 2024 and 2025. Saithe, let us not forget, is one of the stocks under pressure. Things are tough enough without a doubling of Norwegian effort on a key stock that is concentrated mainly around Shetland. By contrast, the highest UK demersal catch in Norwegian waters this year has been about 4,000 tonnes of haddock. That is a bit of a disparity, so can I ask the Minister to give urgent attention to the lowering of the reciprocal cap from 30,000 tonnes a year to 20,000 tonnes a year?

There is a commitment in the agreement to reviewing the cap throughout the year. That is something that fishing industry representatives in Shetland have called

for, but now it needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency. In this, I am merely the interlocutor. If the Minister wishes to discuss this with the real experts, she will find them in Shetland. I hope that once the days lengthen a little bit, we may see her there.

1.2 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate.

I start by thanking all those who support our fleets when things go wrong. Having previously worked for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, I have seen how devoted and brave its volunteers are. Many of them are fishermen themselves, and would rush to help others. I pay particular tribute to the men and women of the Looe station, whom I had the pleasure of visiting recently. They really are the best of us. I also pay tribute to the coastguard stations and search and rescue crews.

I thank the many charities who do so much to support our communities and fishing families, including Seafarers UK, Fishermen's Mission and Fishmongers Hall, to name just a few. I also thank Seafood Cornwall Training, which does so much to help new entrants across our region—something I am very passionate about—and runs safety courses for our fishermen. We cannot overstate how important that work is, and how vital continued Government support is if we are to prevent money from being a barrier to safety.

We are very lucky to have Clive Palfrey in our patch—a born-and-raised Looe lad, former fisherman, lifeboat launch manager and senior coxswain. He has dedicated his life to fishermen's safety, and has led many initiatives, including the first roll-out of life jackets with personal locator beacons. Can I ask the Minister to meet Clive and others, so that there is a better understanding that we still face so many tragic losses in this industry—it is the most dangerous peacetime occupation—and to discuss what can be done to prevent further deaths?

The fishing communities of Looe and Polperro are iconic. They are woven into the fabric of the town's heritage and history, but Members should be under no illusion about how diminished they are from their former glory. That is not just because of the greatly reduced number of vessels, but because of how hard it is for them to make a living, and to support their families and communities like mine. Last year's Great British inshore fishing survey made for grim reading.

If we are serious about the future of fishing, we must make it accessible to the next generation. Young people cannot step aboard a fishing vessel until the age of 16, even though that is the prime age for learning practical skills. We also lack structured support and mentoring, which allows traditional knowledge, safety guidelines and best practice to pass between generations. A properly funded mentoring and training pathway, alongside help-to-buy schemes for boats, licences and quota, would make fishing a realistic career again, rather than a closed shop.

As bass stocks rebuild, 2026 fishing opportunities are limited to those already permitted to catch bass, which closes the door to new entrants developing skills and landing bass lawfully. This risks locking the next generation out of the industry at the very moment that recovery should be creating new opportunity.

[Anna Gelderd]

Cornwall's fishing industries and communities have a long and proven history of managing a successful industry, and that record should be recognised. I support the call from the Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation for a ring-fenced allocation from the fishing and coastal growth fund to deliver a Cornish pilot fishing strategy. We could then take our fishing and seafood sector forward in a stable, confident way as we reset our relationship with the EU. Can the Minister set out when applications to that fishing and coastal communities growth fund will open, the timeline for it, and how funding priorities will be structured—for example, whether allocations will be categorised by science, management, skills or fleet support—so that coastal communities like mine can prepare credible and well-targeted bids?

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking with real expertise and personal experience. As the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee mentioned, we had the chance to visit Brixham, where we heard at first hand that Government funding for fleets has often been focused on keeping old vessels in service, some of which are 60 years old. They may have upgraded equipment that can boost catch values, but then the crew are stuck with outdated and substandard living quarters. Those we met are calling for the growth fund to pay towards new vessels that could massively improve both profitability and quality of life for crews. Cannock Chase is about as far from the sea as a constituency can be, but even I can see the logic of that. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be far more efficient and impactful for us to use the funding in that way?

Anna Gelderd: My hon. Friend raises a really important point, and I am grateful to him for referencing my part of the world.

Dr Simon Thomas and Dr Bryce Stewart are doing brilliant work locally with fishermen. Their latest report was published just this morning. I will happily share it with Members here, and with the Minister, and I can support a meeting with them, at which Members can learn more about this work and the leading research coming out of south-east Cornwall and the south-west, particularly on pollack fishing.

One challenge that our most sustainable fishermen face is the allocation of pollack quota. Rod-and-line fishermen, many of them in boats that are under 10 metres, use one of the most selective and low-impact methods available, yet they are restricted to around 200 kilos a month. That does not even cover genuine bycatch once the bass season opens. Without access to an additional pollack quota, these fishermen are left with no viable options unless they are fortunate enough to secure a tuna licence. A fair rebalancing of pollack quota towards this fleet would support sustainability, reduce waste and keep our small boats working—something that the Minister is particularly passionate about.

The last Labour Government left the previous Conservative Government with the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and a clear map for developing the healthy seas and sustainable stocks that we need. The fisheries Minister, hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), has inherited 14 years of poorly managed stocks, which have led to closures; reduced fishing of key species, such as pollack and bass; and an industry that

has been restricted by home-grown red tape. That has left our inshore fleet more burdened, less viable, and in a more vulnerable state than ever before. I welcome the work being done to negotiate a new bespoke sanitary and phytosanitary deal that will remove mountains of that red tape, and allow our seafood industry to grow as trading becomes easier.

Fishermen in the south-west are also dealing with the unprecedented octopus bloom, which has had a devastating impact locally on crab, lobster and scallop fisheries. For many boats, this has translated into lost income, financial strain, and real concern for their wellbeing. Even if the bloom subsides, there is a serious risk that shellfish stocks will not recover quickly enough to support the potting fleet for many years. I welcome the work that local scientists and fishermen are doing together on this, including the report I mentioned. This is exactly why investment in industry-led science matters; it reflects real conditions on the water, and gives us advice grounded in lived experience.

As an independent coastal state, the UK has both the opportunity and responsibility to manage our own waters sustainably. Stronger protection of inshore grounds, including an engine power limit of 221 kW in the 6 to 12-mile zone, applied equally to UK and EU vessels, would safeguard smaller boats and reduce conflict. A clear limit on vessel size inside the 12-mile zone would reflect a well-established standard used by other nations, align with inshore fisheries and conservation authority practice, and give real protection to the smaller inshore boats active in areas like mine.

It is vital for our Government to turn this tide and make meaningful change, sort out the inherited mess, and make the most of our valuable national resources of fish and shellfish stocks. To that end, I wish to highlight six points. First, will the Government commission work on a fairer regime—one that moves away from a system where those able to buy and lease quota succeed, while smaller-scale fleets struggle? The regime needs to fund science, data collection, monitoring and enforcement, and to recognise the central role of our small boats in coastal communities. That would support a just transition by prioritising low-impact fishing, social value and the long-term stewardship of our seas, while aligning fishing activity with marine protected areas.

Secondly, will the Minister do all she can to get to the bottom of the inshore vessel monitoring and catch app failures that occurred due to the last Government's red tape? The industry warned that the inshore vessel monitoring system was not robust, and that the kit was not fit for purpose. Years later, one device is still not working as it should. While the monitoring kit and the catch app continue to fail, the stress and frustration for fishermen grows. At the very least, we need a clear plan for those systems, and a timetable for fixing them. I would be very grateful if the Minister could set that out.

Too much of our commercial stock is data-deficient. That has created uncertainty, which hits small-scale fishermen the hardest. We already expect our fishermen to provide extensive data on location, catch, size and value, but that information is not being fully used. The consequences of overfishing, illegal discarding and pressure from exceeded quota limits damage the marine environment and undermine responsible fishermen. That is why data and science, though perhaps not the most exciting part of our debate, really matter. I urge the Minister to look

seriously at how artificial intelligence can be used to unlock the value of the data that we already collect. I raised that point in a written question about fishing in areas such as the Cornish 6 to 12-mile zone, which local fishermen are worried about.

Fourthly, the pollack fisheries industry science partnership, led by Doctor Simon Thomas, is working with the Looe fishermen I mentioned earlier. It delivers robust evidence at a fraction of the cost of conventional studies, and has directly informed this year's total allowable catch for pollack. By contrast, the previous Government spent about £450,000 on a close-kin DNA study that remains unpublished. Fisheries science partnerships, such as the pollack FISP, show that when fishermen are treated as partners, it is possible to get real-time data, trust, and importantly, value for money. I strongly support the use of the fishing and coastal growth fund for industry-led science projects like that, so that benefits stay in our ports, such as Looe, rather than being lost to leasing and speculation.

Fifthly, I congratulate Brixham and Newlyn fish markets on a successful year, and particularly thank them for accommodating the sale of landings from our fleets in Looe and Polperro. With the closure of Looe and then Plymouth fish markets, our fishermen face long and costly journeys across Cornwall or into Devon simply to sell their catch. At the tidal ports of Looe and Polperro, where return times shift daily, that creates real logistical pressure. I asked the Minister, when considering the fishing and coastal growth fund, to look at long-term support for securing routes to market for isolated ports. We have discussed that, and I thank her for her engagement.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting so many key issues, as well as developments and successes, in our fishing industry. With between 30 and 40 vessels, Portsmouth has a smaller fishing industry than it once did, although the industry still supplies many small businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to sustain our fishing industry in the United Kingdom, we must make sure that there are training routes for our young people?

Anna Gelderd: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I completely agree that young people in our coastal communities are the future of the industry and the heart of our communities, and we must do all we can to work with them to ensure that they have an industry that is sustainable for the future.

Sixthly, I welcome the Government's commitment to the fishing and coastal growth fund and the fisheries and seafood scheme. I ask the Minister to ensure that the schemes work for small-scale, owner-operator fishermen. Larger businesses have the capacity to prepare their bids and projects, while those with small boats often miss out simply because they lack the administrative time or support. In previous years, we have seen schemes close before many fishermen could even submit an application, something that I know causes real concern and frustration in my community. The last Labour Government addressed that by funding regional support officers to help small fishing businesses develop their plans, gather quotes and complete bids. I urge the Minister to consider restoring those roles, or introducing a similar support system, and basing that support in areas like mine, where small-scale fleets are concentrated, so that help and funding reaches the intended fleets.

Finally, we import and eat almost double what we catch and export in seafood. Although we may be a nation of fish and chip lovers, we consume only 20% of what we catch. Given that some of the best seafood in the world comes from our waters, particularly those of South East Cornwall, we can all play a part by choosing locally caught fish at the tills and the checkouts, and by backing our local fishermen, not just with words but with our demand. I recognise those unsung heroes of our fishing industry: the families and loved ones who support the brave fishermen. The unsociable hours and the uncertain work schedules mean that the support of loved ones and families is vital to fishermen; their families keep the home fires burning, and we should pay tribute to all that they do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That has made me feel hungry. I call Andrew George.

1.15 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), a Cornish colleague who is a very strong advocate for Looe and the fishing communities around her constituency's coast. I want to emphasise a point that she made about the fishing and coastal growth fund.

As the Minister will be aware, the fishing industry is seeking not only engagement and consultation from the Government prior to the announcement, which we expect in April or May—perhaps she will tell us—but full consultation on the proposals. She knows that Cornish colleagues have endorsed and reinforced the case that the Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation has made for a delegated fund of £10 million for small projects. We believe that that is a very good way of ensuring that funding gets to the places it might not reach if it were simply held and managed centrally.

I have been to quite a few debates like this one, including during my previous life in the House. I have been reflecting, particularly as the Government have published the animal welfare strategy, on my early days in the fishing industry. My family had a boat down in Mullion harbour. In the summer months, we used crab and lobster pots and did a bit of mackerel handlining to supplement the farm income. I remember that on the few occasions on which we were able to keep a lobster for ourselves rather than having to sell it, my parents debated the best way of killing it. Should we use the shock of putting it straight into boiling water—we are talking about the '60s and '70s, when we did not have the science behind us—or was it more humane to warm the water gently? I was only a child at the time, but I am sure that with the acute hearing of a child I sensed the lobsters screaming. At least we now have the science to tell us that lobsters are sentient beings.

I am pleased that the animal welfare strategy acknowledges that we need to move things forward. I welcome its commitment to publish guidance clarifying whether live boiling is an acceptable killing method and whether any legislative arrangements or amendments are needed in respect of the supply chain review. That is relevant to the industry, as an adjunct to this debate: it would be helpful to inform fishermen about how the supply chain will work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to the negotiations. At the end of last year, we were somewhat shocked that

[Andrew George]

the Government accepted rules from the EU that will govern how British fishermen can work in British waters, and that it seems they were changed at short notice and without any consultation. These were technical measures that will affect British fishermen in their own waters.

Surely that runs contrary to everything that we were assured Brexit would give the UK—the sunlit uplands in which we would be able to decide for ourselves how we manage our stocks and manage our industry. Will the Minister explain how that happened? Why was the industry not consulted about those changes? Why did they happen at such short notice? Is it because we are outside the pre-negotiations that happen within the EU, during which proposals can be fine-tuned? Were we simply caught out at the last minute?

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall referred to the difficulties within the 6 to 12-mile zone and the fact that, in spite of everything, the Government have acceded by permitting foreign vessels with historical entitlement to continue fishing within the zone for another 12 years. She will know that the industry is arguing strongly, certainly in Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly. Why we do not apply to those waters the same 221 kW engine power limit that applies within the 6-mile limit? Why was that not proposed as a countermeasure to what was thrown on the table by the EU at the last minute? Doing so would have given the British Government a bargaining chip at that stage.

As we missed that opportunity, will the Minister assure us that she agrees that that would be a sensible method of going forward? After all, it protects the inshore fishing grounds; it safeguards, or helps to safeguard, the marine environment; it supports a viable inshore fishing industry; it reduces the impacts from larger vessels coming into the 6 to 12-mile zone; and it provides an enforceable management tool, because it is already established. If she or the Government failed to take the opportunity of introducing it then, does she now accept that it would be a good management tool? Will she ensure that she presses for it?

On the so-called benefits of the EU-UK trade negotiations, we were assured that the export of fish from this country would be made smoother, more transparent and easier, and that the administrative regulations applying to it would be less burdensome. When I have spoken in recent weeks to exporters in my constituency, they have told me the opposite: it has now become more burdensome. In the interests of time, I will write to the Minister rather than going through the technical detail now, but it is important that the sanitary and phytosanitary changes that have been brought in be properly understood. They seem to have created new impediments rather than resolving things.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall referred to the importance of the next generation of fishermen. I have been a strong supporter of the Young Fishermen Network, which is based in Cornwall, since it was established. Matilda Phillips from my constituency has been pressing its case very strongly. I hope that the Minister will look at its manifesto.

There is a degree of absurdity here: we are recruiting new fishermen into the industry, but they are not allowed to go to sea under the age of 16. In the past, that was one way in which they could experience fishing. It can

be done safely: one can regulate and put in the safeguards to ensure that it is done safely. I certainly went to sea well before I was 16. I did not go into the fishing industry, but I know many others who did. It encouraged them and provided them with a strong base. It also gave them ways to buy into the industry by getting in at the smaller, artisanal stage. Many of them, certainly from my area and my generation, became well-established members of the fishing community, from a very small base. I hope that that opportunity will still arise.

Finally, I hope that the Minister will consider how ultra low-impact fishing can be further incentivised and supported. I know one fisherman on St Agnes, one of the Isles of Scilly, who uses a sail—no engine and no plastic. He is doing his best to tick all the boxes and use a low-impact fishing method. Because he fishes for lobster, he has had a really difficult year as a result of the octopus bloom. He tells me that in spite of trying to do what society is encouraging fishermen to do, going the extra mile and being as sustainable as possible, he finds that he is over-regulated and that there are no incentives for him. I hope the Minister will be prepared to look at the case of Jof Hicks and others who are trying to do the right thing.

1.26 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this debate and for restoring it to the main Chamber, as we have been asking for many years. I congratulate the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee—the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who co-chairs with me the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries—on securing the debate.

The Government have taken steps to bring greater stability and long-term thinking to the sector, but it has not been without controversy. They are continuing to allow EU vessels into UK waters for another decade-plus, with no protection for non-quota stocks. The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) made a good point about the speed of the negotiations, which arrived upon us with next to no engagement, either with the sector or with this House. In future negotiations it would be preferable, to say the least, if efforts were made to keep this House informed and if those who have an interest on behalf of their constituents were able to engage directly with those who are negotiating.

The agreement reached with the EU last year has provided at least some parameters of operation. There is an understanding of where the industry will stand until 2038. The new SPS agreement also has the potential to significantly reduce red tape for seafood exporters. Given that more than 60% of UK seafood by value is exported to the EU, that matters enormously to processors and exporters in places like Grimsby.

The UK seafood processing sector supports more than 17,000 full-time jobs, including over 5,500 in the Grimsby cluster alone. It is a modern, innovative industry that enables British-landed fish to reach domestic and international markets. We produce about 10 million fish fingers per week. We were on “Inside the Factory” on the BBC, and were very proud to see that. I will say a little more about the importance of fish fingers when I talk about the subject of British procurement, which was raised at Cabinet Office questions this morning.

Continued investment in modernisation, innovation, marketing and workforce skills will be essential. I welcome the leadership shown by the UK Seafood Federation, which is headquartered in my constituency, and particularly its focus on skills and careers as a priority for the coming years. In the circumstances, given all that has happened for the sector in recent years, I welcome the £360 million fishing and coastal growth fund. It has to focus, as I think it does, on fishing communities to boost skills, support business security and business expansion, and promote fishing as a career. That is exactly what is needed to strengthen local economies, and I will of course be doing all that I can to ensure that Great Grimsby sees some benefit from that funding. I would welcome any update from the Minister on the details of that fund, such as who can apply, how they apply, what the criteria are and when we can expect to see all that detail.

There is still work to do in ensuring that fishing and seafood are fully recognised in wider Government thinking. Too often the sector is treated narrowly as a regulatory challenge rather than as part of the solution on food security, which I know is an important factor for the Government, and on regional growth and resilience. This week, the Government's assessment of global biodiversity loss and national security rightly highlighted risks to food systems, but it did not reference fish or seafood at all. As an island nation, we should be more confident in recognising the necessity of properly managed fisheries to a resilient food system.

As a believer in the importance that offshore wind plays as a critical part of our energy system, and as well as being a representative of a historic fishing town, I am at the heart of the challenge when it comes to considering spatial squeeze. Steps have been taken to address conflicting industry interests. As I mentioned in my intervention earlier, the marine spatial prioritisation programme, introduced last summer, set out clear location-specific priorities for fisheries, nature and other uses of our seas, but fishers are still worried. They must be engaged with and listened to. They do not have the same power as those big wind development companies or those big communications companies that are laying cables. They often feel, and these feelings have been compounded over the years, that their needs are last on the list. The Minister has to focus her support on the needs of fishermen and on ensuring that their voices are heard against some of those other organisations, so they feel confident in the representation they have from this Government.

I said I would come back to fishfingers. We are gradually becoming a much more health-conscious nation, judging by the number of Members—not those in the Chamber today—who are on various weight-loss jabs. Health is much more at the front of people's minds. Eating fish could help with the nation's health. It is high in omega-3 and an excellent source of protein. How can we bring this into the UK economy through our public institutions? There is a good opportunity to build a healthier nation by integrating increased amounts of fish into our schools, the NHS and the Prison Service. That would help not only boost UK industry, but improve the brainpower and concentration of our young people and those who are unwell and need to heal quickly. We need to ensure that fish and fish products from around this country are included in the national food strategy.

I want to underline the importance of the work being led by the fisheries APPG on a national fisheries action plan, which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned. Since leaving the EU, action has been taken to look at stock management, but there is no single and coherent strategy for the fishing and seafood sector as a whole. Responsibility seems to be spread across lots of Departments, making the system complex and fragmented. A clear, forward-looking plan could bring together issues of space, labour, skills and sustainability, providing the long-term direction that the industry needs, and I certainly look forward to engaging with the Minister on this as a cross-party group.

Fishing has a strong and important legacy and will always have a future in the UK. The foundations are being put in place, but increased ambition and enthusiastic partnership with coastal communities will be crucial in ensuring that these future opportunities do not slip through the net.

1.34 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) raised the question of the correct method of dispatch for lobster. May I counsel him against the method that I tried, which was to pop them in the freezer? By the time I opened the door, they had eaten all my ice cream and three of my Fab lollies.

Even as we speak, chic Parisians are enjoying langoustines and coquille Saint-Jacques, perhaps with a crisp glass of Chablis—lucky them. That seafood almost certainly comes from the pristine waters of Scotland, but one of the difficulties we face in getting that seafood into France via Boulogne is red tape, and this is where the Government should step in. That red tape is blamed on Brexit. In fact, it comes from the far side of the short strait. This is a difficulty created by the French—perhaps because of protectionist ideas, who knows?—but it should not take an entire renegotiation of the SPS agreement to get this sorted out. We could have this changed and changed quickly.

The other danger with the renegotiation of an SPS deal is that it may have an impact on the free trade agreements we are doing around the world. We have recently signed one with India, for instance. The comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, the CPTPP—which is easy for me to say; we need a better name for this—could be imperilled by effectively reducing ourselves to rule-takers rather than rule-makers with a new SPS deal.

The other issue that many of our fragile coastal communities face is that they have full employment. Going to sea is not forever. I speak as the son of a marine engineer—I, meanwhile, get seasick in the bath, so I would certainly not want to go aboard a fishing boat. As we have heard, it is an exceptionally dangerous occupation and, even at the best of times, is difficult and hard work. The Home Office has a role here because it is exceptionally difficult to fulfil the requirements to bring in from elsewhere the workers who are crucial to this industry. I wonder if the Minister might touch on this—I appreciate it is a different Department—because we need some simplification of the rules and a realisation that they are making things exceptionally difficult for sometimes long-established businesses that should have a great future.

[John Cooper]

Again, touching on that red tape issue, one of the seafood producers in my constituency, West Coast Sea Products from Kirkcudbright, is facing difficulty even now with getting scallops into France—not because the quality of its product is anything less than exemplary, but, again, because of the rules and the difficulties being placed in its way, not by Brexit, as I say, but by the French themselves. Perhaps we could hear something on that, and perhaps we might be able to unblock this logjam.

1.37 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the Backbench Business Committee for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. I pay tribute to all those who have cast a net, hauled a creel or pulled on a mussel rope to sustain us from the seas.

We have been fishing the waters around our islands for millennia. Just like the right hon. Member's constituency, island life in the Western Isles is still shaped by the rhythms of the sea. The fishing fleet in the islands, while a shadow of the fleet that sustained the international herring industry in the early 20th century, is still a mainstay of the economy. Less than two years ago, these small fishing communities saw off an existential threat from the SNP and Green Scottish Government, which would have effectively wiped out the industry.

The hated highly protected marine area proposals, which would have closed 10% of Scottish waters, were seen off by protests and songs by Skipinnish and Vatersay fisherman Donald Francis MacNeil, but there is a lingering suspicion that the agenda has not gone away. Since the collapse of HPMA, there have been fears that the existing marine protected areas and other designations will become pegs on which further restrictions could be hung. The rebranding of HPMA, without the colourful measures of banning canoeing and paddleboarding, could be a danger. It is understood that the Scottish Government will be consulting on 173 sites. Although the Outer Hebrides sites have not been confirmed, it is expected that up to 20% of those total sites may be in Hebridean waters.

There are a couple of lessons to be learned from the HPMA debacle. The first, for anyone across the UK tempted to back the Greens today, tomorrow or next May, is that the combination of Greens and SNP in Scotland has set back marine conservation by a decade and a half at least. The other is that, if we are to sustain the fishing industry in communities such as mine, we need to end uncertainty. To ensure conservation, we need conversation. We need talks about sustainable management with the fishing industry and fishing communities—the experts on sustainability—on what is essentially their self-interest. Nobody knows how to responsibly steward our waters better than the fishermen themselves.

There is powerful evidence from my constituency that self-imposed controls by the community itself increase the value of landings. In the last year, the value of landings in the Western Isles has gone up to £16 million—a 4% rise—and that increase in value is the result of pot limitation efforts and various other measures, including banning larger vivier crab vessels from operating within six miles. Those statistics demonstrate what folly there

was in trying to impose top-down conservation measures. When the local fishing fleet provides the conservation measures, the dividends are obvious.

The majority of income generated by Western Isles boats comes from the prawn sector, at £9 million. Scallops catches were down 14%, but nephrop landings were up by 25%, mostly due to the presence of processing in the islands. The Macduff Shellfish factory in Stornoway, which has attracted more boats, and there are other processors in the islands, but they face massive logistical barriers not just in getting to the continent, but in getting to the mainland in the first place, thanks again to the ferry debacle that the SNP presided over.

As well as successes, there are major challenges. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) hinted at the problems of recruitment to the sector; in an area such as mine, where depopulation and demographics leave a “doughnut hole” where the working-age population should be, that is a huge challenge. The proposals by the Migration Advisory Committee on skilled worker visa changes would have a profound effect on recruitment to the industry. If overseas hiring for fishing roles ends in December 2026, parts of the country—including mine—would be significantly impacted. While that is not this Minister's Department, her support and the Government's support in flexing those requirements would be appreciated.

The effect on the sector is quite obvious. A skipper from the Western Isles has been in touch with me recently to say that seven years ago he had a local crew of seven, but he is now forced to employ three crewmembers from Ghana. He and his son now skipper the vessel back to back in order to fish at every opportunity and ensure that they pay their foreign crews the right wages—considerably more than he or his son take home themselves. That is a challenge facing the local fishing fleet, but it is not the only one; others include high fuel costs, access to markets and sometimes red tape from Whitehall itself.

Again, this is not the Minister's Department, but the Western Isles council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, and, I suspect, other local authorities across our coastal communities, have faced a recent challenge from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, about which I have written to the Treasury. The council may lose its authority as a registered dealer of controlled oils, supplying 14 fishery piers across the 10-island chain that makes up the Western Isles. Those sites are in remote location, which, combined with the physical geography and the need to have fuel supplies available out of normal hours, means that the sites cannot possibly be physically or remotely monitored, as HMRC says they have to be. The council has been informed that, unless the sites are monitored and HMRC is satisfied that all sales are for legitimate licensed use, the sites and the licences may not be approved.

We see there, as we saw with conservation measures, the disconnect that often exists between bureaucracy and the reality of island and fishing communities. I welcome the Government's £360 million fishing and coastal growth fund and regret, as I said in an intervention earlier, that a direct proportion is not going where it should be—to Scotland, where a large part of the UK's fishing effort is—because the Scottish Government demanded control of the fund without agreeing a mechanism beyond the Barnett formula.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), who is no longer in her place, that that fishing and coastal growth fund should be directed towards the recruitment of new entrants and young people into the industry. There are commendable efforts in the Western Isles to get young people into the industry, with some success, but our populations are so small that they can only go so far. That fund should be directed towards small, inshore coastal communities, to help to revive them and those coastal economies, rather than being handed out to the mackerel millionaires or the quota barons who currently rule the oceans.

Fishing quotas themselves, which could be the subject of a whole other debate, should serve the public good, not narrow interests. If we are serious about the future of the seas and our coastal communities, quotas must be looked at again. They should have a social value and be aimed at the long-term benefit and sustainability of our coastal communities.

1.46 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for applying for this debate, those hon. Members who supported his application, and the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time on this important subject. However, I regret that the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) used so much of their time to attack the SNP Scottish Government. The plain fact of the matter is that I am elected, as are they, to deal with matters in this place. My advice to them is: if you are so concerned about Scottish matters in Holyrood, please stand for election there.

I want to give some context before I deal with those matters that are relevant to Westminster.

Mr Carmichael: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Seamus Logan: No, not yet. I may allow interventions later, but I want to get to the second paragraph of my speech first.

Fishing is an incredibly important livelihood for many of my constituents. Fraserburgh and Peterhead ports are among the largest fishing ports in Europe in terms of the tonnage and value they consistently bring in. Across Scotland, the Scottish Government's Scottish sea fisheries statistics show that the value of the Scottish fishing industry in 2024 was £756 million—the highest in the past 10 years. Scotland's sea area is six times larger than our land area and accounts for 63% of the UK's exclusive economic zone. It is therefore no surprise that Scotland accounts for the largest part of the UK's fishing industry, generally representing around 60% of total UK landings by both tonnage and value.

The industry is obviously important to Scotland's rural and coastal communities; it is a key part of Scotland's food economy and provides employment all around our coast. The issue of this debate is crucial to my constituents—but, regrettably, the decisions taken by the Westminster Government regarding the Scottish fishing industry are regarded by those constituents as treacherous. First, we had the EU-UK agreement, announced last year, which saw fishing access arrangements extended for 12 years, rather than the preferred annual renegotiation that would have ensured better leverage for fishers. The Scottish Fishermen's Federation described

this decision as “disastrous” for Scottish farming and described the UK Government's view as being that the fishing industry is “expendable”. The Prime Minister said that this UK-EU deal was a “win-win”, but that characterisation is risible.

Then, as if to pour salt in the wound, the £360 million fishing and coastal growth fund allocations saw Scotland receiving just £28 million over 12 years, or just over £2.3 million a year—7.8% of the fund. How on earth is that approach sustainable? It is an unmitigated disaster for Scottish fishers. Trading away access to Scottish waters and refusing to mitigate that policy through the coastal growth fund is simply creating the conditions for the Scottish fishing industry to fail. A sector worth £756 million to the Scottish economy faces changed conditions with no consultation, as Members have acknowledged, mitigated by a pitiful amount from this UK Government.

The Scottish Government were sidelined in the allocation of the coastal growth fund, with the pathetic excuse that they had requested a devolved approach. Now we learn from the *Fishing News* that the application of the Barnett formula was because of a decision by the Treasury to baseline the marine allocation for 2024-25, rather than ringfencing it. To clear this up for Members who commented on it, at no point did the Scottish Government say that the allocation should be Barnettised; they simply asked for the devolution of the decision making on that fund to Scotland.

Mr Carmichael: Well, what on earth did they expect? They asked for devolution. With devolution comes Barnettisation. Is the hon. Member going to stand there and tell us that the SNP Government did ask for the rebasing that we have seen previously? I have certainly never heard that suggested, and we have taken evidence on this in the Select Committee.

Seamus Logan: I want to address that now. Under the European maritime and fisheries fund, when we were part of the European Union, the UK received approximately £207 million over six years, of which Scotland received 46%—46%, not 7.8%. That is why Scotland wanted that matter devolved: so that we could properly support the Scottish fishing industry, in the same way that the European Union and the UK did in the past. Why change the approach?

