

Monday
26 January 2026

Volume 779
No. 238



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 26 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

Monday 26 January 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That Mr Speaker do his issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in the present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Gorton and Denton, in the room of Andrew John Gwynne, who, since his election to the said Borough Constituency, has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Jonathan Reynolds.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Youth Hubs

1. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the roll-out of youth hubs. [907445]

3. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the roll-out of youth hubs. [907447]

7. **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): What steps he is taking through the roll-out of youth hubs to help support young people into education, training and employment. [907452]

17. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the roll-out of youth hubs. [907464]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Sympathies to you, Mr Speaker, on your recent injury. If you require a WorkWell appointment with a health practitioner, we recently had a national roll-out, and I am sure that we can arrange that for you.

We believe that work is good for people. That is why we are expanding youth hubs to more than 350 areas, ensuring that every 16 to 24-year-old, including those not on benefits, can access the support needed to earn or learn. That is part of our effort to take jobcentre support out of the jobcentres and meet young people where they are. It comes on top of the strengthening of our youth guarantee, backed by £820 million of investment to offer training, work experience and subsidised employment to young people who are out of work.

Paul Davies: I recently met with James Boyle, who runs Longwood FC, a grassroots football club for young people in my constituency. Longwood FC has had a really positive impact on the mental health and physical wellbeing of the young people involved, and is a great example of community-led youth engagement. I commend the Government for their investment in such youth engagement through youth hubs across the country. Can the Minister confirm the timetable for the roll-out of youth hubs in my constituency?

Pat McFadden: I congratulate my hon. Friend's constituent James Boyle on his work running several teams at Longwood FC. That is a great example, and a number of youth hubs are located in football clubs and other sporting organisations. I understand that Huddersfield youth hub currently serves at least some of my hon. Friend's constituents, but if he wants to explore further options, I encourage him to contact his local jobcentre so that it can work with local partners to see what is possible.

Patrick Hurley: Will the Minister join me in recognising the work of the Big Onion, which provides skills training, employment support and related services in my Southport constituency? It has supported more than 1,400 young people into careers across the wider borough. Will the Minister also set out what further support the Department can give to community organisations like that, and how its success can be shared across the whole youth hub programme?

Pat McFadden: The Big Onion is one of a number of organisations doing excellent work in trying to help young people into work. It is part of a larger partner group that the local jobcentre works closely with. In fact, one of our youth employability coaches is based with the partner group in the town hall once a week. This is exactly why we are expanding youth hubs across the country, so that we can work with other organisations to take the help where young people need it in the community.

Natasha Irons: The expansion of Department for Work and Pensions youth hubs and the roll-out of Young Futures hubs are a testament to the Government's commitment to stand alongside young people and support them to succeed. The Centre for Young Lives has called for Government Departments to work jointly to ensure clear alignment across those hubs to prevent duplication and to stop young people falling through the gaps. What steps will the Government take to ensure that Young Futures hubs and DWP services share information effectively, align their programmes and provide seamless pathways to improve outcomes for young people?

Pat McFadden: One of my first visits in this post was to the youth hub at Selhurst Park, which is close to my hon. Friend's constituency, as part of our partnership with the Premier League. When I was there, I heard the story of one young person, Erin, who had had a successful outcome: she increased her confidence, got a job and wanted to move on to another one. It is important that we put in place handover arrangements, particularly for 16 to 18-year-olds, to ensure a smooth transition from the earlier help they will get in a Young Futures hub to the kind of age group we deal with in youth hubs, which is more focused on employment and careers.

Jas Athwal: Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of hosting a roundtable with the Jack Petchey Foundation, where young people from London and Essex spoke powerfully about the barriers they face, including feeling that there are fewer opportunities for them. What steps is my right hon. Friend's Department taking to deliver on the Government's targets for two thirds of young people to be in university or an apprenticeship, so that young people can gain the skills they need to achieve their goals?

Pat McFadden: One of the early steps we have taken is to change the way that the growth and skills levy—the apprenticeship levy—works, so that more of that money is directed towards young people. That step was necessary because there had been a 40% decline in youth apprenticeship starts over the past 10 years. If we want to focus on young people and on employment for young people, we need to ensure they have a good chance of getting an apprenticeship start.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I wish the Secretary of State well with this initiative, but does he share my concern that as his Department seeks to reduce youth unemployment, the Chancellor is doing everything she can to increase it, with her jobs tax increasing unemployment? Of the 170,000 payroll jobs lost since the election, until November 2025, some 45% involved young people. This Government have cost young people 150 jobs per day since they came into office. How does his scheme cope with that?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member will be aware that 513,000 more people are in work compared with this time last year. He referred to the Chancellor. I am grateful to the Chancellor for the £820 million funding for the youth guarantee, which will bring training help to 300,000 young people and provide subsidised employment for those young people who have been out of work for 18 months. That is important to get young people into the habit of the discipline, pride and purpose that comes with having a job.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Bicester is one of the fastest-growing towns in the country, yet it currently has no dedicated youth hub. In the town centre sits the former Courtyard Youth Arts Centre, which remains largely configured for youth work. The courtyard currently serves a purpose as limited office space, but could clearly be repurposed back to its original purpose. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the funding announced in December for youth hubs should prioritise places such as Bicester, where existing public assets could be better used to deliver youth services at high value for money for the taxpayer?

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I am aware of the employment and growth generated by Bicester Village as a major retail and visitor location, and I understand his representations about having a youth hub that may be associated with that. We will look at all representations, because, as I said, we want to get the help to where people are in the local community.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I encourage the brilliant team at Kendal jobcentre, who already do a fantastic job reaching out to young people

across the Westmorland area, but also congratulate the Secretary of State on what is a very positive initiative? Will he bear in mind, however, that in communities like mine where the distances to travel are enormous, we—and he—should be looking at having youth hubs outside the main towns such as Kendal and Penrith, and look at Kirkby Stephen, Appleby, Grange and Windermere, so they are closer to the people who need those services? Will he also pay attention to, and discuss with his Cabinet colleagues, the fact that awful bus services in rural areas like ours mean that young people cannot get to appointments?

Pat McFadden: All the beautiful locations the hon. Member mentioned tempt me to offer a visit. I echo his thanks to the people who work in Kendal jobcentre and the other jobcentres around the country. The issue of transport and distances is an important one, which is why the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), is pioneering the roll-out of mobile jobcentres, located in vans, that can visit a small area, one or two days a week.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It strikes me as odd that rather than extolling the virtues of the Government's flagship youth guarantee, we have had a number of Labour MPs asking about youth hubs. Is that because it is easier to defend the setting up of some youth hubs than feeding back on the roll-out of the youth guarantee? Since the Labour Government came into power, businesses have stopped hiring young people in roles where they could be paying someone more experienced the same amount of money. That has meant that youth employment has gone up since July 2024, with the most recent figures showing a 103,000 increase in unemployed young people.

Does the Secretary of State agree that rather than Back Bench-pleasing schemes tinkering around the edges of the youth unemployment crisis, what we need is a strong economy with confident businesses actively seeking to employ the hundreds of thousands of talented yet unemployed young people across the country?

Pat McFadden: It is very nice to see the Conservative Front Bench here—you can never be sure these days who is going to be turning up on the opposite side, Mr Speaker. I take it from the shadow Minister's question that she is against youth hubs, but I have to remind her that the initiative began under her Government; we have expanded it. It also seems that she is for a cut in wages, but the Government do not think that is the way to go. I remind her that more people are in work than there were a year ago; the economic inactivity figures are down; real wages are rising; and as for unemployment, it was going up for the past few years, including while the shadow Minister's party was in power.

PIP Review: Cancer Patients

2. **Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab):** If he will take steps to ensure that the Timms review of personal independence payment does not propose changes that would affect people undergoing cancer treatment.

[907446]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): My review of the personal independence payment will be co-produced with disabled people, and its 12-person steering group will meet with me and my two co-chairs face to face for the first time later this week. I cannot pre-empt the choice of priorities and recommendations, but the review will draw on the full range of voices to build a system that is fair to everybody.

Mr Quigley: I thank the Minister for his response. Many cancer patients receiving PIP and universal credit were alarmed by proposals put forward last summer suggesting that individuals undergoing active cancer treatment might be required to complete a work capability assessment before accessing those benefits. What assurances can the Department give that people in the midst of cancer treatment will not be burdened with these assessments at such a vulnerable and challenging time?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend raises a good point. However, on the work capability assessment, people claiming universal credit can be treated as having limited capability for work and work-related activity—LCWRA—if they are being treated for cancer, if they are likely to be treated within six months, or are recovering from treatment. I hope that will reassure my hon. Friend's constituents.

Support into Work: Health Conditions

4. **Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people with health conditions into work. [907449]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): Good work is generally good for health and wellbeing, so we want everyone to get work and get on in work. Through our Pathways to Work guarantee, which is will be backed by £1 billion a year of new funding by the end of the decade, and our Connect to Work supported employment programme, more disabled people and people with health conditions will be supported to enter and stay in work.

Andrew Lewin: I welcome the investment and the news earlier this month from the Office for National Statistics that the number of people in employment has risen by 500,000 since July 2024. I am sure that the Minister will join me in celebrating the fact that more people are entering the labour market under a Labour Government. While we should celebrate progress, we must recognise that there is more to do. What more are the Government going to do to support people with health conditions back into the workplace, and in particular, to build on the success of the WorkWell pilot?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about the WorkWell pilot. When I attended a recent WorkWell session in Cambridge, I was really impressed. Following the success of the pilots, which have so far supported more than 25,000 people, WorkWell will expand across all of England, backed up by a £259 million investment over three years, and could support up to 250,000 people into work. Participants receive proactive early support based on their health-related barriers to employment, such as mental health issues, musculoskeletal problems and other long-term health issues.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Access to Work is meant to help disabled people to stay in employment, yet numerous constituents tell me they have been waiting more than nine months for an assessment, and a year or more for changes of circumstances. Those delays are putting jobs and incomes at risk. How many people has the Department assessed as losing work because of the delays and what urgent action is being taken to clear that backlog?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman mentions an important scheme that enables people to move into work and stay in work. It is right to say that that there have been some issues with Access to Work. More resources have gone in to ensure that those who are moving into work in particular are prioritised by the scheme. I am sure that the Minister for Social Security and Disability, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who leads on Access to Work, can write to the hon. Gentleman with further detail on what more we are doing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): As a result of this Government's economic vandalism, unemployment continues to rise, particularly among young people and those with disabilities. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we support people back into work, but the Access to Work scheme is overly bureaucratic and faces significant delays. Indeed, at the weekend, one of my constituents told me they had been asked by a Department official to fill in a fraudulent timesheet in order to be paid on time. What is the Minister doing to get this programme back on track so that disabled people have the support they deserve and are contributing to the broader economy?

Dame Diana Johnson: As I just set out to the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), there have been some problems with Access to Work, but it is this Government who are dealing with them. We have already put in resources, with a particular focus on individuals who are moving into work to make sure they get access to whatever support they need. Again, I am very happy to provide further details of what additional support we have put in, but it is this Government who are actually dealing with these problems and ensuring that people with disabilities and long-term health conditions have what they need to support them into work and to keep them in work.

State Pension Age Changes: Compensation

5. **Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of compensating 1950s-born women affected by the maladministration of state pension age changes. [907450]

6. **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of compensating 1950s-born women affected by the maladministration of state pension age changes. [907451]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): As the Secretary of State set out on 11 November 2025, we are retaking the decision made in December 2024 as it relates to the communications on state pension age. We will update the House on the decision as soon as a conclusion is reached.

Mr Dillon: I was one of 100 MPs who signed a cross-party letter calling on the Government to take action for WASPI women. Such is the strength of feeling in my constituency that I am regularly contacted about this issue. In the Government's determination, are they planning to consult with the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, especially if they are minded to deny 1950s-born women their lived experience again?

Torsten Bell: I know that hon. Members across the House will have been contacted by constituents who have been affected, and many of us will also have family members who have been affected. As I said, we will update the House as soon as a conclusion is reached. We have committed in public to doing so within three months of the decision in December, which means a decision will be reported to the House before the beginning of March.

I gently say that we need to be clear about what is at stake here: this decision relates narrowly to the question of the communication of the state pension age changes. For many women, including many of my constituents, the issue they are actually most focused on is the increase, and the acceleration in the increase, in the state pension age that was put in place by the coalition Government, which not a single Lib Dem MP voted against back in 2011. I think we should be clear about that, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be clear on that with his constituents when they raise the matter with him.

Sarah Dyke: There are more than 8,000 WASPI women across Glastonbury and Somerton, including Miriam from Martock, who has lost a staggering £50,000 because of the maladministration of state pension ages changes. Because she was unable to work, she was forced to sell her home and live on released capital; now, aged 70, she has rejoined the workforce. Miriam and women like her deserve fairness. Will the Minister commit to properly compensating 1950s-born women, and will the Government consult with the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman before finalising their response?

Torsten Bell: I know that many of our sympathies would be with Miriam. Many Members have constituents who face challenges in the years running up to the state pension age and who are, for whatever reason, unable to work.

The hon. Lady has rather made the point that I just set out, though. She talks about losses of £50,000 or £60,000, which I also see in letters from constituents, but that does not relate to the issue of communication of the state pension age. What she is referring to—the increase and acceleration in the state pension age—was put in place by a Liberal Democrat Government, and not a single Liberal Democrat MP voted against it. It is important to be clear about what is and is not part of

the PHSO's investigation. As I say, it is very important that we take these issues seriously. We should not have seen an acceleration of the state pension age where some women were only given five years' notice, but that was put in place by the coalition Government. We will not be making those mistakes.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, can I offer my deepest sympathies for your recent injury?

I pay tribute to the WASPI women in my constituency for their tireless campaigning on this issue. Will the Minister outline the difference that his Department and this Labour Government are making to all pensioners in Harlow?

Torsten Bell: Mr Speaker will not be on camera right now since I am speaking, but I can reassure the whole world that he is very much still with us. We all hope that that will be the case for some time to come, but when he does decide to become a pensioner, he will, like all pensioners, have the full support of the Government. We are bringing down waiting lists, which is benefiting pensioners right across the country. The biggest single disgrace facing older generations across the UK today is the state of our NHS, and that is why this Government are investing in bringing down waiting lists month after month after month.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I had better add my sympathies for your poor leg to those of the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince).

The Labour party has performed, frankly, a spectacular U-turn on its support for WASPI women, but now it finds itself bogged down in judicial reviews and accusations of incompetence. If the Government cannot even deliver literally nothing for the WASPI women without messing up, what hope is there for them delivering wider welfare reforms?

Torsten Bell: I simply cannot let the hon. Member off on this. It was the Conservatives who made the decisions on accelerating the state pension age and in some cases gave women around five years' notice or less of the increase. That was a choice made by the Conservative party. This Government are considering a report from the ombudsman that the Conservatives left sitting on their desks and refused to make a decision on—and we are going to make a decision.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Prior to the Government's decision not to grant compensation to WASPI women, there was a disturbing lack of engagement with the ombudsman. Since then, the ombudsman has been able to gain access to the paused action plan, but only after leaving their electronic device at the door. Is the Minister comfortable with the way that this trusted civil servant has been treated?

Torsten Bell: The ombudsman is an important part of the systems that we have in place to make sure that the administration of public services is done in the right way.

The hon. Member will know that our permanent secretary met the ombudsman before Christmas. A draft of the action plan that he refers to was shared with her in order to provide her with reassurance that progress was being made on it. As he will be aware, the work on the action plan has been stopped because it was an intrinsic part of remedy set out in the case last year. As I have said, the Secretary of State is considering the evidence in the round, and we will report back to the House as soon as a decision is taken.

PIP: Number of Claimants

8. Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of trends in the number of claimants of the personal independence payment. [907454]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): There were 2 million working-age personal independence payment claimants before the pandemic. That number is now over 3 million and is set to exceed 4 million by the end of the decade. My review will aim to make sure that PIP is fair and fit for the future.

Mr Mohindra: One of my constituents in Abbots Langley, Darren, suffers from a very complicated congenital heart condition, which, alongside his hyperthyroidism and obstructive sleep apnoea, significantly restricts his ability to perform everyday tasks including work. Despite that, Darren has recently had his entitlement to personal independence payment withdrawn. As Darren now awaits a heart transplant, can the Minister outline what steps his Department will take to ensure that Darren and his family receive the necessary financial support during this stressful time?

Sir Stephen Timms: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I have not seen the details of that particular case, but I would be happy to have a look at it if he would like me to. There is, of course, the opportunity for mandatory reconsideration and in due course for appeal, but I would be happy to look at those details.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When the data is segmented, there is a strong correlation between NHS waiting lists and the number of claimants of personal independence payments, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that those people who are unable to work because they are on an NHS waiting list are having their health optimised so that they can engage with employment and be fast-tracked through the system?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend will welcome, as I do, the dramatic record fall in waiting lists that has been recently reported, but of course we need to make further progress in reducing waiting lists and we are determined that the assessment for PIP will be fair to everybody. As I have mentioned, the steering group will meet for the first time over two days at the end of this week, and I know that everyone on that group will be focused on ensuring that we can deliver a fair system for those who need it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Since the right hon. Gentleman became Disability Minister, half a million more people have gone on to PIP, and the sickness benefits bill is heading up to £100 billion a year by the end of this decade. We know that his review is not due to serve up any savings, but there must come a point where even he would say that the country cannot afford this. Does he have any ambition to make welfare savings?

Sir Stephen Timms: We have already made some important changes. For example, we have removed a serious disincentive to work that was created in the universal credit system by the last Government. That has gone, thanks to the changes in the Universal Credit Act 2025, which finished its passage last summer. Those changes will take effect in April. We do have a broken system—the hon. Lady is absolutely right about that—but it is the system that was left behind by the last Government; and, yes, we are determined to fix it.

Post-16 Education

9. Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that post-16 education provides the necessary skills to support the economy. [907455]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we have already taken action. We published the skills White Paper in October, and we are investing £1 billion in skills packages in sectors that will create hundreds of thousands of jobs over the next five years. The Budget also set out more than £1.5 billion investment in employment and skills support over the spending review period, including for the youth guarantee and apprenticeships for young people.

Peter Swallow: I welcome the commitment in the post-16 education and skills White Paper to support the development of skills passports, because supporting young people to develop essential skills such as media and financial literacy, communication and problem solving must be at the heart of our plans to tackle youth unemployment. What conversations has my hon. Friend had with the Education Secretary on developing and capturing skills before 16 as well?

Andrew Western: I confess that my hon. Friend has had more conversations with the Department for Education on this subject than I have, because he met the Secretary of State recently to discuss this. He will be pleased, I am sure, to know that the Department for Work and Pensions, working with UK Hospitality, piloted skills passports in the hospitality sector last year, and that the role of my noble Friend the Skills Minister sits directly between the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions specifically so that the sort of joined-up work to which he refers can take place.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Samee is a charity working in Dorset to support disabled young adults into self-employment. It has celebrated 10 years and supported 2,700 people, and it has what it

tells me is the world's only supported self-employed internship. Young people who have learning disabilities have great skills for self-employment. However, they cannot access the work because they cannot get a unique tax reference because they take more than 12 months to get to the relevant earnings levels. What is the Minister doing to help young people into self-employment so that they can fulfil their destiny?

Andrew Western: The hon. Member raises an important point. Can I begin by commending that charity in her constituency? There is an acknowledgment among the ministerial team that we need to look particularly at the support available for people looking to move into self-employment, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the work of the charity further.

Cost of Living: Support for Families

10. **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support families with the cost of living. [907457]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): I thank my hon. Friend for his question on this important issue for the Government. Action to support families includes raising the national living wage, expanding access to free school meals and tripling investment in breakfast clubs. Removing the two-child limit in universal credit will benefit 1.5 million children across Great Britain, including over 2,500 children in Bolton West. We have also implemented the fair repayment rate for deductions from universal credit and announced a new £1 billion a year package to reform crisis support.

Phil Brickell: Almost 4,000 people with jobs in my Bolton West constituency still need universal credit to cope with the cost of living. Heating, water and food bills have been stubbornly high. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that families in my constituency get the support they need to pay the bills?

Dame Diana Johnson: We recognise that too many homes in England struggle to afford heating, and tackling fuel poverty is a Government priority. On 21 January, we published a new fuel poverty strategy, alongside the warm homes plan, to better protect fuel-poor households by 2030. At Budget 2025, we cut energy bills by an average of £150 and expanded the warm home discount, providing £150 rebate to a further 2.7 million low-income households.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Food and energy costs remain high, and a significant number of families are struggling—more than they ever have before—to try to make ends meet. Has the Minister given any consideration to matching the SNP's Scottish child payment to ensure that more families with children can be kept out of poverty?

Dame Diana Johnson: As I said, we lifted the two-child limit in the child poverty strategy. We know that will lift about 450,000 children out of poverty. Combined with all the other measures that we have set out, including on free school meals and so on, we think that about 550,000 children will be lifted out of poverty. That is against the

backdrop of the 900,000 children who went into poverty during the time of the Conservative Governments from 2010 onwards. Of course, we speak all the time to the Scottish Government, and we will continue to have conversations about how we can deal with child poverty.

Young Disabled People: Support into Work

11. **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support young disabled people into work. [907458]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): It is important that the welfare state is there to support disabled people. Too often in the past, disabled people have been signed off and written off. The state has paid benefits, but has not done enough to help disabled people into work, so we are now expanding employment support for the long-term sick and disabled through, among other things, the Connect to Work programme, which will deliver £1 billion for this purpose in supported employment over the next three years. We are also supporting the "Keep Britain Working" report by Sir Charlie Mayfield, which is aimed at keeping people in work through co-operation with employers.

Daniel Francis: Too many young people with education, health and care plans are being kept on them until they are 25 years old due to the complexities involved in offering them the specialist support required to place them into apprenticeships or work placements. Will the Secretary of State therefore provide an update on the work being undertaken across Government Departments to support these young people into career paths so that they can commence their working lives?

Pat McFadden: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Ever since he came into this House, including in his maiden speech, he has made a powerful case on behalf of carers and children with disabilities. He makes the critical point that we should not give up on anyone. He is right that not all the conditions that are identified will be permanent and not all conditions should be seen as barriers to work, and that we should do everything we can to help disabled people into work.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Obviously, the ability to use public transport is vital to allow disabled people or others who are less mobile to access work. Inverurie station in my constituency has just been removed from the Access for All programme, which provides mobility aids in stations—in this case, a lift will now not be installed. I completely appreciate that Access for All is not a responsibility of DWP, but access and allowing disabled people to get to work is. What conversations has the DWP had with the Department for Transport regarding the removal of Access for All funding, and does the Department share my concern that disabled people and those who are less mobile in my constituency will now have less ability to get to work on public transport?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that mobility and public transport are essential in helping people to get to work. On the specifics of her question, the best thing that I can do is to get the Department for Transport to write to her with a proper response.

Personal Independence Payment Review

12. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on the Timms review of personal independence payment. [907459]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): My two co-chairs, Sharon Brennan and Dr Clenton Farquharson, were appointed in October. We have appointed a firm to facilitate the co-production of the review, and, drawing on an open expression of interest, we have appointed a steering group of 12, which will come together for the first time this week.

Mr Perkins: It is clear that the number of people with conditions that make them eligible for personal independence payment support has in recent years expanded far beyond what was initially intended, and that reform is needed. It is also clear from conversations with my constituents that many disabled people desperately need that support. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give us that, after his review, we will have a system that considers the individual, rather than the check-box approach that has brought the personal independence payment regime into such disrepute?

Sir Stephen Timms: The steering group that we have appointed is made up overwhelmingly of disabled people, many of whom currently claim PIP or have done so in the past, so the perspective that my hon. Friend rightly asks about will be at the heart of the review. The review is co-produced, and effective co-production needs transparency and openness—the co-chairs and I are publishing monthly letters. I hope that he and everyone who follows this with interest will see the progress we are making and the determination we are expressing.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Could one of the Ministers please explain to me and the people of Ashfield why the UK has one of the highest rates of disability in Europe?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am not sure which figures the hon. Gentleman is drawing attention to. There certainly has been an increase in the incidence of disability. The incidence of benefit claiming has been greater than the increase in the incidence of disability, though. That is one reason that we are undertaking this review. We must ensure that the system is fair, because PIP is a vital benefit for many, and that it is fit for the future.

Employee Health

13. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support employers to keep people healthy at work. [907460]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Businesses are a really important partner in supporting workers' health. This is not an issue just for government. I have seen excellent examples of employers doing this, including when I visited British Airways at Heathrow in November to mark the launch of the final report of the "Keep Britain Working" review. Sir Charlie Mayfield, who wrote that report, made a number of recommendations, including the launch of a vanguard scheme, in which over 100 employers are now taking

part. They are playing a leading role in developing best practice when it comes to workplace health and keeping people in work for longer, even if their health declines over time.

Nick Smith: I am delighted that we have a trailblazer pilot in my constituency. In *The Times* at the weekend, Alan Milburn emphasised the importance of boosting young people's life chances. Will the Secretary of State outline how data from the pilot will strengthen delivery to keep people healthy at work?

Pat McFadden: I opened the Neath opportunity hub in south Wales in October, and I announced further funding of £10 million for the trailblazer covering that area. Alan Milburn is doing important work in reporting on the whole issue of young people in activity and work. The thing that unites these efforts is the belief that work is good for you, and that we do not want to see young people graduating from education into a life on benefits. That work brings together current activity and the future changes that we will need to make.

PIP Review: Musculoskeletal Conditions

14. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps he is taking to ensure that the Timms review of personal independence payment considers the needs of people with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions. [907461]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): As I have said, the review will be co-produced with disabled people to put lived experience at its heart. It will engage widely to bring together the full range of voices, including those of people with arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions.

Jim Shannon: I wish you well, Mr Speaker, and I hope you are being spoiled by the staff around you, and obviously at home as well. You deserve it.

I thank the Minister for that positive answer. As he will appreciate, people living with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions make up one of the largest groups of PIP claimants, and should the previous PIP proposals have continued, more than 77% of claimants living with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions would have lost their claims. The Minister is a good man. Would he please agree to a roundtable with me, Arthritis UK, and people living with arthritis, organised at his convenience, so that he can hear directly from those impacted?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting suggestion, and I will be happy to have the roundtable he has called for.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

"Keep Britain Working" Review: Recommendations

15. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department's progress on implementing the recommendations of the "Keep Britain Working" review. [907462]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Last week I met Sir Charlie Mayfield, author of the “Keep Britain Working” report, to discuss progress. He reported that more than 100 employers are now onboard to act as vanguards, including British Airways, Sainsbury’s, Holland and Barrett, and a number of smaller employers. The aim is to develop a healthy life cycle of work throughout people’s careers. We are also setting up the health information and data unit that Sir Charlie recommended in his report.

Debbie Abrahams: As my right hon. Friend knows, Sir Charlie made a number of recommendations, including providing evidence of returns on investments that would incentivise more businesses to take part in preventive measures to ensure that their workers remain healthy and in work. Given the excellent network of academic centres across the UK, how will the proposed workplace health intelligence unit harness their expertise, and ensure that we are reducing health inequalities that also dampen productivity and economic growth?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises a number of issues. As I said, we are setting up the unit that Sir Charlie recommended, and I very much hope that it will work with academic expertise across the country. Her initial point about this being a win-win for employers is important, because if an employer lets someone go, they lose that experience and have to go through the effort of hiring somebody new and training them up. It is a worthwhile experience to try to help someone stay in work if they have a decline in their health over a period of time. That is good for the employee, and for the employer.

Jobcentres: English Courses

16. **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of jobcentre work coaches in directing people to English for speakers of other languages courses. [907463]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): Jobcentre Plus offers tailored, flexible advice and support to help individuals get into work and overcome any barriers to employment. Work coaches offer all claimants a comprehensive menu of help, including referral to skills provision and job search support. That can include referral to local ESOL provision.

Antonia Bance: I thank the Minister for her answer. I recently visited Tipton Jobcentre Plus, and I pay tribute to the great work of the staff based there in what is a really tough jobs market. They told me that they would value the ability to refer jobseekers to an intensive ESOL course, with the expectation that the jobseeker attends every weekday for a number of months, to tackle the key barrier to sustainable employment for many, which is a lack of English skills for work. Will the Minister consider engaging with our combined authority to pilot an intensive, mandatory ESOL intervention, to get locals into work and raise incomes in my area?

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for her interest and her visit to Tipton Jobcentre Plus, and for her kind words about the staff there. Jobcentre Plus in Tipton has been reviewing local ESOL availability. It is

welcoming work with the combined authority to look at expanding provision, to ensure that demand is met and so that more claimants can move into work.

Topical Questions

T1. [907470] **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Since the new year we have had the first expressions of interest from firms that want to participate in the youth guarantee scheme. We have announced our intention to change benefit entitlement for people in mental health hospitals who have been convicted of serious violent crimes. We have announced reforms to the disability confident scheme to encourage more employers to make their workplaces suitable for disabled employees, and we have introduced a Bill to lift the two-child limit, which will have its Second Reading in the House next week.

Baggy Shanker: Whether it is at Kia, Alstom or others, apprentices in Derby are thriving at our large manufacturing companies, but we also want our small and medium-sized businesses to take on more apprentices. Will the Government set out what is being done to help smaller businesses to take on more apprentices?

Pat McFadden: I congratulate my hon. Friend and everyone involved in Team Derby on their excellent training and employment record. Around 40% of all apprenticeship starts are in small and medium-sized employers and they will benefit from the £725 million in funding that we announced at the Budget, which includes fully funding SME apprenticeships for eligible people aged under 25. As he will be aware, employers are not required to pay anything towards employee national insurance for those apprenticeships.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Under this Labour Government the number of people on benefits is soaring, with nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training, and over 700,000 university graduates are now out of work and on benefits. Many young people are putting in hundreds of job applications and getting hundreds of rejections. This Government are killing their jobs and their dreams by taxing job-creating businesses into oblivion. What does the Secretary of State have to say to those young people?

Pat McFadden: What I have to say to those young people is that the rise in graduate inactivity happened under the last Government. Economic inactivity is down by 450,000 since the last election. There is a critical problem—the hon. Lady is right—in NEET numbers, which have been rising for four years. The difference is that we are doing something about that through the youth guarantee, which has £820 million behind it, and by changing her record on apprenticeships, which saw a 40% fall in youth apprenticeship starts over 10 years.

Helen Whately: Young people hearing that answer will not be reassured, but that is no surprise—what else can the Secretary of State say? The Prime Minister is too busy blocking rivals for his job, while a generation of young people pay the price for his weakness, and so are taxpayers, who are footing a ballooning benefits bill. Now is not the time for another review, scheme or slogan; what young people want is the chance to get a decent job and to get on in life. Surely he agrees that it is time to scrap the job-killing red tape in the Employment Rights Bill and cut taxes for businesses, so that they can give young people the chance to get off welfare and into work.

Pat McFadden: People want to stand for my party, but people want to leave the hon. Lady's, and they are doing that day by day. We want to give hope to young people. That is why we have put the youth guarantee in place and we are changing the apprenticeship system: she could have done those two things while she was in office, while the NEET numbers were rising year on year, but she utterly failed to do so.

T2. [907471] **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): My constituent, Julie, a single mum of two, had a successful career in marketing, but had to quit after battling with depression, stemming from undiagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Julie has been stuck in a cycle of struggling to get treatment and diagnosis on the NHS and having to go back to work before she is ready—a story that is sadly echoed among many of my constituents who struggle with fragmented mental health services and a lack of employment support due to cuts made by the previous Government. Will the Minister update the House on the work that she is doing with her counterparts in the Department of Health and Social Care, to ensure people struggling with mental ill health can recover and get back to work?

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): I meet my colleagues in the Health and Social Care Department regularly, particularly because of the important work that the joint work and health directorate is doing to get people into work and to support people with health conditions in work, including those with chronic mental health conditions. Our employment advisers in talking therapies specifically target people with mental health conditions.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Sayce review investigated the carers' allowance scandal and identified that almost 87,000 carers were affected. The Government are planning to write off the debts of 26,000 carers, but does that mean that the Minister believes that 60,000 carers are guilty of fraud?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I think the hon. Gentleman would agree that Liz Sayce did a superb job. We commissioned her review straight after the general election, and we have accepted all but two of the recommendations that she made in her report. We are working through the detail of how to implement those recommendations, and we will set out the proposals and the details as soon as we are able to do so. We are also working with carer

organisations on communications with the carers affected to ensure that they are right. I look forward to giving the hon. Gentleman more details as soon as they are available.

T3. [907472] **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): In the light of the Government's commitment to delivering employment and opportunities for young people of all backgrounds, will the Secretary of State set out what recent progress has been made on establishing the youth guarantee scheme in Scotland?

Pat McFadden: The youth guarantee scheme will be delivered across Great Britain. That includes the jobs guarantee scheme, which I mentioned earlier. From the spring, we will provide more than 1,000 fully subsidised jobs in six areas across the UK, including central and east Scotland, ahead of the national roll-out, which will come later this year.

T4. [907473] **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): One of my constituents is a disabled Royal Navy veteran. Their migration to universal credit has been a nightmare, involving incorrect payments, long delays to identity verification and a lack of help with accessibility. I have received no response to their case since 13 November last year. Does the Minister agree that that falls short of what people should expect from the DWP? Will he help me to get this matter resolved?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am sorry to hear of the hon. Gentleman's experience. We are in the most difficult part of the transition, as people who were previously on employment and support allowance move over to universal credit. We have introduced an enhanced support journey to try to simplify it, and I am keeping a very close eye on how it is going. If he sends me the details of that case, I will certainly look at them.

T8. [907477] **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): This week has been an incredibly good one for jobs, investment and opportunity in Ipswich. Halo, one of the biggest tech firms in the UK, is moving its global HQ into the centre of town and creating 1,000 jobs, many of them for graduates. Sizewell C has unveiled plans for a new bus depot, which will create 400 jobs, some 75% of which will be from the local area. It has been a brilliant week, but there is much more to be done. Will the Secretary of State outline what extra steps he is taking to get young people back into training and employment?

Pat McFadden: Let me congratulate my hon. Friend on the fantastic work that he has done in campaigning for the investments in and around his constituency. Major infrastructure investments such as Sizewell should be an opportunity for local employment and training and for increasing the skills of local people, and we want our youth guarantee and the changes we are making in the apprenticeship system to support those aims.

T5. [907474] **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): On Friday, I met a constituent who has been told that she is losing all her child maintenance payments because her ex-husband simply told the Child Maintenance Service that he had moved abroad, which my constituent knows is entirely false. What steps will the Government take to verify claims from people trying to get out of their child maintenance payments?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I am very sorry to hear about the case that the hon. Gentleman raises. If there is evidence of false claims made in applications, I would clearly be very grateful if he would share that information with me directly. I will be sure to come back on him—*[Interruption.]* I will come back to him on that to ensure that it is fully investigated. If we are coming back on anybody, it will hopefully be the gentleman to whom he has referred.

T9. [907479] **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): In Stroud, we have secured £90,000 in funding for a scheme that places employment social prescribers and occupational therapists into GP practices. They support people who are out of work and in receipt of benefits to return to employment, improving their health and reducing their reliance on welfare. Will the Minister consider rolling out that model nationally, recognising that work is often the best cure for sickness?

Dame Diana Johnson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the meeting that we had on this very subject just a few months ago and for raising the issue of how important it is to get people back into work. There are lots of good examples of GPs who are doing that around the country, and I look forward to seeing what more we can do to work with him and other GPs to ensure that we get as many people as possible back into work who are not in work at the moment due to ill health.

T6. [907475] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I have two constituents who have been awaiting work capability reassessments since July and September 2024. That is more than a year that they have been stuck in limbo, rather than preparing to get back to work. Will the Minister confirm what my team has been told—that extreme waiting times are now normal in the Department? Will he set out what it is doing to break that backlog?

Sir Stephen Timms: We are certainly addressing the backlog, but if the hon. Lady would like to send me the details of those two cases, I will certainly investigate.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): My constituent Stephen Sherwood has complex needs and learning difficulties. He could not understand changes to universal credit, needed guidance that never came, and so lost financial support that he badly needed. Stephen and his mum, Nicola, rightly want to know whether the DWP involves people with complex needs and learning difficulties in the design of system changes, and whether the Government will do more to ensure that such people have these changes explained to them in ways that they can understand.

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. As I have said, the process of migration that we are going through is the most difficult part, as people move from employment and support allowance to universal credit. We have introduced an enhanced support journey to assist people such as my hon. Friend's constituent who are going through this process, but I look forward to meeting him in a couple of weeks' time to discuss lessons from this particular case.

T7. [907476] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): In the Budget, the Chancellor froze thresholds, which brings state pensioners into paying tax. This was raised with the Chancellor, who said that she did not want that to happen and that she would create a workaround. However, only two weeks ago we voted on the Finance Bill, which the Labour party pushed through, and as it stands that means that pensioners will pay tax on their state pension. What is the DWP doing to ensure that they will not pay tax on their state pension or have to submit a tax return?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): It has been confirmed that those whose income is only the basic level of the basic state pension or the new state pension will not be required to pay tax next year, because the level of personal allowance has been set above the level of the new state pension. What the Chancellor said at the Budget was that in future years we will make sure that no pensioner will be required to fill in a self-assessment form, or indeed a simple self-assessment form, for any tax that is due because the new state pension level is above that of the personal allowance.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): A constituent of mine disclosed full details of her change in circumstances to the Department, but although the Department admitted it was its mistake—it had received that information and had repeatedly failed to update its records—it still sent her a very threatening letter. Although I fully support the need to protect the public purse, would the appropriate Minister agree to meet me to discuss how the Department could improve its updating procedures, reduce the occurrence of overpayments, and treat claimants more considerately when they have received overpayments through no fault of their own?