Torcuil Crichton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and politely decline his offer to stand for the Scottish Parliament, because Na h-Eileanan an Iar has an excellent candidate in Donald MacKinnon. Next May he will wipe out the SNP and give us a real voice for the islands, which have not been listened to in 18 years.

We have much to agree on when it comes to the share of the fishing and coastal growth fund, and I remind the hon. Member that the fund will be there for a decade. What is past is past, and without rancour, we could work together through the fisheries APPG and other organisations to ensure that more of this fund goes to our coastal communities, and particularly our fragile inshore coastal communities that need support—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Interventions should not be that long.

Seamus Logan: The hon. Member will know that, in reality, we do work very well together in the APPG under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for

[Seamus Logan]

Orkney and Shetland and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn). I accept the point about the fishing and coastal growth fund. I think he agrees with me that we need a review of that decision, but I will come back to that later.

Why did the Westminster Government change the approach and Barnettise the formula? Many of my constituents think it is because there are no votes for Labour and there is no prospect of ever winning another seat north of the Tay, alongside perhaps the seat of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar. I can tell the Minister that that is not going to change any time soon with this approach, because this Government are stealing our money to prop up their failing support in coastal communities in England.

A recent freedom of information request revealed that the Secretary of State for Scotland had made no effort—zero effort—to lobby the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss a fairer and proportionate allocation, given Scotland's massive contribution to our food sector. What is the point of the UK Government's Scotland Office if it does not stand up for Scotland?

Finally, as if the above were not enough, visa restrictions by the Home Office have been suffocating the growth of fishing in Scotland. Key sector stakeholders have raised concerns about the changes to visas coming into force at the end of this year and the impact this will have, particularly on processing. Their concerns about visa provision extend to hiring workers for operations within the 12 nautical mile limit, given the overlap in fishing grounds. I appreciate that this is not within the Minister's brief, but I would be grateful for clarity from her, or at least for her to tell us that she is lobbying the Home Office on this point, so that people and industries in my constituency can thrive and contribute to our growing economy. But please do not try to tell us that we need to hire local people. This mythical workforce sitting at home twiddling their thumbs simply does not exist. We are at full employment in my constituency, and efforts to recruit young people into this industry are simply not working—just ask Mike Park at the Scottish White Fish Producers Association.

The future of fishing in Scotland is at a precarious stage, and I want to use this opportunity to plead with the UK Government: please listen to the Scottish Government, to the Scottish fishing industry and to fishermen and women to get this right. One more U-turn will not make much difference to this Government, considering the number they have already made, but it will make the world of difference to fishing and coastal communities in Scotland. It is not too late to give Scotland a fair deal.

1.55 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for applying for today's very important debate. I would like to start by paying tribute to the fishermen and women of Bridlington and Hornsea in my constituency and to the RNLI and inshore rescue teams who keep our fishermen safe right across the UK.

The House will be well aware that Bridlington is the lobster capital of Europe, landing over 300 tonnes every year, and the largest shellfish landing port in the UK. I hope that next time the Minister is back in Brid, she

has the opportunity to sample some of our fine fresh seafood at Salt on the Harbour or the Old Lifeboat Station opposite the Spa.

I welcome the fishing and coastal growth fund, but I caution that it is £360 million over 12 years, which is £30 million a year. In a harbour like Bridlington, the cost of a major upgrade, or in fact just normal maintenance to harbour walls, often runs into millions of pounds. I fear that we could quickly run out of money for major capital projects, but I hope that those capital projects can apply to this fund and that Bridlington will be able to benefit from it. I also hope that we will be able to address the skills issues, which are key for the fishing industry. We need to attract school leavers into the industry and ensure we have the next generation of people out there at sea; this is a real problem up and down the country at the moment.

Another issue I would like to talk about is spatial squeeze. The Government are consulting on a land use framework, which is welcome, but we need something similar for the marine environment. We have heard from Members today about the challenges of juggling space for renewable energy, and there are very large offshore wind farms in Hornsea.

John Cooper: Is my hon. Friend surprised to hear that the SNP denies the existence of spatial squeeze, and advisers told senior figures in the Government not to talk about spatial squeeze? Spatial squeeze is real. I return to his point about Bridlington being the lobster capital of Europe. We do not have to divide on this, but I think he will find that it is, in fact, Port William.

Charlie Dewhirst: On that second point, we will have to agree to disagree, but my hon. Friend is right in terms of spatial squeeze. If it is not an issue, I do not understand why it takes up so much of the briefing from the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations; they, I suspect, are the real experts in this area.

I turn to the EU deal and the frustration that our fishing industry has been sold out for the next 12 years in return for an SPS deal that has yet to be negotiated. I fear that things have got worse since that announcement was made. In fact, the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has contacted MPs to say:

"In last year's annual negotiations between the UK and the EU that concluded last December, something new happened that has deeply alarmed UK fishermen. As well as deciding fish quotas for 2026 as expected, the two sides also agreed new technical fisheries management rules for their respective national waters. We are told that the EU proposed these measures and that the UK negotiating team was blindsided by their inclusion in the talks. Nevertheless, they agreed to them. Rules that govern how British fishermen can work in British waters were changed, at short notice and without consultation, at the request of the EU. This is unprecedented."

It went on to say:

"It was startling to learn... that the collaborative, evidence-based process that we all thought we were working within had been set aside in favour of a bargain struck between civil servants over a few days in London and Brussels. More troubling still, the rules will be more lenient in EU waters."

That says to me, "sell out again", and it sets a direction of travel as we negotiate an SPS deal with the European Union. It is clear that we are negotiating from a very weak position, and are willing to do whatever the EU

pleases to have a deal done by the end of this year. This Government could perhaps learn lessons from the previous one about setting false deadlines for trade negotiations. I am happy to admit that we made mistakes in the early days post Brexit, and I caution against doing the same now.

It would be remiss of me not to touch on bottom-trawling. The issue has become a focus for anti-fishing groups, but if it were to be banned across our marine protected areas, that would destroy the industry overnight and decimate certain coastal communities. Much of the campaign against it misrepresents the industry; it is not as damaging as some organisations say it is. I hope that the Minister will take up the issue with the industry, and will ensure that bottom-trawling is properly represented in any negotiations about the use of that technique.

In conclusion, I am proud to represent such a successful fishing industry. I know that Bridlington is close to the Minister's heart, and I would love the opportunity to meet her, perhaps even in Bridlington, and local fishermen to discuss the future of the industry, so that we do what we can, together, to support the lobster capital of Europe.

2.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for setting the scene so incredibly well. I envy his knowledge of fishing, and I am always pleased to support him in a secondary role in such debates. I represent Strangford in Northern Ireland. It has a strong fishing community, particularly in Portavogie, and I wish to relay a number of issues that have been raised with me. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place—she will know that—and I hope that when I ask her a question, she will be kind and will accede to that request; it is perhaps similar to questions that others have asked. I give special thanks to Dr Lynn Gilmore, who is in charge of the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation. She is doing extremely well. I am reminded of Margaret Thatcher's saying:

"if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman."

We have a woman chief executive of the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation, and I look forward to deliberating with her, and with the Minister.

As the House will be aware, the seafood industry in Northern Ireland plays a vital role in supporting the economies of our coastal communities. In 2023, the fishing fleet comprised 211 registered vessels, and employed 445 people. The majority of its vessels fish in the Irish sea, and operate from the three main ports: Portavogie in my constituency; Ardglass; and Kilkeel. The Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation represents those three ports, as well as other places. Trawlers of over 10 metres, mainly targeting nephrops, account for around half the fleet, and today at least 70% of the nephrops fleet is reliant on a non-EU migrant crew. That is one of the highest rates in the United Kingdom fishing industry. Those crews form an important part of the workforce. Recent data shows that approximately 50,500 tonnes of fish and shellfish were landed by the Northern Irish fleet, worth £80 million. Nephrops accounted for 46% of landings by value. I want to put those stats on record, because it is important to understand the value of the fishing sector in Northern Ireland, particularly to my constituents.

The Northern Ireland fishing sector also supports 18 seafood processing operators, which generated a further £62 million in 2023 and support 570 full-time jobs. However, those numbers belie the true value of the industry, which is in its cultural and historic importance—others have referred to that—and the skills handed down through generations, because the pride that our communities take in the fishing industry is immeasurable. Sadly, all that is being threatened by issues outside the control of the men and women who risk their lives to put delicious local seafood on our plates. The Northern Irish fishing industry, so valuable to our economy and our coastal communities, is facing unprecedented challenges. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) outlined the issues facing crew, as did the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I suspect other Members will raise that issue, as it is a key point to underline.

Foremost among those issues are matters relating to visas for overseas crew. In a recent letter to the Minister for migration and citizenship, the hon. Member for Dover and Deal (Mike Tapp), Northern Ireland industry leaders described the cliff edge that they face when it comes to skilled worker visas. Those will become unavailable to the fishing industry beyond 2026—that is really worrying—except for during a limited period of time in which the visas of crew already working in the industry can be renewed. Industry leaders also highlighted escalating salary thresholds—again, those have been a bugbear for some time—and the English language requirements in the industry, and they requested an urgent meeting with the Minister to discuss those issues. If such issues are not addressed, that could result in a loss of up to 70% of crew on Northern Ireland vessels, potentially tying up almost 100% of the Northern Ireland nephrops fleet within a few short years. We are in the last chance saloon, and there will be cascading impacts on processing businesses and fishing communities, and the potential for a loss of workforce continuity and traditional, generational knowledge.

The industry has repeatedly requested a bespoke visa for fishing, as it ramps up efforts to recruit more local workers into the industry. At the time, the Minister's response offered nothing to industry. It was in part contradictory, and it ended with that Minister declining to meet Northern Ireland industry leaders to hear their concerns. The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs and I have had many discussions, and have worked together on many things, and she has always been responsive. I ask her and the Government to please have a heart when it comes to the fishing industry. Could I meet her and the Home Secretary, to go into the detail of what is needed to save the fishing industry? I request that meeting urgently; that is my major request to the Minister, as this issue is really important to the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation and the fishing fleet.

Those in fishing occupations will no longer be eligible for the skilled worker visa, and post 2026, no visa route will exist for recruiting foreign deckhands. That eliminates the only legal pathway for vessels to get the crew needed to operate inside the 12 nautical mile zone. The importance of this cannot be underlined enough. The fishing industry needs a dedicated immigration route for fishing crew post 2026, preferably in the form of a bespoke visa. That would protect British businesses while a recruitment drive sought to source more domestic labour for the fishing industry in the long term.

[Jim Shannon]

I remember a few years ago an advert was put in a European fishing magazine. It sought to recruit people from Europe to the fishing industry. One hundred people replied to that advert; 10 people expressed a further interest; and only one turned up for the interview. I make that point because sometimes, when we looked around the United Kingdom, and across the EU at the time, we saw a potential workforce, but it just was not there. Northern Ireland industry wants an opportunity to brief the Minister and highlight industry concerns that if nothing is done in the short to medium term, British businesses will fail. It is that straightforward.

The Northern Ireland fishing industry is facing an unsustainable decrease in the Irish sea's available fishing grounds through expanding offshore marine protected areas, proposed bans on bottom-towed gear, and rapid offshore renewable development. Unlike in agriculture, fishermen do not hold property rights to their areas of food production—that is a fact; it is not like farming—so fishing is an easy target for displacement. Additionally, fishing areas have no statutory basis for protection, unlike marine protected areas, or offshore renewable developments. The combined effect of the spatial restrictions already in place or under development will be to threaten the operational and financial viability of the Northern Ireland fleet.

The industry has lost 4,728 km of fishing grounds in the Irish sea over the past couple of decades—that is around three times the size of London. The implementation of management measures in MPAs in the Northern Ireland offshore area, and additional offshore renewable energy zones in the same constrained Irish sea region, threaten a further reduction in fishing grounds—and there could be more. We need to see evidence-based decision making, and site-specific management on the principle of sustainable use, rather than blanket spatial bans for unknown or uncertain environmental benefits.

Core to that must be the designation of Northern Ireland fishing organisations as statutory consultees in marine planning. That brings me to my second ask: can the Northern Ireland fishing organisations be allowed to play their part, and be involved in the discussion about marine planning? There should be statutory consideration given to the impacts of displacement of fishing effort before any area becomes unavailable for fishing. That would enable the Northern Ireland fishing sector to have an impact.

To sum up, the Northern Ireland fishing industry seeks Government support for a balanced planning system that protects fishing as a legitimate, food-producing industry that is vital to the UK's people, economy and national food security. Having already faced decades of disruption, reduced fishing grounds, lack of local labour and increasingly unpredictable quotas, fishing communities in Northern Ireland now face a series of simultaneous pressures that threaten their long-term viability.

Confronted with such changes, fishermen are left with profound uncertainties that accentuate financial stress, as well as mental health issues, for them and their families. In every aspect of policy, from quotas and immigration to marine protected areas and offshore wind developments, fishermen are under pressure. The fishing industry has shown over many years that it is prepared to work constructively with government, and

it is doing so. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland set that point down as a marker. The fishing sector wants to work with the Government. It wants to protect the seas that it is fishing in, because they have to be sustainable. That is what the sector is about, and I hope that the Government wish to work with the sector.

The sector has responded positively to scientific recommendations, increased levels of gear selectivity to reduce impacts on the environment, and operates within one of the most heavily regulated fishing regimes in the world. Before anything else in the Irish sea, at the beginning of time, there was fishing. When God created the world, he created the Irish sea and he created fishing—that was before everything else happened. Our communities, who are ever mindful of that, were the original stakeholders. I think I quote the Bible accurately when I say, "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, and he created the sea."

Food security, as well as economic security, will depend on being able to maintain a sustainable fishing industry in Northern Ireland. With the right foresight and committed cross-government policy, the industry will be able to sustain itself, remain productive and remain the cornerstone of communities that live along our coast, as it has been since the beginning of time. If we ignore the concerns of Northern Ireland's fishing communities, a rich heritage could be lost that would be irreplaceable.

2.12 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am an unpaid director of the Newhaven Fishing community interest company. As such, I see at first hand what is happening to our local fishing industry, and I rise to talk specifically about the impact on our town.

In Newhaven, we have a small but long-standing fleet, and our fishing heritage is under threat. We have between 15 and 20 active vessels working out of Newhaven, catching sole, plaice, brill, turbot and other bits and pieces off our Sussex coast. Much of that fish goes elsewhere for processing, to all corners of the UK and beyond, before it ends up coming back to our plates. We are exporting those jobs, increasing emissions and missing the chance to build our local economy and invest in a small part of the Government's growth agenda. I believe that has to change.

We want our fish processed locally, and jobs created in coastal communities, rather than fish being shipped abroad and coming back again—and sometimes then going back abroad and back here once more. The recent plans to bring processing back to Newhaven are exactly what we should be doing nationwide, but that needs long-term commitment from the Government, if it is to stick.

In the meantime, we are losing our fishing community. The charter boat fleet that historically brought customers to Newhaven's tackle shops, pubs and restaurants all year around has almost completely disappeared. A constituent of mine runs the last charter company in Newhaven. During recent works at the port, he was forced to relocate temporarily, but was promised that he could return. Now he has been told that he cannot come back, despite Government funding for a new pontoon, supposedly for the fishing fleet. That is the kind of bureaucratic nonsense that puts marginal businesses into receivership

and brings generational businesses, like his and many others in our town, to an end, in some cases after decades or even hundreds of years of operation. When we invest in coastal infrastructure, it should support the entire fishing community, including commercial vessels and charter boats that bring economic activity to our towns. Both are vital to a thriving coastal economy.

We have been successful in attracting Government investment to support the local fishing industry in Newhaven, with some £12 million for new landing stages, and for processing and other facilities in the town. My thanks go to Lewes district council and my predecessor, Maria Caulfield, who supported the bid for that funding, which has been essential to giving our fishing industry in Newhaven a chance—just a chance—of surviving and thriving in the future. However, we need to do far more to support our fishing businesses if they are to be sustainable in the long term.

Here is what is really at stake. Without new people entering the industry, small independent businesses will disappear. They will be replaced by massive multinational companies and EU mega-trawlers that disrupt our wildlife, deplete our fish stocks and send their catches to distant markets. In our case, many are flagged to the Netherlands. We will lose local jobs and an industry on which communities like ours depend.

Our local fishing businesses are largely family affairs, with one generation taking on the business from another. It is a tough and sometimes very dangerous job. In November 2020, our community was shocked to wake up to the news that the Joanna C trawler had sunk off Newhaven, tragically taking the lives of two fishermen. It was a reminder of the risks that our fishing boats taking every day in unpredictable seas. I should take a moment to pay tribute to our local Royal National Lifeboat Institution crews, based out of Newhaven, and the volunteers at our local Coastwatch who do incredible work trying to keep our fishermen and other sailors safe.

The Government must acknowledge that support for small fishing businesses to encourage more young people to see fishing as an attractive career choice is essential for the future vibrancy of the industry. There is a real danger that we will continue to fund an industry that simply does not have the people to continue it, and it will end up withering on the vine.

We want a different future for the industry. We need to slash the red tape that is strangling our fishing industry and invest in coastal infrastructure—not just by building pontoons, although that is important for our town, but by ensuring that our infrastructure serves the communities that it is meant to support. We need to give coastal towns the power and resources to develop their fishing economies and attract young workers, working in concert with local schools and colleges to build a skills base for the future, not just for our fishing industry but in many of our deprived coastal communities, where a skills base is lacking. They could take advantage of some of the opportunities being created by investments in our local fishing industry and others.

We must put sustainability at the heart of everything we do. We need to work hand in glove with the fishing industry to look carefully at the impact on marine protected areas and ensure that protections for sustainability do not cause catastrophic harm for the businesses that we seek to support.

We must rebuild depleted fish stocks. In the distance, we can often see massive Dutch trawlers operating off our coast. They Hoover fish out of the sea and deplete stocks, meaning that our own fishermen—predominantly line-and-pole fishermen—cannot catch anything when they go out to fish. That is soul-destroying for people who are already in a very challenging industry.

We must ensure that fishing stock negotiations after 2026 get proper democratic scrutiny, as several hon. Members have mentioned. That is because the Conservatives' Brexit threw our industry into chaos. Unfortunately, the Government let that happen again when they extended fishing rights to the EU for 10 more years—and for what? Nothing but some general commitments to negotiate further down the line.

Newhaven has fished its waters since the 1580s. Some fishing families have worked there for over 200 years; indeed, some of their names are known to pretty much everybody in the town. It is a close-knit community. We have local fish shops, plans for new restaurants and a community that wants to buy local catch, but right now we have a local fleet that is struggling even to stay in business.

My coastal communities are not an afterthought. They are the frontline of our food security, our environmental stewardship and our cultural heritage. We must deliver a fair deal for fishers, with real investment and sustainable practices, working with Government. I would be remiss not to take the opportunity to extend the Minister an invitation to come down to Sussex by the sea and visit our fleet in Newhaven.

Too often, very small fleets like ours can be overlooked in discussions about the fishing industry. In his excellent introductory speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned how fishing is sometimes treated as a homogeneous industry in which all areas are the same. Our small fishing fleet is as worthy of protection as any other, but it can be easily overlooked in wider discussions about the larger industry. I want communities like Newhaven's to have the power to control their own future, with a thriving fishing industry at its heart.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before the Front-Bench speeches begin, may I extend a warm welcome to the Minister of Education in Ontario, who has been in the Chamber listening to hon. Members' contributions? I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.19 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate and on his powerful speech. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time for today's debate.

The UK's fishing industry is central to our national economy. It contributes more than £1.4 billion annually and supports more than 11,000 fishers. However, despite the sector's economic value, the industry post Brexit continues to face numerous challenges. It has insufficient Government support and has been left to fight an uphill battle against environmental neglect and regulatory stagnation. The previous Government's ill-conceived Brexit deal has had a negative impact on the UK fishing

[Sarah Dyke]

industry and has created deep uncertainty about its future. Our fishing communities feel unrepresented and anxious about the industry's future economic viability.

Within the terms of the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement post-Brexit, UK fishing became subject to a number of regulations. It is unbelievable that the current Government's Ministers have, in effect, agreed to continue with the Conservative plan for fishing, subjecting the industry to another 12 years of neglect through the agreement reached at last May's UK-EU reset summit, as EU boats will now have access to our waters until 2038. The Liberal Democrats hoped that the summit would provide the opportunity for a reset that would benefit our fishing industry, but it just got more of the same. We believe that if the Government had been more ambitious and sought to secure a new customs union, better benefits would have been secured for our fishing industry.

Although it is positive that a comprehensive agreement has been secured across trade and defence, the Government must work with our fishing industry to understand the impact that the extension will have. Greater co-operation is necessary, given that the raft of regulatory changes to the EU applies to all vessels, but fishers do not feel supported by the Government or by the Marine Management Organisation, which gave the industry just five days' notice of changes. Poor communication regarding new gear marking and catch reporting has only furthered confusion and uncertainty in the industry.

The sewage scandal that has blighted our waters for far too long urgently needs addressing. Although Glastonbury and Somerton is landlocked, it is home to diverse watercourses, including the Rivers Brue and Parrett, which offer excellent fishing for local anglers. Upstream towards Bruton, the River Brue supports local trout fishing, while further downstream around Glastonbury and towards Highbridge, the River Parrett is dominated by coarse fishing such as for roach, chub, perch and pike. Both rivers are valued ecological areas for our local communities and our region's biodiversity, but our watercourses have not been left untouched by pollution, with the River Parrett in Langport experiencing 54 separate sewage spills in 2023, amounting to 453 hours of pollution. Devastatingly, in 2025 alone, all the watercourses in my constituency were subjected to more than 45,000 hours of pollution. Across the wider—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady will know that the debate is on the fishing industry, not on sewage pollution of rivers per se. Perhaps she would like to return to the subject of fishing.

Sarah Dyke: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The impact on coastal communities is even more severe and economically damaging. The House will know that fishing waters in Cornwall, including in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George), have been greatly affected by pollution, with many forced to close after high levels of *E. coli* were found in locally sourced oysters and mussels. For local shellfish growers, the actions of unresponsive and irresponsible water companies have destroyed consumer confidence in locally sourced fish, decimating demand and threatening the viability of local producers across many coastal regions.

Despite the desperate pleas of our coastal communities, the inaction of both the previous Conservative Government and the current Labour Government has resulted in a shocking increase in pollution incidents, which were up 27% last year. The Liberal Democrats have been very clear that tougher regulations must be delivered to prevent raw sewage spillages into our waterways. The Government's White Paper, which was published on Tuesday, contains some welcome measures, but it does not go far enough—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will not make this point again. This is a debate on the fishing industry. The hon. Lady has made her point about pollution.

Sarah Dyke: Let me return briefly to Somerset—this is relevant, Madam Deputy Speaker. The European eel was once a key part of the county's identity. It was so abundant that it even served as the local currency, and it was the most economically significant part of Somerset's fishing sector. The presence of this keystone species is said to be the leading indicator for the health of our wetland, river and natural habitats.

Unsurprisingly, the European eel is currently deemed a critically endangered species, with a 90% drop in its population since the 1980s owing to habitat loss and migration barriers. The Somerset Eel Recovery Project, founded by Vanessa Becker-Hughes, is leading community efforts to restore the county's local eel population through conservation and cultural efforts, but despite its best efforts, its work is not bringing the significant changes that it would like. Removing barriers and installing passes is essential for the species' survival, which is dependent on migration. By balancing conservation efforts with sustainable fishing, we can secure the stability of the sector and more of us can enjoy the culinary delicacy that is eel.

Across the wider south-west, we are seeing a stark decline in fish species along our coastal areas. In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), the octopus bloom of last year has led to an 80% decline in crab catch—a decline so significant that it is forcing local fishers to consider early retirement or career changes because they are unable to make ends meet. Fishers in South Devon and across the south-west need greater support from the Government to stay in business while they learn to adapt to these concerning ecological changes, and they require flexibility on catch licences in order to remain in business.

Last May, the Liberal Democrats welcomed the Government's announcement of a £360 million fishing and coastal growth fund after the industry had been let down consistently by nearly a decade of successive Conservative Governments. The current Government must not follow the example of the Conservatives. For a lasting impact to be realised through greater investment, our coastal towns must be given a voice in how the money is spent.

This vital funding should not be spent on generic community assets such as benches and public facilities in coastal towns. It must be appropriately targeted to empower our fishing communities, providing them with greater powers and resources to invest in coastal infrastructure and services. Through delivering a comprehensive plan for spreading economic opportunity, the Liberal Democrats would ensure that the fund supports initiatives

to enhance awareness of the career opportunities in the sector and strengthen skills to retain workers and, crucially, attract younger workers to support future growth.

It is clear that our fishing and coastal communities cannot afford another decade of neglect. The previous Conservative Government left our fishers in the lurch and hung out to dry, while the current Government have failed to grasp the opportunity to secure a genuine reset that would provide both stability and opportunity. Instead, they have chosen to continue with a botched Brexit deal for the industry until 2038. Our fishing industry deserves better.

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

2.29 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I congratulate my friend the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the Chair of the EFRA Select Committee, on securing this vital debate. I have a huge amount of respect for him, given his expertise in, and dedication to, these and other important areas.

We have heard many contributions from Members across the House today. The Chair of the Committee spoke passionately about issues such as spatial squeeze, and also talked about the imbalance in the situation with Norway. The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) talked about how dangerous a profession fishing is and the importance of people in this sector, as well as about the importance of data and science.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) talked about the importance of bringing the next generation into this profession. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) talked about the importance of fish for our food security; she also talked about spatial squeeze and about fish being an important part of a balanced, healthy diet for the UK population. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) talked about some of the key logjams of logistics, bureaucracy and red tape facing the sector, and about a pragmatic approach to workforce issues.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) talked about some of the debates regarding the designation of marine protection areas, about conservation, and about striking accords on workforce issues. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) talked about the importance of the industry to his rural and coastal communities, and also highlighted workforce issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) again talked about spatial squeeze, the importance of the next generation, and flaws in the recent EU negotiations. I fear he was starting a bit of a lobster war with our hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway; I remind him that lobsters are indeed sentient creatures. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is always a passionate advocate for his industries and communities in Northern Ireland, also talked about some of the key issues, including workforce issues and food security.

Finally, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) talked about the significance of the fishing heritage in his community and its importance to his local economy.

Fishing has always been vital to the United Kingdom—it is the lifeblood of communities up and down this country, across all four nations of our UK. I pay tribute to the

brave and hard-working fishermen and women, the processors, the transporters, the traders, and everyone else who does so much to harvest and deliver that precious food source, which is so vital to our food security and to local economies across the land. I also thank representative bodies such as the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation for all they do to champion and advocate for those vital industries. His Majesty's official Opposition are committed to standing up for, and supporting, our coastal communities and fishing industries. As an independent, sovereign coastal nation, our fishing rights are a fundamental asset; we cannot weaken them, and they are crucial to maintaining our food security and our economy.

The previous Conservative Government made progress in making us an independent, sovereign coastal state, including through our work to secure the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement for fisheries in 2021. We used that agreement as a catalyst to secure £970 million in fishing opportunities by 2024 and an uplifted quota at a value of £146 million, including significant gains for the pelagic sector. The current Government had to renegotiate on quota and access under the terms of that agreement. Unfortunately, the fruits of the Government's negotiation with the EU were somewhat spoiled. It was quite simply a sell-out that throws our fishing industry under the bus for the sake of closer ties to the EU. Industry representatives have described the deal in no uncertain terms as a "horror show", and as giving away "the best card that we still had".

We Conservatives are fundamentally clear that we stand with all our hard-working fishermen and women, who will be significantly impacted and have their fishing capabilities restricted because of this retrograde deal.

Back in March, when it was first being seriously suggested in the public discourse that fishing rights might be bargained away for access to the European defence fund, I asked the then fisheries Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), to confirm that the Government would not capitulate on our fishing rights. The Minister responded that he was

"determined to get the best possible outcome for our fishing sector".—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 366WH.]

Unfortunately, the Government caved in to pressure to seek closer ties with the EU at any cost. Worse still, we have learned that despite the Government caving in, the EU has still refused them those closer ties on defence. While nations as far afield as the Faroe Islands have the option of negotiating with the EU yearly to improve their lot when it comes to both quotas and access, the Government's deal means that our fishing industry is locked into current arrangements for 12 years.

Seamus Logan: The shadow Minister is speaking about the European Union. Just today, I have heard about requests from the European Union regarding the size of fishing nets, which the British Government have apparently accepted without question. Is the shadow Minister aware of that?

Dr Hudson: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. When requests like this come in, we have to take a very logical view across the United Kingdom and the UK Government have to be strong in their deliberations, because we have to make sure that our waters are protected.

[Dr Hudson]

The Leader of the Opposition explicitly set “no reduction in our fishing rights” as one of the five tests for this Government’s agreement with the EU. The Government have not even come close to meeting that test. His Majesty’s Opposition also note that in the most recent discussions, technical management rules were brought into the frame of negotiations for the first time. As the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East has intimated, that is a clear sign of the increasing influence the EU is starting to have as a result of these changes.

While of course we all welcome any funding to support the fishing sector and improve the welfare of coastal communities, the Government’s fishing and coastal growth fund was really just a sticking-plaster exercise—yes, it was a significant amount of money, but it was really to try to cover up their errors in their fishing policy so far. As the Minister will remember, when that fund was announced, I asked her to confirm any practical details of how the fund would be delivered; how it would support fishermen and women and coastal communities; and, importantly, whether the funding would be front-loaded, which is the only way that the Government can begin to repair some of the harm they have started to cause since taking office.

As I have said, we absolutely support any funding provided to fishing and coastal communities. When we were in Government, we brought in the £100 million UK seafood fund to support the future and sustainability of UK fisheries and the seafood sector, allocating funds for science, research, infrastructure, skills and training across the sector. Today, we have heard from Members across the House about the importance of data, research and science—we need to collect that, and we need to fund it. From the autumn Budget documents, we also know that the Government plan to spend £25 million in the financial year 2026-27, which is a small part of the £360 million in the fishing and coastal growth fund. They must provide that funding as soon as possible, in a way that makes an actual difference to fishermen and women and to coastal communities.

Speaking of the Budget, like most of the country, people in fishing and coastal communities will have been anxious about the autumn Budget and the changes it contained. We in the Opposition are concerned about the impact of the tourist tax on coastal communities that rely on tourism—that tax will serve a double blow on top of the difficulties the fishing industries and coastal communities have already faced. Owing to the Government’s increase in employer national insurance contributions, employers have been left to make very difficult choices, such as refusing to hire new staff, freezing pay or—worst of all—letting people go. This is really hitting the fishing industries.