Sir Stephen Timms: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend for that discussion.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): People who come to this country and make it their home are welcome to work and pay their taxes. However, Ministers may have seen reports over the weekend of foreign career criminals who have been spared prison now claiming universal credit. Taxpayers are going to be outraged by this fact, so what action will the Minister take to ensure that only people who are entitled to receive universal credit do so, and that career criminals do not?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue. Payment accuracy and ensuring that only those who are eligible to claim benefits do so are incredibly important for confidence in the system. I have not seen the specifics of the case to which he refers, but where we become aware that such errors have been made, we seek to claim that money back. We have taken further powers through the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025 to take action against the sorts of serious and organised criminals he refers to, and I am pleased to say that that Act received Royal Assent last month.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What discussions has the Minister had on removing universal credit from convicted killers who are currently serving a sentence in a psychiatric hospital?

Pat McFadden: I have had a number of discussions, including with victims' families. It is important to stress that if someone is sentenced to a psychiatric hospital, their care and maintenance is paid for by the state in any case. We therefore propose a change to the previous system that will stop the build-up of—in some cases—large sums of money in continued benefit payments.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): My constituent Andrew co-founded Adzuna, a job search website built on artificial intelligence. Its research shows that existing AI tools could improve the DWP's service and create 250,000 more jobs per year. However, it is reported that the new rebuild of the service is not going to include those AI tools. Can the Secretary of State give the House reassurance that we are going to incorporate those new tools into the rebuild of the service so that we get that employment boost?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if, for commercial reasons, I do not confirm that Adzuna's specific tool or any other would be part of the work we are taking forward. I can tell him that we will be bringing forward a new AI tool in the coming months that will include not only "find a job" options, but CV support, interview training and various other cutting-edge tools that will support people up and down the country into work, utilising the power of AI.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The UK shared prosperity fund currently supports about 20% of Renfrewshire council's employability budget. Given that that funding is due to come to an end, can my right hon. Friend outline what steps he will take to support employability services in Renfrewshire going forward?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend will have heard me refer to the youth guarantee being a GB-wide scheme, so it will help people in Scotland. She will agree with me when I point out that the Scottish Government have had the most generous financial settlement since devolution was introduced, and I would hope that some of that would go towards the kind of priority that she outlines.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): My constituent has been trying for more than five months to get a response from the DWP about his UC claim. Having now taken up the case, I too am experiencing unacceptable delays—it is now 15 weeks and counting, when the supposed turnaround is 15 days. Can the Minister please say what action he is taking to ensure that the DWP responds to constituents and to MPs within reasonable timescales?

Andrew Western: May I begin by apologising to the hon. Lady for the experience that she and her constituent have encountered? She will be pleased to know that I recently met our newly appointed complaints lead and the independent case examiner, who is raising concerns about the trends she is seeing. We are putting in place a range of interventions that take us forward in a positive way to improve our complaints handling process, and I will be happy to share more detail with her directly.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust are campaigning for an essentials guarantee that would ensure that benefits

cover the necessities for living. Does the Minister agree that the welfare state should be a universal safety net, not a trapdoor?

Pat McFadden: I very much agree that the welfare state should be there to help people to change their circumstances, not just to keep them in their circumstances. I am pleased to report that we have now put in place the crisis and resilience fund, which will help people in the most desperate circumstances, and we have guaranteed its funding for the next three years.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent Harry has a learning disability, and he is so brilliant that he has not one but two jobs. His mum, Helen, is his appointee, and she is not allowed to access his Access to Work paperwork online. This means she has to print out 24 bits of paper, get it manually signed and pay to post it. That is crackers in 2026. Will the Minister undertake to look at Harry's case and ensure that appointees, such as Helen, do not find it too hard to access Access to Work, so that we can keep brilliant people like Harry in work?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and it is one of the reasons we are reforming Access to Work. We consulted on reform in the Green Paper last year, and I think she is right that we need a less bureaucratic system for access, not least for appointees.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I wish you a speedy recovery, Mr Speaker—as I understand it, the other fellow came off much worse.

On the Isle of Wight, our NHS trust takes students who would otherwise have ended up NEET—not in education, employment or training—and puts them through a pre-apprenticeship scheme that gives them not only the skills but, more importantly, the confidence needed to start an apprenticeship and then go into work. I encourage the Secretary of State to visit the Isle of Wight to see the great work that the trust does. Will he encourage other employers to do the same thing?

Pat McFadden: I will certainly visit the Isle of Wight if I can—diary permitting. The issue he raises about confidence is crucial. When I speak to our work coaches, time and again they say that building the confidence of young people to get out there, to apply for things and to go into new and unfamiliar circumstances is a critical part of their work.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): My constituent Sam has been failed by the Child Maintenance Service. Her ex-partner hid a load of his income. She knows that because the CMS sent her the evidence but then denied it. Any reference to onward referrals is denied, and she is stuck in the bureaucracy. This is an unacceptable situation. She says that by the time the back payment comes through for her children, she will be passing it straight through to her grandchildren. It is a total disgrace. Women should not be treated like this; they should not be subjected to this kind of failing bureaucracy. Will Ministers look into the matter and into Sam's case?

Andrew Western: I will have a look at the general issue, and if the hon. Member could share details of Sam's case with me directly, I would be happy to look at it for him.

Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill

3.40 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the Government's plans for the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I hope that you make a swift recovery, Mr Speaker—having injured my ankle just before Christmas, I know how painful it can be.

On 22 May, the Diego Garcia treaty was signed and laid before the House. As the Defence Secretary told the House on the day of signature, the treaty secures the strategically important UK-US military base on the island of Diego Garcia. The base, as I have said in the House many times, is essential to the security of the United Kingdom and our key allies, including the United States. It is essential to keeping British people safe. It is also one of our most significant contributions to the transatlantic defence and security partnership, because it enables rapid deployment of operations and forces across the middle east, east Africa and south Asia, helping to combat some of the most challenging threats, including threats from terrorism and hostile states. Its unique strategic location creates real military advantage across the Indo-Pacific. The facility has also helped the collection of data used to support counter-terrorism operations against, for instance, high-value Islamic State targets in recent years.

As we have made clear many times in the House, the UK will never compromise on our national security, and, as we have been repeatedly making clear, the agreement that we have struck is vital for protecting our national security, guaranteeing the long-term future of a base that is vital for both the UK and the United States, which had been under threat, as the Opposition fully understood and on which they were briefed. The deal secures the operations of the joint UK-US base on Diego Garcia for generations. It was publicly welcomed by the United States, Australia and all other Five Eyes partners, as well as key international partners, including India, Japan and South Korea.

Just last week, the House spent two hours debating the Lords amendments to the Bill. The Opposition will know, of course, that the programming of business in the other place is a matter for the other place and not for us. However, the Lords' consideration of Commons amendments has been delayed because the Opposition tabled a wrecking amendment hours before the other place rose—[*Interruption*]/—I think this just shows the measure of them, Mr Speaker—and a day before a scheduled debate. This is irresponsible and reckless behaviour from the official Opposition in the second House, using programming tactics to frustrate the implementation of a treaty on a critical national security matter.

I have to say that stands in stark contrast to the reasoned and constructive criticisms, questions and suggestions from Members in other parties, and indeed from Cross Benchers. We have engaged with those in

good faith at every stage, and we will continue to do so. This is on the official Opposition, because their amendment is not only unnecessary; it is toying with our national security. It is only right that we take time to consider the next steps on programming, because we remain confident that this treaty is the best way forward.

The Lords will consider the Commons amendments in due course, and that will be announced in the usual way. The Government are committed to the deal that protects the joint UK-US base on Diego Garcia. Some have sought to sabotage the process through procedural motions and parliamentary stunts. We, instead, are focused on delivering this Bill to protect our national security.

Priti Patel: Labour's Chagos surrender humiliation continues. Today the Government were hoping to force through their surrender Bill in the House of Lords—giving away territory, handing over £35 billion to a foreign Government allied to China, and betraying the Chagossians. But after the Conservatives pointed out how their surrender would violate our existing international obligations and challenged the Government, the Government pulled the Bill from the House of Lords Order Paper to avoid being defeated.

In its rush to appease left-wing lawyer friends, Labour overlooked the 1966 treaty between the UK and the US. I have a copy in front of me for the Minister to read. It states that the British Indian Ocean Territory "shall remain under the United Kingdom's sovereignty."

Does the Minister accept that the Bill and the treaty with Mauritius violate the 1966 treaty with the US? Following the US President saying that the UK is giving away the Chagos Islands

"FOR NO REASON WHATSOEVER...There is no doubt that China and Russia have noticed this act of total weakness...The UK giving away extremely important land is an act of GREAT STUPIDITY",

can the Minister tell us what discussions have taken place with the US Administration in the last few days and whether they have communicated that they are now reviewing the deal?

Britain's weak Prime Minister seemed to suggest in the House last week that he was being bullied by the President, which is quite a personal statement. Has the Prime Minister had a direct discussion with the President about Chagos in the last week, and can the Minister confirm that any changes to our 1966 treaty with the US will undergo parliamentary scrutiny under the 21-day Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 process, with time given for debates and votes? Does he accept that it would be logical for this House to consider amendments to the 1966 treaty with the US before proceeding with the Bill? Can the Minister confirm that upon appointment as the British Indian Ocean Territory envoy and before becoming National Security Adviser, Jonathan Powell, a friend of China, accelerated the negotiations with Mauritius to surrender the Chagos Islands? It is time Labour saw sense, scrapped this treaty and stood up for Britain.

Stephen Doughty: I did think that perhaps the right hon. Lady might have something more, but the tone, the braying and the noise reflect a simple political stunt from the Conservatives, which is deeply regretful when we are talking about such important matters of national security.

The right hon. Lady asks specifically about the US-UK exchange of notes. I am genuinely surprised about that, because we have been clear throughout that before the UK can ratify the treaty, we will need to do the following: pass primary and secondary legislation; update the UK-US agreement—the exchange of notes; and put in place arrangements on the environment, maritime security and migration.

Perhaps the Conservatives have only just clocked on to the need to update the UK-US agreement, but the Minister in the other place answered the noble Lord Callanan's question on 22 December:

“Talks are ongoing to update the UK-US Exchange of Letters on the operation of the Diego Garcia Base.”

We have been clear about that throughout, so presenting this as some sort of gotcha and saying that we have not looked at the law is absolute nonsense. Frankly, it is deeply, deeply irresponsible.

We have made excellent progress towards finalising an updated UK-US agreement. For the record—because the Conservatives will not have looked at any of the history of this—the UK-US agreement was updated in 1972 and 1976, twice in 1987, and in 1999, so this is a regular process. We have had to update it, for a range of reasons, in the past. We were always clear about the need to put in place the necessary domestic and international legal processes to deal with this matter. The idea that this is something new, or some sort of gotcha, is simply for the birds.

The right hon. Lady asks about the contact with the United States. We remain engaged with the United States on a daily basis on matters relating to our national security. We will continue to engage with it on this important matter and on the importance of the deal to secure US and UK interests, and allay any concerns, as we have done throughout this process. There is nothing new in that, and it is absolutely right that we do so.

The right hon. Lady's claims about China were simply rubbish. I am really surprised that the Conservatives continue to play these shocking party political games.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I am sorry that I am the only Labour Back Bencher who wants to speak. I have huge respect for my hon. Friend, and I fear that I am not going to say anything he particularly likes. I have followed this matter as closely as possible, and I have gone along with the Government up to this point, but it has been against my instincts. I still cannot understand exactly what we are doing here. International agreements do not protect us against our enemies or our allies; sovereignty does. I genuinely think that the people we represent will be asking, “Why can the Prime Minister not step forward, assert sovereignty over these islands, and make it clear that we have the military defence to defend them?”

Hon. Members: More!

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend has perhaps not been in for some of the previous debates on this, but I have set out why on a number of occasions. *[Interruption.]* Again, there is a lot of noise from the Conservatives, but they knew the problem here. They knew the risk to the operations of the base, which is why they engaged in 11 rounds of negotiations. I say again that the operations of this base were under threat, and we are not willing to

play roulette with our national security. We therefore put in place the necessary steps to protect—and this is the crucial thing—the operations of that base, and our ability to carry them out fully in the way they are today, from the threats to it that existed. They put our national security—

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What threats?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member asks what the threats are. I have set those out on many occasions in this House. What is more, we have secured better protections in this deal than the Conservatives attempted to negotiate, including the buffer zone and the protections in relation to foreign forces on the outer islands. The priority for us has been securing our national security and the operation of this base for us and our allies.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have argued consistently that the Chagossians' right to self-determination should be honoured, so even at this eleventh hour I ask the Government to reconsider their obstinate refusal to give Chagossians a voice over the homeland from which they were shamefully and violently removed. Will the Minister support the Liberal Democrat amendment in the other place that seeks to secure binding guarantees from the Government of Mauritius? The Government have also failed to address the concerns shared across this House about the vast sums of public money due to be sent to the Government of Mauritius over the lifetime of this agreement. We should not sign 99 cheques today that Mauritius can cash over the next century, so will the Minister support the Liberal Democrat amendment in the other place to give Parliament annual scrutiny of the payments made to Mauritius? In the light of the shifting US position, I encourage the Minister to consider soberly the approach the Government are taking, and I urge him to accept the Liberal Democrat amendment in the other place for a pause while the US position is clarified.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in the other place have given serious and considered reflections on this Bill a number of times. We have discussed them privately and responded to them in the other place, and I will certainly listen very closely to what he has said on a number of issues. Those include continuing to update both Houses on the cost issues and other matters, although I am sure he agrees that some of the wild figures we have heard quoted are simply not accurate or based in any kind of fact.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the Chagossians. He knows that I and others have engaged with Chagossian communities on a number of occasions, and a wide range of views have of course been expressed by Chagossian communities. He knows that a referendum would not have resolved this long-standing issue between the UK and Mauritius, which required state-to-state negotiations. Indeed, the courts here, noting the conclusion of the International Court of Justice in the 2019 advisory opinion, have proceeded on the basis that the relevant right to self-determination in the context of BIOT was that of Mauritians rather than of Chagossians, and that remains the fact.

[Stephen Doughty]

I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman says about Chagosian communities. He knows my commitment to them, to listening to the range of views and to trying to do the right thing, including acknowledging the deep wrongs of the past. We will continue to engage with him and his colleagues, and I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the amendments in the other place.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister is keeping up a brave face in public, but when he goes back to his colleagues he will have to tell them that the only contribution from his own Back Benches was to disagree with the Government's position, and to do so bravely and articulately.

Does the Minister accept that the reason that this Bill may not go through is the work of the Conservative Opposition in both Houses of Parliament and the words of the leader of the Reform party in Mr Trump's ear? Does that not show what can be achieved when two parties make common cause in a very worthwhile aim to achieve a vital objective?

Stephen Doughty: That comment speaks for itself, but I must say that I am absolutely astonished. Perhaps the right hon. Member is next on the defection list.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Oh, grow up, you silly little man!

Stephen Doughty: Those are absolutely extraordinary comments. We have made very clear how this deal supports our national security interests and those of the US—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Member will want to withdraw that comment.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I withdraw it, Sir.

Stephen Doughty: Again, I think the tone of Opposition Members tells everybody—it tells the public—exactly what is going on here, which is political game playing. There were hundreds of votes the other day for ensuring that the Bill went through, because it has the consent of this House, and it is deeply irresponsible for Opposition Lords to be playing reckless games with our national security in the other place.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I will tell the Minister what is deeply irresponsible, and that is to give away our national sovereignty and damage our national security interests. That is what is deeply irresponsible, and thank heavens the US Administration have now realised that they were deliberately misled by our National Security Adviser and the Foreign Office—[*Interruption.*] Mr Speaker is listening intently. The National Security Adviser deliberately misled the American Administration, and they are angry. They are furious at what has gone on, and that is why they have changed their tune. Will the Minister confirm that if the Americans will not sign the update to this agreement, it is dead and buried? And who will resign?

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to take any lessons in national security from the fake patriots over there on the Opposition Benches and a party whose leader in

Wales took bribes from Russia to promote narratives from the Kremlin. I think Conservative Members ought to be very careful about who they associate with.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Minister, who is normally a reasonable fellow, always makes the point that the last Conservative Government started the negotiations. Does he now understand that, first, we were unable to conclude them and that, secondly, we would never have agreed or concluded the very one-sided deal that he and his colleagues have so naively and mistakenly agreed?

Stephen Doughty: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would like to publish what costs the then Government were willing to pay for this deal.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In answer to a recent written question, a Defence Minister confirmed that

"all decisions on whether to approve foreign nations' use of military bases in the UK for operational purposes considers the legal basis and policy rationale for any proposed activity."

Can the Minister confirm that this commitment on the use of military bases in the UK by allies such as the US also applies to the military base at Diego Garcia?

Stephen Doughty: I am afraid that I might need to write to the hon. Gentleman with the detail on that very specific point, but I can assure him that our operation of military bases, whether alone or with allies, is always in accordance with international law. That is why we have followed the process that we have in updating the different pieces of legislation and other agreements that need to be updated.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): When did the Minister first learn that the United States could effectively veto this agreement with Mauritius?

Stephen Doughty: I do not really understand the premise of the question. We have always been clear that we would work closely with our key defence and security ally the United States in securing the base on Diego Garcia. We have set out on a number of occasions the processes by which we would need to bring this treaty into force. There is simply no gotcha moment here. This has been clear, and it was made clear to those in the other place, but perhaps Members have not been reading the answers to the questions.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Is it not clear that the Minister, who is normally very benign, is now rather tetchy? If he was so sure of what he says, why did he not make a statement rather than be dragged to the Floor of the House by the Opposition? When the previous Foreign Secretary made the clear statement that, if the US says no, this deal is off, was he referring to the 1966 arrangements or was he just doing it off the cuff?

Stephen Doughty: We have always been clear that we would work closely with the United States to put in place the agreements to protect our national security and the operations on Diego Garcia. That is exactly what we have done. That is exactly what this Bill and this deal secures. I have set out clearly the importance of

updating the exchange of notes. That has been clear throughout and it was made clear in the other place before Christmas. It has been made clear on a number of occasions. Really, there is nothing new here.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Does the Minister acknowledge that, ever since the brutal removal of Chagossians from their homes in the 1970s and 1980s, their one unifying factor has been their determination and desire to return? Will he also confirm that international law indicates that the Chagos islands—both the archipelago and Diego Garcia—should be, under decolonisation statute, handed over to Mauritius, and that the only way of guaranteeing the right of return of Chagos islanders is for the House to accept the treaty that the Government have negotiated, which is supported by the Chagos Refugees Group, largely based in Mauritius and the Seychelles, and some of the Chagos islanders who live in this country. *[Interruption.]* Of course there is debate—nothing wrong with that—but this guarantees a right of return.

Stephen Doughty: We have been clear about that on a number of occasions. The right hon. Gentleman sets out very many important aspects of the history of this matter, and importantly puts on record the views of a range of other Chagossian groups who speak in support of the treaty and in support of the deal, primarily because it gives them the best chance to be able to resettle on the outer islands. We continue to support them on that measure, and we will continue to engage with all Chagossian communities—even, of course, those who disagree with the deal—to ensure that their needs and concerns are heard both in this country and internationally. That is also why we are capitalising the Chagossian trust fund.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I think it is unprecedented at such an event for only one Government Back Bencher to speak, and the hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden) very bravely spoke against the deal. It is very important that the sovereignty of these islands remains British. That was highlighted in the Labour manifesto, which stated:

“Defending our security also means protecting the British Overseas Territories...Labour will always defend their sovereignty and right to self-determination.”

May I suggest a gentle down ramp for the Minister, for whom I have a lot of admiration, which is simply to just not find the time in the other place to progress things and allow Prorogation to gently wash this particular piece of proposed legislation out to sea?

Stephen Doughty: We have been clear throughout that the national security of our country comes first—and the national security of our allies and partners—which is why the previous Government were engaging to do a deal. They recognised the threat to the operations of the base. We concluded that deal. We have a deal that secures the future operations on Diego Garcia well into the next century. That is the most important thing in this whole process.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Unusually, the Minister has resorted to bluster today, accusing those of us who are opposed to the treaty of being “irresponsible” and “toying with” the security of the country. Does he not accept that it is the Government who are toying with the security of this country by ignoring the views

of the Americans who use the Diego Garcia base, the fears of the Chagossians and the drain on public finances? Are the Government not using their majority and their Members as pawns to push through a deal that they know is wrong, unfair and dangerous for the country?

Stephen Doughty: I should clarify that I was referring not to the right hon. Gentleman, but to the irresponsible procedural game playing by Opposition peers in the other place. Many people, including those who oppose the Bill, have raised serious, considered comments on and criticisms of the Bill which we have tried to engage with in good faith. I do not recognise his comments about the cost. This is a priceless national security asset, and the deal compares well with what other countries pay for their bases, such as France’s base in Djibouti. This is a crucial deal for the United Kingdom, the United States and our allies. We will never compromise on national security and on protecting this country from terrorism and hostile states. That is absolutely crucial. That is why we are doing this deal.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I first express my respect for the Minister’s ability to consistently defend the indefensible? An absolute masterclass! Is it not the case that the President of the United States now has our Prime Minister completely over a barrel after his incautious and unhelpful remarks over Greenland? Would it not have been better, along the lines of “The Art of the Deal”, to have dealt with this before the Government signed the surrender treaty, and not after?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman makes a link with the discussions on Greenland in recent weeks. We have been absolutely clear that we will always work with the United States on the treaty: we will always allay any concerns they have, and we have engaged with them every single day throughout the process. The deal was welcomed by Secretary Rubio, the US Administration, Secretary Hegseth and across the United States system, and very much so because—I will make this point, Mr Speaker—we secured a deal that, crucially, secures the operations that we and the United States conduct at the base, and that has additional protections that the previous Government did not get into place.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): When the historians write about this period of British history, those who have engineered this betrayal of British sovereignty over the King’s islands, along with the complete betrayal of the loyal British-Chagossian people, will not come out of it too well. I ask the Minister, even at this late stage, to review this shameful policy and give the Chagossian people—whom he did not even mention in his reply to the shadow Foreign Secretary—the same right of self-determination that we afford to all other British overseas territories. Why are the Chagossians treated differently to everybody else?

Stephen Doughty: With the greatest of respect, as the hon. Member well knows, I have regularly referred to Chagossian communities, and I have engaged with and met them on many occasions—even in opposition, before I became a Minister. I have deep respect for them, including those members of the communities who disagree with me. I simply cannot take anything seriously from the hon. Member, when he has joined a party that had such links to Russian money coming into its leader in Wales.

Richard Tice: Grow up, man!

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Tice, thank you.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Last time I checked, there were 404 Labour MPs. Why does the Minister think that his Whips could not come up with a single Back Bencher to come to the Chamber and support his position today?

Stephen Doughty: Because they see this for what it is, which is simply party political game playing. Games are being played with our national security in the other place in a way that is deeply reckless and irresponsible.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Minister did not answer the question that the shadow Foreign Secretary asked, but it is inconceivable that Foreign Office Ministers will not have had discussions with their American counterparts about this issue over the last week. Can the Minister tell us whether it is still the Government's position that US opposition to the treaty is purely about Greenland?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said many times, we continue to engage with the United States every day, as we have throughout the process, and that will continue.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a surprise to see the Minister so ratty and full of bluster, so I am going to ask him a technical question that I would appreciate his answer to. We have talked about the 1966 UK-US exchange of notes; the question is whether the Government can go ahead with the Chagos deal without the US. Where do the Government stand? Does the deal have to have the US's blessing, or can the Government do it without that blessing, and with no change or negotiation of the 1966 contract?

Stephen Doughty: Again, I am slightly baffled by the question, because I answered it right at the beginning when the shadow Foreign Secretary asked me. I will read out my answer again. I said that we had been consistently clear that before the UK can ratify the treaty, we will need to do the following: pass primary and secondary legislation; update the UK-US agreement—the exchange of notes; and put in place arrangements on the environment, maritime security and migration. Indeed, that was very much the tenor of the answer that was given to Lord Callanan in the other place.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Last week we had a discussion about the cost of this deal, and I asked the Minister whether he would confirm the figure of £34.7 billion from the Government Actuary's Department. He did not give me a direct answer, but later in the debate he confirmed that it was a nominal amount, not adjusted for inflation or the social time preference rate. With that in mind, will the Minister give the House the most accurate assessment he can of the true figure for the total cost of the deal, adjusted for inflation and the social time preference rate?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member asks an important question. The Government were clear about the forecast costs when they signed the deal, which were that the average cost per year was £101 million and the net

present value was £3.4 billion. As I made clear the other day, forecast costs are, of course, forecasts; we expect any number to change over time, in particular to reflect things such as the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast inflation rate, which was updated in November 2025. I mentioned that the Treasury was updating the methodology for the social time preference rate. We are not going to keep recalculating every day, but at the time when the treaty was published we were very clear and gave a lot of information; we have given answers on this issue on many occasions and will continue to keep the House updated in the usual way.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The former Foreign Secretary said very explicitly last year that if the United States does not like this deal, it will not go ahead. The US does not like this deal; it has been very explicit on that. Can the Minister tell us whether the now Deputy Prime Minister was telling the truth when he made those comments?

Stephen Doughty: We have been very clear that the agreement we have struck is vital for protecting our national security and guaranteeing the long-term future of this vital base for both the United Kingdom and the United States, which had been under threat. I have referenced the many comments from across the United States Administration. We continue to engage with the United States every day, making clear the very important parts of the deal that protect its security and ours, and we will continue to have such conversations.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I hold in my hand the explanatory notes that accompany the Bill. There are extensive sections on historical background and legal background. Nowhere within those sections is there any reference to the 1966 treaty. Why is that? I have two specific questions for the Minister. First, does he accept that the 1966 treaty—or notes, as he calls it—is extant? Secondly, is it capable of being altered unilaterally?

Stephen Doughty: Of course it is extant, Mr Speaker. It is an arrangement between ourselves and the United States. It has been updated on a number of occasions, which I have listed. As I have said, we have been clear that before the UK can ratify the treaty, we will need to do the following: pass primary and secondary legislation, update the UK-US agreement, and put in place arrangements on the environment, maritime security and migration. I am staggered that some on the Opposition Benches have only just clocked this; we have been aware of it and we engage with the United States every single day. That was made clear even before Christmas to the noble Lord Callanan in response to the question he asked my noble Friend Baroness Chapman. Again, this deal secures the base for the operations of ourselves and the United States, and we will continue to engage with the United States on a daily basis on it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. He and I share concerns on the issue on human rights, and I want to ask a question about that. As the chairperson of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I am very aware of the human rights concerns that exist, including on the repression of personal expression, and reports of

concerns for the rights of children and minorities. This leads me to again ask the Government to reconsider their strategy, not simply because our national security is at risk, the partnership with our closest allies is being strained and Chagossian citizens are expressing their opposition, but owing to the fact that we are handing over these people to be ruled under a cloud. Will the Minister confirm that the Government have fully considered the human rights concerns involving the Mauritian Government and are content to continue despite those worrying reports?

Stephen Doughty: As always, I have deep respect for the issues the hon. Gentleman raises in this place, particularly when it comes to individuals' human rights and liberties. We have engaged extensively with the Chagossian communities and have heard a range of views. There are a number of groups that are very strongly in favour of this deal and some that are opposed to it. I respect that; there will always be disagreements on this issue. We have worked very closely to ensure that their needs are at the heart of this deal, whether that is through the trust fund or the clarificatory statements we have been able to secure from the Mauritian Government on the way the trust fund will operate to support Chagossian communities here. The hon. Gentleman can absolutely be assured that I remain seized of these issues, as do other Ministers, and they will continue to form a part of our engagement as the deal goes forward.

Police Reform White Paper

Mr Speaker: Before we start, it would be remiss of me not to say to the Home Secretary that although we have a statement now, I watched this all unfold yesterday and over the past few days. Whether it is the FBI or the merging of police forces, it really needs to be brought to the House before it is taken to the media. I say once again to the Home Secretary, who I know is very diligent in the job, that these are not my rules; they are the Prime Minister's rules. I do not need the Prime Minister ignoring his own rules.

4.13 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on police reform.

A little less than 200 years ago, speaking at this very Dispatch Box, Sir Robert Peel declared that:

"the time is come, when...we may fairly pronounce that the country has outgrown her police institutions".—[*Official Report*, 28 February 1828; Vol. 18, c. 795.]

Those words could just as well have been spoken today.

Policing is not broken, as some might have us believe. Last year, the police made over three quarters of a million arrests—5% more than the year before. Some of the most serious crimes are now falling, with knife crime down and murder in the capital at its lowest recorded level. However, across the country things feel very different. Communities are facing an epidemic of everyday crime that all too often seems to go unpunished—and criminals know it. Shop theft has risen by 72% since 2010, and phone theft is up 58%. At the same time, in a rapidly changing world, the nature of crime is changing. Criminals—be they drug smugglers, people traffickers or child sexual abusers—are operating online and across borders, with greater sophistication than ever before.

The world has changed dramatically since policing was last fundamentally reformed over 60 years ago. Policing remains the last great unreformed public service. Today, as this Government publish a new policing White Paper, I set out reforms that are long overdue. They define a new model for policing in this country, with local policing that protects our communities and national policing that protects us all.

Since taking office, we have already restored a focus on neighbourhood policing that the last Conservative Government eroded. They pulled bobbies off the beat, and now over half of the public report that they never see police on patrol in their local area. It was a foolish error, because neighbourhood policing works. Across the world, the evidence shows that visible patrols in high-crime areas work. The last Labour Government put more officers on the streets, and confidence in policing hit record levels. The Tories cut them, and confidence fell.

This Government are righting that wrong, with a target of 13,000 more neighbourhood officers by the end of the Parliament, and we have already put 2,400 back on to the beat. We have also introduced the neighbourhood guarantee, so that every community has a named, contactable officer. I also intend to end the distortive "officer maintenance grant" that was introduced by the last Conservative Government, who had to replace the 20,000 police officers lost on their watch. The results

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

were perverse: uniformed officers hired but stuck behind desks, with 12,000 men and women in uniform now working in support roles, including—absurdly—some 250 warranted officers working in human resources. I intend to end that by introducing a neighbourhood policing ringfence, which will ensure that forces are putting uniformed officers where the public want and need them: out in the community, fighting crime on our streets.

However, we must do more. Today, policing happens in the wrong places. We have local forces responsible for national policing, which distracts them from policing their communities. At the same time, we have forces of various shapes and sizes, and quality varies widely by force. This Government's reforms will ensure that we have the right policing happening in the right place. That starts with the creation of a new national police service.

At first, the force will set standards and lift administrative tasks off local forces. In time, it will draw in all national crime-fighting responsibilities, including counter-terrorism policing, serious organised crime, and fraud. This will ensure that local forces are no longer distracted by national responsibilities, while at the same time creating an elite national force that is expert at fighting the ever-more sophisticated criminals who are operating nationwide, across our borders, and online.

Alongside the new national force, we will replace the patchwork of 43 local forces that has remained almost unchanged since the Police Act 1964. That model has been straining for decades, and today it is simply not fit for purpose. Our 43 forces are of varying sizes: some have just 1,000 officers, others over 8,000, and the Metropolitan police is 30 times larger than our smallest forces. As a result, some forces are not equipped to handle complex investigations or respond to major incidents.

Meanwhile, the duplication across force headquarters means that money is wasted, drawing resource away from frontline policing. We will introduce a smaller number of regional forces responsible for specialist investigations, including murder, serious sexual offences and public order. Within these forces, we will introduce smaller local policing areas. These will be focused exclusively on local policing, tackling the burglaries, shoplifting and antisocial behaviour that too often go unpunished today. It is vital that we set these new forces up in the right way, so I will soon launch a review to determine the precise number and nature of the new forces. Its work will be completed this summer. Taken together, these reforms will put the right policing in the right place: an elite national force will tackle nationwide crime; regional forces will conduct specialist investigations; and local policing will tackle the epidemic of everyday crime.

Our structures are outdated, and so is our adoption of the tools and technology that could make our policing more effective and more efficient. Criminals are operating in increasingly sophisticated ways, but in policing, in all honesty, our response is mixed. While some forces surge ahead, with the results to show for it, others are fighting crime in a digital age with analogue methods. We will ensure that every force is adopting the latest technology, led out of the new national police service. This will

include the largest-ever roll-out of live facial recognition technologies, across England and Wales. We know that this approach works. In London, in just two years, the Metropolitan police has made 1,700 arrests, taking robbers, domestic abusers and rapists off our streets.

When the future arrives, there are always doubters. A hundred years ago, fingerprinting was decried as curtailing our civil liberties, but today we could not imagine policing without it. I have no doubt that the same will prove true of facial recognition technology in the years to come. At the same time, we will launch police.AI, investing a record £115 million in AI and automation to make policing more effective and efficient, stripping admin away to ensure that officer time can be devoted to the human factor that only a police officer can provide.

Common standards apply both to the technology we use and the quality and performance of our officers. We must, and we will, set and maintain the highest standards. We have already introduced new vetting requirements enabling forces to dismiss those who fail vetting checks, alongside a range of measures to lift policing standards. We will introduce a licence to practice for police officers, recognising the professionalism, dedication and duty that comes with the uniform. We must be willing to set clear standards and the performance that we expect within forces, and to hold policing leaders to account for their delivery. Under the last Conservative Government, there was a retreat from the historical role held by Home Secretaries and the Home Office since the days of Peel. That was an error, and this Government will reverse it.

As the old Peelian maxim has it, the police are the public and the public are the police. I consider it essential that the people, through Parliament, can determine what they expect from their forces, so this Government will restore targets for police forces and set minimum standards that forces must abide by. Force performance will be transparent and public, and where performance falls, we will take action. We will create new turnaround teams to go into a force where performance has fallen, and in the most extreme examples of a failure of leadership, I will restore the Home Secretary's power to fire a chief constable. This vital power was relinquished by the last Conservative Government, who handed it to police and crime commissioners—a position that I consider a failed experiment, despite the best efforts of many excellent PCCs across the country. We will now draw that experiment to an end. Local accountability and governance will remain essential, however, and will continue to be provided by mayoralities or local crime and policing boards.

Taken together, these are, without question, major reforms: a transformation in the structures of our forces, the standards within them, and the means by which they are held to account by the public. These are the most significant changes to how policing works in this country in around 200 years. The world has changed immeasurably since then, but policing has not. We have excellent and brave police officers across the country, and effective and inspiring leaders across many of our forces, but they are operating within an outdated structure, making the job of policing our streets and protecting our country harder than it should be.

I began by quoting Peel's declaration that "the country has outgrown her police institutions".

He went on to argue that the

“safest course will be found to be the introduction of a new mode of protection.” —[*Official Report*, 28 February 1828; Vol. 18, c. 795.]

Now, as then, it is time we had the bravery to pursue a new mode of protection and a new model of policing, with the right policing in the right place. That means local forces protecting their communities and national policing that protects us all. That is what this Government will deliver, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: You did run slightly over, by over a minute, so I will give a little bit of leeway to the Opposition Front Benchers. I call the shadow Home Secretary.

4.25 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement—especially after her busy weekend chairing the national executive committee, which excluded Andy Burnham from returning to Parliament. Anyway, the Home Secretary’s statement—[*Interruption.*] There seems to be some concern from the Benches behind her on that.

The Home Secretary’s statement is striking for what it does not say, because there was no mention—not one word—of her plans for total police officer numbers. The reason for that is simple: total police officer numbers are falling under this Labour Government, as figures due for release later this week will confirm. The last recruitment intake before the election was in March 2024, and there were 149,769 officers in post—the highest number in this country’s history. By the same time the following year, under Labour officer numbers had fallen by over a thousand, and in the current financial year, numbers are falling even further, with the Met alone saying that it will lose a staggering 1,500 officers this financial year.

On officer numbers, the Government are engaged in a con trick. They are transferring officers away from crime investigation, 999 response and other teams into neighbourhood teams, so they can say neighbourhood numbers are going modestly up. But total police officer numbers are falling, so there will be fewer 999 response and investigation officers, response times will be slower and investigations will not be as effective. The Home Secretary can set targets and make announcements, but the fact is she is presiding over falling total police numbers and the public will be less safe as a result.

The Home Secretary has said that she will change the structure of policing. Briefings over the weekend said the reorganisation will be complete in—I had to double check this—2034, nearly a decade away. But we have a crime crisis today. Shoplifting and phone theft are surging under this Government, with shoplifting now at its highest level ever. Knife crime in London is up by 80% under Mayor Sadiq Khan. Women are being let down, too, with sex crimes up by 9%, rape up by 6%, stalking up by 5% and harassment up by 6% under this Labour Government. That requires action today, not in 2034.

The Home Secretary’s plan includes mandating the merger of police forces. Briefings over the weekend suggest a reduction from 43 down to 10 or 12, so a single police force might cover an area from Dover to Milton Keynes or from Penzance to Swindon. Such huge forces will be remote from the communities they serve, and resources

will be drawn away from villages and towns towards large cities. The biggest force in the country is the Met, and yet it has the worst crime clear-up rate of any force; it fails to solve 95% of reported crimes. That goes to show that large scale does not automatically deliver better results, and therefore we will oppose the mandated merger of county forces into remote regional mega-forces.

Police forces are warning that Labour’s early prisoner release scheme means more crime and more demands on policing. Most criminals will now be released after serving just one third of their prison sentence, and even rapists will serve only half of theirs. To make things even worse, Labour plans to abolish prison sentences of under one year, so even the most prolific shoplifters will never face jail. That is a recipe for disaster, cooked up by the Home Secretary in her previous role.

We can agree on some things, because the Home Secretary has copied them from us. I am glad that she is continuing the roll-out of artificial intelligence and live facial recognition started under the previous Government—we fully support that. It is right for Home Secretaries to have greater powers to intervene; we announced that policy at our conference last year, and of course we support it. She now says that she will abolish non-crime hate incidents. We need to see the details, but might she explain why Labour voted against that measure when we tabled it as an amendment just last year?