A scientific, evidence-based approach is non-negotiable if we are to ensure high ecological and environmental standards in fishing across all fishing countries, including the UK—standards that are paramount for sustaining our precious seas and oceans and ensuring responsible global trade. However, a delicate balance has to be struck. While ensuring ecological and environmental standards, we must also ensure that the fishing industries are able to survive and, indeed, thrive. When we talk about improving marine welfare and addressing some negative practices, we must be clear that fishermen and women in the UK are trying to act in the best interests

of the ecosystem on which they depend. As we have heard from Members across the House, the experts on nurturing and protecting that precious resource are the people who fish it. Likewise, an evidence-based approach must be at the centre of the solution tackling spatial squeeze, which we have heard a lot about today.

It is vital, as we enhance our abilities to deliver clean energy, that offshore wind is delivered in the right way and in the right place, looking at all the evidence, including on how offshore wind impacts on the fishing industry, ecosystems and marine life. While the Marine Recovery Funds Regulations 2025, which came into force in December, compensate for environmental damage caused by offshore wind, they fail to compensate fishermen and women for any harm to their livelihoods done by offshore wind projects. That is just another missed opportunity to protect the industry by this Government. Unfortunately, it is their embedded approach at present.

Seafish’s recent report on employment in the fishing industry in 2024 showed an increasingly ageing demographic in the sector, with difficulties for many to access the skilled labour that fishing demands. Pretty much every speaker today talked about the importance of workforce moving forward. Without new fishermen and women, the industry will not have a future. Will the Minister please confirm what the Government are doing to tackle this existential threat to the industry?

Part of solving the problem must look at the practice of fishing itself, which is undeniably a dangerous and demanding industry. Financial instability, the tough conditions and the physical stress can have a significant impact on people’s mental health. I commend the work of several charities, including the Bearded Fishermen Charity, the Fishermen’s Mission, FishWell and the Angling Trust, to support fishermen and women with their mental health. What measures are the Government taking to make fishing safer and to help improve the physical and mental health of our fishermen and women?

In conclusion, fishing is vital for our local communities, our economy and our food security, which is national security. This Government had the room to make real progress on the good—albeit not perfect—legacy they were given. Unfortunately, they are adrift from the shore when it comes to truly grappling with the challenges facing the industry, or they have actively worsened the situation with their decisions, such as this awful EU deal. The Government must wake up and steer their ship in a new direction, or they will see the industry sink on their watch.

2.42 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): It is a pleasure to respond to an extremely good debate, with many Members reflecting the issues that they have discovered in their own constituencies and bringing them to the Floor of the House, as we expect them to do. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for his tireless commitment to championing the fishing industry and for persuading the Backbench Business Committee to grant this debate in the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) has worked closely with the right hon. Gentleman in his work on the fishing industry, and she is delighted to be here, ensuring that an important local industry to her constituency is properly represented and reflected on the Floor of the House.

Fishing is an incredibly important industry to the vitality of many coastal communities. It is culturally and socially important. It is a way of life passed down from generation to generation, and it is evident in a town's built environment, whether it is the jetties and marinas, the seafronts where the boats moor or the fish huts that dot many a local promenade, not least where I was born and grew up, as the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) was so generous to point out in his contribution.

The key to achieving the collaboration we need to ensure the future of our fishing industry is working with those who know the industry best to deliver opportunities for the future. We also have to remember that fishers contend with tough working conditions. Many hon. and right hon. Members on both sides have raised that point. It is a difficult and dangerous life, but it is often undertaken with passion and commitment. I pay tribute to all those who have been injured or tragically lost their lives at sea. Fishers provide us with the world-class fish and seafood that the UK is rightly revered for. I pay tribute to the RNLI, which often goes out in dangerous conditions to rescue people and save lives at sea. I commend the ongoing efforts of the fishing industry to improve safety—those efforts must continue as a priority.

The fishing industry is operating in a challenging environment, as we have heard from Members from all parts of the House, but many highly promising areas in the industry present opportunities, and we wish to enable the industry to grasp them. It is the case, though, that sectors within the fleet are struggling. There is increasing competition for marine space. Our marine spatial prioritisation programme helps to mitigate that, and I thank industry leaders for the data they have shared and contributed to, which has hugely improved the programme's insights into this key challenge.

Pressure on stocks means that we must carefully manage fisheries, including in some cases through significant reductions in total allowable catch and changes to other measures. The sector contends with barriers to exports, and Labour's work to develop new markets and ease the administrative burden of trading in a highly perishable foodstuff is complex and will take time, but that work has begun. Meanwhile, as we have heard, in particular from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other Members, it can be hard to recruit staff, and entry into the industry requires significant investment.

In that context, the ability to change and adapt is important, and fishing has a good record in doing that. Fishing businesses have to mitigate the impacts on stocks that are under pressure, adapt to changing distributions of fish because of climate change, respond to changing consumer demands, adopt new technologies and develop new skills. It is a task that this Government will continue to support the industry in navigating. We are supporting and encouraging the industry to organise and collaborate, to plan confidently and to invest for the long term. I will continue to work with industry experts—big and small—who know the sector best in order to build a thriving and sustainable fishing industry.

Jim Shannon: Would the Minister agree to have a meeting with representatives from Northern Ireland? I feel and they feel that that would be advantageous for us all to find a better way forward for the sector.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am a very generous person, and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman's representative bodies. He knows that fishing is devolved, but I understand that some issues are dealt with nationally, albeit not by my Department. Such issues are dealt with by my previous Department, the Home Office, but not by my current Department—I am obviously talking about the issue of visas, which been raised by several hon. Members on both sides of the House. I do not want to give away internal Government issues, but I have a meeting in the diary with the relevant Home Office Minister, where I will discuss some of these issues. Although I cannot promise what the outcome will be, I can promise that the industry will be properly represented. I know that this matter is also relevant to aquaculture and processing, so I am more than happy to take into account any information that hon. and right hon. Members wish to give me ahead of that meeting. Having met some members of the industry around the country, I understand the pressures.

I have met many representatives of the fishing industry since assuming my role in September, and I had a hugely informative visit to Newlyn in December. I have been invited to Bridlington, to Shetland and to Newhaven, so I have an entire tour of the country coming up. I may not be present in the House for a long time, because I will be yomping around the coast to have a look at what is going on in both big and small sectors of the industry. The industry is very complex, and it is impossible to make generalised comments about it. What is important for an inshore small boat will be very different from what is important for a deep sea trawler that spends many months out at sea; I understand the differences.

On that note—having plotted my escape from this place for a few nice visits; I know the importance of seeing and understanding for myself the diversity of the industry, which sits at the heart of our national identity as an island nation—let me say that I am grateful for the invaluable contributions of my fellow coastal MPs on both sides of the House, who have brought the views of their coastal and fishing communities to the Floor of the House. I am listening. I know that I will not be able to please everybody, but I will do my best to understand the issues that are being faced.

The development of the fishing and coastal growth fund has been welcomed in some places and condemned in others. We have been working with the industry to understand the priorities of fishing and coastal communities, and to ensure that they help shape the fund so that it can drive growth for the future. Several themes are emerging from the initial engagement, including the importance of developing the industry's workforce for the future—something that has featured in discussions on the Floor of the House—making port-side improvements and ensuring that funding goes to all parts of the industry, including small-scale fishers as well as larger parts of the industry. The issues of education, entry to the industry and ongoing training have also come up.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) did not miss her chance to suggest that Cornwall should have a ringfenced allocation from the fishing and coastal growth fund—a request that I heard when I visited Newlyn. I am very interested in using the fund to ensure that money is made available to those who know their areas best, so that it can be put to best use. That does not always happen with Government

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

funding. I do not want the money to go to people who are very good at making bids for funds; if possible, I want it to go to the places where it will do the most good, so I am in the market for listening to suggestions on how that can be properly brought about. After all, we have 12 years to try to make a difference, and I hope that the fund can do that.

Andrew George: I am very grateful to the Minister for coming to Newlyn, which is in my constituency, and for listening to the industry. The Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation proposes a dedicated fund of £10 million, and wants to ensure that it works with the Government to agree on a strategy to develop the industry over the next decade, including through the recruitment of new, younger fishermen.

Dame Angela Eagle: I had discussions with the Cornish Fish Producers' Association and the Young Fishermen's Network on the quay down in Newlyn. I missed the hon. Gentleman at 5 am! Perhaps we can meet another time when I am down there. The bid has been well thought through in principle, and I am impressed with it. However, we have to wait until the fund is properly launched. At this stage, I cannot say anything other than how impressed I was with the bid. Decisions will be announced after our consultation with the industry is over. I am sure that the devolved Governments will be doing similar things with their parts of the fund.

In the negotiations on the fishing opportunities for 2026, we have been able to agree about 640,000 tonnes of UK fishing opportunities, worth roughly £1.06 billion, based on historical landing prices, including 610 tonnes, worth roughly £960 million, secured through negotiations with the EU, Norway and other coastal states. We have secured these deals against a very difficult backdrop of challenging advice for a variety of stocks, including northern shelf cod, against a legacy of 14 years of mismanagement, broken promises and neglected coastal communities.

Our approach to the negotiations is based on rebuilding trust with fishing communities, securing decent jobs, and restoring fish stocks so that our seas can support jobs and coastal communities for generations to come. We have worked closely with those in the sector to discuss the science—an approach the Conservative party refused to take, preferring to negotiate headlines rather than outcomes—as well as to understand their perspectives and requirements, and help them prepare for the impact of quota decisions.

We have achieved a number of resulting wins in this year's negotiations, including more opportunities for our sea bass fishery, a commercially viable total allowable catch for Irish sea herring, valuable plaice and sole quota transfers, and flexes in the channel and the Celtic sea. The total allowable catches agreed with the EU and Norway have enabled the continuation of the mixed demersal fishery in the North sea, avoiding the cliff edges and uncertainty that characterised negotiations year after year. We have agreed a new management model for North sea herring, which will help to ensure the long-term sustainability of the stock. We have increased opportunities for our commercial pollack fishery, following two years of being unable to target the stock, and we have achieved a significant increase in the UK bluefin

tuna quota from 63 tonnes to 231 tonnes. We need to continue to focus on working closely with the industry to improve the scientific understanding of fish stocks and consider further improvements to management measures that protect fish stocks, and support good jobs and strong coastal communities for the long term.

At the end of his speech, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland asked me about Norwegian access. We believe that the UK-Norway bilateral arrangements are fair and balanced, but I appreciate that some individual UK stakeholders may favour changes to the current arrangements. We take that into account in the negotiations each year and keep it under review. It is important to look at these deals in the round, because what is given away may also be swapped in the quota swaps, and therefore there are trade-offs. However, if he and those in the industry in his constituency feel that something is going wrong or that too much has been given away, he must let me know so we can ensure that the quota swaps are working as intended.

We are working at pace towards a new sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU, and are aiming to have legislation in place by the end of 2027. The new agreement will slash red tape for UK seafood exporters and reopen the market for GB shellfish from certain domestic waters, which will make it easier to sell British fish to our largest trading partner and strengthen the economies of our coastal communities.

We are supporting offshore wind development as a key part of achieving the Government's mission of making Britain a clean energy superpower. The transition to clean power must be fair and planned, and done with, not to, our coastal communities. As part of addressing that, the Government for the first time gave a strategic steer to the Crown Estate on key risks and issues associated with areas of potential future offshore wind development in the English sea. This steer, provided through the marine spatial prioritisation programme, is helping to guide the Crown Estate in identifying suitable areas for future offshore wind that avoid Government priorities such as the fishing industry and environmentally sensitive areas. I hope to continue to work closely with those in the fishing industry to ensure that their voice is heard when we discuss how these things are done.

I am conscious of time, so I will finish by saying that bringing about change is incumbent equally on the fishing industry and on the Government. We want to work together to bring about positive change. We know that fishing faces many challenges, but with close collaboration, openness to innovation and a Government willing to take responsibility rather than make excuses, there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of fishing—and I certainly am.

2.59 pm

Mr Carmichael: I do not know if the Education Minister from Ontario that you welcomed is still here, Madam Deputy Speaker, but if not, that is unfortunate. Many of my family emigrated to that province in the early 19th century, so it is nice to see some of them coming back now.

I place on record our appreciation for the engagement from various fishing organisations, in the run-up to today and throughout the year. They include the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, the Shetland Fishermen's Association, and the National Federation of Fishermen's

Organisations; Mike Cohen and Felix Davies from the latter have been in the Gallery throughout our debate. If that is not an illustration of their determination and commitment, then I do not know what is.

We have had, I reckon, 13 Back-Bencher contributions, as well as contributions from the three Front Benchers. We have covered the usual range of issues, including tax, quotas and spatial squeeze, but we managed to diversify into how to kill lobsters and the reintroduction of eels. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) took us back to the beginning of time. There was a happy contrast between his speech and many that we have sat through over the years that did not take us back to the dawn of time, but made us feel as though we had been taken back to that time.

The Minister gave an impressive list of the asks that she has been given. It will be daunting to address them all, but I encourage her to see that list as a positive, because it shows that there are people in this industry who want it to develop and grow. This is a great industry that can have a great future if we give people the basic tools to get on and make it great. I thank the Minister for allowing us to ventilate the issues today, and I am sure that we will return to the subject in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the fishing industry.

Agricultural Sector: Import Standards

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 20 January, on The future of farming, HC 527.]

3.1 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of import standards on the agricultural sector.

I am delighted to have secured today's debate. I am very grateful to all colleagues who signed my application, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time. I am happy to take interventions during my speech.

This debate is about the imbalance between our high domestic farming standards, which rightly prioritise animal welfare and the environment, and our imports, which often fall short. The Government's animal welfare strategy, published just before Christmas, shows our ambition to protect all animals from needless cruelty and suffering. It is the biggest and most ambitious animal welfare programme in a generation. It includes measures to phase out the use of cages in farming, move away from using carbon dioxide to gas pigs, and introduce standards for the humane killing of fish. That is real progress and reflects overwhelming public support for safeguarding animal welfare, but when we improve domestic animal welfare standards, we have to be careful that we are not just exporting cruelty overseas.

British and Northern Irish farmers want animals to be treated well and to have good lives, but UK farmers are undermined by low-welfare imports. Many countries that we import animal products from do not share our standards, so those products are cheaper to produce and sell. Our farmers find themselves in an impossible situation, often unable to compete. Sow stalls, for example, are banned in the UK, but 95% of pork imports come from countries where they remain legal. British shoppers buying bacon have no way of knowing whether the pig that produced it spent its pregnancy in a cage so narrow that it could not turn around. It is the same for hens. Battery cages are already banned here. It is brilliant that we are committed to phasing out cages altogether—the Government should be congratulated on that—but long term, as a next step, we need to think about imports, too. The animal welfare strategy states that we will

“protect our most sensitive sectors and uphold animal welfare standards where we consider overseas produce has an unfair advantage.”

The Government recognise the issue. Now is the time to put that intention into practice.

Brexit has resulted in a massive increase in non-EU imports over the last few years. Although most EU imports are from countries with similar standards to the UK, that is often not the case for imports from non-EU countries. Ninety-five per cent of countries with access to our markets have lower welfare standards than we do. In just four years, from 2020 through to 2024, non-EU beef imports increased by 31%, poultry by 60%, pork by 81% and eggs by a staggering 228%. New trade deals for the UK are welcome, but we need them to uphold our high standards on both animal welfare and pesticides on crops. The price of a good deal cannot be access to the UK food market on more favourable terms than those available to our domestic farmers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward; he is absolutely right to underline these issues. Does he not agree that the recent EU-Mercosur deal opens the EU market to increased imports of agricultural products such as beef, poultry, sugar and ethanol under tariff-rate quotas? That may well mean sacrificing quality for cash, and may have an unwanted knock-on effect for our farmers. The hon. Gentleman is clearly trying to save and look after our farmers, who are already under immense pressure. On that deal, the UK Government must make representations to the EU regarding food safety.

Sam Carling: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who makes his point well. I will touch on EU regulations later.

Our Labour Government have a stellar record on this issue so far. In negotiations with India, we refused to lower protections on goods such as pork, chicken and eggs. In talks with Korea, we have secured new commitments on animal welfare, stronger than any it has signed up to in any previous trade agreement. The next step is to equalise all our import standards, rather than just the standards for new agreements. We cannot go back to full alignment with the EU, either. The EU still allows sow stalls, foie gras and fur farming, all of which fall short of our standards. Switzerland successfully negotiated an animal welfare carve-out in its sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether the Government are seeking similar exemptions for animal welfare in the UK-EU negotiations. That would ensure we retained the ability to restrict imports that do not meet British welfare standards.

Let me address any arguments about the impact on food prices that changes could have. Over the past few years, food inflation has hit households across the country, and we all want prices to be more affordable, but I think we can all agree that that should not come at the expense of high standards. In the long run, undercutting our farmers will lessen our food security, leaving us more dependent on less reliable markets overseas, and as the Government have repeatedly said, food security is national security. That means that we must defend our farmers from a flood of low-quality imports.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions food imports and illegal imports. Next month will be the 25th anniversary of the devastating foot and mouth outbreak. Nowhere knows better than my Carlisle and north Cumbria constituency just what happens when foot and mouth takes hold. Does my hon. Friend agree that illegal meat imports heighten the risk of animal diseases such as foot and mouth, and that we need a co-ordinated strategy that involves the Government, local authorities and local port authorities to ensure that we counter such biosecurity risks?

Sam Carling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the biosecurity aspect of this issue. My farmers, too, have been significantly impacted by foot and mouth disease in the past, and I know how important an issue that is. She puts her point on the record.

I was talking about potential arguments around food prices. Research from Animal Policy International shows that were we to act on this issue, the cost to consumers would actually be very small. Banning battery cage egg

imports, for example, would cost just 2p to 4p per person per year. Since all major supermarkets have already committed to phasing out caged eggs, most consumers would feel zero impact, with battery cage imports going to independent retailers and food service as it stands. The boost to domestic farmers, by contrast, would be huge. UK egg farmers could gain up to £15 million annually if battery cage imports were banned. There would also be price stabilisation if we removed imports that undercut UK eggs by up to 20p per dozen. That does not cost the Exchequer; it would be quite a significant benefit to the Exchequer.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I was at Noble Foods last week, as part of the National Farmers Union's food and farming fellowship programme. The issue, it was explained, is not just lower welfare standards. We need to ensure that eggs are safe. My hon. Friend is too young to remember it, but I remember the salmonella outbreak when I was a teenager. We have to be clear that food safety is as important for imported goods as it is for home-grown produce.

Sam Carling: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I remember doing that scheme myself last year. It was incredibly valuable, and I encourage other colleagues to do it. The NFU is doing a brilliant job. Polls show that consumers do not want low-welfare imports either; nine in 10 people support banning them. That may be unsurprising—we are a nation of animal lovers, after all—but that level of cross-societal support on an issue is rare and should be celebrated.

Some 81% of my constituency of North West Cambridgeshire is agricultural land, which means I spend a lot of time talking to farmers about what they need to thrive, and this issue comes up all the time. Members do not have to take my word on that; they can take the words of Lloyd and Mat, two farmers I know from Lodes End farm in Ramsey in my constituency:

"We grow high quality produce, to high standards. Sometimes, for little and often no profit. To see imported produce coming into our country that doesn't meet the same standards that we have to achieve seems wrong. We want a level playing field and to feel that we are valued. So much effort, time, passion and pride goes into everything we grow on the farm. We not only grow quality produce but also do this while improving habitats for wildlife and reducing our environmental impact. Farmers do so much more than just produce the food we eat—we are an integral part of the communities we are proud to call home. We need to back British farming."

Who could disagree with Lloyd and Mat on that? It is certainly not easy to be a farmer. Long, difficult work is set against razor-thin profit margins, unpredictable weather variability made worse by climate change, and distinct unfairness in the supply chain.

So what is the ask here? If we are doing so well as a Government on new trade deals, what change am I advocating for? We need legislative change to tackle the flaws in previous trade deals, which are damaging farmers like Lloyd and Mat. I am glad that the Government are backing farmers, and are allocating a record £11.8 billion to sustainable farming and food production over the course of this Parliament, but tackling the unfairness of low-welfare imports would make a real difference to farmers in my constituency and across the country. Indeed, just on Tuesday, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee took evidence on how important a fair approach on imports is to farm profitability.

This is not just about welfare standards; it is about environmental standards, too. Crops that have been treated with damaging pesticides are being sold in the UK, despite those pesticides being banned here. That is not good news for the environment. Imidacloprid—I hope I pronounced that correctly—a neonicotinoid highly toxic to bees, has been banned in the UK since 2018, yet it has been found in the UK on potatoes, peas and grapes imported from several countries.

As with lower-welfare imports, the UK will face pressure to weaken our domestic pesticide standards to secure new trade deals. Pesticide Action Network has highlighted potential pitfalls of the India trade deal, particularly as India allows the use of 62% more pesticides that are classed as highly hazardous than the UK. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that that is being kept under review.

We know what happens when we compromise our standards for trade; I am afraid the Conservatives did it often. The previous Government's flawed Australia agreement increased sheepmeat imports by 162%, despite many Australian lambs being subjected to live skin cuttings without anaesthetic in a painful process known as mulesing, which was banned in the UK by the previous Labour Government. Our sheep farmers certainly did not thank the Conservatives for the impact that trade deal had, and is still having, on their livelihoods.

With the US reportedly demanding that the UK adopt lower standards in trade talks, I am glad that we have been clear in response that our food standards are a red line, and that we have committed to high food, animal welfare and environmental standards in any deal. That is exactly the approach we need, but we must be consistent about it. Change has support across the board, notably from the NFU and animal welfare bodies like Animal Policy International, both of which I thank for their ongoing work in this area. It also has strong support across the political divide, with massive majorities of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat voters supporting banning imports of animal products produced by farming methods that are banned in the UK.

What does change look like in practice? All campaigners and the public want is consistency—to ensure that all agricultural products sold in the UK, whether domestic or imported, adhere to British welfare and quality standards. If it is not good enough to be produced in Britain, it should not be sold here, either. Legally, there is precedent in several areas. Slaughter standards are consistent; certification is required to ensure that imports are slaughtered to standards that are at least equivalent to UK standards. Shark fin imports and exports are completely banned; the Ivory Act 2018 bans the import of ivory products; and we ban the import and sale of cat and dog fur. There are numerous precedents that can be applied here, and it makes sense to do so across the board.

World Trade Organisation case law says that the UK can apply its animal welfare standards to imports, and the UK Trade and Agriculture Commission has confirmed that the UK's free trade agreements do not prevent us from implementing stricter import regulations based on welfare standards. Will the Minister consider legislation to require imported animal products to meet British welfare standards, as is already the case for slaughter standards?

Aligning imports with our domestic standards is backed by farmers and consumers, backed across the political spectrum, and backed by rural, environmental and animal welfare organisations. We have strong legislative precedent, and we have legal clarity. We know that the impact on prices would be negligible, and that our economy would benefit. We would have confidence in the welfare of our animal products, and in the quality of fruit and vegetables on shop shelves. These are big, tangible benefits. Taking action would do so much for Lloyd and Mat in my constituency, and for thousands of others like them across Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This Government have shown promising signs so far. Let us build on that and take the next crucial step.

3.14 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I will start by setting the scene to explain why we import so much food and why we are not self-sufficient.

We are never going to be self-sufficient in food—certainly not in bananas or avocados, but not in some meat sectors either. Although we produce very large quantities of lamb and beef, we are only 58% self-sufficient in pork; I think the figure is a little higher in poultry. If we were 100% self-sufficient in pork, we would have to export so much more to achieve a carcass balance and achieve value for the farmer from the pig that it would be quite a challenge. As a great nation of bacon butty lovers, we eat a lot of bacon, to the extent that we have to import a certain amount. We are therefore exporting other cuts of a pig, such as belly pork to Europe and fifth quarter to China. That all adds value and achieves a better price for our hard-working farmers.

It is important to point out that the sanitary and phytosanitary agreements that we have been talking about do not cover some of the welfare issues that we have discussed, which are separate. The challenge of those agreements, as our trade negotiators are very aware, is that a country can fall foul of World Trade Organisation rules by telling another country what welfare standards it expects it to employ, so it can find itself in difficulties. In making any trade agreements with other countries, we need to be conscious that we should allow market access only where we are satisfied that welfare standards have been met.

At the moment, when it comes to EU-UK import-export relations and livestock and meat, we are at a relatively similar welfare standard. I mean no criticism of the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling)—it is all quite technical—but sow stalls are not the same as farrowing crates. The sow stall ban in 1999 was a challenge because the EU did not implement it immediately, and that caused us a lot of problems. Farrowing crates are a topic of conversation at the moment. They are part of the animal welfare strategy that the Government have published, and the industry has been working very closely on them for a number of years. About 60,000 traditional farrowing crates are in place in the UK. To convert to a free farrowing system would require planning permission; the crates cannot just be pulled out and replaced. It will be a huge challenge.

I am sure that the Minister is aware that the issue with the sow stall ban in 1999 was that there was not a sufficient transition period. I hesitate to say this, but I think she is experienced enough to have been here at the time. *[Interruption.]* Yes, she was here at the time.

[Charlie Dewhurst]

We lost 50% of the British pig industry. That did not mean that we ate 50% less pork; it meant that we imported a load more from abroad.

Whatever happens and whatever measures are taken on pigs, poultry or anything else, it is really important that we do not reduce our domestic food production, lower our food security, reduce British jobs in farming and replace them with jobs abroad and meat produced abroad, often to standards that we would not like. That will be a key issue as the Government take forward their animal welfare strategy. They must ensure that we do not diverge from or move too far ahead of European Union producers, because we are reliant on a huge amount of meat from the European Union. If we put greater production costs on our farmers, we will disadvantage them and naturally they will be displaced. It is a really important issue.

The hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire was right to raise the US. The US still has sow stalls, which were banned in this country 27 years ago. The US does not have ambitious targets to reduce antibiotics, as we do. The UK pig industry has reduced antibiotics by 69% since 2015, so we have been making real progress without the intervention of Government, and there is a recognition that we need to use fewer antibiotics. The issue is that it adds costs and lowers production levels because producers are not able to use outdated methods, particularly sow stalls. That puts us at a disadvantage with some trading partners.

In my previous life, before being elected to this place, I was closely involved with the negotiations on the Canada deal. That was a similar challenge: Canada has methods that we would not accept in certain areas. In the Australia deal, pigs were not included at all because we felt that the welfare standards were not sufficiently high enough for us to import them. The Minister is definitely aware of that. It is important that we all work together to ensure that in any moves we make on trade and food imports, we are always mindful of protecting the great British farmer.

3.20 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, agriculture is a key part of our local economy and our identity. The Isle of Axholme alone consists of 50,000 acres and is characterised by a mix of intensive agricultural land, including significant arable land, and a historical, unique system of open-field strip farming, particularly around parishes such as Haxey and Epworth. One farmer in Ealand categorically assures me that we have the best soil for growing the tastiest spuds in the world—so for the Burns night festivities this weekend, Madam Deputy Speaker, you know where to shop for neeps and tatties.

No one takes up life as a farmer because they want an easy time. Farming is hard. Farmers pour their heart and soul into their land; I know that from my wife's family. I see it from my window at home: they are up before the break of dawn and out after the owls have emerged. My farmers meet the rules—they pay for assurance, inspections and traceability—but when the time comes to sell their crops, their meat and their products, they find that they are not on a level playing field. They are undercut by imports produced to lower standards at a lower cost. That is just not right.

Over the past year or so, I have spent a significant amount of time understanding the issue. I have been out with farmers in my constituency. I have visited farms across Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, have attended roundtables with local farmers and have held surgeries. I have attended farmers' shows, markets and fairs and have hosted several here in Westminster. I hope soon to meet representatives of Epworth and District young farmers club, which is raising money for the Yorkshire air ambulance and the Lindsey Lodge hospice. In the autumn, I will attend the first ever Isle country show. I have spent time listening directly to the concerns that farmers have raised. Today, I want to feed back clearly to the Minister what they are telling me and what we can do to support them. I will give some examples that they have shared with me.

Let us start with grain. Grain merchants can import grain that is not Red Tractor-assured. Too often, it arrives without the paperwork that we would expect for something that goes into our food chain. UK grain is grown to higher standards. That really matters, but our grain also costs more to produce, so when imports come in cheaper it drives prices below UK production costs. When UK-assured grain is then bulked out with imported grain, it makes a mockery of the premium that our farmers have earned through the quality of their production.

We can grow excellent potatoes in this country, yet we are seeing vast quantities being imported from as far as Portugal, simply to shave costs. That is madness when we factor in the distance, the carbon and the message that it sends to domestic producers who are doing the right thing day in, day out. It is the same story with beef. When we import beef produced to lower welfare standards at a scale that drives down unit costs, we are effectively punishing British farmers for maintaining higher welfare standards and traceability.

There are double standards on crop protection. Oilseed rape became far harder to grow successfully here after key plant protection products were banned, leaving growers exposed to pests such as cabbage stem flea beetles, yet imported crops can be treated with products that our farmers are not allowed to use. That is not a level playing field; it is a tilted one. I will keep repeating that point.

Finally, I turn to sugar. We have sugar beet growers close to processing plants in this country who sustain jobs and local supply chains, yet sugar cane can be imported from countries in which it has been treated with chemicals that are banned here, and then be processed in the UK. I am told that it then ends up on our supermarket shelves with packaging covered in a Union flag that implies British provenance.

I call on the Government to do three things for our farming community; I would love the Minister to respond if she can. We need stronger equivalence in our import standards: if a product cannot be produced here under the rules, it should not be able to undercut our farmers on our shelves. We need robust enforcement and paperwork checks at the border, because standards on paper are meaningless without compliance in practice. We need honest, clear labelling that protects British trademarks and gives consumers the information they need, not marketing that blurs the origin or standards of what they are buying.

UK farmers are frequently inspected, licensed and held to higher welfare and environmental rules. That approach delivers food that is safe, traceable and trusted.

The least we can do is ensure that our trade and import regime rewards their efforts rather than undermining them. Let us help our farmers to plough their fields successfully in future by levelling the playing field for them right now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Ann Davies.

3.25 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; as most hon. Members know, I am a dairy and sheep farmer from west Wales. I am very aware of the volatility of markets and its effect on our sector. Sheep and beef prices have been steady for the past year or so, but dairy has absolutely crashed since August or September: it is down by between 9p and 12p a litre, which is about 25% to 30% of income, with inputs remaining exactly the same. That is unsustainable.

The welfare standards to which we adhere when producing food here is exemplary, and standards continue to rise. However, while setting even higher standards at home, we allow the import of products produced in countries with lower standards. Animal welfare strategies, such as the one introduced for England last month, highlight the link between welfare standards and food security. The public agree that imported food must be of a standard equal to home-produced food, but that has to be mirrored in the trade agreements that are negotiated. Our farming community cannot be traded off, as has happened in the American deal. The farming community deserves no less than equality in standards, and my Caerfyrddin farmers certainly deserve no less.

Interestingly, the Countryside Alliance acquired some figures through a freedom of information request to see how many local authorities and Government Departments procured UK and local food, and whether those organisations had a policy to buy local food. Only one Department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, had a policy, and only one other Department, the Department of Health and Social Care, could say how much local food it procured. Of the 215 local authorities, only 26 could provide information on the amount of UK or local food they procured. That really is not good enough. We produce only 60% of what we consume. If we support locally produced food, we will import less.

Locally in Caerfyrddin, Carmarthenshire county council is working hard to ensure that we put locally produced food on the public plate. That work is being done on a council-owned farm, in partnership with Social Farms and Gardens, Castell Howell Foods, Hywel Dda university health board and others, to give top-quality vegetables to our children and elderly. If we can do it in Carmarthenshire, surely more councils can support our local agricultural community in that way. We all need and deserve sustainably produced, fresh, nutritionally dense food.

We are all aware that we import about 40% of the food that we consume, but none of this food is subject to minimal animal welfare or environmental production standards. Input standards are almost entirely related to product safety and the threat to human health and the environment, rather than to how they are produced.

Establishing animal welfare and environmental core standards will ensure that the food we eat, whether it is produced at home or abroad, meets the high expectations of British consumers. With core standards implemented alongside balanced and commercially meaningful trade deals, not only can international trade drive economic growth, but it can help our farmers to become sustainable, resilient and supported businesses. Diolch.

3.29 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) for securing this vital debate and for his thoughtful speech, and I extend that to other hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, too. It is an important opportunity for us to consider an issue that sits at the intersection of the food we eat, trade, animal welfare and the sustainability of our rural economy.

The UK's post-Brexit free trade agreements have rightly opened up new opportunities for British exporters, but they have also raised concerns about how imports are produced, particularly as we look to increase our welfare ambitions. By cutting tariffs on agricultural products from partner countries, those deals can unintentionally allow products to enter the UK that are produced to far lower animal welfare or environmental standards than those expected of our farmers. These are not minor issues; they go to the heart of how we support our brilliant domestic producers and how we maintain public confidence in the food we eat.

Practices that are banned or tightly regulated in the UK—conventional battery cages for hens, sow stalls, tail docking of pigs, and certain pesticides—remain permitted elsewhere, and those products inevitably end up on our supermarket shelves. Without clear protections, imports produced in that way risk undercutting our farmers, and they undermine the principle that high welfare production should be the norm, not just for British producers.

The Trade and Agriculture Commission, which advises the Government on trade deals, has highlighted those differences and warned that they have both ethical and economic consequences. British farmers investing in high-welfare sustainable production should not be left competing on an uneven playing field against imports produced more cheaply by cutting corners. That applies to raw materials as well as finished products.

On Tuesday, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that I sit on heard from the formidable Baroness Batters about her profitability review. She mentioned a comment made by Sir Liam Fox, who, as Trade Secretary, argued that the UK should shift post Brexit to importing cheaply produced raw materials and then add value to them under the Union flag. I agree with Baroness Batters that we should reject that reductive view of the value of the excellent raw materials that our British farmers produce. We should be proud of and protect them.

Many organisations, including the National Farmers Union and the National Pig Association, have called for core standards for imported agrifood products. These standards would ensure that all food sold in the UK, whether domestic or imported, meets the welfare, environmental and production standards expected by the British public. It is entirely reasonable for consumers

[*Josh Newbury*]

to expect that pork, beef, eggs or poultry produced abroad meet very similar, or the same, requirements as those produced here.

Two other realities that we have to confront in this debate and which the all-party parliamentary group on UK food security, which I chair, has discussed at length are the cost of food and keeping our shelves stocked. As someone who represents a constituency with pockets of deep deprivation, including neighbourhoods that are among the 5% most deprived in the country, I am concerned that a rapid move to equalise all import standards could have a knock-on effect on food prices, which, as I am sure hon. Members right across the House will be aware, have been very high, particularly over the last five years. Equally, we do not want to see a repeat of the empty shelves that we all remember from the pandemic, which brought home the fragility of just-in-time food supply chains when unexpected disruption hits. As my hon. Friend said, these issues are interlinked, and the more we undermine our domestic supply, the more prices will go up and the more reliant we will become on overseas imports.

The Government have recognised these varied concerns. In the trade strategy published last June, it was clear that the Government will uphold high animal welfare standards and will not lower food standards to accommodate imports. It explicitly acknowledged practices that are not allowed domestically, such as sow stalls and battery cages, and committed to assessing whether those imports have an unfair advantage. I hope it will find that they do.

Where necessary, powers such as quotas, exclusions and safeguards will be used to protect domestic sectors that are most at risk. That approach is welcome. It strikes a balance between maintaining the benefits of free trade and ensuring that British farmers are not undermined. But as we have seen in previous trade deals, including in discussions with the United States, it is vital that those protections are clear, enforceable and applied consistently. Without them, we risk creating a market where the lowest welfare products set the price and not the highest standards.

Equally important is transparency for consumers. Recent polling by Opinium for Humane World for Animals shows that the British public often misunderstand what products labelled as, for example, “welfare assured” or that carry the Red Tractor logo actually guarantee. For example, 65% of people incorrectly believe that “welfare assured” prohibits keeping pigs and chickens in cages and 67% believe it prohibits the use of CO₂ for slaughter. If consumers discovered that labelling does not match the reality they think it does, nearly half would feel misled, angry or disappointed.

Mandatory labelling is vital. It will protect consumers, support domestic producers and ensure that imported products adhere to the same high standards—or at least that we can see if they do not. Public support for stronger labelling measures is overwhelming, with 77% backing a new animal welfare labelling law and three quarters supporting stricter enforcement by trading standards and the Advertising Standards Authority to prevent misleading claims.

I acknowledge that getting labelling right will require many tricky balances, and that there is only so much space on a packet. I do not downplay those issues, but by combining robust import standards with transparent

labelling, the Government could ensure that trade works for farmers, for animals and for consumers alike, reinforcing confidence in the British food system while maintaining fairness and ethical standards.

Charlie Dewhirst: The hon. Member highlights an important point about the challenges of potential welfare labelling. If imports are not labelled in the same way, as they probably would not be, British producers could be put at a disadvantage when it comes to what a consumer might think about how something has been produced. We must be conscious of that.

Josh Newbury: The hon. Member is absolutely right that we need to be careful how labelling will affect imported goods and therefore what the consumer sees in the supermarket. My take is that, if we educate consumers on the labelling for our standards and, if those labels are absent, what the implications might be for imported products, we can better inform them and protect our domestic producers. That will inevitably have to go alongside any improved labelling for our products.

Sam Carling: Does my hon. Friend agree that if we can unify our import standards with our domestic standards, that problem disappears in many ways? The standards will be the same and therefore we will not have labelling that might undermine our farmers.

Josh Newbury: I agree with my hon. Friend, but I also point out that there will inevitably be some producers who want to produce to higher standards than the minimum, particularly in this country. They should be fairly recognised and rewarded for that, so there will always be the need for a clear and transparent labelling system. Getting that right will be tricky, but it is important that farmers who are producing to higher standards get fair recompense for that.

I hope the Minister can update the House on where work on labelling has got to, so that consumers can make informed choices for themselves and their families. Ultimately, this issue is about more than import and export figures on a screen; it is about fairness for our farmers, transparency for consumers, and the sustainability of our whole food system. As this House debates the impact of import standards, I urge the Government to continue their firm commitment to core standards and to ensure that free trade agreements work for farmers, for consumers and for British values alike.

3.37 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) for leading this important debate.

The UK prides itself on having some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and I welcomed last month’s animal welfare strategy, which promises to go further still. I particularly welcome the planned ban on farrowing crates for sows and cages for hens—crucial steps forward in our animal protection in this country—and have called on the Government to set out clear timescales for their delivery and support for farmers during the transition.

The animal welfare strategy reflects years of campaigning by animal protection organisations and growing public demand for change, and marks a significant step forward, with real commitments on animal welfare standards—but

there are some glaring gaps. What is illegal to produce here because it is too cruel remains legal to import and sell. That is incoherent, undermines public confidence and leaves higher-welfare British farmers facing unfair competition. The principle should be straightforward: if a practice is too cruel for food produced in Britain, it should be too cruel for food imported into Britain.

Yet reality tells a different story. Some 97% of our pork imports come from countries where sow stalls are still legal, despite the practice having been illegal here for 25 years. Battery cages may be banned here but they remain widespread elsewhere, and imports of eggs have increased more than twelvefold in the last year alone. Since the Australia trade deal was signed, lamb imports have risen by over 160%, despite cruel practices such as mulesing—illegal here—remaining common there.

This is not a niche concern. According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Compassion in World Farming, 95% of countries with UK market access have lower animal welfare standards than the UK. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs data shows that non-EU imports of eggs have more than tripled since 2020, poultry imports have risen by 60%, and pork by over 80%. In trade discussions with the United States Administration, Ministers focused on food safety and sanitary standards, but that focus risks leaving a huge loophole for imports produced in ways that would be illegal here, widening the welfare gap instead of closing it. While the UK will rightly maintain its ban on hormone-treated beef and chlorine-washed chicken coming from the US, it is

“looking to compromise in other areas”.

Higher-welfare British farmers are paying the price. The NFU has been clear: farmers want trade deals, but not at the expense of being undercut by food produced to standards that would be illegal on their own farms. Over 90% of British livestock farmers support restricting low-welfare imports, and the public agree: more than four in five people support banning imports produced using methods outlawed here. We need a statutory requirement that animal products sold in the UK, whether produced here or imported, meet British welfare standards. We also need mandatory welfare labelling that applies equally to imports. The animal welfare strategy's consultation commitments on that do not go far enough.

In conclusion, I would be grateful if the Minister could set out how the Government intend to close this loophole and ensure that our individual trade deals and overall policy fully reflect the ambition that is rightly included in the animal welfare strategy. The standards of our higher-welfare British farmers at home should not be undermined by lower welfare standards abroad. We should not be importing cruelty, and our farmers deserve a level playing field.

3.41 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, isn't it wonderful to get to Thursday and find that business has run fast, so there is no time limit on speeches and some time to go? Rejoice! *[Interruption.]* I shall rejoice; whether others do is a different matter.

This has been an excellent debate, and I particularly enjoyed the speech from the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies). I went through her constituency last summer on the way to go and see my hon. Friend the

Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell). Next time, I shall stop off for a cuppa and see her in action. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), I married a woman from a family of farmers, so I share his experience and interest in these issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) gave an excellent speech to open the debate, but I want to focus my remarks on the farming industry and the brilliant farmers in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), I am on the National Farmers' Union fellowship scheme this year. I am also the vice-chair of the international trade and investment all-party parliamentary group.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as you have heard me say before, Newcastle-under-Lyme is an age-old market town in north Staffordshire, surrounded by the green, rolling hills for which England—and Wales, of course—is known and of which we are all proud. I promised every single farmer I met in the months and years before the general election, and in the time since, that I will do whatever I can to support farmers in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire and across our country. That means defending our standards every single day. That is why this debate is important, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire for securing it.

That is also why I am pleased that we got to the right place on agricultural property relief and the inheritance tax threshold for farmers and farming families. There has been much commentary on this issue and much genuine concern felt by farmers in my constituency and up and down the United Kingdom. A number of us raised it loudly, repeatedly and, thankfully, effectively. I thank the NFU and all the farmers in my patch who spoke out, and I am grateful to colleagues in government for ensuring we are now in the right place. It is also why I set up my farmers' forum soon after the general election, because after years of being let down and forgotten, I wanted my farmers back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme to get the hearing they deserve, the support they need and the opportunities to thrive, to keep us fed and to keep going.

There is so much in our United Kingdom that we should be proud of, and Britain's farmers are just one example. I feel sure that our farmers in Staffordshire, and particularly those in Newcastle-under-Lyme, are leading the way. They are the backbone of our food system. They tend to our land, they produce the clear majority of what ends up on our dinner tables, and they allow us all to feel a sense of pride. Their contribution underpins our food security and strengthens rural economies.

The Speeds at Betley Court farm are responsible for a brilliant fireworks display in November each year, and the Betley show each August, and all colleagues—including you, Madam Deputy Speaker—would be welcome to join the festivities this year. At the Kennerley's Plum Tree Park farm, grass-fed lamb boxes are supplied seasonally, and there is a dog playground; they have diversified their offer to consumers, their neighbours and our community, and helped to put our part of the world on the map. I hope the Minister will come to see those success stories in Newcastle-under-Lyme for herself before too long.

[Adam Jogee]

I am firmly of the view that we should always buy British, as that is smart and necessary for our farmers and for the future of British farming. It is also good for our pubs, shops and restaurants, and I hope that Front-Bench colleagues—not this Minister as there is plenty for her to do, but others—will do what the previous Conservative Government did not do: get a hold of the challenges facing the hospitality sector in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the nation, and ensure that support for our town centres and local businesses is delivered speedily.

As I make that call to support those businesses, which are in turn supported by our farmers and local farming sector, I also think about brilliant local businesses that stand with our farmers every day. Plant and Wilton in Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre is a wonderful family butchers, which of course gets meat from farms both locally and up and down the kingdom. Pubs like the Swan in Betley and the Albert in town are moments away from farms that are tended to by brilliant farmers, some of whom, I suspect, enjoy a pint or two from time to time.

At the Butchers Arms in Audley, Mark the landlord is known for his excellent cooking prowess—again using British food from British farms, many of which are located in Staffordshire. It is similar at the Archer in Wolstanton. When we think about the standards required for the meat and other food that we eat in the pubs I have referred to, and that people enjoy up and down the country, it is important that we make the case for the highest and strongest British standards every step of the way.

Lee Pitcher: When we talk about food standards, we are also talking about the kind and quality of food that we get in our public services. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as contracts for Government services fade out, one of the best things we can do is to ensure that, going forward, at least 50% of food provided in those services is sourced locally?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Royal Stoke University hospital, which is across the road from my constituency border but is staffed by and serves the vast majority of my constituents, is ensuring that its patients and workers enjoy the highest standards and the best of British food. I feel sure that the Minister will agree that that is an excellent point when she sums up the debate.

Constantly thinking about the impact and benefits of the highest British standards leads me to highlight how important it is to remember that the issues facing the agriculture sector and British farmers—who work day in, day out to deliver those highest standards—did not start in July 2024. The price of milk, trade deals that undercut our farmers and access to labour are just some of the long-standing challenges that, as the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin pointed out, farmers like her, and many in Newcastle-under-Lyme who are working to the highest of British standards, have been forced to endure for far too long.

Across the last three years of the previous Government there was a £358 million underspend in the agricultural budget. I hope the Minister will confirm that under this Labour Government, farmers will always receive the

support they need not just to maintain the highest of British standards, but to ensure that food production is more sustainable and profitable. While the Conservatives sold out and undercut farmers in trade deals—we must not forget that—I urge my colleagues in the Government to continue with their principled approach. As my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme pointed out, we must always back British standards, we must always back British food and we should never bargain either away. We must never sign trade deals that leave our farmers, including those in Newcastle-under-Lyme, exposed or allow lower quality imports to undercut what British producers deliver day in, day out and to the best of standards.

There is big and serious export potential for British food. I want people from across the world to buy British, to eat British and to benefit from the highest of British standards. I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth. I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State are planning targeted overseas missions, so I urge them and other colleagues to look at the Commonwealth, with which we already have age-old historical ties, as the default partner of choice. As we look to ensure that we export British goods that have been produced to the highest of standards, we will benefit greatly from that partnership.

I suggest that the Minister speaks to colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that all our trade envoys are banging the drum for British food, because we know that it is produced to the highest of standards—standards that the rest of the world can only look to for inspiration. While Scottish salmon is the kingdom's leading food export, I hope that the Minister will also do whatever she can to help me to increase exports of Staffordshire oatcakes, because the world deserves nothing less.

To put it simply, we must protect our farmers, uphold our standards, and back British food at home and abroad. Notwithstanding the challenges over agricultural property relief, I welcome the steps being taken by the Government to give British farmers the tools, investment and confidence that they need to thrive. We are creating a new farming and food partnership board, chaired by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, that will bring together farmers, processors, retailers and the Government, so that those working on our land have a real voice in how policy is made to ensure that we always maintain the highest of British standards.

We rely on trade to complement what we grow here, to give families year-round choice, to help stabilise prices, to protect our supply chains when global shocks hit and—I know the Minister will agree—to ensure that the highest of British standards are maintained and supported. We will not always get everything right and nor will we always make everyone happy, but we do need to listen to our farmers and our food producers. They are the ones flying the flag for the highest of standards, so we need to ensure that they are not undercut when food with lower standards comes from elsewhere. My message to farmers and producers in Newcastle-under-Lyme is that this Government hear them loud and clear, and they have our full support.

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

3.52 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for the debate to proceed.

The UK agricultural sector experienced an enormous shift on leaving the European Union. There was simply no plan in place for farming and international trade, and the post-Brexit era has seen seven DEFRA Secretaries of State and five Prime Ministers. As Baroness Batters said in her recent farming profitability review, this has led to a complete lack of constant political direction at a time when farming needed it the most. Nothing has done more to increase the cost of farming and to reduce farm incomes than the Conservative's botched Brexit, and it has harmed and undermined protections for animal welfare and the environment.

The Conservative Government did not stop there. In addition, they set a dangerous precedent for future trade agreements in how they went about their negotiations. Stripping away parliamentary scrutiny and forcing terrible deals through has given unfair advantage to imports from countries with much poorer standards, which would fail to meet the high-quality British production standards. The Liberal Democrats demand that every new trade deal should be subject to proper scrutiny, but this Government's refusal to do so in their latest trade agreement with President Trump—despite calling for proper oversight while in opposition—is a reminder that Parliament has not yet taken back control.

I am proud to come from a farming background. My family has farmed in and around Somerset for more than 250 years, and my brother continues the family business. Like all farmers, he takes great pride in what he does. Despite much turbulence in the industry, farmers work hard to provide the nation with food for our tables. In large part, they remain resilient to most market shocks, but bad trade deals have allowed butter and cheese imports from Australia, New Zealand and the United States to start to land on our shores in increasing volumes. These products are flooding our domestic markets at the expense of British farmers, yet they are under no obligation to have point of origin labelling. That has inevitably led to UK milk buyers slashing farm gate milk prices to a level that is simply unacceptable, and which is unsustainable.

I recently met Rich Clothier MBE, the managing director of family-run Wyke Farms near Bruton. I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will join me in congratulating Rich on recently being appointed an MBE for services to sustainable agriculture and food production in the King's new year's honours list. Wyke Farms is one of the UK's largest independent cheese producers. It has been crafting award-winning cheddar and butter from Somerset for over 160 years, and under Rich's guidance it now exports products to more than 160 countries.

Rich recently told me:

"People want to eat food produced to British standards of welfare...environmental and food safety...But currently they have no way of knowing...and being able to make that choice."

That is what is important: to ensure that our consumers know what they are buying and are able to make that choice. However, because of Brexit, the Government are forced into agreeing poor trade deals that continue

to undermine British farmers and the food that they produce. Over the past few months, milk prices have been in freefall, leaving many dairy farmers on a financial cliff edge. Milk prices are currently well below the cost of production; we have seen thousands of litres of milk being thrown down the drain, and I fear that there will be much more to come over the next few months if we do not do something about it.

Given the absence of point of origin labelling in our trade policy, products are offered to customers without appropriate labelling, allowing them to masquerade as UK-produced. That is why I introduced the Dairy Farming and Dairy Products Bill, which would force the Government to ensure that any trade deals do not negatively impact on British dairy farmers.

Liberal Democrats are keen to ensure that farmers and growers receive fair treatment in the supply chain, as existing protections are no longer sufficient to tackle unfair practices by large buyers. We want to reform and strengthen the Groceries Code Adjudicator, merging it with the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator and giving it greater powers and resources. What is required is a sensible trade policy that ensures British consumers are protected from imported food produced at lower standards—standards at which it would be illegal for British farmers to operate.

Liberal Democrats are champions of free trade; we know the benefits that it brings to British farmers and businesses. But we also know that regulatory alignment is key. We cannot allow British farmers to be undercut by cheaper imports. However, Canada will soon ratify UK membership of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—which, worryingly, could open the doors to products from farming systems that are banned here and further undermine British farming.

Battery cages have rightly been banned in the UK since 2012, but the CPTPP could allow Mexican farmers who use battery cages to export a large number of eggs to the UK. Those eggs will be produced in a manner that would simply be illegal here. This would force farms such as Silverthorne Farm near Milborne Port, which has 15,000 hens that are all free to roam over its 32 acres, to compete with lower standard importers that operate at a fraction of the cost.

The Government have recently released their animal welfare strategy after promising the largest increase in standards in a generation. While the Liberal Democrats have long called for, and support, many of the measures that the Government have announced, the strategy lacks a commitment to protecting UK food security and farmers through trade policy. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has stated that it will consider whether overseas producers have an "unfair advantage"; unfortunately, it is clear that the answer is yes, they do. It is worth recalling that one former Environment Minister slammed the UK-Australia deal, saying that the UK

"gave away far too much for far too little",

and described it as "not very good" for British farmers. I am glad that the Government are prepared to use the "full range of powers" at their disposal to protect the most sensitive sectors, as there is little doubt that this is needed. The Government must urgently renegotiate the Australia and New Zealand trade deals, so that we can

[Sarah Dyke]

uphold high standards on food safety, animal welfare, health and the environment. If these standards cannot be met, we should withdraw from such deals.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU is an absolute priority, so that we can cut red tape, reduce checks, and lower costs for exporters. We have called for an agreement to be delivered as soon as possible. It should be modelled on the EU-Swiss veterinary deal, and should guarantee enhanced access to the single market, with minimal checks. We also want a bespoke UK-EU customs union, so that we can rebuild our economy and support British producers, and the tariff-free movement of goods between EU member states, in order to strengthen domestic economic growth. A far more ambitious, free and fair trade deal with Europe is an absolute necessity. It would give the Government some of the financial scope that they need to keep a few more of their promises to improve our vital public services. However, any upcoming agreement poses some risk to British farmers, as any agreement could limit the UK's ability to apply our own standards for imports. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for us to replicate the Swiss model, which is based on mutual recognition of animal health measures.

The Conservatives sold British farmers down the river in their desperation to agree trade deals by arbitrary deadlines, but there is now an opportunity to properly protect British welfare standards in all future deals. That must be at the forefront of this Government's mind in all future negotiations, as it is critical for UK farming, food security and national security.

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

4.2 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I start by thanking the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) for securing this debate and opening it so excellently. It has offered Members from across the House the opportunity to discuss an issue that is central to our national interests and our values. The speeches we have heard today reflect a deep commitment across this House to our farmers, our food standards, animal welfare, the environment, and the integrity of British agriculture.

We have heard a range of contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst)—to whom I pay tribute for his expertise on the pig industry, and whom I thank for his work on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee—talked about the complexities of the global trade in meat, the importance of food security, and a sensible transition on husbandry regulations. He also touched on inappropriate antibiotic use, which I will speak about in due course. The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) talked about the importance of the grain and sugar sectors in his part of the world, and of transparency in labelling. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) and to her family on the farm. It is brilliant that she brings that expertise to the House of Commons, and I thank her for all she does. She talked about welfare standards, food security, and the importance of local food procurement.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), whom I also thank for his excellent work on the EFRA Committee, talked about the importance of food security and, again, transparency in food labelling. The hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), who is a proud advocate for high animal welfare standards, talked about the important bans that we uphold on hormone-treated beef and chlorine-washed poultry; I will touch on those in due course. Finally, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) spoke about the importance of both buying and exporting British. I thank him for his comments.

Standards are not abstract trade matters; they are questions of fairness, food security and moral duty. British farmers are rightly proud of producing food to some of the highest animal welfare, environmental and safety standards in the world. They do so not only to comply with the law, but because it is right. It is therefore indefensible to allow them to be undercut by imports produced to standards that would be illegal in the United Kingdom.

I am proud of the previous Conservative Government's record on advancing animal welfare. We banned the export of live animals, including cattle, sheep, pigs and horses for fattening or slaughter, under the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024; increased the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years under the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021; and, importantly, enshrined animal sentience in UK law under the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, thereby establishing the Animal Sentience Committee. That means that any new legislation that we consider must pay due regard to animal welfare. I was proud to co-sponsor the Conservative-initiated Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025 to tackle the cruel puppy smuggling trade and the horrific practice of dog ear cropping.

In the United Kingdom, we have brilliant farmers who farm to the highest animal welfare standards, and we should be proud of that. As I have said many times in this House, we can be a beacon to the rest of the world. British farmers follow strict rules on banned growth promoters, on housing and welfare conditions, and on environmental protections. Those standards carry costs and responsibilities that farmers accept, because they reflect public values. The injustice arises when food produced to lower standards overseas is allowed to enter our market and compete directly with food produced under our higher rules. That does not raise global standards; it simply exports cruelty and imports unfair competition.

We Conservatives have consistently defended our standards. In 2024, when the Leader of the Opposition served as the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, she suspended trade talks with Canada, after Canada insisted on including hormone-treated beef. That decision sent a clear message that the UK will not compromise on important bans, such as bans on hormone-treated beef, ractopamine-treated pork, or—we have heard about these today—chlorine-washed poultry and bovine somatotropin-treated dairy, all of which remain illegal in the United Kingdom. Those practices merely hide substandard—unacceptable, in some cases—husbandry methods, and are not positive at all for animal or bird welfare. I was proud that the previous Conservative Government stood firm on the bans on such products in our negotiations with Canada, and I urge the current Government to maintain that firm position.

The United Kingdom has among the strictest welfare laws in the world. By contrast, countries such as Canada and the US still allow hens to be kept in battery cages. Here, 83% of eggs come from free-range or barn systems, and the Government have committed to phasing out all cages for laying hens by 2032. The Opposition have made it clear that we very much support banning cages or close confinement systems where there is clear scientific evidence that they are detrimental to animal and bird health and welfare. That is in keeping with much of the United Kingdom's legislation on the use of cages and crates, which includes a law to ban keeping calves in veal crates, introduced in 1990; legislation banning keeping sows in close confinement stalls, introduced in 1999; and measures to ban battery cages for hens, introduced in 2012.

Under the Conservative Government, Ministers were clear that it was their ambition for farrowing crates to be no longer used for sows. Indeed, the new pig welfare code clearly states:

"The aim is for farrowing crates to no longer be necessary and for any new system to protect the welfare of the sow, as well as her piglets."

I emphasise that last part. It is important that the industry is heard and, as we have heard today, that we have a sensible, workable, pragmatic transition that works and upholds animal welfare. Future trade deals must insist on core standards, or we risk encouraging systems that our own laws reject.

Transparency also matters; consumers should be able to see how their food was produced. In 2024, the Conservative Government consulted on improved welfare and origin labelling, but the Labour Government's animal welfare strategy, released just before Christmas, offers only vague intentions on labelling; there is no timetable and no binding commitments. Clear, mandatory labelling would empower UK consumers and reward UK farmers who do the right thing.

The emergence in the UK of products that do not meet our animal welfare and environmental standards is potentially compounded by the alarming situation facing our national biosecurity. With disturbing reports of foot and mouth disease emerging abroad—including in Europe last year—African swine fever advancing up the continent of Europe, and the ongoing outbreaks of avian influenza and bluetongue virus in this country, we must maintain our vigilance. After raising concerns in Parliament on 17 occasions, I was pleased that the current Government finally listened and agreed to commit funding for the vital redevelopment of the Animal and Plant Health Agency's headquarters in Weybridge, which was started by the Conservative Government. I thank APHA, which I visited again last month, for its tireless work, particularly in the face of the ongoing avian influenza situation.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I have the Animal and Plant Health Agency in my constituency—it is confusingly named the Weybridge centre, but it is actually in New Haw—I thank the shadow Minister for his advocacy on this issue, and the Government for putting in the funding for the redevelopment.

Dr Hudson: I thank my hon. Friend for his very kind intervention. He proudly stands up for that important institution, which I know the Minister has visited, as

has the Minister in the other place. It is important that, cross-party, we support something that is so critical to our national security.

As we have heard today, the very real consequences of illegal meat imports for human and animal health are a disaster waiting to happen, unless the Government maintain vigilance and step up now. Our ability to detect and seize illegal meat imports at our borders is being tested to its limits. According to DEFRA, the amount of illegal meat seized between January and April 2025—72,872 kg—was close to the amount seized in the whole of 2024, which was 92,382 kg. Dover Port Health Authority alone has seized 367 tonnes since 2022. Given the ongoing threat, it is essential that sufficient funding is provided to our agencies at the border, and that routine certification surveillance and spot checks can be carried out at Dover and other ports, to prevent illegal meat and products of animal origin entering the country.

It is vital that—in addition to upholding standards, protecting our biosecurity and safeguarding animal welfare—we ensure that the United Kingdom has enough veterinary surgeons. At this point, I must declare both a professional and a personal interest: I am a veterinary surgeon, a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and a graduate of Cambridge Veterinary School. The UK does not train enough vets domestically. They play a vital role in animal health and welfare, which we have been talking a lot about today, but also in food safety, public health and disease control—all things that come into this debate on standards. That is why I am deeply concerned about the possible closure of Cambridge Veterinary School, as recommended by the council of Cambridge University's school of biological sciences. I know the Minister is very aware of this issue, as I have raised it with her in the Chamber, and with her colleagues in DEFRA. We cannot maintain animal welfare or food security without adequate veterinary capacity, so I urge the Government to press Cambridge University to stop this short-sighted possible closure. In addition, the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 needs to be updated. Although that was mentioned in the Government's animal welfare strategy, there was no timeline or urgency. Again, I urge the Government to act.

Sadly, the Government's record on supporting farmers gives us cause for concern. Just look at their treatment of the sector, as instanced by the ill-judged and awful family farm tax, on which they have only partially U-turned. I do not believe that we are in the right place, and there is much more that we still need to do on that.

By permitting imports produced under weaker standards, the Government risk favouring overseas producers over British ones. Ministers say that they are passionate about animal welfare and food standards, and I take them at their word, but their record and their rhetoric tell a slightly different story. Their keenness to merge with EU standards is worrying, especially on animal welfare, given that our standards in the UK are higher. Returning to EU regulatory alignment would make us rule takers, not rule makers, preventing farmers from adopting innovations such as gene editing.