The simple fact is this: total police officer numbers are falling under this Home Secretary’s watch. As a result, 999 response times and crime investigations will suffer. Shoplifting, phone-snatching and sex offences are all rising under this Government. Regional mega-forces will make things worse, not better. Her grand plans will not even be fully implemented until 2034, but action is needed today. These announcements will not make our streets safer this year or next year, and the public will see that rapidly.

Shabana Mahmood: Dear me! I will take no lectures on policing from the Conservatives. They had 14 years in government and delivered no meaningful change beyond decimating neighbourhood policing, introducing the failed experiment of police and crime commissioners, and sweeping away meaningful targets to hold our police forces to account.

The shadow Home Secretary complains about non-crime hate incidents. Pray tell, who was in government when they were brought in? He talks about the powers of the Home Secretary. Which Government got rid of them? It was the Conservatives—and not once in all their time in opposition since the general election have they had the gumption to apologise from the Dispatch Box for their appalling track record on policing. Conservative policies saw police numbers slashed by 20,000. They very hastily tried to reverse that measure by bringing back another 20,000 officers, but they did so in a distorted way that meant that 12,000 of those warranted police officers were doing desk jobs. I ask him to read the detail of the White Paper and reconsider whether he wants to stand against everything in it. He cannot possibly believe it a good idea for warranted police officers to do desk jobs; he cannot possibly think it fine for 250 of those officers to be in human resources and 200 in admin support. I cannot believe that even he, with all his lack of attention to detail, thinks that that is a good idea.

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

I urge the shadow Home Secretary and his Back Benchers to reconsider whether they will stand against the policies unveiled in the White Paper. I urge him to look again carefully at regional police forces. He will have looked at the White Paper, so he knows full well that the regional forces will have local police areas that can concentrate on policing local communities right down to the neighbourhood level. The only reason I am bringing in this new model of policing is to protect neighbourhood policing, which was decimated on the Conservative party's watch. If he wants to stand against local police areas focused on local communities, and against regional forces dedicated to specialist investigation to ensure that rape and murder cases benefit from exactly the same high standards of service across the country, more fool him. Those measures will result in a better policing model for everyone across our country.

The shadow Home Secretary raises the example of the Met. One thing that Louise Casey found in her 2023 report was that the Met's national responsibility for counter-terrorism policing—it does counter-terror for everyone across the UK—distracts from its policing of London. These reforms will mean that counter-terror policing, and all other national policing requirements, will sit with the National Police Service, so that the Met and every other force in the country can focus on policing their local areas. I cannot believe that he wants to stand against reforms that deliver better local policing, but that appears to be where the Conservatives are at.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the announcement by the Home Secretary. In London, we have long known that neighbourhood policing is vital. Only yesterday I was in Dalston, where there has been a lot of antisocial behaviour, and people have noticed the extra police on the streets. There has, though, been an issue of abstraction in London, where officers often have to backfill blue light officers or police national demonstrations. How will the Home Secretary plan this process to ensure that that does not happen, and that those teams are dedicated to neighbourhoods?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right to say that too many of our police forces are distracted from being able to police their local communities because they are dealing with national level issues, including national issues relating to public order. All those functions will ultimately sit within the new National Police Service, but in the interim I will appoint a special command to deal with public order policing in particular, to ensure consistency of approach across the country.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): After a busy weekend policing Labour leadership rows, the Home Secretary is today in the House to announce reforms to policing. I think we all agree that we hope she is more successful with the latter than she was with the former.

This Government came to power with a pledge to increase police numbers, but instead of 13,000 more neighbourhood police, the latest stats tell us that we have 4,000 fewer frontline police. Numbers are down, and so is public trust. The police are stretched, and too many crimes are

going unchecked. After years of Conservative chaos, people are crying out for a visible police presence in their communities. That is why we welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to focus on restoring proper community policing; we hope that is more than simple words. As well as getting more police on our streets, the Home Secretary must also address the horrifying decline in police counters and stations, which began under the Conservative but sadly continues under Labour in London today. Will she commit to ensuring a police counter in every community that needs one?

Policing must be fit for the modern era. It must be able to tackle organised crime, which too often presents itself in our communities through mobile phone theft, drug dealing, car crime and bike theft. Can the Home Secretary reassure the House that the new national force will be properly resourced and integrated with local forces, so that counter-terrorism and intelligence work are not undermined? As local forces are abolished and merged, we must not see vital links lost to local communities. For example, Gloucestershire police is one of the smallest forces, with urban and rural policing teams. If its leadership is placed under the control of a Bristol-based force, how will people in Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and the Cotswolds be reassured of that local focus?

Is placing the power to hire and fire chief constables in the hands of the Home Secretary the right approach? Does it not further politicise policing, particularly with the prospect of the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman) as a future Home Secretary in a Farage-led coalition of chaos between the Tories and Reform?

Rural communities have long been neglected. Will the Home Secretary commit to placing dedicated rural crime teams in every force?

Finally, the Home Secretary mentioned facial recognition. Will she ensure that proper safeguards are put in place to ensure that the technology is not biased, and that those from ethnic minorities can be reassured that they will not be wrongfully criminalised?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for his support, I believe, for at least some of the reforms, particularly those on neighbourhood policing. He is absolutely right: neighbourhood policing is critical and will be bedrock of the new policing model unveiled in the White Paper. We have already made progress on increasing the number of neighbourhood police officers. There are already 2,400 additional officers, and that number will be 3,000 by the end of March, with at least 1,750 over the next financial year; we will continue to make progress on neighbourhood police officers.

The hon. Member also mentioned police numbers. As is clear in the White Paper and from my statement, what matters is what those officers are doing. I hope that he and his Liberal Democrat colleagues will agree that nobody wants warranted police officers to be sat behind desks working in HR and admin support. We want police officers out policing our communities, going after criminals, and providing the reassurance that only visible policing can provide. He will know that decisions on police counters and other measures are for individual forces, but I hope that he will recognise that we have delivered on our commitment to have a named contactable officer in every neighbourhood, which I believe goes some way to reassuring local communities.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about counter-terror policing and the National Crime Agency. I assure him and the whole House that those two organisations will only move into the National Police Service when it is fully ready. We will not compromise on the operational capabilities of either of those organisations. I will work closely with the leadership of both to make sure that the switch into the National Police Service only happens in a way that does not compromise the operational effectiveness of either counter-terror policing or the National Crime Agency.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that these reforms are fully funded to the end of the Parliament. He also made a point about regional forces. Again, I urge him to absorb the detail of the White Paper and I look forward to discussing these issues with him in more detail. Within the regional force structures, there will be local policing areas, right down to the neighbourhood level. That will ensure that whether people live in a rural area or in an urban one, like me, they get the local policing that they need and deserve. That is the absolute foundation of all these reforms, so that regional forces can concentrate on the things that can be done at scale, like specialist investigations and public order policing, and local police areas can police right down to the neighbourhood level and deal with the everyday crimes that are blighting communities all over the country, exactly as he says. That will apply equally and just as forcefully for rural communities as it will for those in towns and cities across the country.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that although I believe that live facial recognition is incredibly important technology, we will ensure that its roll-out is in line with the sort of regulations that we would expect to make sure that it does not have a distorted effect. We are consulting on that right now. In the future, the National Police Service will ensure that the adoption of technologies across policing takes place quickly and in line with the standards that we would all expect.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement about the deployment of 13,000 more neighbourhood officers. That will be incredibly welcome in my constituency, where we have a serious antisocial behaviour problem. However, residents in my borough of Lambeth overall have a historical issue with levels of trust in the police, largely due to racial profiling. Will the Home Secretary reassure me and my constituents that reforms to policing, including any measures that grant more powers to the police, will seek to address the issues of police mistrust and racial bias in policing?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me reassure my hon. Friend that we will ensure that the roll-out of all policing powers, including the use of technology, is in line with the race action plan, which we support, and that any measures are stress-tested to ensure that they serve all communities equally. It is our position that the police must always police without fear or favour, so that every community can be confident that they are getting the right quality of policing and nobody is being unfairly targeted.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Kent is one of the largest counties in the country. It faces significant geographic challenges. We have the channel tunnel; Dover, the largest port of entry into the United

Kingdom; Manston airport, which is likely to reopen; and, of course, the small matter of illegal migration across the channel. I cannot see how a policing area that I understand will stretch from Banbury in Oxfordshire to Herne Bay on the North sea coast and Sandwich on the channel coast, will be policed effectively and locally, as it currently is. I am, I think, one of the only Members of this House who has held a warrant as a serving police officer—[*Interruption.*] I did say “one of the only”, not “the only one”. I understand only too well the need for policing to keep pace with the same tools that are used by the criminals, but will the Home Secretary tell the House whether or not this plan has the confidence of the constabulary?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution and for his service, as well as that of other hon. Members who have served in our police service. I reassure him that, as will be clear when I introduce legislation later in the year, the plan for regional forces will include an absolute focus on local police areas. Local policing for local communities will be tailored to many of the needs that he has pointed out, but at a regional level we will have the necessary economies of scale and the capacity to deal with specialist investigations, while ensuring that the quality of those investigations does not depend on which part of the country they happen to be in. When the detail is out, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be able to support the proposals, given that they will focus carefully on local policing areas specifically in order to deal with some of the issues he has raised.

The exact number of regional forces and the geography that they will span will be a matter for the reviewer—I hope to announce who that will be very soon—with a view to reporting in the summer so that we can crack on with rolling out these reforms.

I have been delighted and a little surprised by the sheer number of policing leaders who have come out in support of these proposals, including those who represent organisations that will see change as a result of the reforms. The sheer range of people who have supported the White Paper shows that these reforms are the right ones for policing in our country.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I very much welcome these proposals. The NCA is hugely under-resourced, and bringing these elements together will hopefully give it the funding required to do its job properly. The amount of duplication of effort that occurs and the lack of information sharing result in huge inefficiencies. It is struggling with the pace of change in technology, especially because of end-to-end encryption, and it is struggling to hire and retain staff with the technical skills that it requires—people who have those skills are eagerly snapped up by the private sector. It does not have the funding to make the technical investment needed to keep up with the pace of change.

As a result of the structure and separated command and control of the regional organised crime units, the NCA and the Met, they make decisions and prioritise independently and without deconfliction, in the procurement of tools and data, for example. That means that the same technologies can be acquired multiple times to benefit only a single area. Does the Secretary of State agree that this White Paper will tackle those challenges head-on?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right. The National Police Service will draw in the national responsibilities of both counter-terror policing and the National Crime Agency. Those two organisations collaborate very effectively, and I pay tribute to their leadership and the way in which they operate alongside one another, but they duplicate and build similar capabilities. Instead of having those capabilities built alongside and within two organisations, it makes sense to bring them into one organisation and to prevent that duplication of capabilities and functions. That is one of the main benefits of the reform.

On the sorts of people whom these organisations go after, we know that we are one of the few major countries in the world that does not combine counter-terror policing and serious organised crime. International criminals often cross boundaries and indulge in all sorts of different types of work, including terrorism financing and serious organised crime. The reforms will lead to a very effective service and build on the excellent work already done by officers in counter-terror policing and the NCA.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The Home Secretary quoted Sir Robert Peel at the top of her speech, saying that he was “speaking at this very Dispatch Box”. She clearly has not realised that those Dispatch Boxes were donated by New Zealand after the second world war. Even if she was talking more figuratively, this whole Chamber was destroyed in 1834 after Peel said those words. The accuracy that she sacrificed for rhetoric continued throughout her speech. Following discussions that I have had with the chief constables of Surrey and Hampshire, who are against these proposals, may I ask a question? If chief constables across the country, such as those in Surrey and Hampshire, are against her proposals when her review concludes, will she scrap the proposals—or is this a review in name only?

Shabana Mahmood: I bow to the hon. Gentleman’s greater knowledge of House of Commons trivia; I am sure that he has been an excellent member of every pub quiz team that he has ever been a part of.

The review will look at how we deliver regional forces, so it will mean a significant reduction in the number of forces. However, it will advise on the correct number of regional forces and how we should go about implementing that policy.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): The Home Secretary’s proposals will allow for a new focus on community policing and engagement, which was proven to work under the last Labour Government. By far the biggest issue that I come across is the lack of feedback to victims of crime. With the proposals that she has announced and with technology improving all the time, will she commit to looking at that to see whether it can be improved for residents and constituents, as well as improving trust and accountability in policing?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think we could make a lot of progress if we could ensure that the victims’ code was implemented consistently across the country, and I know the Justice Secretary also wishes to make sure there is greater adherence to all the requirements of the code. In the end, policing is a public service; it is there for members of the public, and

to give victims of crime confidence that their case will be dealt with fairly and as quickly as possible and that criminals are brought to justice. That is exactly why we are making these reforms.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): As a former police officer, I have watched the roll-out of Police Scotland with some sadness because, despite best efforts, it has not delivered in Scotland what the Home Secretary hopes to achieve with her amalgamations. Communities feel that neighbourhood policing is further away from them, and that they do not have the hoped for visibility and local accountability. I hope that she is taking some lessons from Scotland.

The Home Secretary has also been making points about the number of police officers who are working in desk jobs. She surely recognises that a number of those individuals are working in those areas because they are on light or restricted duties, and we always need to have roles available for those people. We have focused too much on police officer numbers and not enough on the back-office functions and the expertise of police staff. Will this White Paper address the overall resourcing model for policing?

Shabana Mahmood: One of the real issues with the Police Scotland reforms was that they were completed within one year. I have made a deliberate decision to phase in these proposals and measures over a number of years—towards the end of this Parliament and into the next. I make no apology for that proposed timeline, because I believe we must go carefully; these are big changes, and it is important that they are rolled out effectively and in a way that maintains the confidence of the public, as well as all those who work in our police services. I think we have already learned the lessons of what has happened in Scotland. Of course, the other big difference between the measures I have introduced today and what happened with Police Scotland is that we have focused from the outset on neighbourhood policing. That has been the absolute bedrock of all the proposals I have made, which is not quite the same as what happened over in Scotland, although specialist capabilities and specialist investigations have certainly improved.

Turning to desk jobs, the most important thing is that we have warranted police officers who are policing our streets. Of course there is often a need for some officers not to be out; there is a need for support staff as well, and we have to strike the right balance between those who are in frontline policing and those who are doing back-office roles in our police service. We will have a workforce strategy as part of this White Paper, but we need always to keep in mind that we are talking about a police service that delivers for the public, so what we really care about are outcomes and what those officers are doing—how they are policing our streets and providing much-needed reassurance to all of our communities.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I am really pleased that the Home Secretary is retaining the role of democratically elected metro mayors in the oversight of police forces. My specific question is about police AI. We know that AI training models have bias, particularly around race, so how are we going to ensure that these AI models will not contain that bias? Also, all of the major AI companies are foreign-owned. How are

we going to ensure that our national security is protected, and that this data is not taken and used against the United Kingdom by foreign Governments?

Shabana Mahmood: I reassure my hon. Friend that at the moment we have strong measures in place for how data is used in our police service. In future, all of that capability will sit with the National Police Service, which will set the standards. They will be very high standards with a high degree of transparency, so that we are always stress-testing our use of AI and technology to ensure that it is used effectively for policing, but not in a way that contravenes our collective values.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): To follow on from the previous question, the Home Secretary has strongly supported digital facial ID and artificial intelligence. As her colleague, the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), has said, both of those technologies show significant error rates, particularly when it comes to racial minorities. Innocent people fear this, particularly after the Post Office scandal, which showed that courts believe computers rather than people, resulting in miscarriages of justice.

I have three questions for the Home Secretary. First, what does she regard an acceptable error rate for these technologies? Secondly, does she support the provision of compensation for people who are misidentified by such technology? Thirdly, she has talked about regulations; will she put all of these reforms on a statutory basis, based on primary legislation that passes through this House?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the Home Secretary, I remind Members that a lot of people are on their feet to ask a question, and I want to finish this statement at around 5.30 pm. Will you answer one of those questions, Home Secretary?

Shabana Mahmood: I think that is me being told to go faster. Let me assure the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) that we are consulting on the safeguards for the use of AI in technology and live facial recognition. I assure him that I will always make sure that robust safeguards are in place, and I am sure that we will debate these issues in the House many times over the months to come.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. My constituents expect the everyday policing response to improve, but they know the value of more specialist public order capabilities, because in August 2024 the brave officers of Northumbria police put on their public order gear to protect our citizens against disgraceful violent conduct in our city centre. Can the Home Secretary say a little more about how she envisages public order responsibilities sitting between the national body that she outlines and regional forces? Can she say a little about the funding streams for that?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Learning the lessons of what happened in 2024 is why we have already decided to bring in a national command role specifically for public order policing. He raises other issues, particularly on funding. All these reforms are fully funded to the end of the Parliament,

but the specific funding streams are a matter for future funding settlements. He will know that we are publishing the funding settlement for the coming financial year on Wednesday.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary on having attracted dozens of her Back Benchers to support her, when the Foreign Affairs Minister responding to the urgent question just before could not find a single one to support him on the dreadful Chagos deal.

Can the Home Secretary tell us a bit more about how the new structure will be governed? I understand the idea about the national police commissioner at the very top, but what sort of executive key people will there be lower down to ensure that relevance is maintained in rural areas, as opposed to the different needs of urban areas?

Shabana Mahmood: The White Paper envisages a whole change to the accountability mechanisms for policing at every level, whether that is for the National Police Service or right down to regional forces and local police areas. The right hon. Gentleman will know that I am bringing back powers to the Home Secretary. We have also published a performance framework today that will bring transparency to how police forces are functioning. A new national commissioner will be in charge of the NPS and all the other structures will sit underneath that. I assure him that at every level there will be a high expectation of high performance and of accountability, both to local policing and crime boards and to the Home Secretary directly.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): As a former police officer of three police forces in this country, I can categorically and honestly say that the many reforms presented in the White Paper are welcomed by my former colleagues and by me. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had the chance to bring these reforms forward. They tried many times, and they failed many times to bring them forward. What makes us different from the previous Governments? I put on record my full confidence in the current Home Secretary to get this done once and for all.

Shabana Mahmood: I appreciate my hon. Friend's support for these proposals and for our ability as a Government to get them done, and I appreciate the support of the other officers of the rank and file with whom I know he is still in touch. These major reforms will take time to deliver. I have been encouraged by the support received from policing leaders and rank and file police officers all over the country, including from those whose organisations will change and sit within the National Police Service. I say to Opposition Members: if they care about neighbourhood policing and local policing for local communities, these are the reforms for them, and they should support them.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Over the weekend, the Home Secretary was trailing this proposal as a British FBI. While it might indeed be their FBI, British it most definitely is not, as it applies only to England and Wales. In Scotland, we are immensely proud of our culture and ethos of policing by consent and the fact that we have the lowest crime rates in the whole of the UK. The last thing we want is this creeping

[Pete Wishart]

Americanisation. Can she say today—clearly and concisely—that this proposal will not apply to Scotland and no attempt will be made to foist it on us?

Shabana Mahmood: I do regret the hon. Gentleman's inability to move beyond party politics. As he will know—in fact, the Minister for Policing and Crime, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), has engaged with the Scottish Government today—the National Police Service will be UK-wide, but its powers and remit will vary between England and Wales and Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England and Wales it will have full operational powers and will be able to carry out its law enforcement activities, but in Scotland and Northern Ireland it will carry out operations only with the agreement of the legally designated authority, which is the position today.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Can she confirm that, as she consults on the new police force structures, local accountability, community engagement and place-based policing will remain central to the Government's approach?

Shabana Mahmood: I can, 100%.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It will not take much of a *Hansard* search for Members to see that many years ago I asked Baroness May, who was then Home Secretary, to do something very similar to this, but the devil will always be in the detail. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, West and South Yorkshire are far more densely populated than North Yorkshire, which is now a big chunk of my constituency. May I ask the Home Secretary who will be involved in the consultation on the smaller policing areas, and how much credence those people will be given—because this very much has to come down to local level and local councils—and may I also ask what scrutiny we, as local Members of Parliament, will be able to give that consultation? Ultimately, that is what it will all hinge on.

Shabana Mahmood: I know that the right hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in these affairs, and I will happily discuss some of the details of these proposals with him. I will announce the appointment of a reviewer in due course, and it will be for the reviewer and the supporting panel to set out how they intend to conduct the review, including the consultation. However, I absolutely take the right hon. Gentleman's point that these reforms will work if they have the buy-in and if they make sense based on geography. They will reflect that, and I will ensure that when I receive the reviewer's report, that is the same lens through which I will look at the proposals.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): Policing needs a stronger national centre, modern IT systems that actually work and can talk to each other, and much better mental health support for officers who are exposed to so much trauma. These reforms could deliver that, so I welcome those elements. However, I am sceptical about the licence to practise and the value that it might add, although I approach it with an open mind. Although I believe in having different routes into policing, I am

sceptical about direct entry at inspector rank specifically, given that it is such a crucial operational rank—and one that I myself have held. This has, after all, been tried unsuccessfully by the previous Government.

If policing reform is to be a success, it will be down to the implementation on the frontline—that is what really matters to the public—so the voices of those on the frontline must be a key part, and that cannot be possible through the rotten Police Federation, which only today was found to have unlawfully suspended elected officers for speaking up. Will the Home Secretary guarantee that she will take the voices of the frontline into account before making final decisions, and will she meet me to discuss the proposals?

Shabana Mahmood: I will absolutely take into account the views of the rank and file, and I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend. As for the Police Federation, the White Paper makes it clear that we are not happy with the status quo. The Policing Minister has met its representatives directly, and they know that if they do not improve quickly enough, I will not hesitate to bring forward further reforms to ensure that our rank and file police officers are better represented. My hon. Friend also mentioned direct entry. As he will know, Lord Blunkett is currently leading an independent commission on police leadership, and I will look at the proposals that he puts forward. The White Paper signals our interest in this model of direct entry, but, as has been noted, the devil is always in the detail and it is all about how these reforms are implemented. I hope that my hon. Friend and others will continue to keep an open mind as we develop our proposals further.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The White Paper states, on page 24:

"To build trust and increase accessibility, officers will also maintain a visible presence in local hubs, schools and community spaces".

May I ask the Home Secretary how that vision marries with the fact that in London, under the Met's "tough choices" programme, we are about to see the closure of the Twickenham police station front counter? We have already lost our specialist schools team and we have lost our specialist parks police, including those in Bushy Park in my constituency. Does this not show that the Home Secretary can make as many reforms to structures as she likes, but if they are not resourced properly, our constituents will not see the community policing that she is promising?

Shabana Mahmood: What the hon. Lady's constituents will see is the increase in neighbourhood police officers—we will have 3,000 in place by the end of March—and a named, contactable officer in every neighbourhood. The neighbourhood policing guarantee is the absolute bedrock for ensuring that communities, wherever they are—in London or other parts of the country—always have visible policing in their neighbourhoods.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and I pay tribute to all those who serve to keep us safe. In respect of the impact that this will have on Wales, can she assure me that she will consult all local partners—MPs, police forces, local government and the Welsh Government—in order to determine what local scrutiny of governance looks like in Wales as part of these reforms?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me assure my hon. Friend that the Policing Minister met representatives of the Welsh Government today, and we will continue those conversations. The independent review will take into account existing devolution and local governance arrangements, and I will happily ensure that he and others who are interested in this are kept updated as the review rolls out.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): My constituents are already concerned that Avon and Somerset constabulary is dominated by Bristol and that far too few resources are devoted to Somerset's smaller towns and villages. How will the Home Secretary ensure that her new, larger regional forces police our rural communities properly?

Shabana Mahmood: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there will be local policing areas within the new regional forces, with neighbourhood policing as the absolute bedrock of those local policing areas. I would not be bringing forward these reforms if I was not absolutely certain that we are absolutely protecting local policing in the set-up of the new model for policing, so that every area gets the type of policing it needs and deserves.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Last Friday I held a community meeting with Cumbria's police, fire and crime commissioner, David Allen. Since his election just 20 months ago, he has been focused on taking those officers who were forced into the back room under the last Government and putting them back on the frontline. Can the Home Secretary please reassure me, and our police, fire and crime commissioner, that the reforms she has outlined today will continue to strengthen frontline policing, particularly in rural areas such as Cumbria?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly powerful point. I can provide her with that reassurance, and the Policing Minister spoke to her police, fire and crime commissioner today.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Humberside force that polices my Brigg and Immingham constituency covers four local authorities and two separate mayoral authorities. Exactly what proportion of police funding is likely to come from the police precept, and how will it be divided up?

Shabana Mahmood: Those will be matters for the independent reviewer to advise on. They will look not only at the correct number of regional forces for England and Wales, but at the method of rolling out those police forces. I am sure we will be able to discuss those when the review reports in the summer.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): As a former police officer, I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. Under its current chief constable, Greater Manchester police has seen a resurgence and has become a highly performing police force that serves a growing and economically successful city region. That is in part because of a highly effective working partnership between Greater Manchester local authorities and the mayoral combined authority. Can the Home Secretary provide an assurance that the current structure, which is clearly working well, will not be altered?

Shabana Mahmood: It will be for the review to recommend what the new structure of the regional forces should look like, but let me pay tribute to the work of Greater Manchester police and the chief constable in particular. Greater Manchester is a very good example of a large force that is not burdened by significant national services. It is therefore able to concentrate on policing its local communities, and to do so very effectively. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Home Secretary chunters from a sedentary position, but he could do with learning a few lessons from Greater Manchester.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): In Greater Manchester we love a bit of drama. We have the longest-running soap opera in the world—"Coronation Street"—we have some nail-biting derby matches, and over the weekend there was some pretty high-octane speculation about whether the current person responsible for policing in the city region might be allowed to apply for another job. Where we do not want more drama, though, is in policing our communities. Could the Home Secretary share her thinking about how to preserve what works well in Greater Manchester—where the police force is coterminous with the mayoral authority and the 10 local authorities within it, enabling good, strong partnership working—so that my Hazel Grove constituents get the policing they deserve?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me reassure the hon. Lady that I am very much "No Drama Shabana". I have already paid fulsome tribute to Greater Manchester police, and I think some excellent work is taking place in that part of the world. I am sure that the reviewer, once appointed, will take into account good examples of local policing within a larger force structure, and I am sure there are many lessons to learn from Manchester.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her action. One local farmer described to me the crime he has been experiencing, with gates cut open, crops damaged, and quad bikes and 4x4s stolen. Because he lives close to the Bedfordshire border, the criminals just flee over the border, and Thames Valley police finds it very difficult to follow that up. Can she say how these reforms will improve the police presence and their response times in rural areas, and in particular how they will solve the problem of police forces not collaborating across borders?

Shabana Mahmood: The absolute bedrock of these reforms is local policing through the local police areas, which will be part of our proposed regional forces, with neighbourhood policing embedded within them. My hon. Friend will know that legislative changes are coming in to deal with some of the issues she raised about quad bikes specifically. The intention of all these reforms is to ensure that whether people live in a rural area or an urban city, as I do, they get an exceptional standard of service at both the neighbourhood level and the regional level, with national policing through the new National Police Service that will keep us all safe.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): We all want to see more effective and efficient policing, but I am not quite sure whether this White Paper will deliver it. Clearly, the devil will be in the detail. The Home Secretary will know that West Mercia police, covering Shropshire,

[Mark Pritchard]

Herefordshire and Worcestershire, is a high-performing police force. Can she reassure my constituents that she understands the difference between, for example, West Midlands urban policing—she obviously oversees it, but she also lives in that jurisdiction—and the rural and semi-rural policing of forces such as West Mercia police? In my experience, regional counter-terrorism policing works very well in the West Midlands, which oversees that for West Mercia police as well, and so does the National Crime Agency under its excellent leadership.

Finally on the reforms, can I ask the Home Secretary to review the effectiveness and efficiency of the 101 service, and as the Official Secrets Act covers some police officers, but not all, is this not an opportunity to ensure that all police officers are covered by a duty of confidentiality and secrecy?

Shabana Mahmood: I respect the right hon. Gentleman's views, but it is precisely because I understand the difference, which he raises, between areas such as those he represents and those I represent that I am bringing in this new model for policing. I believe this is the right model to ensure that it does not much matter where people are in the country—whether Shropshire or inner-city Birmingham—because they will always have excellent, high-quality neighbourhood policing, with a local force entirely committed to policing their local area day in, day out, and dealing with all the crimes that we know are tearing at the fabric of our communities; a regional force, which can do the specialist investigations at scale, so that they do not get a different standard of service depending on which part of the country they are in; and a National Police Service that I believe will bring in the NCA and counter-terrorism policing in a way that will make sure we are all kept safe. We are the only major country that does not have those two functionalities together, and I think it is the right change to make.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): To ask a nice short question, with a nice short answer, I call Mohammad Yasin.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Government's reform agenda in support of our mission for safer streets. In Bedfordshire, Operations Boson and Costello—tackling guns, gangs and organised drugs crime—have driven major arrests and a 15% fall in antisocial behaviour in Bedford town centre, backed by £7.3 million in special grants. Will the Home Secretary commit to maintaining these grants or to integrating them into core police funding to ensure that effective, evidence-based, local crime reduction programmes continue to protect our communities?

Shabana Mahmood: We will say more about specific funding in the coming days, so I will not be tempted to say any more about that now. The White Paper makes it clear that, as we roll out a new structure with regional forces, we will take the opportunity to review the police funding formula.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It must be right to look at this White Paper with an open mind, and I commend the Home Secretary's willingness to

listen. I will make two points for her to consider. First, in Royal Sutton Coldfield we are most concerned that neighbourhood policing—community policing—should be accountable, dependable, reliable and accessible. We know that all policing is, above all, local. Secondly, will she bear in mind that strong leadership is the key to policing? We need to find ways of bringing in fresh blood at senior levels. Will she make it easier for that to happen? In particular, there should be a way of encouraging senior officers in the armed forces to look at transferring to senior positions within the police.

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman is a Birmingham neighbour of mine; I always take what he has to say seriously. I agree with him on everything he said about neighbourhood policing and its responsiveness to the local communities that it serves. The Blunkett review will shortly report. It has been looking at leadership in policing, and I am sure that those recommendations will touch on some of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The litany of failures under the Conservatives of Staffordshire police is too long to mention in the short time that I have for this question. The Home Secretary mentioned local accountability being done through mayors and police and crime boards. Where we will have mayors in areas smaller than those of the likely police forces, can she say more about how she anticipates that accountability working? Can she also say what accountability there will be for local policing areas? In Stoke-on-Trent, we have a really good police service that works well with local partners, but that accountability could be lost if it is moved to big, regional figureheads.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me assure my hon. Friend that accountability at both national and local level is critical to these reforms. Once the review has reported on what the shape of those new regional forces should be, we will be able to say more on the exact relationship between areas where there is a crossover of mayoralities, as well as for local policing and crime boards. It is absolutely the intention that, at every level, there will be obvious accountability for local responsiveness and performance. That goes right up to the national level, where the Home Secretary will have new powers going forward.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—specifically, my role as the co-chair of the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group.

The White Paper recognises that changes to policing governance and crime prevention in Wales will have to reflect the existence of more than a quarter of a century of devolution. Meanwhile, three independent commissions have recommended that justice and policing be devolved to Wales. Considering that around 56% of our police funding in Wales already comes from devolved sources, does the Home Secretary not agree that this package of radical changes is exactly the right time for the devolution of policing to Wales?

Shabana Mahmood: No, I do not.

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the Home Secretary's statement. I would like to highlight two Government initiatives—Clear, Hold, Build and Operation Machinize—with our hard-working police force that are making a real difference in Ipswich. I can see parallels with some of the proposals that the Home Secretary has laid out for local policing. Although we received a welcome multimillion pound uplift in police funding, we have been majorly short-changed over the years, as one of the worst funded local authorities for more than a decade. Can the Home Secretary assure me that these changes will result in extra resources that we desperately need to continue the good progress that we have made in Ipswich and Suffolk?

Shabana Mahmood: We will say more about the funding settlement for the coming year in just a few days' time, but my hon. Friend will know—and I hope he will welcome—that every force, wherever they are in the country, will see a real-terms increase in funding. We propose to deal with the wider questions about the police funding formula once we have the review and we know what the recommendations are for regional forces going forward. That will be the appropriate time to review the police funding formula, which we will do.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The basic command unit that includes Torbay does not have services such as firearms officers or roads officers. Will the Home Secretary give clear guidance that all basic command units should include such disciplines?

Shabana Mahmood: Going forward, in the new model, it will be obvious where those disciplines sit, whether that is in the National Police Service or within regional forces, right down to the neighbourhood level. The intention of the new model is to ensure that, wherever someone is in the country, they get an excellent quality of service, including all the capabilities that are needed to keep our communities safe.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the improvements to policing that I am already seeing in Exeter thanks to a 13% increase in funding, with 171 officers newly on the streets across Devon and Cornwall. As the Secretary of State consults on police force structures, can she confirm that strong local policing and operational leadership will remain core to the service and that we remain committed to improving standards—important across Devon and Cornwall—both of which are key to public confidence in policing?

Shabana Mahmood: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Responsibility for high standards across the whole service will in future sit with the National Police Service, but in the meantime I am working closely with police leaders everywhere to ensure our standards are as strong as they can be, so that no matter where you are in the country, you get the quality of service that you deserve.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): On this Government's watch, in the west midlands we now face a £41 million black hole, which we are told will lead to a reduction in policing numbers. Under these new reforms, how will the Home Secretary ensure we see a net increase in the west midlands, particularly in my constituency?

Shabana Mahmood: Under this Government, we have increased funding to forces by close to £2 billion since being elected, and the funding settlement for 2026-27 is an increase of £796 million based on the year before. It is this Government who are funding police.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome in particular the commitment to visible and neighbourhood policing. Many towns across the country continue to face challenges with organised crime and county lines networks. How will the reforms help to tackle that systematically? May I ask the Home Secretary about the future role of violence reduction units, which are really important in providing new focused prevention work?

Shabana Mahmood: I will say more about specific funding decisions in the coming days, but let me reassure my hon. Friend that we absolutely recognise the role that violence reduction units play in dealing with knife crime in particular. Let me also reassure her that local police areas within regional forces will ensure that every community, wherever it is, gets the high standard of service that everyone deserves.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): My concern is about the regional and local levels. In South Northamptonshire, my villages already really struggle to get attention because it always goes to Northampton, Kettering and Corby. The regional system may make that worse, so how will the local areas actually work in practice? If they stick to existing sizes, I will have 96 parishes who still will not get attention, unless we exclude the major towns. Has the Home Secretary given thought to that?

Shabana Mahmood: It is precisely because I have given thought to the problems the hon. Lady raises that I brought the reforms forward in the first place. Within our regional forces we will have local police areas, which will be very clear when I bring forward legislation to this House, with the specific remit of policing their local communities.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): The recent National Audit Office report into police productivity highlights inconsistency in the operational and financial resilience of police forces, which suffered after the criminal inaction of the Conservative party. Will the Home Secretary set out how the National Police Service will enhance collaboration, while maintaining neighbourhood policing, including in my Kent villages and communities?

Shabana Mahmood: The National Police Service will take over many of the administrative functions that are currently done 43 different ways by chief constables across the country, including lifting the burden of procurement. That will now be done once through the National Police Service, saving time, preventing duplication and increasing the effectiveness of policing. Taken together, the reforms meet the challenges set out not just in that NAO report, but, I am sure, in many reports over the years. This new model of policing will deliver for local people, wherever they are, with a national service that can make sure we wipe out duplication and make the savings we need so that we can reinvest them in the frontline.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Will the Home Secretary give us some clarity on the bespoke legal framework on police AI, please? Will its scope be commendably narrow, getting police use of facial recognition under control while clearly outlawing other uses, which would match the EU's AI Act, or will it be too narrow, leaving other public authorities, such as potentially the Border Force, local authorities and the private sector, in the ungoverned wild west of uses that we see now?

Shabana Mahmood: We are very much focused just on policing and we are consulting on those matters as we speak.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): In my part of the world, people who get in touch with me about crime raise four major issues: car crime, county lines, antisocial behaviour and retail crime. The first two are often caused by criminal networks that extend beyond Staffordshire, and into the west midlands and further beyond. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the reforms are aimed at ensuring there is a regional response to those cross-border crimes, allowing local police to focus on antisocial behaviour and retail crime?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is 100% right—that is exactly the intention of the reforms, and it is how we will ensure that we have a new model for policing that can serve every community and deal effectively with every type of crime.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): There are a lot of things to welcome in this statement, but police licence to practise is probably not one of them. I say this because other trades and professions that have licencing, annual appraisal, or periodic revalidation have found that it simply becomes a time-sapping industry. I am sure that is not the Home Secretary's plan for the police, particularly since my constituents want our police to be on the frontline and dealing with online fraud, not ticking boxes.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will work closely with the police as we develop the new licence to practise. We will obviously want to strike the right balance between ensuring that our officers are up to date on training and investing in their skills, but not creating a bureaucracy that then gets in the way. At the moment, we already have quite a bureaucracy when it comes to training. It is right that we move forward to a more professional model by having this licence, but we will consult and work with policing as we roll it out.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Those responsible for organised crime, fraud and terrorism do not operate within the boundaries of local police forces, so I welcome a joined-up, national approach to those types of crime. However, residents in Derby also want more visible policing in our city centre and local communities, and that is what we have been working to deliver. Can the Home Secretary tell us more about how the reforms will empower local forces to respond more effectively to everyday crime and antisocial behaviour?

Shabana Mahmood: Dealing with everyday crime and antisocial behaviour is the reason for the reforms. The new regional forces will undertake specialist investigations, ensuring that we have the same standards of service all

over the country. Within them, from local police areas, right down to policing at the neighbourhood level, we will ensure we can deal with exactly the types of crime that my hon. Friend raised, which we know are rising in number. It is critical that we deal with them, and that is the absolute bedrock of our neighbourhood policing pledge, where we are ensuring that every neighbourhood in every community is policed properly, effectively, and in a way that reassures the public.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Thames Valley is already a large police force, where our superb police officers and staff struggle to balance resources effectively, even with local command units now across rural areas like my own and the bigger cities, such as Oxford and Milton Keynes. Given that it is such a large force—and that right now it finds itself with a budget settlement £9 million lower than expected—and given the commitment from the Home Office only to fund 40% of new recruits, what confidence can we have that the Government will adequately fund bigger forces?