The Labour manifesto spoke about food security, but it failed to set out a clear plan to protect farmers from low import standards. The Conservative Government's Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 laid the foundations for the development of disease and

[Dr Hudson]

climate-resilient crops and the breeding of animals and birds that are resistant to harmful diseases such as avian influenza and porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome. As I have mentioned, the landmark Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act, ended the inhumane export of live animals for slaughter or fattening. These are important achievements, yet the Opposition have concerns that these vital Acts may be repealed, watered down or weakened because of this Government's pursuit of a reset with the EU. I hope the Minister can assure the House that those safeguards will remain intact and that we will not take a backward step on animal welfare and innovation in the agriculture and food security sectors.

We have already seen how sectors such as fishing can be treated as bargaining chips in international talks, with our UK fisheries sold away to Europe for 12 years to try—at this stage, in vain—to get access to the European defence fund. Farmers are watching closely and are understandably worried that agriculture could also be a bargaining chip. If import standards are watered down in the name of smoother trade or convenient deals, British farmers may lose out by being denied access to revolutionary tools such as gene editing and precision breeding that the EU is slow or reluctant to adopt. Moreover, animal welfare will be weakened, consumer confidence will be damaged and the long-term resilience of our food system will be jeopardised.

This is not about protectionism. It is about our values. Farmers are asking for a fair and level field on which to compete, which means import standards that reflect the standards required of British farmers and demanded by British consumers, as well as clear red lines in every trade negotiation, proper enforcement at our borders and no agreements that sacrifice agriculture for political expedience. Can I ask the Minister directly whether the Government will guarantee that no food produced to lower standards than those required of British farmers will be allowed into our market? Will they commit to not trading away our standards in future negotiations?

I would welcome the Minister's response on the public procurement of food, which we have heard a bit about today. Sadly, the Government buying standards still have a loophole that allows public bodies to bypass high animal welfare standards on the grounds of cost. If we are to lead globally on animal welfare, we must uphold such principles here at home.

Import standards are fundamentally about trust—trust between farmers, consumers and the Government. British agriculture depends on that trust. Opposition Members will examine every agreement, every regulation and every concession that may risk undercutting our farmers and weakening our standards, or indeed compromising animal health and welfare. His Majesty's most loyal Opposition urge the Government to support agriculture and defend the standards that the British people hold dear.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): This debate goes to the heart of something that this Government care deeply about: the future of British farming and the food on British tables.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) for securing the debate, and I thank all Members for their contributions.

Let me be direct about what we are trying to balance in this area. British farmers produce most of our food: two thirds of it in 2024, which means that 65% of everything we eat is produced in this country. When it comes to what can actually be grown or reared in this country, that figure rises to over three quarters: 77%. In other words, we do not grow our own bananas or mangoes, and we cannot grow our own citrus fruits except in particularly hot weather, so we have to import them.

The hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst) used the phrase “carcase balance”, which is important to think about when we talk about the balance between exports and imports. In the UK, we eat only particular bits of the animal, not all of it. It is useful to be able to export the bits that the British do not particularly want to eat, so the farmer who produces the animal gets more of a return than they would if those markets were not open.

The potential benefits for UK producers of open trading markets for such things are very great indeed. Although I will spend much of the rest of the debate talking about standards for imports, we have to remember that exports are also important to our home-grown industry. Exports are harder to gain if we are too closed about the imports we allow in our trade deals, because trade is a two-way street. I caution everyone to think about that balance, as well as thinking about what we would like to see in trade deals: it is real, it exists and we ought to take it seriously.

We have to remember that we are a trading nation. Trade gives families access to food that we cannot grow here; it keeps prices affordable; it means that we can get food out of season all year round; and it provides a safety net when supply chains are disrupted by disease, drought or conflict. Although being able to grow most of what we want to produce here is an important part of food security, so is having reasonable, predictable and acceptable access to other markets so that we can import when we have to, if there is a particular issue.

The question is not whether we trade, but how we trade and on whose terms. This Government have been clear that we will not sacrifice British standards on the altar of trade deals. All imports must meet UK food safety requirements, and that is not going to change. We have been clear that hormone-treated beef and chlorine-washed chicken, which hon. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned, are and will remain banned in the UK. As the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) pointed out, that is because such treatments are designed to hide what has happened as a result of production methods. We are firm that we will not allow that. There are also potential issues with the human food chain, and we do not wish to put our consumers at risk.

We understand that there can be frustrations when farmers here are held to higher welfare standards than some competitors abroad. Sometimes there are good reasons for those differences. We have not heard about any of that in the debate today, but farmers across the world face different geographical environments, different climate conditions and different disease risks. Practices such as sow stalls and battery cages, however, are banned in this country for good reason. We will not pretend

that every difference in global standards is acceptable just because it happens to be legal elsewhere; we spend our time trying to persuade other countries to see the sense in adopting our higher food production and livestock standards.

As we have said in the trade strategy, we will not lower food standards. We will continue to uphold high standards in animal welfare. We will always consider whether imports have an unfair advantage and what the potential impact of trade agreements on UK food production could be. That is why, in our trade deal with India, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire pointed out, we kept tariffs on pork, chicken and eggs: because we were concerned about the welfare standards. We used the powers we have, and we will do so again where our farmers and our values are at stake. In the India deal, we also secured commitments to co-operate on animal welfare—the first time that India has ever agreed to that in a trade deal. The independent Trade and Agriculture Commission recognised that achievement in pursuing our policy on animal welfare protections as a part of our trade deals.

We have a proud history of leading the way in ensuring the very best care for animals. In December, we published our animal welfare strategy, to which hon. Members on both sides of the House have referred. It will improve the lives of millions of animals in the UK. We recognise that animal welfare is a global issue, and we will continue to champion high animal welfare standards around the world, promoting robust standards nationally and internationally. Our recent trade deal with Korea includes comprehensive language on animal welfare that goes beyond anything that Korea has agreed to date. We will continue to strengthen co-operation and information exchange on this globally important issue.

In his opening speech, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire mentioned eggs from Ukraine. We are 90% self-sufficient in eggs in this country. The Ukrainian trade in eggs is about 1% of our supply. That is done partially as support for Ukraine's industry and economy in the global situation in which it finds itself, at war with Russia. Despite that, I have met both Ukrainian Agriculture Ministers and they are working hard to ensure they can come into compliance with EU regulations in egg production as soon as possible. We are helping them to try to do so. The debates that we are having on animal welfare with respect to egg imports are real, and they are happening. I have raised them personally with both Ukrainian Agriculture Ministers.

Protecting standards is not enough on its own, however. We are backing British farmers to create a productive, profitable and sustainable future for farming. We believe that support is essential for our country's economic growth and food security. Through new technology, streamlined regulation and nature-friendly farming schemes, we are helping farmers to produce food for the nation. A stronger and more productive domestic farming sector is in our national interest and will keep high-quality British food on the shelves for consumers.

The heart of our approach is working in partnership with the sector, which is why the Secretary of State and I are grateful to Baroness Batters for her recent review of farming profitability. We are taking forward a series of measures from the review to deliver practical support and long-term certainty for farmers. We recently announced a new farming and food partnership board as part of

our actions. This brings farmers, processors and retailers together, because food security is not just about what happens on the farm; it is about the whole food chain, all the way from the farm to the fork. Farmers will have a seat at the table when policy is developed, and their voice will shape what the Government do.

Different parts of our food system face different challenges—the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) talked about what is happening in the dairy sector at the moment—but they also face different opportunities. Together, we intend to develop sector plans that target growth in sectors such as horticulture and poultry first, sectors in which there is significant untapped potential to increase home-grown production. This will be followed by other sectors in which there is real scope to grow more of our own food, because when British farming thrives, consumers benefit, with affordable, high-quality food on their tables.

As well as supporting producers at home, we are working to extend the international reach of British food and drink. We will continue to focus on new markets for the sector. We have 16 agrifood attachés around the world opening doors for British producers. Last year alone, their work removed barriers, creating £127 million of export value for our home-grown food producers. That includes opening British pork access to Mexico and removing costly barriers for British dairy exports to Egypt. This year, the Secretary of State and I will be leading dedicated trade missions to showcase British food and drink overseas and boost our exports. Our high standards are something we should be proud of; the reputation of our top-quality produce helps us to unlock new markets, and many of those we deal with see UK food as at the top of the quality mark and want to have access to it.

Closer to home, the majority of our agrifood trade is with the EU, including around 70% of our agrifood imports. That is why the SPS agreement with the EU to slash red tape for the businesses that trade most with our nearest neighbours is so important, as it will make agrifood trade in our biggest market cheaper and easier to engage with. The agreement will bring down costs for UK producers and remove most of the regulatory trade barriers. We have been clear about the importance of high animal welfare standards, and the EU has accepted that the UK will need to retain its own rules in some areas. As in all trade deals secured by this Government, we will maintain red lines in our negotiations.

We are a nation that has always led on animal welfare. In 1999, the Labour Government banned sow stalls before most of the rest of the world had heard of them. I understand the issues that the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst) raised and I want to reassure him that we are working closely with the industry on transition in some of the areas mentioned in the current animal welfare strategy, such as banning farrowing crates and moving away from enriched cages for hens. We do not want the law of unintended consequences, but we do want increases in animal welfare. This Government will not allow that legacy to be undermined through the back door by trade policy. We will protect our farmers, uphold our standards and back British food at home and abroad. That is what food security means, and that is what this Government will deliver.

4.31 pm

Sam Carling: I am glad to have a couple of minutes to wind up after what has been an incredibly valuable debate that has covered a whole range of topics. I start, of course, with the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst), who, I think, agrees with me—there were various bits of discussion there. I referred exclusively to sow stalls in my speech; he importantly raised the issue of farrowing crates, which also remain an issue in the UK. He spoke of wanting to ensure that our farmers are not undermined, and that is the whole point of this, right? It is about ensuring that we expect at least the same standards of imports coming from overseas so that our farmers are not undercut in that way. So, yes—we agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) made some excellent points around the enforcement of standards and honest labelling. All Members present will know just how many emails we get from constituents on the practice of farm washing, where products that have been imported from overseas mistakenly—and, in many cases, misleadingly—try to imply that they meet British standards when they do not, with big Union Jack flags and everything, as my hon. Friend said. We need to get on top of that.

The hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) talked about how we need to ensure that more of the public sector prioritises buying British, which I think is really important and something the Government have commented on. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) referred to Baroness Batters, who makes explicit and positive reference to this issue in her profitability review. The hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) reinforced some of the points I made on the undercutting of farmers and spoke of how much that impacts his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) also spoke about the importance of buying British and the critical link to the hospitality industry, including the various pubs in his constituency, the names of which he treated us to.

The comments of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), on the Australian trade deal were particularly useful. They also relate to what was said by the shadow Minister who spent some time talking about the Conservatives' record. There was some good stuff in there. I will just read him this quote from Michael Gove, a former DEFRA Secretary, speaking at Conservative party conference about the previous Government:

“we negotiated poorly with Australia, and New Zealand, but particularly with Australia in defence of our farmers. In the anxiety to secure trade deals, we did not think about the long term.”

I would just encourage Opposition Members to reflect a bit on that.

I had a comment to make if I got an intervention from a Reform Member, but none have turned up, so that did not happen. If they had tried to attack us on this, I would have mentioned that the leader of Reform, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), went to America recently to call for economic sanctions against the UK—far from lowering tariffs for British beef exporters as we have done in our landmark economic deal with the US.

I am grateful to the Minister for speaking about the need to ensure that our farmers can export too—that is a really important part of this. She is right that there is a balance to be struck. I thank her for detailing some more of the Government's examples of success in this area. I did not mention Ukraine specifically with regard to eggs, as I am very conscious of the issues she raises, but I am grateful to her for referring to the positive measures in terms of making some progress over there.

To reiterate, this Government have been clear that worsening our animal welfare standards and allowing imports of low-welfare goods is a red line for us. We are not going to do it, and that is positive. However, that raises a question: why do we not legislate to make sure of that? I trust this Government, but I cannot say I trust future Governments, and I do not trust the trade deals that sadly are already in place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of import standards on the agricultural sector.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Unauthorised Entry to Football Matches Act 2026

Sentencing Act 2026

Holocaust Memorial Act 2026.

PETITION

Safety of the A525 near Meadows Primary School

4.35 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The petition of the residents of the constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme declares that the A525 outside Meadows primary school and the A531 at the junction of Crewe Road are inadequate, dangerous and putting the lives of the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme at risk. The petition acknowledges that in December 2025 a parent was knocked down dropping their child off to school and that there have been many more near misses in the many weeks and months before.

The petition calls on the police, fire and crime commissioner in Staffordshire and Staffordshire county council to act sooner rather than later to make the road fit for purpose. It further recognises that traffic-calming measures including traffic lights, speed bumps, speed cameras, a reduced-speed zone or a roundabout modification would meaningfully improve safety. It notes that each and every parent should feel safe dropping their children off at every school in Newcastle-under-Lyme. It further notes that a corresponding petition online on the same issue has reached 289 signatures from the good people who live, learn and work in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme,

Declares that the A525 outside Meadows Primary School, and at the junction of Crewe Road, is inadequate, dangerous and putting the lives of the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme at risk; acknowledges that in recent weeks, a

parent was knocked down dropping their child off to school, and there have been many more near misses in the weeks and months before us; notes that each and every parent should feel safe dropping their children off at school; and further notes that an online petition on this same issue has reached 289 signatures from people who live, learn and work in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to push Staffordshire County Council to make the sections of the A525 near Meadows Primary School in Newcastle-under-Lyme fit for purpose by introducing traffic calming measures that would meaningfully improve safety such as traffic lights, speed bumps, speed cameras, a reduced speed zone, or roundabout modification.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003159]

Local Government Finances: Surrey

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

4.37 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The amount of money that local government authorities have, such as Surrey county council and the new east Surrey and west Surrey unitary councils, has a huge day-to-day impact on residents. It determines the provision of services and the protection of our communities, and it is essential to the many businesses and voluntary organisations in the area through both policy and the many direct contacts held with local service providers.

We heard again this week claims that the Government are boosting funding for councils, but the reality does not live up to the rhetoric. Surrey county council's budget is being reduced by over £50 million for the next financial year. Surrey is negatively impacted more than any other area despite increased demand and escalating costs just to maintain existing service levels.

The Government's calculations simply do not provide enough money for statutory services such as adult social care provision—and we all know about the urgent action that is needed to improve the special educational needs system and support available for children, schools and families. Instead of investing in services, the Government are slashing central grant funding for Surrey. Despite that, Surrey county council has managed to put forward a balanced budget, thanks to hard work led by Councillor David Lewis, but the situation as it stands is unsustainable, and the risks are mounting. The Government need to act.

In addition to the counterproductive funding decisions being made by the Government, we have the added complication of local government reform. Changing the structures of local authorities is a complicated matter. It requires changes in contracts, staffing, location and every other aspect of running a large and complicated organisation, yet we have no information on how the transition will be funded. It cannot possibly come from existing budgets if services are to be maintained, given the situation I have outlined. There is no clarity on what will happen to staff during the transition. Many jobs are at risk, and some have already sought new, more stable opportunities elsewhere. All face additional pressures as a result of reorganisation, and the risk is that important decisions will be delayed, leaving Surrey stuck in stasis.

Beyond transition, we must look at the foundation of the new unitaries. We all know the concerns about local authority debt. Some councils, such as Runnymede borough council, which covers a big chunk of my constituency, were able to operate a commercial strategy with sound financial management, meaning that the risk of high debt was mitigated by clear controls and revenue provisions. However, they are the exception. Too many local authorities borrowed heavily without the knowledge or systems to manage the risk, and none did so more disastrously than Woking borough council.

Given the size of the authority, the failures at Woking are unparalleled, both in terms of the scale of the debt and the failure of financial management and scrutiny, yet, despite announcements that the Government are proceeding with local government reform, there is still no clear plan about what to do with the Woking debt.

[*Dr Ben Spencer*]

In October last year, the Government announced debt relief totalling half a billion pounds for Woking borough council in 2026-27, but that still leaves more than £1.5 billion of debt, and under the Government's plans, that may shortly become the liability of residents across west Surrey.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is giving an excellent speech that has really drawn out the pressures on his constituents, as well as on mine and on those of the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford). West Surrey unitary authority as a whole faces the prospect of beginning its life with £4.5 billion of debt. The hon. Gentleman raised a very important point about the vital public services that need to be paid for. My constituents are concerned that when west Surrey unitary authority comes into existence, those public services could falter and fail on day one, and I am sure his constituents are concerned, too. Through the hon. Gentleman, I ask the Minister for reassurance that that will not happen and that some kind of financial package will be offered to my constituents and those of the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, although it sounds like it was more for the Minister than for me. He has given the Minister time to prepare for his inevitable question, which I hope she addresses in her speech.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for letting me take the debate from Surrey to Staffordshire. There is concern in Newcastle-under-Lyme about what a potential new unitary may look like and about whether the debt of current councils will be carried over to it. I want to add my concerns to his. This is not a party political issue; it is about ensuring that people are not forced to pay off the debt accrued by others.

Dr Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is exactly right: through local government reform, all areas could be affected by the debt and other commitments of neighbouring authorities.

That brings me to the point I was about to make, which is that it really is not fair that my constituents in Runnymede could have to pay for the failed decisions of Woking politicians—both those in power and those who failed in their duty to scrutinise decisions—because those constituents never got to vote for them. The scale of the remaining debt, when combined with the debt of other local authorities, means that the new west Surrey unitary will be bankrupt from day one. New local authorities should be established on a sound and equal footing, so that the provision of services can be determined by local need. The Government need urgently to introduce a sound long-term financial plan for both unitaries in Surrey.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his impassioned and powerful speech on this matter, with which I wholeheartedly agree. I think he is being somewhat polite in the way he describes what this unitary authority is going to be. Essentially, if it is saddled with the debt from Woking and a number of other boroughs, it will essentially be stillborn from the start, and residents in my areas of Farnham, Haslemere

and the other Surrey villages that I represent will be worse off because of it. Does he not agree that the Government must write off that legacy debt, or at the very least ring-fence it, so that our constituents do not face the problems—to be frank, the absolute mess—left by other boroughs and their politicians?

Dr Spencer: My hon. Friend is a lot harder in his language on this issue and I very much respect him for that. At the very least, we need to have a well thought-out plan and strategy for what is going to happen with the block of debt. There is a variety of different options for how it can be managed and dealt with. Here is the fundamental problem that my constituents—service providers, charities and businesses—raise with me and are really worried about: that decisions made in a neighbouring local authority, which they have had no involvement in or dealings with, will have a material impact on them when the west Surrey unitary authority is set up.

I realise that the scale of the debt is a huge and complicated problem. I do not envy the Minister in trying to find a way through. I am glad that we have this forum for debate this afternoon, but we need to have these debates and discussions so that the west Surrey unitary authority—and, frankly, others that are being set up that face similar problems—can be dealt with fairly and so we know what is coming down the tracks. My residents are not going to be punished for decisions made in other authorities that they never had the chance to vote for. That is fundamentally unfair.

By the way, in some ways this is not something that we are unused to in my part of Surrey. We sit on the penumbra—just on the outskirts—outside London, and there are plenty of policies that come from this awful Mayor of London that affect us in a whole range of negative ways and which we do not have the ability to vote for. Unfortunately, this situation is far and away the most substantial we have faced, and there is so much fear, concern and uncertainty about what may be coming down the track.

Of course there is a huge irony in all this, because Surrey is one of the largest contributors to the Exchequer in our country. Cutting local authority funding, and impacting services and the many contracts that local authorities maintain, risks serious harm, not only locally in Surrey but to the national economy. Let us consider some examples.

If the Government do not effectively fund local highways, that will lead to deteriorating road conditions, resulting in more temporary emergency repair works. We all know the nightmare that that causes, with delays, costs of millions in lost work hours and missed appointments, and longer transit times for goods. That damages the Surrey economy and, by virtue, the national economy. If the Government do not effectively fund adult social care, that will cause bed blocking in hospitals and pressure on health services, impeding effective recovery and care.

If the Government do not effectively fund planning services, that leads to lengthy delays in assessing applications for homes and businesses and, crucially, risks enabling rogue development, which blights Surrey and other areas. Although planning enforcement remains a discretionary service, there is a real risk that it is increasingly seen as a “nice to have” and not an essential tool to protect communities. Evidence shows that enforcement

rates continue to fall in the face of funding pressures. Inappropriate and illegal development—people essentially cocking a snoot at the planning system, and building anyway—is a serious problem in my constituency and in places across the country, and my residents are rightly incensed. Critical to stopping this activity and turning the situation around are not only stronger enforcement powers—for which I have been campaigning for years—but, at the very least, the resources to do proper planning enforcement.

Dr Pinkerton: In my area—perhaps in the hon. Member's, too—we have had increased housing targets of up to 150% as a consequence of this Government's decision. I understand their commitment to house building, but such targets open up the floodgates to opportunistic development—development that is unplanned. It requires incredible expertise in planning departments to ensure that such development is appropriate and that there is enforcement where necessary. Those are exactly the kind of services that risk being cut at just the time when we face the greatest pressure. Does he agree that we need some kind of financial resolution to ensure that these services are continued into the future?

Dr Spencer: I thank the hon. Member for raising housing targets and planning in local authorities. The majority of my constituency is covered by Runnymede local authority and, I think, roughly a third by Elmbridge local authority. In the Runnymede authority, there is a local plan, so there is no risk of the opportunistic development that he mentions. In the Elmbridge local authority, there is no local plan, so there is opportunistic development. Applications are under way that are causing huge concern to local residents in the Cobham, Downside, Stoke D'Abernon and Oxshott area in particular. In fact, at the end of last year, I wrote to the Secretary of State along with councillors from Elmbridge to raise our concerns about the fact that, because of local government reorganisation, again Surrey has found itself stuck in stasis.

There is a local plan in Elmbridge. Can that be put together by the time we hit the election of the shadow authorities? When you think about it, the term itself is an awful one—try knocking on doors and asking for support for the shadow authorities! What is Elmbridge to do? Do people living in the Elmbridge part of my constituency effectively have to wait a year and a half, until we have the full authority going when the shadow authority transfers over, before we can have some sensible progress when it comes to getting plans in place to protect people from opportunistic development? That is before we even talk about the scale of the housing targets, whose spread is disproportionate in Elmbridge; and I will ask the Minister later about the absence of a commitment for a Surrey mayor, who would in part be responsible for planning decisions. I hope Members can see that it is all a bit of a mess, and my constituents and local businesses are stuck in the middle.

No topic is more sensitive or concerning than where we find ourselves with special educational needs provision. We all know what happens when that is not fully funded. I welcome the work that the county council and Councillor Jonathan Hulley have been doing to improve transparency and engagement locally, really turning up the dial on what is happening for families and children with special educational needs, but ultimately we need national changes to services and support, and the funding to bring forward

delivery. Without the local funding, the opportunities for children to reach their full potential are limited. It leads to failure demand, which is when services do not provide what is needed early on, thereby creating more demand in the system later, and that harms and limits children. That is notwithstanding all the pressures on families and siblings and on schools, which are going above and beyond to try to support those children.

The Government know these risks—I know the Minister knows and appreciates them. I hope the Government also know that it is a false economy to cut costs right now. The resulting economic and social impact of not funding these essential services will be calamitous locally.

Of course, as night follows day, I fully expect Government Members and others to see this as an opportunity to blame the Conservative Government, and of course I acknowledge that local government has struggled as a result of difficult financial decisions over the years, but there really is no more capacity for cuts. That is why we need to address the issue now. I want to use this debate as a plea to move beyond any sort of blame game or political posturing and work together to address the real risks that we face and establish a sound financial basis for effective local authority finances.

Given the clear risks, more than anything else we now need certainty. Residents and businesses need to know that they will not be shackled with high costs resulting from other local authorities' poor financial management. Businesses and charities that have contracts and partnerships need certainty about their future. We all need to know that there will be adequate funding so that we all retain access to the essential services that local authorities provide. That cannot wait until after the May elections. Our voters need to know what authorities they are voting councillors into. They need clarity over the scope of the authorities' powers. This debate is the Minister's opportunity to answer the questions of 1.5 million Surrey residents.

How will local authority debt be dealt with? Will central Government ensure effective funding, or do Ministers intend to rely on constant tax rises despite the cost of living pressures? These are council tax rises—taxes on working people, as she and the Government, I assume, would define them. Will we have a mayor in Surrey? If so, can we have the details? How can we prevent the long-term risks if the Government continue to prioritise short-term funding cuts? For once—just for once—will this Government put Surrey first?

4.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I thank the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) for opening this debate on the important topic of funding for local government in Surrey and for the thoughtful, constructive and eloquent way in which he made his remarks. I also thank him for acknowledging that we have inherited a very challenging context. I do not intend to do any party political back and forth, but the reality is that the inheritance was incredibly tough. We are working at pace to rectify that, in an impossible context for everyone involved.

We share the hon. Member's view that local government is on the frontline of delivering services to the people of this country. It can do so only when central Government

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

works with it in partnership to overcome the shared challenges that we face. Our local government reforms, including funding reforms and reorganisation, will enable local councils that are empowered to deliver local services and equipped to drive economic growth and to work in the interests of their communities. That is a shared goal and a shared priority, and we will work with anyone across any political party in order to deliver it.

I turn first to the local government finance settlement. I put it on the record that this is the most significant move yet to make English local government more sustainable. That is a core priority against the really tough backdrop that local authorities across the country are having to navigate. We are delivering fair funding, targeting more money to the areas that need it most and then putting in place multi-year settlements for the first time in a decade. That will give councils the certainty to make the longer-term calls so that they can take a more preventive approach and do less crisis management.

For the local authority in Surrey, by the end of the multi-year settlement period in 2028-29 the provisional settlement makes available almost £1.5 billion of core spending power—an increase, in totality, of 7.3% compared with 2024-25. We acknowledge that there has been a cut in the core grant but, as has been the case for the past decade and a half, we look at the totality of core spending power, and it is going up. That does not in any way negate the fact that it is a tough context for local government to have to operate in, having had to operate in a really tough context for the past decade. However, we are trying to give sufficient flexibility in the approach that we are taking to enable local authorities to weather that.

For the first time since 2013-14, the Government are updating the relative needs formula, which forms part of how local authorities' funding allocation is calculated. That has involved using more up-to-date data, including the indices of multiple deprivation published in 2025, as part of our assessment of needs. We know that that is leading to a redistribution across the country that is tough for some authorities to absorb, but we think it only right and fair that we target more support to those authorities and communities that have huge levels of need and deprivation. I say that as an MP representing a London constituency. London is taking some of that hit, but we see that as fair across the country, because in the end what we care about is supporting the communities that need the most help.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Taiwo Owatemi.)

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are simplifying and consolidating 36 revenue funding streams worth over £56 billion over three years, which we hope will provide greater flexibility, stability and certainty for local authorities.

We recognise that funding reform is just one part of the story. That is why we are committed to simplifying local government by ending the two-tier system and establishing new single-tier unitary authorities. I think the end goal that Members across the House are trying to get to is consistent. There is common ground: we

want authorities that are sustainable and strong and can deliver for constituents. The Secretary of State has decided, subject to parliamentary approval, that Surrey will move towards two unitary councils: east Surrey and west Surrey.

The question of debt was raised, and rightly so. We are very alive to the pressure facing the new unitaries because of the historical debt. As the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge says, we have announced an unprecedented commitment to repay, in principle, £500 million of Woking borough council's debt in 2026-27. That is the first tranche of support, and we will continue to explore what further debt support is required and how we can work with the new west Surrey authority to resolve the debt issue. We are clear that residents are at the heart of this, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that we are delivering for them. We are committed to working together to make sure that they are protected and have the quality and level of services that they deserve.

Gregory Stafford: From what the Minister says, it sounds as if she accepts that the remaining debt is still unsustainable to be dealt with at a local level. Is she teasing us with a future announcement of further moneys, or is it more of a general ambition?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I would do no such thing as tease with announcements that sit with the Chancellor. What we have said to partners on the ground in the local authority is that this is a shared problem and we are committed to working together to find a resolution. We understand the pressure that the historical debt will place on the new authorities. It is incumbent on all of us to find a way through that ensures that, on the other side of it, we have local authorities that are sustainable, can survive and can deliver the quality of services for the local residents that is required.

Dr Ben Spencer: I think the Minister said a moment ago that she would work with the west Surrey authority to resolve the issue. At what stage in the process does she anticipate a decision and resolution? The west Surrey authority will not be an operational statutory unit until spring next year. We have elections to the shadow authorities this year. As I understand it, those shadow authorities will not have any powers until vesting day, when they are transferred to the full-fat authority, so the current county council and the district and borough councils will still have statutory powers.

Is the Minister saying that there will be no debt resolution until the west Surrey unitary authority is set up? Is she saying that there will be a resolution when the shadow authority is in place, or will we have a resolution before the elections this May? That is really important for our residents, who need to know what set-up the councillors they are voting for will have to deal with. Can she guarantee, or even say that it is her ambition, that she will get this resolved before we get to those elections?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are already working with all the authorities involved. That is why we put in place £500 million for Woking local authority. We have been working with it historically, and we will continue working with it to resolve this. I cannot give a timeframe, in part because resolving this requires all parties involved to come together to understand the scale of the problem

and, critically, how we can work together, using the levers available to us. I hope that the hon. Gentleman hears that there is a shared commitment to resolving this, and we will work with the constituent local authorities to get a resolution.

Dr Pinkerton: Will the Minister give way?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I will make a little progress, if I may. I acknowledge the pressure that social care is creating for the local government finance system; that is squeezing vital services. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge mentioned planning, but we see this issue across services that are not non-statutory. Ultimately, the core thing that local government can deliver is effective services that build our communities and hold them together, and we all want to preserve that. That is why we are driving through pretty punchy reforms across children's social care, for example. That is the biggest transformation in a generation; there will be an historic £2.4 billion of investment over the multi-year settlement period in the Families First partnership programmes. We are building a national care service based on quality care, backed by £4.6 billion of additional funding available for adult social care in 2028-29, compared with 2025-26.

We will bring forward a full White Paper on special educational needs and disabilities, because we understand that there is pressure, and the impact that has on local government finances. We must find a way to deliver the best possible services for children and families who need support, and must do so in a sustainable way.

Dr Pinkerton: I am terribly grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She has been extremely open in her responses so far. One side effect of the financial pressures that Surrey faces as a consequence of special educational needs is the so-called safety valve agreement. That has had consequences for a proposed school in my constituency, Frimley Oak Academy, for which money is designated. The Department for Education agrees that it should go ahead, but as a result of the safety valve agreement, Surrey cannot go ahead with it, because of that school's ongoing operational costs. That is an example of financial constriction having a material effect on the provision of a vital educational offering. Will the Minister perhaps take that point away, and inquire whether the situation could be freed up to ensure that the school can come to my constituency?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I am happy to take that point away, and either my Department or the DFE will write back and provide an answer to the hon. Gentleman.

Let me address the question about devolution and the devolution process, and the move towards a mayor. We are absolutely committed to devolution. I have spoken to the leader of Surrey council and made it clear

that we want to move forward. For us, the first step is creating a strong strategic authority that is empowered to start driving economic change and can bring constituent authorities together for strategic decision making. We want to move forward with that at pace, so we will work with the new unitaries, and with partners on the ground, to build a strong economic footprint, and build the institution that allows us to move to the next stage of devolution.

Gregory Stafford: The Minister is being extraordinarily generous with her time, but I do not want her to miss the opportunity to respond to the important question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) about a Surrey mayor. Will she confirm whether we will get a mayor in Surrey before the end of this parliamentary term?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Ultimately, that will be a local question. The process is always to put in place a combined authority first and foremost, and to get that working. The big lesson that I have learned from my many years working in the space of devolution—a lesson that we see when we look across the Greater Manchester combined authority—is that if we first get strong institution working in partnership, so that the combined authority can hold power and deliver economic development functions, it makes the mayor far stronger and more effective.

The first stage for us is working with the constituent authorities to move forward with the strategic authority. We want to do that at pace, and to ensure that we are equipping it with the powers that it needs, so that it can start driving economic prosperity for the area, take on strategic planning powers and transport powers, and start investing in the local community. We can then move through the stages of devolution. The commitment to devolution in Surrey is absolutely there, and we will work with partners to deliver that.

I thank all hon. Members for the powerful points that they have raised, and for their passion, commitment and advocacy for Surrey. I hope that they have heard, in this debate, that the Government are absolutely committed to fixing the foundations of local government finance, against an incredibly difficult backdrop. We are ready to listen to the concerns of any local authority about the ongoing reforms. We know that they are difficult and punchy, but we are making the reforms because we think that they are necessary if we are to get local government back on a sustainable footing. We are determined to work together, across party lines, to deliver our shared goal of services that work for constituents in every part of this country. The Government are absolutely committed to that.

Question put and agreed to.

5.10 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 January 2026

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Transport Connectivity: Midlands and North Wales

1.30 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport connectivity in the Midlands and North Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss, and to open this debate on a subject that goes to the heart of economic opportunity, social mobility and quality of life.

Connectivity determines whether people can easily get to work, get to school and get out and about. For communities such as mine in Aldridge-Brownhills, the state of our transport links will decide whether young people can access opportunities and whether businesses can grow. Reliable transport and good connectivity are not nice-to-have extras; they are fundamental to how well off and connected our region is. Right now, we must do so much better. Today, I will focus on three areas where I believe ambition has been promised but delivery is falling short: buses, rail infrastructure and our roads.

For many people, buses are the only form of public transport available, not least in my constituency, which still does not have a single railway station. Bus fares matter, particularly for young people. If we are serious about opportunity, we cannot price young people off the network. Other regions have recognised that and acted. In Tees Valley, the Conservative mayor, Ben Houchen, introduced a £1 bus fare for everyone aged 21 and under, and it has been a clear success. It has boosted ridership and helped young people get to work, college and their apprenticeships. Wales has followed suit by rolling out £1 single fares for 16 to 21-year-olds across the country, and there are plans to extend the scheme further.

My constituents are left asking a simple question: why not the Mayor of the West Midlands? Our Labour mayor so often talks about fairness and inclusion, yet young people in our region continue to face some of the highest bus fares in the country. While other areas are cutting fares to widen opportunity, young people in my constituency are still paying full price to get to work or education.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady agree that the issue is not just fares but routes? Derbyshire had a 60% loss of bus routes in the 15 years up to 2023. Would she say that it is hugely disappointing that for such a long time, most of which was under her party's Government, bus routes have been slashed?

Wendy Morton: What I would say is that, although I am not an expert on Derbyshire bus routes, I absolutely recognise the importance of good connectivity. In the west midlands, constituents regularly ask me, "Why has this bus route changed?" or, "Why has that bus route changed?" So it absolutely matters to our constituents.

On connectivity, the lack of fairness for young people is not inevitable. We have seen that targeted youth fares can work, but what is sadly missing in the west midlands is not evidence but political will. If fairness and inclusion really are priorities, a west midlands youth bus fare scheme should be delivered quickly.

Alongside that, our mayor has promised a transformation of the bus network through franchising. In principle, greater local control can offer integrated routes, reasonable fares and improved standards, but the mayor needs to be honest with us about the timetable and the cost. Franchising will not deliver meaningful change for many years, and the funding currently allocated is a fraction of what will ultimately be required to deliver the scheme. Greater Manchester's experience shows that franchising takes times and significant investment.

In the meantime, our bus services remain unreliable and under-resourced. Once again, passengers are promised jam tomorrow. Transport users need buses that turn up and fares that they can afford, not more empty words.

Adam Jogie (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The right hon. Lady represents one part of the west midlands; I represent another part—the last seat in Staffordshire, which is on the Cheshire border. Many of the challenges that my constituents in Madeley, Audley, Wolstanton and Clayton have raised with me are related to the role that private companies, like D&G Bus and First Bus, play in delivering the bad or unreliable services to which she refers. Is it not the case that, as well as political will, we need those bus companies to step up and deliver?

Wendy Morton: I absolutely agree; there needs to be a wide approach to make this happen. I know from casework that we sometimes need to write to companies and ask them what is happening with a specific bus service. I just want a better bus service for my constituents, so that they can get to work or education. I remember growing up in a rural area—it was not in the west midlands—where we had one bus service a week. Young people in particular need access to good transport.

Going back to the issue of franchising, there is a long-term ambition, but interim action is essential. That means supporting new routes and the routes that we have now. Improving reliability is so important, as is addressing fares. We cannot pin all our hopes on reforms that are a decade away while services deteriorate in the present. The gap between promise and delivery regarding our buses must be closed as a matter of urgency.

That gap is even more stark when we turn to rail. The midlands rail hub is the single most important rail project for our region—

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Hear, hear.

Wendy Morton: We agree on many things—alongside Aldridge train station, of course. The midlands rail hub would unlock capacity, allow more frequent services, and make new and reopened stations viable. However, when I ask Ministers whether the scheme is fully funded,

[Wendy Morton]

the answer is always the same: £123 million has been allocated, not to deliver the project but merely to progress the next phase of development. The remainder, which is an estimated £1.75 billion, is still described as being

“subject to future funding decisions.”

We were told that the midlands rail hub would be delivered in full. The previous Conservative Government committed £1.75 billion in the 2023 Network North plan to deliver it. That funding has since been pulled by the Labour Government, leaving the full delivery of the project in limbo. I would be happy if the Minister could provide, in his response to this debate, the clarity that this project is fully funded to delivery, because it is critical to making sure that the west midlands, and the greater part of the region, keeps on moving, and we have that much-improved connectivity that enables new routes to be opened up and greater passenger capacity. The Government now talk about Northern Powerhouse Rail, but without the midlands rail hub there will be no midlands engine to power it. We need both, and we need them to be delivered.

There is the same uncertainty when Ministers are asked about passenger services on the Sutton Park line, which remains freight-only. Any future passenger use is said to depend on additional capacity, which is the very capacity that the midlands rail hub was meant to provide. There is no timetable, no commitment, and sadly no plan. This is policy paralysis; infrastructure is not funded and then a lack of infrastructure is used as the reason why nothing can progress. The midlands rail hub either will or will not be built, but indefinite reviews and partial funding help no one, least of all residents in my constituency and across the west midlands, and our local businesses.

That brings me to Aldridge train station. It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I am raising this. Why? Because it matters. Aldridge is a major settlement of some 25,000 people, but it has been without a passenger railway station for decades, despite clear demand and a growing population. Under the previous Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, funding was identified, land was secured, and the project was moving towards delivery. Local people were given a timeline and told that a new station was coming. Then priorities changed. A review happened. Funding was redirected. The project was placed under review and Aldridge train station was pushed into the long grass—some might say, into the sidings. It did not fail a business case; it fell victim to political decisions, with the Government allowing the secured funding for the station to be moved to pet projects of the Labour Mayor of the West Midlands.

Rest assured, I will continue to raise this issue at every opportunity, as the Leader of the House is all too aware from Thursday business questions, because it matters. When pressed on rail expansion in the north and east of the west midlands, the answer is always the same—future funding, future capacity, under review. Aldridge is told to wait. Sutton Park is told to wait. But my constituents have waited for long enough.

I want to highlight the importance of open-access operators. Services such as the proposed Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway could bring new connectivity and competition, with trains running along the Sutton Park line through Aldridge—but because

Aldridge still has no station, those trains will pass straight through. Open access has a role to play, but only if the infrastructure is delivered. Supporting open access must go hand in hand with delivering projects such as Aldridge station. I am hugely supportive of this project, but it must stop in Aldridge.

I have focused on public transport, but roads are equally critical. In Aldridge-Brownhills, our roads remain very much the backbone of local travel. Here too, our development needs are racing ahead of infrastructure. Large-scale housing proposals—another topic I regularly raise in this House—on green-belt land around Stonnall Road and Bosty Lane would add hundreds of new homes without the road upgrades needed to support them. Those roads already feed into Chester Road, which is sadly an accident blackspot, with a tragic history of serious injuries and fatalities.

Dave Robertson: The right hon. Member and I have both done some work on Chester Road—a place where one of my constituents lost their life a number of years ago. Is the right hon. Member able to update us on any conversations she has had with Walsall council about that area? I, and my constituents, would greatly appreciate that.

Wendy Morton: As the hon. Gentleman rightly indicates, this is an issue where we share an interest. He can rest assured that I do and will continue to raise it with Walsall council. It really does matter. I know the case that he refers to. What happened was a tragedy.

Local campaigners such as SCAR—Stonnall Campaign About Roads—have long called for action. I pay tribute to some of our local road safety campaigners—Jayne Preston, who will love having a mention in this place, even though it is in sad circumstances; and also Colin Roberts. They have done tremendous work and continue to raise the issue of road safety and that of the victims as well. Let me also take the opportunity to acknowledge the charity RoadPeace, a national charity for road crash victims, with which I have worked locally. For more than three decades, the charity supported bereaved families and campaigned for safer roads. Its recent closure as a charity is deeply saddening. It should remind us all of the human cost of what happens when we get road safety wrong.

While I welcome some recent funding for safety measures on Chester Road near this particular blackspot, residents are rightly asking where the wider plan is. We cannot add hundreds of homes without first investing in the roads and the junctions that residents rely on every day, even before any more homes are built. This will be development without infrastructure. If housing targets are imposed, which is very much what is happening in the west midlands in my area, infrastructure funding must be part of it. Roads, junctions, traffic management and public transport links must come before houses are occupied, not years afterwards.

The midlands and north Wales do not need more warm words or long-term plans that never quite materialise. We need transport that works at a price that people can afford. Across buses, rail and road, the pattern is the same: ambition without delivery; young people priced off the buses; rail schemes left half funded; towns told to wait; housing built without infrastructure. Things do not have to be this way. We know what works, but what is missing is action and delivery. I gently say to the

Minister that if the Government want people to believe in their plans for growth, they must start matching ambition with delivery.

Our region is ready to play its part, but it cannot do so with stalled projects and permanent delay. Our communities have waited long enough. It is time to stop reviewing and deferring, and to start delivering the transport that actually works. I genuinely look forward to hearing from the Minister about how he intends to make this happen. I will happily meet with him to discuss Aldridge station, to see what more we can do to ensure that the Mayor of the West Midlands understands why this matters, why I keep banging on about it, and why I will keep doing so until it is delivered.

1.46 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I will focus most of my speech on Rugeley Trent Valley station, which is of interest to my constituents, particularly those in Rugeley and Brereton, even though it is technically just over the border in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson)—a neighbour constituency-wise and in the Chamber today.

As we know, transport connectivity does not stop at constituency or council boundaries, and neither does the impact of stations where the facilities are not adequate for everybody. Rugeley Trent Valley is a striking example. The station has three platforms, yet only platform 3, serving trains towards Lichfield and London, is step-free. Platforms 1 and 2, serving far-distant locations like Birmingham, Stafford and Crewe, can be reached only via a steep footbridge. In practice, wheelchair users, parents with prams, older people and those with limited mobility are effectively barred from using two thirds of the station. With the delays that often characterise Avanti West Coast services and short connection times, running across from one platform to the next is simply not an option for many of my constituents.

Let me give some real-life, human examples. One constituent in her 80s told me that she can no longer visit her family because she cannot carry a suitcase up and down the steep staircases safely. That highlights how the barriers are not limited to wheelchair users. Another constituent recounted travelling with a friend who has serious mobility issues from the waist down. He arrived at the station to discover that the only way for him to catch their connecting train was to physically haul himself up and down the stairs. Station staff did what they could, but goodwill alone cannot overcome infrastructure that excludes so many people in our communities.

People are desperate to make journeys for work, healthcare, or family reasons, and they will often attempt unsafe routes if no accessible alternatives exist. While the British Transport police and station operators do what they can to manage risks, long detours or temporary measures are no substitute for basic dignity and safety.

Using the database of the Office of Rail and Road, I noticed that more than 200,000 people exited and entered Rugeley Trent Valley station in 2024-25. A constituent highlighted that other stations on the network, even ones with fairly similar footfall or electrified lines, such as Kidsgrove station near Stoke-on-Trent, have been upgraded with lifts, waiting rooms, and toilets. Clearly, it is not a question of engineering impossibility, but of prioritisation.

West Midlands Trains and London Northwestern Railway have told me that they fully support installing lifts at Rugeley Trent Valley. They acknowledge the station's accessibility issues and the impact on passengers, but as many hon. Members will know, major upgrades such as this fall under Network Rail's Access for All programme, which is always heavily oversubscribed. Over 2,500 stations in the country require upgrades, and Network Rail applies strict criteria, prioritising stations by passenger numbers and the proximity of the next accessible station. For Rugeley, nearby stations such as Stafford or Lichfield Trent Valley score higher under that system.

Although Rugeley has been discussed and even shortlisted in the past, the next allocation of funding is still several years away. In the meantime passengers are offered so-called mitigations, such as being carried to the next accessible station and sent back again or provided with discretionary road transport. For many of my constituents those are simply not viable or dignified solutions. They are workarounds for systemic failure, showing exactly what regional inequality looks like, with smaller towns often having to wait endlessly at the back of the queue while people with the greatest need are left to navigate shortcomings in the system.

Dave Robertson: My hon. Friend elucidates the problems that we face at Rugeley Trent Valley station. He is a doughty campaigner and it is a pleasure to work with him and to follow his lead. The issue affects not only his constituents but a number of mine as well. I want to go back to his remark that, "The next station is Lichfield Trent Valley." Very few people in this room will have tried to do that journey, which is not simple. There is no direct road linking the two places. We have to go through Armitage in a circuitous route. Sometimes just looking at the distance between two stations is not sufficient; we have to look at travel times as well. The practicalities of being able to do that I feel are sometimes overlooked by the Access for All process. He was making an excellent point and I want to reinforce that.

Josh Newbury: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the plethora of issues we have at Rugeley Trent Valley, which are not restricted to the footbridge. Coming in and out of the station, travellers are met with a national speed limit rural road with very poor visibility from both sides, so the problems at the station are plentiful. Even though it provides a fantastic facility for people to be able to get to destinations as far away as London, it really is not set up very well to handle that level of traffic.

On a more positive note I would like to highlight progress on the midlands rail hub, which will strengthen connections across the west midlands and help more people to get around quicker and easier. I hope and expect that the rail hub will have a positive knock-on effect on the whole region, including on the Chase line that serves my constituency. The project is an example of how investment can make a tangible difference to everyday travel and I welcome the Government's commitment to progressing the project and delivering improvements, as confirmed in the Budget.

It should also be said that the vast majority of public transport journeys in Cannock Chase are made on buses, and it is buses that often feature heavily in my postbag. I was immensely proud to serve on the Bill Committee for the Bus Services Act 2025 and to support

[Josh Newbury]

legislation that begins to address the long-term decline in our bus services. Under the previous Government, not only were more than half of all routes in my constituency lost, but the frequency and reliability of services were eroded. I very much welcome the unshackling of councils when it comes to setting up publicly owned bus companies and seizing the opportunities to take back control of fares, routes and timetables, for which my constituents have been calling for many years.

The Act is on the statute book, so now the ball is in the court of Reform-led Staffordshire county council, which so far seems to be showing the same lack of interest in boosting bus routes and taking advantage of franchising as the previous Conservative administration. For residents in parts of my constituency that need reliable buses the most and yet do not live on a route at all, such as those in the Norton East area of Norton Canes, Slitting Mill and Etchinghill in Rugeley to name a few, action is urgently needed.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and county neighbour for giving way. I just want to give voice to the people in his constituency who he has just referred to, as well as people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and north Staffordshire. On that urgent need, I join him in urging the county council to get its act together and do so quickly.

Josh Newbury: I thank my colleague from Staffordshire for backing up my point. We all have examples in our constituencies of where powers are urgently needed and where they could make a massive difference if the council gets its act together, as my hon. Friend says, and gets on with it. He knows that rural parts of our constituencies are often the areas that are the worst served and therefore the most isolated.

My constituents see every day the impact of regional transport inequality, whether it is a bus that never comes or a platform that cannot be reached. I welcome the Government's determination to put fairness and accessibility at the heart of transport policy, and I will continue to work constructively to ensure that Cannock Chase receives the investment it needs.

Looking ahead, I hope the Department for Transport ensures that accessibility is key to funding decisions, so that towns like mine do not continue to be left behind. I would also welcome clarity from the Minister on what short-term measures could be introduced while longer-term solutions are delivered, so that passengers are not forced to choose between safety and independence and making essential journeys. By working together I am confident that all residents in Cannock Chase and across the midlands can access a public transport network that is safe, reliable and inclusive.

1.54 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I thank those who have already spoken.

I am here to talk about rail. I would love to talk about buses, but I do not think I will have time. Specifically, I would like to address the midlands rail hub, which the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) has already spoken about. The project was conceived under the previous Conservative Government,

and I do not shy away from that. Unfortunately, it then sat on a shelf gathering dust, and there was no real movement on it until after the election, when this Labour Government came in.

Wendy Morton: I cannot resist. When we were in government, we committed to the midlands rail hub in the big Network North announcement made before the general election. We also committed the funding.

Dave Robertson: The right hon. Lady mentions the Network North money. It was a mythical project last seen leaving London, carried by Dick Whittington riding Shergar. The money simply did not exist. This Labour Government found the money for the project in the Budget, but it is not only the money. The alliance for delivery has already been appointed, and things are moving at pace. I very much hope to see spades in the ground this year, moving the project ahead, so that we can all start to benefit as soon as possible.

Wendy Morton: Can I come back quickly?

Dave Robertson: Yes, because it is you, Wendy.

Wendy Morton: Thanks very much. Again, on the point of funding, is the hon. Gentleman sure that his Government have fully committed all the moneys needed to deliver the midlands rail hub in full, not just one part of it?

Dave Robertson: The right hon. Lady drives at that point again, but what we are seeing is the difference between words from one side of this House and action from the other. We have seen that in large parts of my constituency over a number of years. However, I will now seek to make some progress rather than be sidetracked by the numerous failings of the previous Government.

The midlands rail hub is a huge boost to travel across our region. It will increase rail capacity in Birmingham, leading to 300 trains passing in and out of the nation's second city every single day. The benefits will be felt across the east midlands, the west midlands and beyond, with extra services from the midlands to Wales forming part of the project.

For Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages in my constituency, the midlands rail hub will mean a doubling of the number of hourly trains on the cross-city line to Birmingham—the busiest commuter line in the country outside London. Services were slashed under the previous Government, and we need the midlands rail hub to get them back on a sustainable footing in the long term.

The rail hub is an important investment, but it cannot be the end of the story for the midlands. For far too long, there has been far too little investment in transport in our region and neighbouring regions. I am very aware that I am sitting next to an MP from the east midlands. London and the south-east enjoy a fantastic turn-up-and-go service that we in the midlands can only dream of. We are now seeing investment in the north with Northern Powerhouse Rail, and it is right that we have that rebalancing, but we cannot overlook the bit in between.

In my area, the next step is clear: the midlands rail hub. Following that, we need to look to reopen the Lichfield-Burton-Derby line—the South Staffordshire line—for passenger services. This existing train line

already carries passengers; it just does not have stops. It is a diversion route that trains have to use, so drivers have maintained route knowledge. Previous scoping work for the project suggested it could deliver, at a minimum, a £7 million boost to our area's economy.

The route would halve public transport journey times from Lichfield to Burton and cut journey times from Sutton Coldfield and Lichfield to Derby and Nottingham by up to a third. It would mean easier travel for work and leisure, and crucially, it would mean easy access from my constituency to the University of Derby. It would also take pressure off the heavily congested A38, which runs parallel to the railway. Reopening this line would open up the possibility of a new station in the village of Alrewas to serve the National Memorial Arboretum, which is a fantastic facility that I advise everybody to visit. Unfortunately, that is very difficult on public transport.

Our national centre for remembrance is shockingly underserved, and not only by train links. The only bus option from Tamworth is currently being rerouted on a miles-long detour because Chetwynd bridge, which crosses the River Tame next to the arboretum, is closed to heavy vehicles due to maintenance problems. Despite support for the project from my predecessor, the Conservatives never funded the business case for the South Staffordshire line. I want to see action on Chetwynd bridge and that business case coming forward, so that we can really start to drive improvement in rail connectivity not only within regions but between regions from the west midlands to the east midlands. The South Staffordshire line is a fantastic place to start on that.

1.59 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing forward this important debate on transport in the midlands—which is one of my favourite subjects, so I had to be here for it. I represent North West Leicestershire, so my focus will inevitably be on the east midlands.

My constituency is at the heart of the national forest, and East Midlands airport rests at the very top of it. However, in tune with other semi-rural constituencies, we have no passenger rail at all, and a pretty poor level of bus connectivity. As North West Leicestershire is also not in the East Midlands combined county authority, it will not directly benefit from the financial settlement allocated to the city regions, so I would welcome the Minister's view on how the areas within the midlands that are not covered by devolution can get their fair share of transport connectivity.

Before I came to this place I sat on the highways and transport committee at Leicestershire county council. I know at first hand how poor transport funding has been under the last Conservative Government, including in Leicestershire, with 62% of services being cut in my constituency alone. As a county councillor, I lost count of the number of notifications of bus service changes I received, which included cuts. Bit by bit, those changes cut off public transport access to healthcare, college, work and leisure.

Through new funding, thanks to our Government and our clear commitment to public services, we can restore some of that, although it can be frustratingly

difficult to liaise with our county colleagues to get the changes in services that our communities desperately need. It still feels disjointed and patchy, and I know the issue will not be solved overnight.

In 2023-24, the east midlands had the lowest transport spending per head of the population at just £368 per person, compared with the UK average spend of £687 and the London spend of £1,313. Between 2019 and 2024, research shows that the east midlands received £10.8 billion less in funding than it would if it had been allocated just at the average, not at the London level.

Catherine Atkinson: My hon. Friend is very effectively making an important point. As she has set out, between 2019 and 2024, the Conservative Government gave the east midlands a quarter of the funding that they gave to London and half of what they gave to England on average, and I know that her area does not benefit from the £2 billion that our brilliant East Midlands Mayor Claire has secured for transport. Does my hon. Friend agree that if our regional transport was more equal, it would create more prosperity, economic growth, social equality and regional development?

Amanda Hack: The economic benefit of effective and connected transport is there for us to see. Having never worked in London before, it always surprises me how easy it is to get to places—if a bus or train gets cancelled, it is fine, because there is one five minutes away. If a bus gets cancelled in my constituency, people need to get a taxi or they will not get home. That is the inequality that we see.

What does this issue mean in my constituency? Around 87.4% of households in North West Leicestershire have access to one car or van, compared with 61% in Manchester and 22% here in London. With the lack of available and reliable public transport, more people are forced to rely on personal transport, thereby increasing the volume of cars and vans on our roads. That also has a devastating impact.

Some 80% of east midlands commuters drive, and the average number of rail journeys per resident is just seven per year, which is half the rate of the west midlands and a third of the east of England. In fact, East Midlands airport has the highest proportion of travellers getting there by car, at 91%, which is mainly down to it having the lowest connectivity of all airports across the UK. We have to think about transport connectivity—railways, buses—and how we get to our airports.

North West Leicestershire has not had a passenger rail service since the Ivanhoe line closed there in the '60s. My constituency relies heavily on buses, but I will say much more about the Ivanhoe line next week in a dedicated debate on the subject.

I have done a little research on how my constituents get to their nearest train station. From Coalville, the station is about 12 miles away, and it would take an hour on public transport to get to Loughborough or Leicester—far too long; it would be about 30 minutes by car. It would also take about an hour to get from Ashby-de-la-Zouch to Burton train station, but that would include more than one bus, which could be problematic for travellers, who are really reluctant to take multi-bus journeys because one of the buses might fail to come. Residents in Kegworth have the most convenient public transport journey to a train station—to

[Amanda Hack]

Loughborough, which takes just 36 minutes. However, East Midlands Parkway train station is only a few minutes by car.

We are massively underserved as a result of this connection problem between rail and buses. The fact is that my constituents have to make ridiculous, non-efficient journeys just to get where they need to be. I would welcome the Minister's view on how the difficulties of connecting communities are a real barrier to growth, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) mentioned in her intervention.

My constituents tell me that they are driving to get to the train station anyway, often in the wrong direction, so they might as well continue by car to their destination and avoid getting on the train altogether. That means more cars on our roads and more pressure on our road network.

Obviously, I have given simple examples, but I want to think about what the situation means for my constituents when they are trying to get to work, school or hospital. Accessible, efficient, reliable public transport should not be a luxury; it should not be a postcode lottery, but that is what it seems to be. When I meet young people across my constituency, they tell me that the public transport situation is a huge barrier to getting the training opportunities—the apprenticeships and classes—that they want and deserve.

Recently, a resident of Ashby-de-la-Zouch got in touch about their daughter's problems in getting to college in Loughborough. I thought it would be useful to share their words:

"The number of buses are extremely limited and this results in her leaving the house at 06.30 am and not returning until 7 pm with several hours waiting in and around bus stops"

—for a girl of 16, that is not ideal.

"Secondly, the service has on multiple occasions failed to turn up and left her in Loughborough without a way of getting home other than hoping my wife or myself are able to pick her up."

When a young person is trying their best to get their life on track, the very last thing we should be doing is putting additional hurdles in front of them. Yet for too many, transport—or the lack of it—becomes a deciding factor in whether they can engage in their chosen education at all.

If we get transport connectivity right, the impact on individuals, families and the long-term prosperity of our regions can be transformational. I cannot continue to accept a situation in which my constituency has an international airport yet has no passenger rail and such poor bus services.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): Order. I warn hon. Members that there may be a vote soon.

2.8 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate.

Transport links are essential to our economy, tourism, trade and everyday life, but all too often they have been neglected. Up and down the country, people in businesses have been plagued by an inefficient, unreliable and unaffordable public transport system, which was completely neglected by the former Conservative Government. Now,

as with many other areas of our creaking infrastructure, the public find themselves wondering when the change promised by the Labour Government will finally arrive, as if it were another heavily delayed train.

As we have heard at length today, too many rural communities remain effectively cut off from public transport. I grew up in Market Rasen in Lincolnshire, and I distinctly remember the frustration of simply trying to get to Lincoln—or beyond, to Newark or Nottingham—given the unpredictable and unreliable single-carriage trains that filled the air with thick, black diesel smoke.

Those challenges impacted the job opportunities of the people I grew up with and left our local economy—though beautiful and traditional in its own way—hanging off the edge of the rest of the east of England like a loose thread. It is startling that now, more years later than I care to admit, very little has changed. I am going to channel the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and join his calls for improved services to Market Rasen, including a direct link to King's Cross, which may well improve my home town's connection to the rest of humanity.

We have already heard how suburban communities such as Smethwick and Solihull, Loughborough and Long Eaton have suffered for years with poor train and bus services. In fact, it could be said that suburban towns do not get the attention that they deserve in the wider debate about this issue. As someone who represents a suburban town on the outer bounds of London, I reassure Members present that the problems discussed today are not completely alien to those faced by commuters in Sutton. Having lived in rural Lincolnshire, lived and worked in Lichfield, Ilkeston and Nottingham, and travelled to Broughton in north Wales for years on the train and bus services, I have personally suffered the impacts of that lack of connectivity.

Improving people's lives, however, is not just about grand plans for infrastructure—even though as an engineer and recovering transport planner, I do wish that all problems could be solved by it—it is also about delivery and real funding for those projects, coupled with good leadership and real results. That is why the Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's announcement last week that they are backing the long-standing Lib Dem calls to finally deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail—a clear Lib Dem win if ever I saw one. The plan, following the completion of Northern Powerhouse Rail, to build a new rail link through the midlands from Birmingham to Manchester is also welcome.

Dave Robertson: It is always great to see the Liberal Democrats finding a south-east MP to come and talk about transport in the midlands and north Wales. The hon. Member mentioned the well-overdue news that the Government will be following through on the rail improvement projects and building north to south, rather than south to north—as they always should have done. I wonder if he would like to reflect on the fact that the areas that returned massive Labour majorities are now seeing the investment from a Labour Government, so is he absolutely certain that he wants to claim that as a Liberal Democrat win?

Luke Taylor: When we see the investment going in, the tracks being laid and the services turning up to stations, I think we will agree that that is a win for any Government. For too long, we have seen empty promises

that have not been funded and have not arrived, so perhaps we should all pause our congratulations and backslapping until those projects finally materialise.

With just over £1 billion of funding allocated for those projects so far, however, we had hoped for something more concrete. Indeed, beyond the headline that up to £45 billion can be spent, the mere £1.1 billion commitment to spend another five years making a plan to make a plan to consult on a consultation is cold comfort to those whose dreams of a truly joined-up economy rest on the delivery of this project—those are the dreams of not just businesses and councils, but ordinary people and community groups. The Government have not yet done enough to convince us that, following a decade of broken promises and distant dreams for transport in the north, we are actually on the cusp of real change.

For communities that have been waiting for rail upgrades for years—like a young boy waiting for the train to Lincoln on the platform at Market Rasen station—there will be another long wait before we see spades in the ground. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the Government to go further and faster, like the trains that we so badly need, to improve transport links in the midlands and north Wales.