Shabana Mahmood: The reforms in the White Paper are fully funded. Let me reassure the hon. Member that every force in the country will see a real-terms increase in its funding in the new police settlement. The hon. Member raises the challenges seen by Thames Valley police and across the country, but the reason we are rolling out this model of policing is to have a better balance between neighbourhood policing, local police areas, regional forces and the new National Police Service.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, which I hope will deliver a more joined-up approach to tackling some of the most serious crimes. However, we know that the police still have significant work to do in rebuilding public trust. Will the Home Secretary outline how the reforms will help raise standards, increase numbers and strengthen public confidence in our police?

Shabana Mahmood: I reassure my hon. Friend that we have already made changes on vetting, learning lessons from some of the cases where things have gone wrong. It is our expectation that the police will provide a very high standard of service, and we will invest in staff to ensure that they deliver the standards expected by all our communities, building public trust not costing public confidence in policing. It is absolutely the intention of the reforms to ensure that we have a police service that we can all be proud of.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am concerned that a merger of Surrey police with neighbouring forces will divert resources away from communities in Surrey. On a busy Saturday night, Reigate will inevitably lose out to Reading. What reassurance can the Secretary of State provide to my constituents?

Shabana Mahmood: I do not accept that areas will miss out under the new model of policing, because ensuring that we have a model that can deliver for every type of community and deal with every type of crime is exactly the point of the reforms.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I welcome this statement. In Bracknell Forest, our neighbourhood policing teams have been listening to residents' concerns over e-bikes and off-road bikes, and have taken targeted

action to clamp down on this kind of antisocial behaviour, although it is not perfect and there is still more to do. Does the Home Secretary agree that neighbourhood-level policing, driven by community concerns, should be the new model of policing?

Shabana Mahmood: I 100% agree with my hon. Friend. I welcome the good work that has already taken place in his area, although I know there is more to do. The changes that we are bringing in will improve our ability to meet the challenges faced by his community and communities across the country.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I welcome the commitment to police funding reform. Dorset is the second worst funded police force in the country and has a much higher proportion of local funding, with 50% funded by the precept. Dorset MPs and the police and crime commissioner wrote to the Home Secretary in November, and we want to push for a reply. What assurances can we be given that seasonality will be factored into the new funding formula?

Shabana Mahmood: I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets an answer to the letter she sent along with colleagues. Once we have completed the review into the new shape of regional forces, we will announce plans on the review of the police funding formula.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the Government's focus on funding for neighbourhood police patrols, which has enabled Thames Valley police to form a new anti-shoplifting unit in Reading. Retail crime is still far too frequent and blatant in our shops. Will the Secretary of State or her Ministers come to visit the newly opened Reading police station in my constituency and meet our local shop staff and police officers to help them to tackle the scourge of shoplifting?

Shabana Mahmood: Just a few days ago, I was out meeting neighbourhood police officers who deal with retail crime in Lambeth; I am sure that either the Minister for Policing or I will avail ourselves of a visit to Reading as well.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Police Service of Northern Ireland is currently excluded from the counter-terrorism policing grant of about £1 billion a year, which is accessible to GB forces. Now that counter-terrorism is being looked after by the National Police Service, will the Police Service of Northern Ireland be able to access some of that funding?

Shabana Mahmood: Again, the Policing Minister met representatives from the Northern Ireland Government. The legal basis for how counter-terror policing works will not change under the new National Police Service, but I will look at what the hon. Gentleman says about funding specifically.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Communities in Kent are pleased to see that funding for police next year will be 20% higher than in the final year of the previous Government, with a target for 43 new neighbourhood police officers across the county to police our streets and rebuild community policing after years of neglect.

Does the Home Secretary agree it is crucial that the White Paper rebuilds trust between communities and police not just in Kent but across the country, so that the public can have confidence that a police person will be there when they need them?

Shabana Mahmood: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a powerful point: in the end, policing is a public service. It is essential that we maintain public confidence in our policing and that we are also sure that the standard of service we get from our police is the same no matter where we are in the country.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I have raised in the House a number of times the police allocation formula and how it impacts Cambridgeshire, which is the fourth worst funded force in the country. Could the Home Secretary outline how the formula will be changed to reflect the division of tasks between the National Police Service and regional forces? I heard what she said about rural crime and neighbourhood policing. The rural crime action team in Cambridgeshire, although incredibly under-resourced, is very effective. This seems like a fantastic opportunity to try to restructure rural crime action teams to tackle hare coursing and machinery theft, rather than neighbourhood policing in rural areas. Lastly, on pay, local police officers have raised concerns with me around things like the application of overtime and the adjustment bank, and of course the south-east allowance for forces in Cambridgeshire.

Shabana Mahmood: Once the review's work on recommendations for the number of new regional forces has completed in the summer, I will set out further proposals on how the police funding formula needs to be reviewed and updated to reflect the changes in the new model of policing. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on that point, and I am sure we will debate these issues many times in the House over the coming months and years. On rural crime and overtime, I can offer him a meeting with the Policing Minister to go through the detail of those issues.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I offer a cautious welcome to the proposals. Reorganisations and mergers are only effective if they create a more efficient system that reinvests savings into the frontline. Under the Tories, Hartlepool saw cuts to the frontline, including to our custody suite. Does the Home Secretary agree that the proposals will only be successful if such cuts are reversed?

Shabana Mahmood: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the only reason I am bringing forward these proposals is to improve our police service across every part of the country, with neighbourhood policing as the absolute bedrock. We will have local police areas, regional police forces and a National Police Service, so that we can deal with every type of community and every type of crime effectively in this country. We want confidence in our policing to be high no matter where people live. My hon. Friend cautiously welcomed the proposals, but I hope that he will consider the detail and support their delivery over the months and years to come.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Reducing the number of police forces to 12 mega-forces risks rural forces once more being neglected and under-resourced. Since 2023, the cost of rural crime has tripled

[Sarah Dyke]

year on year, while Avon and Somerset's rural crime team is vastly under-resourced, leaving communities throughout Glastonbury and Somerton feeling frustrated and vulnerable at a time when organised crime in Somerset is surging. Will the Home Secretary commit to a countryside copper guarantee and install a dedicated rural crime team in every force to ensure that all rural crimes are treated with the seriousness that they deserve?

Shabana Mahmood: I think we have done better than that with our neighbourhood policing pledge. Every area will get neighbourhood police officers, and that includes having a named, contactable officer in every neighbourhood in the country. That means that whether someone lives in a rural or urban area, they will get the same standard of service. I would hope that the hon. Lady would welcome that.

The hon. Lady gives the number of 12 for the regional forces. She will know that there will be a review—I will announce an independent reviewer in due course—which will report in the summer on what the correct number of regional forces should be. I ask that she waits until the review recommends the number of forces, and I look forward to discussing these matters with her then.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. I know from my time working at the Home Office that, for some time now, the structure of policing has not been fit for the future. The threat that crime poses has evolved; our police must do so too. The Home Secretary's reforms will help to deal with the most sophisticated crimes, but could she explain to my constituents how they will be a win for tackling local crime and support operations like "clear, hold, build" in Colindale, which has massively reduced crime in that area?

Shabana Mahmood: The new model for policing will ensure that wherever people live in the country, whatever community they are part of, they will have a high standard of service. The new model will ensure in future the police are capable of dealing with every type of crime, whether that is going after terrorists and serious and organised crime through the National Police Service; dealing with specialist investigations to bring murderers, rapists and other serious offenders to justice; or dealing with the local issues that my hon. Friend raised through local police areas.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I would like to invite the Home Secretary to talk rubbish with me for a moment. Organised waste crime has been described by the former chief executive of the Environment Agency as "the new narcotics". A recent BBC investigation found that there are more than 500 illegal waste sites operating across the UK, including super-sites like that next to the River Cherwell in my constituency. Rural communities bear the brunt of this crime, yet the Environment Agency's joint waste crime unit cannot cope with the scale of this criminality. Given that this is serious and organised crime, will the Secretary of State ask the new National Police Service to take responsibility for tackling major waste crime and organised illegal dumping?

Shabana Mahmood: As a Birmingham MP, I can very much relate to the hon. Member's concerns about waste, fly-tipping and the possible involvement of organised crime. To the extent that it involves serious and organised crime, some of that will of course fall within the remit of the National Police Service going forward. These are important issues, and I would be happy to arrange for either myself or the Policing Minister to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I particularly welcome the measures to ensure that warranted police officers go where we need them: on to our streets and into our communities. Can I draw particular attention to the intention to scrap the failed police uplift model—a policy that is about as Boris Johnson as it gets? Although it did recruit officers, they often ended up sat behind desks performing roles more suited to experienced police staff. Does the Home Secretary agree that scrapping police uplift will ensure that officers are more likely to be out fighting crime than sat behind desks?

Shabana Mahmood: Numbers matter, of course, but what matters more is what those officers are doing, and that is exactly what these reforms are about.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): One resident from Uplyme on the border of Dorset and Devon wrote to me about a burglary that she had experienced. She reported it to Dorset police, who told her that it was for the police in Devon to pick up and that her case would be passed on to Devon, but days later she had heard nothing more. Can the Home Secretary assure us that the mergers she has described today will mean that cases, and indeed residents, will no longer be bounced between neighbouring police forces?

Shabana Mahmood: Yes. The point of the new model for policing is to make sure that victims of crime get a good standard of service for whatever type of crime they have been victims of, no matter where they are in the country.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and welcome the reforms that she has set out. I was pleased to see a mention of direct entry—although, as I say that, I realise that my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) might never pass to me in football again. Can she set out in more detail how this might look in a modern police force like Harlow's?

Shabana Mahmood: The White Paper signals our interest in the direct entry model for increasing the range of people working within our police service. Lord Blunkett will be reporting shortly on his review of policing leadership, and I am sure that those recommendations will deal with many of the issues that my hon. Friend has raised. I look forward to receiving them and implementing them in due course.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Home Secretary has been reasonably clear today that the National Police Service would be UK-wide, dealing with counter-terrorism, organised crime and fraud, but she then said that there could be an opt-out—or maybe it is an opt-in—in respect of regions like Northern Ireland. Will she explain that?

Who would exercise that opt-out? Would it be the Police Service of Northern Ireland? Would it be the Northern Ireland Executive? Where would that leave us in respect of the National Crime Agency, which is ultimately to be absorbed into this National Police Service? Could it continue to exist in Northern Ireland if there was not the opt-in, which would be essential?

Shabana Mahmood: The Policing Minister has met representatives of the Northern Ireland Government today, and I will happily meet the hon. and learned Gentleman and other hon. Members from Northern Ireland to make our proposals clear. The remit of the National Police Service will be UK-wide, but its powers and the remit specifically between England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will vary depending on the arrangements that we already have in place. I will happily discuss this with him in detail.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and I very much welcome the UK-wide National Police Service. The papers over the weekend referred to a “British FBI”, and I am reminded that national and international crime gangs are involved in terrorism, drug smuggling, people trafficking and child sexual abuse. They traverse all the regional borders of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and in Northern Ireland we also have the border with the Republic of Ireland. Can the Secretary of State please confirm that Northern Ireland will be fully included in that police force and that it will not be an England and Wales-only force, as that would in no way increase domestic security?

Shabana Mahmood: In Scotland and Northern Ireland, the National Police Service will be able to carry out operations only with the agreement of the legally designated authority. That reflects the current arrangements for serious and organised crime and counter-terror policing in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. I will be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on any other points of detail.

Armed Forces Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Defence Committee, The Armed Forces Covenant, HC 572, and the Government response, HC 1034; oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 18 March 2025, on Women in the Armed Forces follow-up, HC 404; correspondence between the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Defence Committee, on the Armed Forces Bill, reported to the House on 21 January and 20 January.]

5.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a rare privilege to open this debate. This is only the second ever Labour Armed Forces Bill, yet the provenance of this legislation reaches all the way back to the Bill of Rights, and more than three centuries on, granting authority to maintain our armed forces remains one of the most important—if not the most important—formal constitutional responsibilities of Members of this House.

This is a substantial Bill—a reflection of just how much the world has changed over the past five years. It is more dangerous and much less certain, and this new era of threat demands a new era for defence. That is why our Government have committed an extra £5 billion to defence spending this year and committed to the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, switching funding directly from overseas aid. It is why we are proposing, through this Bill, to increase our warfighting readiness and homeland security, and why we are putting the men and women in our armed forces at the heart of defence plans.

In the coming years, we will ask more of our service personnel, and it is only right that they expect more of their Government. The Bill takes significant steps to improve service life and strengthen the bond between society and our forces. At the general election, we pledged to renew the nation’s contract with those who serve, and I am proud to say that we are delivering on that promise: the largest pay increase for our armed forces in more than two decades, expanded wraparound childcare support, an independent Armed Forces Commissioner and a funded plan for a safe, decent home for every forces family. Through this legislation, we continue the work of renewing that commitment, with better housing, better services and better protections for those who serve.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that we have a good turnout in the House tonight to debate the Armed Forces Bill, which affects the quality of life and the service of the brave people who keep us safe? Yet again when we debate this vital subject, not a single Reform Member of Parliament is in the Chamber. Is it not wrong that these people wrap themselves in the flag, but never come along to defend the people who actually protect that flag?

John Healey: There is a general support for the right hon. Gentleman’s comments on both sides of the House. This Armed Forces Bill, as I will go on to say, commands all-party support, and it is a shame that we have not got all parties in this House to demonstrate that.

[John Healey]

The bond between the British people and those sworn to defend them is a proud part of our nation's security. The purpose of the armed forces covenant is to strengthen that bond. The policy and principles underpinning the covenant were first set out in a Command Paper in 2008 under the last Labour Government, and to this day—this relates to the right hon. Gentleman's point—the covenant maintains strong cross-party support across this House and across the UK.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, welcome the armed forces covenant and the legal duty that it will place on devolved nations. Of course, while Wales has 5% of the population, we contribute 7% to Army strength. Could the Secretary of State tell me, therefore, whether any extra new money will be coming to Wales to support the covenant, particularly in the NHS, which is of course so beneficial to veterans?

John Healey: I welcome the leader of Plaid in this House welcoming the Bill and her support for the forces. She is right that the record of the Welsh nation in supporting our armed forces and recruiting some of the best of our armed forces is long and proud. She also knows that the Barnett formula has already delivered a record increase in NHS spending in Wales, and I will go on to speak about the role of the devolved nations in the implementation of the covenant.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Just on devolved issues, will the Secretary of State explain why the armed forces covenant is being extended to local authorities everywhere except Northern Ireland? Why are the councils in Northern Ireland not also included in the Bill? Why are they excluded?

John Healey: Just as the Armed Forces Act 2001 required a degree of discussion, agreement and devolution to the devolved Governments, including in Northern Ireland, so too will this Bill. Our officials are in deep discussion with Northern Ireland Office officials. The Minister for the Armed Forces has written to Ministers in the devolved Administrations, and I am confident that, following the passage of the Bill, we will have arrangements in place allowing the proud armed forces covenant to be fully implemented in legislation at every level of government: the UK national Government, devolved Governments and local authorities across the UK.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Further to the previous intervention, the covenant is predicated on veterans not being disadvantaged by their service, as the Secretary of State will know. However, Northern Ireland veterans will be subject to records that do not apply to civilian terrorists. Will he confirm that there will be no disadvantage to Northern Ireland veterans, and that the covenant will apply to them as originally intended?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman knows that he is speaking about the legislative provisions of a different Bill that is before the House. We will deal with that and strengthen protections for veterans. Successive Governments have failed because it has been too difficult, but, with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for

Northern Ireland leading the way, we will finally have a settlement that allows the full implementation of the Good Friday agreement.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that one job I did before coming to this place was to work at a homelessness charity. It was particularly difficult to see homeless veterans coming to me in need of support. In my constituency, we have nearly 2,000 veterans. Will he outline what additional support the Government will give to home our veterans, and how we will support them with mental health issues, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. The short answer is that there is record funding to support the mental health and wellbeing of veterans; there are record levels of support for veterans' groups, with a new wave of Valour centres shortly to be announced by the Minister for Veterans and People; and there is, of course, a commitment to ensure that no veteran loses out on their right to social housing because of the local connection test, which was in place until this Government removed it after the election.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I take the Secretary of State back to the earlier exchange about Northern Ireland veterans? I have some good news and some bad news for him. The good news is that I strongly suspect that, at the end of all the raked-up trials held against Northern Ireland veterans, none will be convicted. The bad news is that that is not the purpose of doing all this; the purpose is to put them through a nightmarish ordeal that allows republican terrorists to rewrite history. He should not be quite so satisfied with the state of the Government's legislation regarding Northern Ireland veterans. It is a disgrace, and it is tearing up something that was working and that could have worked, according to four professors of law who gave testimony to a previous Defence Committee.

John Healey: I know about the right hon. Gentleman's good news and bad news. We will return to that discussion when we return to Committee stage of the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. When we do so, we will have in place strengthened protections for veterans, and that will be a result of the detailed discussions that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, military leaders, the Prime Minister and I have had in recent weeks with representatives of the forces and special forces, and with former military chiefs, who have a point of view on this—

Mr Francois: Ah! Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

John Healey: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman for the last time.

Mr Francois: The Secretary of State mentions such a wide spread, but when we debated the remedial order last Wednesday, over 100 Labour MPs abstained, including the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, the Armed Forces Minister and two thirds of the Cabinet. If it is such a good idea, why did the Secretary of State not come here and vote for it?

John Healey: Quite honestly, I was unable to be in the House at the time. That is an important piece of legislation because it paves the way for the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. It removes the immunity that the right hon. Gentleman's Government tried to put in place for terrorists. They removed the right of 200 families whose loved ones were killed by terrorists in the troubles to get the same access to truth, information and a degree of justice. Now, if the House will permit me, I will return to the Armed Forces Bill, which is the legislation before us this afternoon.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on doing so much to bring housing back under control and to upgrade it, as well as on the roll-out of Valour centres—the Links charity in Llanelli has put in an excellent application. I also welcome the fact that the Bill will strengthen the armed forces covenant by ensuring that it covers all public services. There is good will across the country, in devolved Governments and in councils, but how will we ensure that, right across all public services, including those that are devolved in Wales, the covenant actually delivers for veterans? We want them to have the very best of services in all circumstances.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We will do that in two ways. First, we are already doing it in discussions with other Departments and with the devolved Administrations, as well as by working with councils where we can. Secondly, we will do it by issuing guidance and sharing best practice, and we will encourage the development of the rest to meet the very best, so that we reduce the degree of postcode lottery and patchwork support for veterans across the UK.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP) *rose*—

John Healey: I will give way first to my hon. Friend and then to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), and then I will move on.