The economy of our entire country will benefit from reversing years of overlooked investment in transport systems. The statistics make that clear, with my home region of the east midlands receiving the lowest transport spending per head in 2023-24 at just £368 per person—a quarter of that in London and half of the average for England. Wales received just £566 per head, compared with an average of £693 in England and £763 in Scotland. Passengers and businesses across the midlands and north Wales deserve better, and the Liberal Democrats will continue to hold the Government's feet to the fire in delivering improvements for them.

To reiterate, we do not pretend that the challenges that the Government inherited are easily fixable. The British railways were left in a terrible state by the previous Conservative Government, but nearly two years on from the general election, many Brits remain fed up with the state of the British railways—with a network still plagued with delays, high ticket prices and overcrowding.

The Government would do well to remember that most passengers just want the strong delivery and good leadership that I mentioned, regardless of who owns the railways. People want better, more reliable and more affordable services—full stop. If nationalisation fails to make the impact that it promised, as the early warning signs indicate may be the outcome of the Government's intervention, nothing will have changed.

In the spirit of constructive opposition, I invite the Minister to consider how the Government might align their plans more closely with the Liberal Democrat plans for our railways. Namely, I invite the Minister to meet my Liberal Democrat colleagues to discuss introducing a passengers' charter like that laid before the House yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover). It would go a long way towards offering passenger protections on reliability, accessibility, affordability, amenities such as wi-fi and toilets, and seat guarantees. It could be folded into the ongoing development of the Railways Bill. Similarly, will the Minister outline how the Government plan to significantly extend the electrification of Britain's rail network without committing, as we have done, to a

10-year plan for more electric trains, greater investment in batteries, and ensuring that all new lines are electrified as standard? Such measures could make a huge difference to the carbon impact of our train network, including by creating new capacity for freight to be carried by rail rather than road, while delivering real results for passengers at the same time.

Finally, I invite the Minister to outline why the Government are not working with local authorities, not just in the midlands and north Wales but across the nation, to unleash the pent-up capability of transport-led economic growth in our towns and cities. The repeatedly delayed Leeds tram would be a great start, as would—if you will indulge me, Ms Furniss—extending the Transport for London tram to Sutton. However, I imagine that the Minister will be able to discuss some of these matters with the Mayor of Greater Manchester face to face much sooner than he had anticipated when he woke up this morning.

2.16 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this important debate. It is not the first time that I have heard her make the case for Aldridge station, which she does with considerable force. She has been not just consistent but consistently impressive and determined in her campaigns for that station, and on wider transport issues, particularly in the west midlands.

Much has been said about the daily reality facing passengers, businesses and communities across the midlands and north Wales region, where ambition has too often outpaced delivery. Transport is not an end in itself; it is the wiring that allows our economy to function and when that wiring is faulty, growth stalls, opportunity narrows and communities are left behind. That is nowhere clearer than in the midlands. A recent report by the Centre for Cities put it starkly, stating that

“Transport is the wiring that allows urban economies to function” but that in large UK cities outside of London that wiring is simply not working as it should. Today, with a fragmented network, only around 600,000 people, just 20% of the city region, can reach Birmingham city centre efficiently. But with properly integrated transport, increased bus frequency and reduced journey times, that figure could rise by over 250,000 people—a 44% increase—and take connectivity to nearly 30% of the city region. That is not a marginal gain; it is the difference between a city region that functions as a single labour market and one that does not.

Buses, of course, remain the backbone of local transport, particularly for young people and those without easy access to a private car or to rail. Targeted youth fares, such as those introduced in Tees Valley and Wales have shown what can be achieved, but fares alone are not enough if services are unreliable, infrequent or poorly connected to rail and tram networks. Integration is the missing piece. Joining up existing networks so that they function as one system is the fastest and most cost-effective way to improve public transport in England's major cities outside London. With greater devolved powers, metro mayors can increase frequency, reduce journey times and better connect buses with commuter rail and tram networks, but only if national Government provide clarity, consistency and backing.

[Greg Smith]

The consequences of poor co-ordination are most visible on rail. The midlands rail hub, about which we have heard a lot in this debate, is critical to unlocking capacity, improving frequency and enabling stations and services that would better connect communities across the region, but instead of certainty, we have partial funding, endless reviews and projects left “subject to future decisions”—a phrase worthy of whatever sequel comes to “Yes Minister”.

This matters not just for the midlands but for north Wales too, particularly when it comes to open access rail, which has the potential to deliver connectivity more quickly and introduce genuine competition. Proposals from Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway to operate direct services between Wrexham and London would significantly strengthen links among north Wales, the midlands and our capital. That is exactly the kind of market-led connectivity that can expand access to jobs, education and private investment.

But open access services can succeed only if the supporting infrastructure is in place. Capacity constraints, missing stations and poor integration with local transport risk meaning trains pass through communities, rather than serve them. If the Government are serious about improving connectivity across the midlands and north Wales, they must ensure that decisions on infrastructure enable new services, such as the WSMR, rather than frustrate them.

The wider connectivity challenge is felt acutely around Wrexham industrial estate—one of the largest in Europe. Major employers there, including JCB, Platts Agriculture, Kellogg's and Net World Sports, have highlighted persistent difficulties for workers travelling from the surrounding villages due to poor public transport links into the estate. There was a welcome announcement of a new bus network designed to link communities with industrial estates in the Flintshire and Wrexham investment zone, but business and residents alike are still waiting for the detail: routes, frequency, timelines and how the services will integrate with existing rail and bus networks.

Connectivity is about not just long-distance rail, but whether someone can reliably get from their village or town to work on time and at a reasonable cost. Without last-mile integration, growth zones risk becoming isolated islands of investment. Those challenges are mirrored elsewhere in north Wales: the A55, the north Wales main line and the Menai crossings are strategic routes not just for Wales but for the entirety of our United Kingdom, yet road projects have been frozen, rail electrification funding has been withdrawn, and a blanket 20 mph policy has been imposed without regard for the economic impact—or any regard for common sense. Labour's explanatory memorandum acknowledges that default 20 mph limits could cost the Welsh economy up to £9 billion, yet the policy was forced through, despite a record-breaking Senedd petition opposing it.

Only yesterday, it was confirmed that repairs to the Menai suspension bridge, one of just two crossings linking Anglesey to the mainland, will be delayed yet again, and that it will now stretch into 2027. That grade I listed structure, approaching its 200th anniversary, remains subject to weight limits and traffic lights, and there is still no long-term plan for resilience. That is not a minor inconvenience; it affects emergency response times, supply chains, tourism and livelihoods. That is

why the Conservatives have consistently argued for a third Menai crossing, working constructively to deliver the infrastructure that north Wales needs.

In the midlands and north Wales, the pattern is the same: ambition without delivery, promises without integration and growth plans without the connectivity to support them. If the Government are serious about growth and levelling up, they must focus on delivering better transport connectivity now, joining up existing networks, backing proven projects, supporting new rail services and ensuring people can get to work, education and opportunity. The Government's call for evidence on an integrated national transport strategy closed in February 2025, but we are still waiting for the outcome. I therefore ask the Minister when the results of that consultation will be published, and how they will support better connectivity across regions such as the midlands and north Wales, rather than adding further uncertainty.

As Jonathan Spruce, a trustee of the Institution of Civil Engineers, told the Transport Committee, planning transport without an overarching framework is “like trying to solve a jigsaw without the picture on the box”.

The Government must help put that picture in place so that regions can plan, spend and connect with confidence.

2.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate, and for her continued advocacy for her constituents in the wider west midlands.

Transport connectivity is not just an abstract policy issue; it shapes people's daily lives. It is how they get to work, education and healthcare, and stay connected to their loved ones and communities. Connectivity sits at the heart of this Government's mission to drive economic growth, unlock housing and tackle regional inequality. We are moving away from fragmented, short-term decision making, and towards an integrated, people-focused system. Our ambition is clear: a transport network that works for everyone, wherever they live.

The midlands has long been a national transport heartland, from historical canals and industrial-era railways, to engineering leadership in Birmingham, Derby, Coventry, Solihull and beyond. The region has always known that connectivity drives prosperity. That legacy continues today, with metro expansion, HS2 and innovations such as Coventry Very Light Rail, which I was very lucky to see myself, cementing the midlands as a historical engine of growth and a test bed for the next generation of connectivity.

In supporting new public transport connectivity across the West Midlands combined authority, we confirmed £15.6 billion for transport for city region settlements, including nearly £2.4 billion for the region up to 2032. That complements the £5.7 billion already allocated through the city region sustainable transport settlement. That long-term funding will deliver integrated transport at scale and end fragmented uncertainty.

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I have a lot to get through, and I would really like to respond to the right hon. Member's points in due course.

Exciting progress is already visible because this Government is backing Mayor Richard Parker's plans. Metro extensions, new rail stations, the Dudley Interchange and a new active travel corridor are transforming connectivity for millions across the region. Connectivity, however, does not stop at mayoral boundaries. Through the consolidated transport fund, all local transport authorities will benefit from more predictable, flexible and aligned funding. More than £1.3 billion will be delivered across the west midlands by 2029-30 to strengthen the links between our towns, cities and rural areas.

To embed this investment, we will soon set out the integrated national transport strategy, mentioned by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith). It is a people-centred approach that recognises that different regions face different challenges. It will focus on reliability, safety and accessibility, and closer alignment between transport, housing, healthcare and public services, ensuring that connectivity supports equality and opportunity for everyone.

We are the country that created the railways, and they are an iconic part of the heritage of the west midlands. Through Great British Railways, we are building a simpler, more unified railway that delivers reliable, safe and better-value journeys for local people, putting local priorities front and centre to deliver what communities actually need. In that context, the midlands rail hub is a clear example of how targeted rail investment underpins economic growth and housing delivery.

Catherine Atkinson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Lightwood: I am going to stay consistent. Members have made a lot of points, and I would like to respond to them. I have a lot to cover.

In July 2025, the Chancellor committed to progressing to the next stage of the midlands rail hub. Once delivered, it will enable up to 300 additional trains each day to travel in and out of central Birmingham, as well as improving services at 50 stations, transforming regional connectivity and providing the capacity needed to unlock sustainable growth.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills will know the difficult decision this Government inherited on HS2. Past mismanagement had led to significant cost increases and delays. Nevertheless, this Government have taken decisive action to reset the programme and progress delivery at the lowest reasonable cost. Recognising the importance of strengthening connectivity between the west midlands and the north-west, on 14 January, as part of our plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail, we set out our long-term intention to deliver a full, new rail line between Birmingham and Manchester.

I appreciate that taking this responsible, long-term decision on future capacity needs on the west coast main line will prolong the uncertainty for residents and businesses along the route. We will listen to the concerns of businesses, residents and hon. Members when making decisions about land powers, and we will work with them, and with HS2, to ensure that we minimise the disruption to people's lives as far as possible. I understand that a number of affected hon. Members are meeting the Secretary of State and the Rail Minister next week to discuss this issue, and I thank them for raising some of those concerns today.

We also recognise that railways in Wales have seen lower levels of enhancement spending in recent years, and we are taking action to put that right. The 2025 spending review and infrastructure strategy recognised Wales's long-term infrastructure needs and committed to delivering at least £445 million of rail enhancements to realise them. That funding will invest in both north and south Wales, fixing level crossings, building new stations and upgrading existing lines. The plans for future rail investment in Wales are being made in close consultation with the Welsh Government, who will be consulted ahead of the next spending review so that Wales's long-term infrastructure needs continue to be recognised.

We also recognise the interest of the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills in open-access applications for Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway. Open access will continue to have a role in the reformed rail sector, and we understand the potential connectivity benefits that the Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway proposals could deliver. We have provided conditional support for that application, subject to the ORR and Network Rail being satisfied that services can be accommodated without compromising network performance or adversely affecting the rights of other operators.

Buses remain the backbone of public transport, and they are the everyday lifelines that keep our communities connected. The Bus Services Act puts passengers firmly in control, driving better services and stronger local accountability. From '26-27, over £3 billion in funding will boost local services nationwide, including £700 million in local authority bus grants. The west midlands alone will receive £264 million to improve reliability, coverage and affordability. For the first time, our funding formula recognises rurality, ensuring that isolated and underserved communities get the support they need.

Cars are, of course, the most common and dependable way for people to get around. Well-maintained road networks keep our economy moving and daily life running smoothly. By '29-30, we will be investing over £2 billion every year in local road maintenance, which is double what we inherited. That will give councils four-year certainty over their funding, so that they can shift from patching up potholes to making sure—

Catherine Atkinson: According to the RAC, Derbyshire has the worst potholes in the country. East Midlands Mayor Claire Ward has announced £121 million for road maintenance, which is a 60% uplift on last year's funding. But with Reform in control of the county council, the number of potholes in Derbyshire is still absolutely abysmal. With both our mayor and our Government giving the funding that is needed, how can we ensure that local authorities such as Reform-led Derbyshire county council actually get on and fill our potholes?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is right to recognise the historic levels of funding going into local areas, which are almost doubling by the end of this Parliament. We increased funding this year from £1.1 billion to £1.6 billion, which came with conditions about publishing transparency reports on their websites. The multi-year funding that we have announced will also come with some conditions and incentives, to make sure that we turn the attention of local authorities from just patching those potholes—going back to fill them again and again

[Simon Lightwood]

is not a good use of taxpayers' money—to preventing them from forming in the first place and ensuring that we fully resurface roads. That accountability will be there for all our constituents to see where the council is or is not doing its job. If it does not spend the money, we will pass it on to a local authority that will.

To come back to a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), we are providing the East Midlands combined county authority with £2 billion through the transport for city regions fund, with the east midlands receiving £450 million from the local transport block. That means the east midlands will receive significantly more local transport funding per head than the England average in the coming years—£561 per person against an average of £391.

Amanda Hack: I want to reflect on those numbers. The east midlands mayoralty is not the east midlands. It covers only Derbyshire, Derby, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. How does the rest of the east midlands fare in terms of funding?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend jumps ahead of my next comment. The Department is providing all local transport authorities with a multi-year consolidated funding settlement, delivering on our commitments in the English Devolution White Paper to simplify funding. Leicestershire county council will be allocated £22.5 million in local authority bus grants over the next few years, in addition to the £8.2 million it received in 2025-26. It is then for her local authority, which I appreciate is a Reform council, to use that funding to the best effect. She touched on bus services. What I would politely say to her local authority is that it has the funding and the powers—it should get on with the job.

I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills for her comments on Aldridge station. She is a former Minister of State in the Department for Transport. Mayor Andy Street failed to use the £1.05 billion allocated to him in 2022 to fully develop designs for Aldridge station when he had the chance. This Government have allocated a record £2.4 billion in transport for city regions funding for the West Midlands combined authority.

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I will finish my point.

Mayor Richard Parker is delivering on local priorities and taking forward schemes that are good value for taxpayers and will deliver real improvements. Perhaps the right hon. Lady would like to explain, when she intervenes, why the previous mayor did not use the money allocated to complete the design work on Aldridge station. There is £3.6 million allocated from the city region sustainable transport settlement funding for development from this mayor, with a report due later this year.

Wendy Morton: Let us be absolutely clear that Mayor Andy Street allocated the money for Aldridge station. I questioned both the Transport Secretary and the Treasury about that money, and I had a reply explaining that this Labour Government had moved the money

out of the budget for Aldridge station. Had the mayor left the money in place, Aldridge station could have been funded and delivered by 2027. The only money that Mayor Parker has allocated to Aldridge is for doing some initial groundworks. The business case is already there. This is not about funding; it is about politics, I am sad to say.

Simon Lightwood: Mayor Andy Street failed to deliver a fully developed design for Aldridge station. When we promise to deliver something here, we will do it with a sound business case. [Interruption.] He did not have the designs, and he failed to deliver. There was £1.05 billion to deliver it, and he did not do that.

There is now £3.6 million, which this mayor has invested sensibly and pragmatically for a development report to do this properly, to make sure that we have value for taxpayers' money and that we deliver the best possible solution. That report is due later this year.

Wendy Morton: Can I come back on that point?

Simon Lightwood: I am going to make progress.

This Government are backing Wales, the midlands and all our regions with long-term investment, local autonomy and an integrated approach across buses, rail, roads and active travel. We are building not an isolated scheme but a coherent, people-focused system that strengthens growth, opportunity and pride in place. Together, the midlands and Wales have long shaped the nation's transport history and, with this programme, they will continue to drive national connectivity for decades to come.

2.40 pm

Wendy Morton: First of all, I thank colleagues from across the House for joining the debate this afternoon. The hon. Members for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) showed that, whether they are from the east midlands, the west midlands or Staffordshire, transport connectivity absolutely matters, and absolutely matters to our communities. That is where there is a lot of cross-Chamber, cross-party consensus.

We know why this matters, and why Aldridge train station absolutely matters. I have had no more answers from the Minister than I typically get from Ministers at the Dispatch Box. At one point, I was not sure if he was even going to mention Aldridge train station. I am glad he did, but the facts of the matter remain. I set out the case: Aldridge deserves better. Aldridge will keep asking what has happened to fully funding our train station, and I will continue to campaign and bang on about it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered transport connectivity in the Midlands and North Wales.

2.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

International Day of Education

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International Day of Education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. This Saturday, the 24th of January, will mark the eighth International Day of Education, which was established by the United Nations to highlight the importance of education for peace and development worldwide. Nobody can doubt the transformative power of education in empowering individuals, opening up life-changing opportunities, strengthening communities and creating a more peaceful world. The right to an education is enshrined in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which begins with the line:

“Everyone has the right to education.”

Today, unfortunately, there are still many millions of children globally who are not in education. There has been great progress in improving access to education across the world, and the UK has played a powerful role in achieving that progress as one of the world's most influential donors, advocates and innovators in global education. However, in recent years progress has slowed, against the backdrop of successive cuts in the education aid budget, and an increasingly dangerous world of conflict and climate change.

The UK has played a unique role in basic education. Foundational learning provides the building blocks for essential life skills, such as literacy, numeracy and personal development, but there is a serious concern that basic education will be one of the areas hardest hit by cuts in aid, because historically the UK and US Governments have been the biggest donors in that space. The Centre for Global Development has highlighted the catastrophic impact that not funding basic education would have internationally.

I urge the Minister to consider funding basic education as an area of high priority for the UK Government when global education funding is being considered. There is evidence to show how effective investing in basic education could be. New data, which was released this week by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office-funded What Works Hub for Global Education, shows that achieving universal foundational learning could increase global GDP by \$196 trillion over the next 20 years.

Just yesterday, I joined parliamentarians and campaigners to celebrate 25 years of the Send My Friend to School campaign, as well as the efforts of millions of young people to push for the right to education globally. I thank everyone involved in making that event a huge success and I particularly thank the young people for their impressive advocacy. At the event, I had the chance to speak to the former Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Parliament, Fawzia Koofi, who has dedicated her political career to defending the right to education of women and girls in Afghanistan. She told us that when her husband was imprisoned by the Taliban, she wrote letters to the group asking for his release. When she spoke to his prison guard, he said that she should count herself lucky to be able to read and write. So many of the girls that she grew up with did not continue

their education beyond grade 6, and did not learn how to read and write. For her, it was receiving a full education that gave her the opportunity to become who she is today.

Investing in education is one of the smartest long-term investments that we can make for global stability. Improvements in learning opportunities contribute directly to the achievement of sustainable development, and to the empowerment of women and girls. One additional year of education can reduce the risk of conflict by up to 20%, and there are particularly strong effects when girls and women have equal access to learning. In addition, research has shown that improvements in education have powered half of global economic growth in the past 50 years.

The United Nations set a specific strategic development goal for education, SDG 4, which aims to

“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”

by 2030, but with over 270 million children across the globe not in education, it is highly unlikely that that goal will be met. I note that the International Parliamentary Network for Education recently put out a statement expressing its solidarity and the need for global co-operation to tackle the challenges and achieve sustainable development goal 4. It is imperative that we also take urgent action to help to meet that goal. But as we speak, global education is facing a serious threat as a result of sharp cuts to the official development assistance budget. Aid to education is projected to fall by around 24%, or \$3.2 billion, globally by the end of 2026. Unless that course is reversed there will remain significant barriers to accessing education in the poorest parts of the world.

As I mentioned, according to UNESCO over 270 million children are out of school. Cuts to the educational aid budget could push a further 6 million children out of school by the end of this year. In some contexts, including in Chad and Sudan, funding for education in emergencies has already been cut by up to 90%. Such figures reflect real choices that are impacting strides that have been made in expanding access to education across the globe.

The Global Partnership for Education has been instrumental in addressing those challenges against the backdrop of aid cuts. It supports partner countries by designing and financing national education plans, strengthening systems and aligning donor and partner efforts behind one coherent reform programme. In Somalia, where girls' enrolment in secondary school is a mere 9.7% and large numbers of girls drop out due to discriminatory gender norms such as early pregnancy, early marriage and involvement in household work, GPE funds programmes to enhance the learning of Somali children in the federal member states of Galmudug and Hirshabelle, and in Mogadishu, in Banaadir. The programmes construct and rehabilitate classrooms, as well as water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

As a result of GPE's work, 400 new classrooms across 147 schools were constructed, 394 classrooms were rehabilitated and 669 were provided with new furniture, including 15 sets of desks. That supported access to education for over 33,000 out-of-school children, with girls' enrolment increasing by 59%. Between 2026 and 2030, GPE will double the co-financing that it attracts to \$10 billion, reach over 300 million more children and boost UK investment beyond what can be achieved by bilateral programmes alone.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

Yet, as aid is set to fall, payments to multilateral partners such as GPE have been delayed. The Government will soon decide whether to maintain their future financial support to GPE for this period in the coming weeks. By investing in GPE, the UK could help prepare this generation to drive prosperity in their own countries and strengthen the foundations of a safer, more stable and more liveable world.

Emergencies, and educational emergencies in particular, are another area I want to focus on. In a world that has become increasingly dangerous, education protects children from violence and exploitation, lowers long-term humanitarian and recovery costs, and helps to mitigate conflict and displacement pressures. Financing education in emergencies supports the UK's priorities on peace and security, migration, climate resilience, and violence against women and girls. Yet, with the risk of further cuts to the education aid budget, the climate crisis and conflicts threaten to destroy any chances of children getting access to an education.

Globally, 234 million crisis-affected children currently require educational support—an increase of 10 million in the last two years. Children in Africa and the middle east face the largest impact, with millions of them looking at disruption or cancellation of their education. The climate crisis is an underlying cause of that. As climate emergencies become more prevalent, children and families are being displaced from their homes and forced to take shelter elsewhere. When international aid comes in, education is often deprioritised—despite being a lifeline for children in crisis.

That means that classrooms are left without teachers, learning materials and safe spaces, and a generation of children risk losing not just months but years of education at the very moment when stability and hope matter most. According to UNICEF, nearly 40 million children a year have their education interrupted by disasters and disease outbreaks following extreme weather events. Not only are children losing access to drinking water, healthcare and food, but their education is being forgotten and they are left vulnerable to violence and despair.

Furthermore, in places like Sudan, which is experiencing the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crisis since records began, just shy of 12 million people are displaced internally or have fled to neighbouring countries. The civil war is leaving many children traumatised, uprooted from their communities and cut off from education and basic protection. This increases their risk of exploitation, early marriage and long-term poverty, making it harder for the country to rebuild peace and stability for the future.

Education Cannot Wait is a global fund dedicated to financing education in the world's most severe humanitarian crises, working in places such as Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and Nigeria. It invests in safe learning spaces, sustaining minimum education pathways and acting as a frontline protection measure for violence against women and girls. In South Sudan, Education Cannot Wait worked with the Minister of general education to expand equitable access to education and reduce the number of out-of-school children. Through its multi-year resilience programme, more than 190,000 learners—46% of them girls—have gained access to formal and alternative education systems such as accelerated learning programmes.

ECW funding provides tailored support to vulnerable girls, supports the distribution of dignity kits, strengthens school-based child protection systems and expands safe learning spaces where girls feel protected and welcomed. However, we are in a situation where there have been minimal funding commitments by the Government for the upcoming replenishment of both GPE and ECW.

According to UNICEF, planned funding cuts for education in emergencies will mean that crisis-hit countries in Africa and the middle east will lose over 10% of their national education budget. This will also impact teacher development and data systems and will have a lasting impact on education due to a loss of skilled educators and gaps in data, making a recovery less likely even if funding returns in future. That is why it is crucial that the Government provide adequate funding for education aid and support for organisations, such as Education Cannot Wait, that are on the frontlines delivering education in emergencies.

I have a few questions for the Minister. The first relates to the Government's commitments to education in emergencies. Does he agree that it is vital that as part of our humanitarian assistance we support the provision of education in areas of conflict and climate emergencies? When countries emerge from conflict and climate emergencies they need help to get themselves re-established, so can the Minister tell me whether the Government intend to support countries to transition from the emergency education provision to national education systems, particularly if support mechanisms such as the Global Partnership for Education are reduced? Will the Government ensure that the ODA budget will be focused on foundational learning where every lesson has the most transformative impact on a child's life chances? Will education feature in the Future of Development conference being hosted by the UK in May?

The UK has always understood the importance of education. We championed girls' education before others. We fought for foundational learning when the world's attention risked drifting elsewhere, and we played a defining role in the creation of the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait, which are some of the most effective engines for transforming education systems around the world. With a smaller aid budget it is essential that the UK makes its money go further. As we mark the UN International Day of Education, let us celebrate the huge strides we have made in progressing access to education across the globe, but also be honest about the scale of the challenge that we face.

We find ourselves at a crossroads: the Government can choose to continue their efforts in fighting for education for those who need it most, or they can abandon decades of hard work on the international stage. Let us step forward once again and work together to invest in teachers, systems and safe and inclusive classrooms. Let us ensure that every child can learn and thrive, because when we invest in education we build not just schools but futures.

3.15 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (*Bambos Charalambous*) for his excellent

speech and for the excellent event he hosted this week with Send My Friend to School. It was very moving to see so many young people and children coming to Parliament to tell us to speak up for their values and their belief in global education.

Prior to entering this place, I had the privilege of spending a few years as a teacher at a school in Rwanda, where I was doing my PhD research. It was a world away from what we know as a school. I had a chalkboard at the front and a few pieces of chalk, and the children had notebooks and pens—those were about the only resources we had to deliver learning. To this day, it always warms my heart when they reach out to me on social media to let me know how they are doing. Most of them are in their mid-20s, successful and thriving in the world.

I want to talk briefly about one of the young men who attended that school. He was a genocide orphan who, after the genocide, found himself living at the rubbish dump in Kigali in the shell of a burned-out car. He would go out each day with other children and pick through the dump for food to survive. After a few years of that, an American woman who was in the area got out of her car one day to give these street children—they are called *mayibobo*, which means children of the street—some bread rolls. This young man went up to her and said, “Please, I would like to go to school.” She felt moved, so she put him in the back of her taxi, took him to a local family she trusted, and paid them to put him through school.

A few years later, another child at the young man’s school was being bullied because he was poor—he was scruffy and did not have the school supplies. Remembering his experience as a street child, the young man formed a little charitable group in the school. They clubbed together to secretly put school supplies on the student’s bed to help him through school. From that act, they set up a charity at their school, which now has chapters across the entire country, and also in North America and Europe. It is a youth-led charity and it inspires young people to do good. The young man went on to get a scholarship to Harvard University. He did not mention his background because he wanted to have it on merit. Today, he continues to do incredible work. That story illustrates to me not only the incredible success, but how many children like him remain at the rubbish dump and are not given those opportunities.

Global education is facing cuts of £3.2 billion by the end of 2026. That is severe, and the impact will be felt by an entire generation of children around the world. That amount sadly includes cuts to UK aid, although I should say that the UK cannot and should not be expected to go it alone on global education. There are many other things that we need to do. For example, 34 countries in Africa spend more on debt interest every year than they spend on education and health. That is a disgrace. This Parliament could do something by legislating to change that reality, and I hope that we do. We need to do more to encourage other countries that, frankly, could give more and do not to step up.

It is in our national interest to build strong partnerships. I have worked in international development and met many Ministers in other countries, and I noticed how often they were educated in the UK, and how often they previously worked at a university. Unlike in this place,

where we tend to appoint Ministers who are not necessarily specialists in their field, it is generally the case in the global south that Ministers come through the academic ranks and are a specialist in their area. They often have views that were shaped by their time studying at a UK university, or by their relationship to one, which is incredibly important. Other institutions that we should be greatly proud of include the Voluntary Service Overseas, which does important work in education around the world, and the British Council. They are really important parts of UK soft power.

As the world is changing and becoming more volatile, and as Britain’s place in it is shrinking, there are some big players in the world today who do not share our democratic values or our belief in human rights, and who are positioning themselves to sweep up influence across the global south. In that context, we really need to think, as they often do, of a 100-year plan, and what it would look like to shape the world in our image, have people learning our language and have more people feeling a great affinity with this country. That is another important role we can play by investing in education.

I am aware that other Members wish to speak, so I will conclude by appealing for education to be a bigger part of UK thinking about development. The higher education partnerships are so crucial, but so are the school-to-school partnerships and the idea of making development education a part of our national curriculum. It was heartwarming, at my hon. Friend’s event this week, to see children who were globally aware citizens who wanted to connect with children in other parts of the world and to work together to shape a better world. They had some strong messages for us, and we need to listen to them.

3.21 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), who secured this timely debate to coincide with the International Day of Education.

Over my 25 years as a Member of this House, I have been extremely fortunate to travel to all parts of our planet, whether as part of the Foreign Affairs Committee, on which I served for 15 years; the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which does excellent work, as we all know; the Inter-Parliamentary Union; the NATO Parliamentary Assembly; the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly; or, most especially, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which I served as a governor for nine years, doing work in countries around the world. I have also taken part, over the years, in various missions with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to countries including Uganda and the British Indian Ocean Territory. I will say a bit more about the Chagos islands later.

Through my travels I have seen at first hand the impact of British education, cultural exchange and institutional engagement around the world. I felt it right to participate in this debate because I was due to respond to it on behalf of His Majesty’s Opposition as a shadow Minister. Although that is no longer the case, I am sure that the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) will do justice to the role this afternoon, and I wish him well in his endeavours.

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

Education has the ability to transform lives and, ultimately, it shapes the world in which Britain must operate. For generations, this country has been regarded as the workshop for global leaders, and the world's elites have wanted to send their children to be educated here in the United Kingdom. That includes post-colonial leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, Robert Menzies and Mahatma Gandhi, and contemporary leaders such as the great Tony Abbott and Shinzo Abe. The list goes on—it is very extensive—and we should take great pride in the fact that so many distinguished figures from around the world choose to send their children and families to be educated here in the British Isles.

It is clear that our schools, universities and language, and our great British culture, have projected British influence further than any number of tanks or treaties ever could have done. That influence has been built deliberately through institutions and scholarships that are respected across the globe, including the Rhodes scholarship, the Chevening programme, the work of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the generations of Commonwealth scholars who have gone on to become leaders in politics, business, science and civil society. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth, I have seen how thriving these networks of influence truly are.

However, I am afraid that the Commonwealth itself, and bodies such as the Commonwealth of Learning, have been understood by successive Governments as almost like a hangover of colonial times—something from the past that should belong in history. That attitude is wrong and needs to change. We should be proud of what Britain has achieved over the centuries and we should continue those traditions today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing the debate—I am sorry that I could not have been here earlier; I was in the Chamber.

I know the focus of the debate is on what Britain does when it comes education, but the other side of it is that many churches across all of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, including in my constituency, have built schools and universities. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the good work done by the churches in my constituency? The Elim church has built a hospital, a health centre, a primary school and a secondary school, and it does work on job training for farming as well. All these things are done by people from Newtownards going to Malawi, to Swaziland and to Zimbabwe. That is an example of what can happen if we all look at some of the good things that are happening.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The debate is about the International Day of Education.

Andrew Rosindell: That was a fine intervention and I entirely endorse everything the hon. Gentleman said. One of the reasons Britain has had so much outreach around the world is because of our Christian foundations. It is so important to uphold and cherish our Christian heritage. Of course, Christian missionaries have travelled the world and established schools, hospitals, universities and churches, helping countries far and wide and people

of all religions. I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman's examples from his constituency; my constituency also has many churches that do excellent work and support causes around the world. I thank him for raising that point.

The Commonwealth is, I believe, a tangible force for good—I am sure we can all agree with that—and it should be central to any Government's foreign policy. A voluntary association bound by shared language, legal traditions and educational standards embodies the very arguments that we are debating here in Parliament this afternoon. Above all, it provides Britain with a unique global reach that no other country enjoys. There are Commonwealth countries in every part of the world, including, let us not forget, our cherished overseas territories and Crown dependencies, such as the British Indian Ocean Territory, which should remain a British territory.

The Commonwealth has presented our great nation with an inheritance that is the envy of the world. But, obviously, soft power works only when it also serves the national interest. I am afraid that is where this debate has to be honest. Too often, international education policy has drifted away from British priorities and towards fashionable global causes, administered by bloated bureaucracies with little regard for value for money or outcomes. My new party, Reform UK, believes in engagement with the world, but on Britain's terms, not at our expense.

Last month, in my previous role as shadow Minister, I met with the British Council. It does invaluable work—I place that clearly on the record—but what I heard in that meeting should concern the House. Funding from the Foreign Office has still not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The British Council is being forced to consider the closure of up to 35 country offices, with 10 having already been lost during covid. Just £20 million would stabilise the British Council network, yet at the same time, this Government appear perfectly relaxed writing cheques running into the tens of billions for the handover of a British territory, thereby betraying British people, based on questionable interpretations of international obligations that deliver nothing tangible for the British taxpayer.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Member to stick to the motion.

Sam Rushworth: While the hon. Member is on that point, we are all aware of a letter that he wrote in 2020, in which he urged President Elect Joe Biden to do exactly what the Government are doing. Will the hon. Member say why his opinion has changed on the matter?

Andrew Rosindell: I am so pleased that the hon. Member has raised that point. With your permission, Ms Vaz, I will answer it.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I have been advised that we have to stick to the motion, which is about the International Day of Education.

Andrew Rosindell: I will certainly do so. To say one brief thing to the hon. Member, the letter was written to reflect the consensus of an all-party parliamentary group that I happened to be the chair of. The letter did not necessarily reflect my opinions on everything. Self-determination should always determine decisions.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. Could the hon. Member address the Chair, please?

Andrew Rosindell: I will go back to the point. We are told that there is no money for the British Council, yet somehow we find the cash for all sorts of other things: for housing the people who are coming to this country illegally; for the failing digital identification experiment; and for a long list of projects that do nothing to strengthen Britain's position in the world or to promote education.

I am sure we will shortly hear warm words from the Minister about the importance of international education, and rightly so, but those words will ring hollow when the Government are presiding over an erosion of Britain's ability to support education, influence and cultural engagement across the globe. What makes matters worse is that the cuts are focused on British Council offices in developed countries—the countries that need our support more than most. These are places where English teaching may not be the primary objective, but where influence, networks, science, culture and diplomacy absolutely are.

The British Council is certainly not just an English teaching charity. Its stated aims are to foster cultural, scientific, technological and educational co-operation with the United Kingdom. Undermining that mission weakens Britain. However, Reform UK is not calling for a blank cheque—far from it. If Britain is to help educate the world, that education must champion the United Kingdom and its values, free speech, our model of parliamentary Government and the rule of law. It must never put Britain second.

We should not be funding programmes to apologise for our history, undermine our institutions, or promote ideologies fundamentally hostile to our way of life. Nor should international education be used as a back door for uncontrolled migration or permanent settlement. Students should come to Britain to learn, and then return home as ambassadors for this country and assets to their peers. They should certainly not be numbers that disappear into a broken system that is already overstretched.

Ahead of the International Day of Education, I say that, yes, education changes lives, but it also helps to shape geopolitics. If we hollow out our soft power while pouring money into symbolic global gestures, we will wake up—as we have for some time—poorer, weaker and less respected. Reform UK believes that Britain should engage with all nations of the world and treat all countries with respect, working with all nationalities and peoples for the best interests of humanity, but always in Britain's national interest. Our educational institutions and global networks remain world class—dare I say, the best—but the question is whether the Government are willing to end the bipartisan policy of managed decline and once again put British cultural influence back on the map.

3.35 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you chairship, Ms Vaz. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this debate to mark the International Day of Education this Saturday. I pay tribute to our hard-working teachers and our schools in the UK, especially in my constituency.

This should be more than a moment of reflection; it must be a call to action. Education is a moral good, but it is also one of our most effective tools to prevent poverty, conflict and instability. When children are pushed out of classrooms by war, displacement or climate disaster, the consequences are long lasting. The scale of the crisis is severe: worldwide, more than 272 million children and young people are out of school and that figure is projected to rise to 278 million due to global aid cuts.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point about the number of children who are outside of the classroom globally and the impact that has, but it also happens in our own country. I recently visited the Gillford Centre pupil referral unit in my constituency. It does phenomenal work and, unlike other schools, the hallmark of its success is pupils leaving and going back into mainstream education. Does the hon. Lady agree that pupil referral units like the Gillford Centre make a huge contribution to closing the opportunity gap that we know exists abroad and at home?

Monica Harding: I agree 100%, and let us not forget that children are left behind in our country too. In my Esher and Walton constituency, we found that 1,800 children were missing school because of special educational needs and disabilities. Pupil referral units do brilliant work in bringing children back into mainstream education, which is good for our economy and for growth.

As I said, children around the world are missing education; the global aid cuts will increase that number and that rise will be concentrated in humanitarian hotspots. Education systems are being put under strain by the combined impact of conflict, climate shocks and humanitarian collapse. Last year alone, 242 million students in 85 countries saw their schooling disrupted by climate events.

Education is not a luxury; it underpins development, public health, gender equality and long-term stability, yet the global commitment is weakening just as pressures on education systems intensify. International education funding is projected to fall by \$3.2 billion dollars this year—a 24% cut—placing an additional 5.7 million children at risk of dropping out of school. Cuts to the United States Agency for International Development alone are expected to push 23 million children out of education in the years ahead.

Girls will be hardest hit, with gender-focused education aid projected to fall by 28% this year, despite clear evidence that educating girls delivers some of the highest returns of any development investment. At the same time, primary education funding faces a 34% cut, with severe long-term consequences for literacy, numeracy and economic growth. Against that backdrop, the Government's decision to cut the aid budget to the lowest level this century will only deepen the global education crisis, undermining long-term stability, prosperity and the UK's influence abroad.

With aid projected to fall to 0.3% of national income by 2027, education funding is already being squeezed, and overseas education spending is set to drop by 40% this year alone. At the same time, one fifth of the aid budget is now spent on in-country refugee costs, crowding out overseas investment—precisely the spending that helps prevent instability and forced displacement in the first place.

[*Monica Harding*]

Britain has not always stood on the sidelines. For many years, the UK was a leading global voice on education—particularly girls' education—backing that leadership with sustained multilateral investment. Between 2015 and 2020 alone, UK aid helped more than 15 million children attend school worldwide.

I will now illustrate the scale of the crisis by giving examples from some of the worst-affected areas globally. Nowhere is the global collapse in education more stark than in Afghanistan, where more than 2 million girls are formally banned from secondary and higher education, making it the only country in the world to exclude girls from school legally. Meanwhile, learning outcomes for boys in the country deteriorate amid systemic breakdown. The collapse in education in Afghanistan has been worsened by the collapse of international aid: the United States has effectively disengaged from Afghanistan, while British aid to the country has fallen by nearly half over the past five years.

In the Gaza strip, over 650,000 children—almost the entire school-age population—have received little or no formal education for years, with around 97% of schools in the region having been damaged or destroyed. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which has long been the backbone of education provision for Palestinian refugee children, educated over half a million children in the Gaza strip and the west bank. However, it is now operating under severe legal and operational constraints imposed by the Israeli Government, including bans in east Jerusalem, the demolition of facilities, and restrictions on staff, utilities and partner NGOs.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where more than 7 million children are already out of school due to conflict and displacement, a flagship education programme for girls that was previously supported by British aid is set to close this year. That will affect 170,000 children in just one region, the vast majority of whom are girls, and is a direct consequence of our aid cuts.

In fragile and conflict-affected states, education is not only about future opportunity; it also provides safety, routine and dignity right now. Schools often deliver clean water, meals, sanitation and access to child protection services. Yet globally, school feeding programmes face cuts of over 50%, while education in emergencies has been reduced by 24%, with countries such as Haiti, Somalia and the Central African Republic losing aid that is equivalent to more than 10% of their public education budget.

It should not be, and does not have to be, this way. The Liberal Democrats believe that education must be a protected priority within the aid budget and not a discretionary extra. However, that requires reversing the aid cuts and setting out a clear path back to meeting the legally enshrined target of spending 0.7% of national income on aid. I respectfully point out to the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) that although I agree with his words about the British Council and the potential cuts to its budget, and about the influence of British education, it is impossible to see how the British Council could be protected under the cuts that his party is proposing, whereby just 0.1% of GNI would be spent on ODA.

The International Day of Education is a reminder that behind every statistic in this area is a child whose future depends on political choices. If we are serious about reducing poverty, empowering women and building stability—which in turn will benefit the UK by providing economic trading opportunities in global markets, less compelling reasons for people to migrate to these shores, and more global stability and security for our citizens—education must move from the margins to the centre of our international priorities.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): We now come to the winding-up speeches. The Front Benchers have 10 minutes each.

3.43 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz, and I thank the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this debate.

What is education for? It is about so much more than remembering facts to pass exams. It is about lighting a spark in our children, and fostering their creative spirit and critical thinking to ensure that every child grows up with the life skills, the confidence and the resilience they need to be happy, healthy and successful adults, however that looks for each individual. In my view, that is every bit as important as academic achievement. In line with the theme of this year's International Day of Education—the power of youth in co-creating education—we should all seek to create an educational environment that allows children the world over to learn and to ignite that spark.

The Liberal Democrats believe that education is the best investment that we can make in our children's potential and our country's future—indeed, every country's future. It is the root of everything that follows in adult life: the potential for better health; the ability to work and earn a living; and the skills that enable people to participate in work, sport, craft, music and all the other things that enrich a human life. As the International Day of Education celebrates, education also has a significant role to play in enabling peace and development. The United Nations sustainable development goal 4 recognises education as a foundation for “escaping poverty” and for fostering peaceful, healthy societies.

When a girl goes to school, she is more likely not only to achieve higher educational outcomes—that much seems obvious—but to earn more and contribute to economic growth, and to participate in decision making in her community and country. She will be healthier, as will her children. She is less likely to be subject to child marriage, and to experience harmful practices and unwanted pregnancy.

Since the sustainable development goals were set in 2015, girls' enrolment has increased by more than 50 million globally, with 5 million more girls annually completing each level of education up to upper secondary, but still more than 100 million girls of school age across the world are not in formal education today. One of the worst examples, as other Members have mentioned, is Afghanistan, where over 2.2 million girls are officially barred from attending school. Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls and women are prohibited from accessing secondary and higher education. As families lose hope for their daughters' futures, there has

been a rise in forced and child marriages. Girls are kept hidden and are silenced. The Liberal Democrats want to see a foreign policy agenda with gender equality at its heart. The lives of women and girls must not be ignored in favour of trade or regional alliances, and we call on the Government to immediately restore full funding to educational programmes that support women and girls.

At this very difficult time, I am sure that I am not alone in being deeply troubled by the lack of visibility on the world stage of women who are helping to build peace and reconciliation in various conflict zones. As President Trump builds his so-called board of peace, it looks like there will be more male billionaires represented than women. Where are the women who will speak up for their local communities and civil society, and have a deep and vested interest in securing peace and stability for their children's future?

Evidence shows that women's participation in peace agreements increases the probability of them lasting at least two years by 20%, and lasting 15 years by 35%, yet in a UN study, decision making was left to a small group of male leaders in 15 of the 16 national dialogues examined. We see this every day on our TV screens, and I suggest that it starts with education. If we do not give girls the tools and knowledge to grow up to be part of that conversation, we embed that dangerous imbalance and perpetuate in boys the idea that theirs are the only voices that matter.

Looking globally, perhaps the lesser-told story is that an almost equal number of boys are out of school worldwide, and the biggest disparity is poverty related. In the poorest countries, 36% of students are out of school, compared with 3% in the richest countries, and almost three quarters of the global out-of-school population is in central and southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The astonishing and moving example recounted by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) shows how education can transform not only lives, but communities and countries.

The UK has an important role to play in reducing this stark international educational inequality. As proud internationalists, the Liberal Democrats believe that our country thrives when we are open and outward looking, and that applies so much to education. The Liberal Democrats value the UK's central role in founding UNESCO, and we remain steadfast in supporting its mission to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture. Most important, we want to restore the UK's reputation as an international development superpower, by restoring spending to 0.7% of national income and re-establishing an international development Department. We would also recognise the role of education as a force for good, by committing to spend 15% of ODA on education in the world's most vulnerable areas.

We should focus not just on what the UK can provide to the world on education, but on what we can learn from the world to improve our own system. The part of our education system that is in the worst shape is the way we educate children who have additional needs and disabilities. Broken by the previous Conservative Government, the SEND system is failing those children every single day. Years of cuts to school and council budgets have left parents struggling to secure the support their children need, and the system has become intrinsically adversarial, pitting councils and parents against each

other in a situation that is not fair to either of them. It urgently needs reform. Although it is welcome that the Government recognise that, it is incredibly important that they get it right.

I urge the Government to look overseas for inspiration. On a recent trip to Ontario as part of the Education Committee's inquiry into SEND, we saw a significant focus on communication right from kindergarten. Parents there do not have to fight for support because dialogue works, families are listened to, and behaviour is seen as a form of communication. In Ontario, they understand that we must listen to what our SEND children are trying to tell us and focus on inclusion rather than exclusion. Their approach is worlds away from our combative system. I therefore hope that when the Government come forward with their schools White Paper and set out SEND reform, they will draw on the success stories of SEND systems overseas, such as Ontario's, to create a system that truly places children, young people, families and carers at its core.

Our education system should also draw on world-class, internationally recognised programmes that are used around the world, such as the international baccalaureate diploma programme. The IB sets a global benchmark for education and is trusted by universities, employers and educators worldwide. The Government's recent decision to slash the large programme uplift funding, which allows state schools to provide the IB, simply makes no sense. The money saved is a drop in the ocean in the overall Department for Education budget, but by stripping that funding away, the Government are stealing opportunity and further entrenching the divide between our state and private schools. No Government who want to truly close the attainment gap would pursue that policy. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to reverse the cuts to the large programme uplift and ensure that any school wishing to deliver the IB diploma has the funding to do so.

Zooming out to look at our education system more broadly, it is fair to say that, like the rest of the world, we also suffer from persistent levels of educational inequality. Far too many children are leaving school without the skills they need to succeed. The disadvantage gap we see when children walk through the school door on day one grows throughout the education years and is wider at age 16 than it is at age five, according to research from the Education Policy Institute. It is down to us to fix this stubborn inequality. The Institute for Fiscal Studies notes that the gap in GCSE attainment between rich and poor households in this country has remained largely constant for the past 20 years.

To address the failings in our education system that are leading to inequality, the Liberal Democrats call on the Government to take steps including a tutoring guarantee for every disadvantaged pupil who needs extra support, high-quality early years education to help to close the attainment gap by giving disadvantaged children aged three and four an extra five free hours a week, and tripling the early years pupil premium to £1,000 a year.

We want a Government who fulfil their role in helping to reverse the worrying trends in global educational inequality, especially when it comes to women and girls, who look overseas at what the world can do for our own education system, and who properly address the educational

[Caroline Voaden]

inequalities that persist here in the UK. We must ensure that every child's education provides the tools they need to thrive in every aspect of their life.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson, Lincoln Jopp—congratulations on your new post.

3.53 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Thank you for that welcome, Ms Vaz. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), who is also the chair of the APPG on global education, on securing this debate and on his long-standing interest in this matter. I also thank the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) for his gracious words of welcome, particularly because he was due to be standing at this Dispatch Box. When I saw him walk into Westminster Hall, I have to admit that my blood ran slightly cold, worrying that perhaps our shared team had prepared the same speech for us both to give—I should have known better.

We on this side of the House recognise the huge benefits that education brings to supporting aspiration and helping to fulfil potential. Whether at home or abroad, we know that education lays the foundation for young people to build better futures. Here in England, the last Conservative Government raised standards in our schools and lifted the UK's standing in international league tables for literacy to first in the western world, and fourth in the world. We also increased the number of full-time teachers by around 27,000, which is about 2,000 a year on average—a higher annual rate of growth than the 6,500 over five years promised by the current Government.

Internationally, we played our part in supporting initiatives to lift people out of poverty. With the United Nations International Day of Education approaching on 24 January, this is an opportune moment to reflect on the links between education and economic development, and the role that the UK can play. Members will be aware of the UN's sustainable development goal 4, which focuses on quality education to

“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

The previous Government focused effort and resources on this area, including expanding and improving access to education, especially for women and girls, who face particular barriers to securing a meaningful education and childhood in parts of the world. This led to 19.8 million children, including 10 million girls, being supported with a decent education since 2015. That made a profound difference to those lives.

The international women and girls strategy launched in 2023 had a strong focus on education. It highlighted the wider societal benefits of improved education for women and girls in developing countries, including that

“A child whose mother can read is 50% more likely to live beyond the age of five”,

is more likely to be immunised, and is about “twice as likely to attend school.”

Girls benefiting from higher levels of education are also less likely to be affected by violence from a partner, less likely to marry as a child and more likely to find employment and start businesses. One of the great untapped potentials in developing countries is the enterprise and entrepreneurial spirit of women. Better education can help to unleash that potential. That is something that Members in all parts of the House can agree on.

That strategy also focused on the three Es of educating girls, empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights, and ending gender based violence. But education is the essential first step. I ask the Minister, are the Government committed to implementing that strategy? With international development budgets understandably being reduced to support efforts to bolster our defences and national security, can the Minister update the House on the areas where the Government intend to focus resources for the rest of the decade?

My team and I had prepared a rather different speech, but I have been very struck by the fact that four Members have mentioned Afghanistan. If the Chamber will indulge me, I, like the sponsor of this debate, would like to understand from the Minister what the Government are doing in terms of education in Syria, Iran, Gaza and the west bank and Sudan, but I want to tell a rather different story about international education.

It is 2009 and we are in Basharan in the Helmand river valley of Afghanistan. There is a small village in Basharan with a defunct school. A young company commander by the name of Sean Birchall takes over that area and is determined that the school should open for boys and girls. He spends vast amounts of time going backwards and forwards, at great risk, to Lashkar Gah to try to get the education department there to provide teachers and school equipment, such as books and chairs. Sean was killed by a bomb, leaving a widow and an 18-month-old son, Charlie. Nevertheless, the men and women in his company of Welsh Guards continued his extraordinary work and the school got up and running.

Fast forward to April the next year and I am the commanding officer of the Lashkar Gah battlegroup. We have Basharan in our patch, and very near one of the routes into Basharan was an impassable road—the Taliban had put a tax office on it and seeded it with a number of improvised explosive devices. I was given the mission to clear the road. I discussed it with the company commander and said, “It looks to me like we now need to start at one end and go to the other, or start at the other end and go to the other.” He said, “Let me have a think.” Then he said, “Right. I want to start in the middle and clear out in two directions.” I said, “Right, okay.” Taking the Taliban tax office would send a signal to the area that there was greater control.

This involved a lot of moving people and equipment around, which alerted the locals that it was happening. I was at the checkpoint nearest to where we were going to start the operation the next day, and a young lance corporal called Cammy sent a message saying, “Commanding officer to the front gate,” so I went there. My approach to counter-insurgency, which I told the battalion, was: “We need to take risks to be safer.” It is one of the paradoxes of counter-insurgency; it is incredibly dangerous but, nevertheless, it can bear results.

Cammy introduced me to a fellow with a wooden leg—a local—who had come to the gate and asked what was going on. Cammy said—he did not ask me—“I’m going to tell him the plan for tomorrow,” and I said, “Crack on.” So he told him the plan: that we were going to go in the next day and take down the tax office, and that we were going to clear the bombs but knew it was very dangerous indeed.

The man, who was known as the Muj—mujaheddin—said, “Well, I’m going to come with you tomorrow at dawn and I’m going to show you where the bombs are.” I asked him, “Why are you going to do that? It’s incredibly risky.” And he said, “I will show you where the bombs are so that you can clear them, so that you can open the road and my daughter can go to Basharan school.”

We all had a fitful night’s sleep, and, good as gold, the next day, at dawn, he turned up and we gave him a can of yellow spray-paint, and he hopscotched his way around a high-density minefield and sprayed paint on where the bombs were. It is so rare for the good that we enable off the security line of operations—namely education—to play so directly into local consent, in order to advance the cause and British interests.

Under the UK aid flag, our support for education should be a sign of hope and freedom for those who receive it. We have had strong successes in recent years in delivering quality education for those who need it across the world, providing new opportunities for millions. Along with our key partners, the UK should continue to play a leading role, exercising our resources, leverage and expertise to improve educational outcomes and lift millions, globally, out of poverty and into a better future.

4.2 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this debate ahead of the UN’s International Day of Education. It is a topic close to my heart, as the son of a primary school teacher and a youth worker, and having engaged in a number of educational initiatives myself over many years, including teaching English one summer in Ukraine, which I will come back to. I thank hon. Members for their sincere and passionate contributions on this crucial issue.

Of course, education is also important to us all in our own constituencies. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), spoke of a number of the issues around education in the UK. While I am, of course, hugely proud of schools and educational institutions in my own communities in Cardiff South and Penarth, and of the investment from the Welsh Labour Government into new schools and a new further education college there—and proud of many other aspects—we are largely talking today about international efforts on education.

Such efforts include the very powerful examples that the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) just raised. I visited Afghanistan at the very same time that he was serving gallantly there—I thank him for his service at that time—because, under the last Labour Government, I served as an adviser in the former Department for International Development and worked

on Afghanistan policy. Indeed, I worked on many of those issues, including the ways that we tried to support girls’ education in Afghanistan in particular back then, and I have been to many of the places that the hon. Gentleman described.

I also thought about that context today, not only for the people of Afghanistan, tragically, and particularly those young girls, but for the young people I engaged with just last week, in a live video conference linking up Stratford Manor primary school in east London with a school in Kyiv. That was part of the school twinning programme under the 100-year partnership, which is now reaching up to 300 schools. It was really powerful to speak to those young children live on camera with the children in London. They told us about the massive bombardment they had faced the night before in and around their schools and homes in Kyiv, thanks to Russia’s barbarism. They were lucky to be able to join us at that moment because most of the time they have no electricity or heating at their school. The stark challenges faced around the world by children who deserve education are very clear to me, whether that is in Gaza, Sudan or many of the other locations that have been mentioned.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: I will make some progress, then potentially take some interventions later.

I previously worked in the international development sector for a Christian international development charity, World Vision, and for Oxfam, and have engaged with many educational programmes around the world. I have seen the real difference made by not only UK assistance, but international organisations and the United Nations, and the excellent charities that we have here in this country.

Many Members reflected on the important work of the British Council and our scholarship programmes. I have done a lot of work with Chevening scholars and Marshall scholars, among others, as well as Commonwealth scholars, of course. I am really proud that this Government have taken us back into the Erasmus+ programme and its opportunities for international exchange and engagement. It is crucial for young people in Britain, but also for those long-standing partnerships that make us strong and understood, and speak to our values in the world.

As advocates for global education, the Members present know all too well that the system is in serious crisis. UNESCO estimates that every \$1 invested in education and youth skills in developing countries generates \$10 to \$15 in economic growth. Education has also been central to reducing inequality and empowering women and girls. We know its impact, yet 272 million children are out of school globally and 70% of children in lower-middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a basic text by 10. That figure rises to 90% in sub-Saharan Africa. That has to change.

With better research and evidence on what works, a range of different interventions and partners and countries working together, we can make a difference, particularly through taking on board new technologies and new ways of accessing the curriculum and learning. We are part of that effort, building modern and respectful partnerships, as well as shifting from being a direct donor in many circumstances to acting as an investor and an adviser and convenor.

[*Stephen Doughty*]

We will always retain our focus on reaching the most marginalised children who need and deserve quality education. For example, in Sierra Leone, we are working with the Government to build gender-based violence prevention and response, especially with regard to children with disabilities who face gender-based violence. We are helping partner Governments to finance and manage their own education systems more effectively, and we are using world-class evidence to improve teaching in the classroom to ensure that children are learning.

Our people and our expertise and the great strength we have in education in this country means that we are trusted advisers to partner Governments. We have funded pioneering research, particularly on the issue of foundational learning referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green and many others. We are a founding partner of the global Coalition for Foundational Learning, working closely with UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, the Gates Foundation and other Governments. We are a founding member of the Global Partnership for Education. We were at the forefront of setting up Education Cannot Wait, which has done important work. We are continuing to deliver through a range of multilateral investments.

We have had to take tough decisions, which have been referenced by a number of Members. We took the tough decision to reduce our official development assistance spending to 0.3% of GNI by 2027 so that we could respond to pressing security challenges and geopolitical circumstances with which Members are only too familiar. With less funding, we need to do things differently. We have to focus on the greatest impact and we need to target funding on the people who need it the most.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Stephen Doughty: I will not, if that is okay.

We are focusing on five areas: first, improving learning outcomes for all children, particularly targeting girls and the most disadvantaged; secondly, helping partner Governments to strengthen their education systems; thirdly, increasing the scale and sources of financing, so that Governments can access financing to fund education reforms; fourthly, safeguarding education in emergencies and protracted crises, including those affected by conflict and climate change; and finally, driving the reform of multilateral education organisations. I will say a little more about that conflict work in a moment.

We are leading on our own strategy. On 20 January, the Government announced our new international education strategy, which builds on our strong leadership, skills and expertise. Education already contributes more than £32 billion a year to the UK economy. Our strategy sets out a plan to increase that to £40 billion by 2030, generating jobs and skills here in the UK as well. We have expertise, leadership and commitment. I think Members understand that we are in a different circumstance with regard to the funding, but we will continue to remain focused on these issues.

In my last few minutes, I want to turn to some of the points that hon. Members raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green and many others asked about work in emergencies and protracted crises. We recognise that that is a huge challenge, and of

course we are continuing to focus on it. We have committed a further £10 million for strategic partnerships on education in emergencies. We are of course the largest bilateral donor to the Global Partnership for Education, £5.6 million of which is earmarked for education and psychosocial support in Gaza and the west bank.

The situation in Afghanistan is of course absolutely tragic, but even there we continue to support the delivery of education through UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee and other partners, including the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund. We are continuing to try to work in those incredibly difficult circumstances, which are a tragedy for girls, in particular.

My hon. Friend raised foundational learning and asked about the Future of Development conference in May this year. The agenda is still being finalised for that, but we will update him and the House in due course. We are of course looking at new ways to generate resource in straitened circumstances. For example, our support for the International Finance Facility for Education has already unlocked \$1 billion in additional education finance from multilateral development banks. That is very good value for money for the UK taxpayer, because \$1 of cash invested there generally leverages in \$7 of additional concessional finance.

I absolutely assure Members that we will continue to stay focused on the education of girls and those who are most marginalised and least likely to go to school. I agree that the British Council is an important partner, and it will of course help to deliver the international education strategy. I visited the British Council team in Kyiv—tragically, their offices were hit by one of the Russian strikes. Our funding to the British Council is still under discussion.

Of course, that international commitment is matched by our commitment to young people in this country. I mentioned the investment that we are putting in and the Government's focus on this issue. It is not just about schools, in terms of teaching, facilities and curricula; it is also about ensuring that young people are in the best place to learn. That is why we have put 750 primary breakfast clubs in place and extended free school meals to half a million more children. I am incredibly proud of that work, which draws on the lessons we have learned from Wales.

We are proud of what we are doing on education in this country and internationally. These are changed financial circumstances, but we will continue to focus resource where we think it makes the biggest difference for the most marginalised communities, and we will leverage in support from other donors. I thank all Members for the sincerity of the points that they made today.

4.12 pm

Bambos Charalambous: I thank all Members who contributed to this wide-ranging debate. We have had lots of incredible insights into what education means, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), who talked about the young man who lived at a rubbish tip in Kigali and now has a Harvard scholarship. That is an incredible story. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) spoke movingly about his personal experience in Afghanistan. It shows how much people value education, no matter where they are from, and how much of a difference it makes to parents, as well as to children.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) said that we need to thank teachers, who are a very important part of providing education. There is a huge shortage of teachers internationally, which is another area that we need to focus on. She made some excellent points. All hon. Members spoke about how important girls' education is everywhere, so we need to focus on that. The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) spoke about the importance of soft power. He mentioned the British Council and scholarship schemes such as Chevening and, historically, the Rhodes scholarship scheme.

This has been a really good debate, and I thank the Minister for his response. There are a few wishes that I am very keen to follow up on. Times are hard, but we need to ensure that education, which is so transformative and changes people's lives, carries on making a difference. It is one of the most essential things that we can provide funding for.

I thank all my colleagues on the APPG on global education, and particularly Results UK, which provides the secretariat. I thank all the other organisations that provide support, such as Send My Friend to School and other campaign organisations for education. I will leave it there. I thank everyone for taking part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the International Day of Education.

4.14 pm

Sitting adjourned.

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