Gareth Thomas: My right hon. Friend is making an extremely good speech. He will recognise that one way in which we have the backs of current military personnel, as well as of veterans, is by offering, through the Joining Forces partnership, access to a credit union for military personnel. Will he assure me that nothing in the Bill will prevent the further promotion of the benefits of credit union membership to even more military personnel, and will he or a Minister meet me to explore how we might promote the Joining Forces partnership even further?

John Healey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has been a ceaseless campaigner for co-operative and credit union provision throughout his career in this House. I will certainly ensure that he meets the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is in charge of the Bill. If my hon. Friend permits me, I will take this as an early indication of his interest in serving on the Bill Committee, where he could press his arguments on the value of credit unions to members of the armed forces and veterans.

Robin Swann: The Secretary of State talks about a patchwork quilt and a postcode lottery. Operation Restore supports military veterans with their physical and mental health, but Northern Ireland-resident veterans do not have the same access in devolved institutions—the likes of the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt orthopaedic hospital. Will the legislation enable Northern Ireland-resident veterans to access the services that are accessible to English veterans?

John Healey: As the hon. Gentleman knows, a large number of the services on which our forces veterans depend come under the jurisdiction of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Government and the councils in that area. They have a strong and doughty champion in the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, with whom the hon. Gentleman works closely. I encourage him to make his arguments not just in the House, but back in Northern Ireland with exactly the bodies that have responsibility for the provision of services that matter so much to veterans.

To come back to the question of cross-party support, not just in the House but across the UK, 14,000 companies and other organisations are signatories to the covenant, and almost every council in every part of the UK has an armed forces champion to promote the interests and the adoption of the covenant. In opposition, we supported the previous Government when they brought the covenant partly into law through the 2001 Act. With this Bill, we complete the job. We are extending the armed forces covenant across central Government, devolved Governments and at local level, fulfilling a promise that we made in our manifesto. It means that social care, employment support and other public services will be legally required to consider the unique circumstances faced by forces personnel and their families and by veterans.

The Government have ensured that NHS England now operates a single point of contact via integrated care boards. The service pupil premium supports 76,000 pupils, and the local connection test has been removed so that no veteran can be disqualified from social housing in their local area because they have been living elsewhere in the armed forces. But we know that the covenant can do more, and with this Bill it will do more.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State's comments about social care, but an awful lot of care in this country is provided by family carers, who can often be serving personnel or the children of serving personnel. Does he consider that the Bill as currently drafted does everything possible to support unpaid carers who face a greater postcode lottery as they move round the country as a result of their service?

John Healey: The Bill should ensure that if forces families are in such a situation as unpaid carers there is no penalty or disqualification for having an armed forces connection and experience. When they are looking for support from local services, those services will in future have to take into account the unique experience and circumstances that those families and individuals face.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State refers to the local connection test. Will he acknowledge that the removal of that test was initiated by the previous Government? That is not

[*Dr Andrew Murrison*]

the impression he gave in his initial remarks, although it is certainly the case. Secondly, is it his intention to allocate service housing going forward on the basis primarily of rank or primarily on need?

John Healey: On the local connection test, as with a lot of things, the previous Government talked a lot but we have got on and done a lot of those things, and the Bill takes that intent and determination several steps further.

Let me move on to housing, because behind many of the men and women who serve our country are husbands, wives, partners and children, who support them in their service, and who bear the weight of their absence during deployments. For those families, the nation has a moral duty to provide safe and decent housing. As recent Governments failed, satisfaction with military family homes fell in 2023 to its lowest level on record. I, and many other Members of the House have seen why: damp, mould, broken boilers, ill-fitting doors and windows, even a hole in the wall of a children's bedroom. None of us would tolerate our families living in such conditions, and neither should those in our armed forces. It is a betrayal of service, and the crisis in defence housing tracks back directly to perhaps one of the worst ever privatisation deals.

Under the terms of the Annington sale in 1996, the taxpayer picked up all costs for maintenance, repairs and rent, but all the benefits of development opportunities or increases in property value were surrendered to a private equity fund. When I was appointed Defence Secretary 18 months ago, that deal was costing the taxpayer over £600,000 a day. Just six months after the election, our Government reversed that, bringing more than 36,000 military family homes back into public ownership so that we can now plan and invest in the future. Twelve months after the election, we delivered our consumer charter, guaranteeing what should never have been in question: higher move-in standards, quicker repairs, a named housing officer for every family, and renovations of the very worst homes, 1,000 of which were completed ahead of schedule before Christmas. Our charter also tore up rules that should never have been written, so that forces families now have freedom to decorate their own homes, and keep pets without seeking permission.

In November we published our defence housing strategy, and our plan for the wholesale renewal of service family estate, backed by a landmark 10-year investment programme, totalling over £9 billion. All told, nine in 10 of all forces family homes will be upgraded, renewed or rebuilt. Less than three months after the defence housing strategy was published, the Bill delivers a central recommendation of that strategy: the creation of a specialist arm's length organisation, the Defence Housing Service. With the plan, the investment and now the Defence Housing Service, we will end the scandal of service families living in substandard housing, and we will deliver the homes the country needs. When Labour said at the election that we would stand on the side of our armed forces, this is what we meant.

All those who serve our country rightly expect to be able to do so with the fullest respect, and they must certainly be able to do so free from any fear or abuse. Last year we commissioned and published the UK's

first military-wide survey into sexual harassment. We did that to provide for the first time a no-holds-barred baseline to confront the problem fully. The results were sobering, concluding that two thirds of our servicewomen and one third of our servicemen experience some form of sexualised behaviour. Let me be clear: such behaviour has no place in our armed forces, just as it has no place in any workplace—not now, not ever.

The previous Government took steps to improve victim and witness care. We can see some of the benefits of those steps, but it is also clear that more must be done. We have established a new, single tri-service complaints team to take the most serious complaints out of the single-service chain of command for the first time. We have launched a pioneering new prevention programme in Catterick and Plymouth, working directly with young recruits on our bases, to prevent unacceptable behaviours. Through the Bill we go further to strengthen protections for our service personnel, and ensure that perpetrators have nowhere to hide.

Together, provisions in the Bill will make available in the service justice system a comprehensive range of protection orders, including for sexual harm, domestic abuse and stalking. It will strengthen supervision of offenders on release from prison, and ensure that service restraining orders are enforceable in the criminal justice system once a defendant has left the armed forces. It will place a duty on the Secretary of State to issue a code of practice, setting out the services that victims can expect to receive in the service justice system, and it will allow victims to choose whether they wish to have their case heard in a civil or military court, although the formal decision will be taken by the prosecutor.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am greatly encouraged—I think we all are—by what the Secretary of State has said about victims. I am conscious that sometimes we have young people—perhaps aged 16, 17 or 18—joining the forces and finding themselves under pressure, away from home and from their parents, and they might be vulnerable to start with. It is important that a structure is in place where they can make a complaint, and that that complaint will be heard, not lost somewhere in the system of those above them, whether they are officers, sergeants or corporals. Is looking after those vulnerable people who need help at the beginning, and access to people who understand their circumstances, part of this process?

John Healey: Like the hon. Gentleman I am deeply proud that our armed forces will take 16-year-olds and give them skills and discipline, and change the course of their career and future life. If they suffer any of the abuse and harassment that I am talking about, the tri-service complaints team will take that out of the single chain of command. Cross-party support has allowed us to legislate as a House for an independent Armed Forces Commissioner, who has the power to deal with complaints and to launch inquiries if they pick up a pattern of problems, so safeguards and protections are in place. I hope that will give more confidence to young people who are looking at a future career in the armed forces, as well as to their families, who want to see them launched well in their lives.

Make no mistake: these are substantial reforms, reflecting both the seriousness of the problem and our resolve to root it out. These measures are a result of the Ministry

of Defence being part of a cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy for the first time ever, and Ministers and chiefs being united and determined for the first time to play a part in this Government's central mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): On that point, will the Secretary of State give way?

John Healey: I will, but it will be the last intervention that I take.

Helen Maguire: I commend the progress made in the Bill on violence against women and girls. Is the Secretary of State aware that there may be a gap in relation to Royal Navy ships? Commanding officers can administer justice for disciplinary offences and some criminal conduct offences through the summary hearing process, where they investigate the allegation and determine whether the accused is guilty. They are potentially carrying out very serious investigations, which could be into things like serious sexual assaults, in the absence of a warrant card holder. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether that issue is being addressed? Will he explore the possibility of having investigation-trained military police on those ships, which are often at sea for more than six months?

John Healey: The hon. Lady has made a detailed point very clearly—perhaps it is another bid to be a member of the Bill Committee. It is exactly the sort of issue that should be examined in detail at that point in the passage of the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you would be the first to endorse the fact that the first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe. In our age, drones are rapidly changing the nature of war and homeland defence. It is essential that we have the power and authority to protect defence sites from any current or future threats. In October, I promised to introduce new legal powers to bring down unidentified drones over UK military bases. The Bill will create a regime that will allow defence personnel to better detect, deter and defeat drones that pose a threat to defence property and activities.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On that point, will the Secretary of State give way?

John Healey: I will not. I am conscious of the number of hon. Members who want to speak, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to make a contribution.

The reforms are designed to be both flexible and future-proof, allowing defence to adapt to the ever changing and increasing threats. If the strategic defence review were boiled down to one core objective, it would be to raise the level of warfighting readiness in order to strengthen our deterrence.

Crucial to achieving a sustainable, efficient and rapid potential transition to war will be our reserve forces. In 2024, more than one in five troops training Ukrainian forces on Operation Interflex—the British-led multinational military operation supporting the Ukraine armed forces—were reservists. They are an integral part of the operation and, very often, of the deployment and exercising of our forces. The Bill will make it easier to mobilise

personnel earlier, ahead of the outbreak of war. It will align the time for which recall applies across all three services to 18 years, and it will increase the maximum age at which reservists can be recalled, from 55 to 65.

At the moment, we have cyber-operators, trainers, medics and translators who are being shown the door to the military only because of an arbitrary age limit. They are men and women who will continue their profession in civilian life for many years after they are forced out of the military. That makes no sense for the reservists or for our nation's security, so through the Bill we must act to build a major boost to our readiness to fight during this era of increasing threat.

I will end by recalling our manifesto at the election, which said:

“At the heart of our security are the men and women who serve and risk their lives for this country.”

The Bill gives legislative force to that Labour principle, with better housing, better services and better protections to those who serve. We pledged to renew the nation's contract with those who serve. Through this Bill, we are delivering exactly that, backing those who sacrifice so much, making Britain safer, delivering for defence and delivering for Britain. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.15 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a privilege to open for the Opposition on Second Reading of the Armed Forces Bill, given the global circumstances in which we find ourselves, and the sense that the ability of our armed forces to stand up to renewed threats has not been at issue to this degree for many years.

Before turning to the Bill, I want to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks, and those of the Opposition, to a particularly special group of people: those members of the British armed forces who served in Afghanistan, in the cause of freedom and in the wake of the horrific 9/11 attack on our closest ally, the United States of America. The 9/11 attack was not just an attack against the US mainland; it was also an attack on ourselves, and not only because of the 67 British lives that were lost when the twin towers were hit, but because our western way of life seemed to be under direct attack.

So I am glad that President Trump followed his wholly inaccurate and misjudged remarks about the service of our personnel in Afghanistan with praise for our military, but their contribution should never have been in doubt. Given the immense pain that his words will have caused the loved ones of those who were lost in Afghanistan, we send a message to those families today that theirs was far from a loss in vain; it was a just cause, where British soldiers played as much a part as anyone else, and one for which we will be forever grateful.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for those words. Will he associate himself with the Canadian, Danish, French, Australian and New Zealand armed forces, and those from many other countries around the world, who served alongside us in that NATO operation? They stood by us, even though article 5 does not apply to Australia or New Zealand, and lost troops in combat, yet I did not hear an apology for them.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his service in Afghanistan, and that of other colleagues present in the Chamber. He is absolutely right. When we debated the President's remarks about Greenland, I made the point on the media round that Denmark had the highest per capita losses in Afghanistan, and the other nations all suffered. We all fought together because it was a common cause.

Chris Vince: As the shadow Secretary of State knows, I always try to find cross-party consensus. Will he join me in praising Private Robert Foster, who was from Harlow and who lost his life in Afghanistan? Members from across the House had constituents who lost their lives serving this country, and we should all be incredibly proud of them.

James Cartlidge: I echo what the hon. Gentleman says. I pay tribute to his constituent and to all those who sacrificed so much in that campaign.

Jim Shannon: I thank the shadow Minister for what he has said, but let us be honest that President Trump should never have made that statement, no matter what. My constituent Channing Day gave her life in Helmand province, and I think of Colin Thompson, who was invalided out of the Army because of an injury on the frontline in Helmand. They are just two out of many. Does the hon. Gentleman not feel, as I feel for my families, hurt by what President Trump said? President Trump has apologised, but he should never have said it in the first place.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head, and I need add nothing further. We all agree and we pay tribute to all those who served in Afghanistan.

Moving on to the Bill, given its necessity to ensure that we have functioning armed forces, we will not seek to divide the House. Indeed, on national security, we should always strive for consensus where possible, as has particularly been the case on Ukraine. We have presented a united Parliament to our adversaries, which should be a source of national pride. However, as with any major piece of legislation, there will be many issues of detail that we will want to tease out in detailed scrutiny in Committee.

While we inevitably have concerns about the underlying issue of defence funding, there are many aspects of the Bill that we support in principle. In particular, I welcome the Government's commitment to strengthening the armed forces covenant. Having been the party that first introduced the covenant, it will be of no surprise that we support moves to strengthen both its purpose and delivery. That said, when it comes to our veterans, we remain resolute in our total opposition to the Government's policy in respect of those who served in Operation Banner to protect all of us from terrorism. The House surely cannot ignore the fact that as we debate this Bill, which is designed to strengthen our armed forces, Labour continues in parallel with its plan to repeal our legacy Act—the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023—and threaten a new era of vexatious claims against former soldiers. It is fair to say that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) will say more about that in his winding-up speech.

On the Bill's proposals relating to the service justice system, there is recognition on both sides of the House that we have massive lessons to learn. Work to improve the system began under the previous Government, as the Secretary of State recognised. After publication of the Atherton report, which identified cultural failings in the forces, the then Secretary of State, Ben Wallace, took steps to enforce changes so that we could better protect women in the armed forces. In 2022 we introduced a series of new policies—for example, clamping down on unacceptable sexual behaviour by introducing a zero-tolerance approach and banning instructor-trainee relationships of any sort. We also established the defence serious crimes unit. As a result of the changes we made, more people have been empowered to come forward, and service personnel who have breached those policies have been discharged or convicted as a direct result.

I particularly welcome the steps in the Bill to ensure that the service justice system protects victims of the most serious offences from further harm. The reality is that implementing cultural change in any large organisation does not happen overnight, but we will work with the Government in the forthcoming sittings on the detail of their proposals to ensure that we find a better way to deliver justice in the armed forces.

Let me move on to the proposed changes to the reserve forces. I pay tribute to all those serving as reservists, including, as was pointed out, those on Operation Interflex—they are a critical part of our fighting strength. That said, given the heightened threat level that we face today, we can surely all recognise that nations geographically closer to the Russian threat, such as Finland, draw a major part of their overall military strength and, thereby, conventional deterrence from possessing a large and active reserve.

As such, it is important that we understand more of the detail about the Government's plans to increase the number of active reservists by 20%. That is stated in the strategic defence review, but with a vague timeline—"most likely in the 2030s".

We can all see that there is a big difference between 2031 and 2039, and that the threat we face is nearer. In his winding-up speech, can the Minister for the Armed Forces tell us if that will be in the next Parliament or the one after that?

We also welcome proposals to make reservist life more flexible, particularly incentivising regulars to stay in the reserves as they explore new careers. In fact, that is exactly what was suggested in the Haythornthwaite review, which was commissioned under the previous Government and delivered by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). It made the important recommendation for so-called zig-zag careers, enabling far greater flexibility between reserve and regular service. We welcome that and will look at it further.

Let me move on to the Bill's proposals for armed forces accommodation. Buying back the defence estate was my top strategic priority as Minister for Defence Procurement.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): You didn't do it!

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady says from a sedentary position that I did not do it. The deal was done in 1996. Who was in government between 1997 and 2010 and did nothing about this issue?

Let me speak openly. When I got the job, I went to visit defence accommodation. As I have said many times, I was ashamed, but I said, “I am going to do something about this.” My former colleague Jeremy Quin, who was the Minister before me, had brought test cases, but there was no work, and nothing had happened under successive Governments. I started the work with the Treasury and with people across Government. That deal, which took a heck of a lot of negotiation, was under negotiation with the Annington group when the general election came.

Dr Murrison: The truth is that there was a level of serendipity in this matter of which the current Government are the beneficiary, and that is the High Court decision on Annington Homes. My hon. Friend is being characteristically modest, because I clearly remember that he initiated this work while he was at the MOD. I am very pleased to hear that the current Government are taking it forward, which is absolutely right, but we need to lay on record the provenance of all this work and who its author is. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for that.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We must never forget the reason for the deal in the first place.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

James Cartlidge: I will take one more intervention, and then I will make some progress.

Peter Swallow: Is the shadow Secretary of State’s defence for the shambles and the shame of military homes that he finally acted as Defence Secretary where his predecessors had sat on their hands? Is that really his defence of the Tory disgrace of our military homes?

James Cartlidge: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for promoting me in posterity. All I can say is that when I came to the job, I was not impressed with the state of armed forces accommodation. Let us not pretend that it suddenly took that shape; in the 13 years when Labour was previously in power, it made no attempt to buy back the defence estate. I return to the point that that is why we did the deal in the first place. We all agree that those who serve our country must never be given substandard homes. The Annington deal has enabled the prospect of what could be the most exciting estate regeneration project for generations. This is the chance to deliver homes for heroes.

We had to buy the estate back, and I enabled that. That being said, delivering such an opportunity requires leadership. The reason why my first policy announcement as shadow Defence Secretary in June last year was the creation of an armed forces housing association, which created a body that could do just that—both manage the estate and deliver a comprehensive rebuild, as the best housing associations have been able to do over the years.

John Healey: Giving it away.

James Cartlidge: From a sedentary position, the Secretary of State says, “Giving it away.” It is very odd when a member of the Labour party thinks that setting up a co-operative is somehow a privatisation.

The body that the Government will create in this Bill to deliver that transformation is the Defence Housing Service. Although we welcome its ambition to improve the supply and quality of defence housing, inevitably we will want to see that its structure means that it is able to deliver as many of the outcomes that we wanted from our own policy as possible.

Specifically, one of the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford first proposed an armed forces housing association in 2020 was to give armed forces families proper representations on its board. Will the Defence Housing Service ensure a similar, meaningful voice for service families? Given that a priority for our housing association model was to extend home ownership throughout the ranks, not least because housing associations have access to a wider suite of home ownership products, what role will the Defence Housing Service play in delivering greater home ownership among service families?

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I know that Members across the House supported Liberal Democrat plans to introduce a decent homes standard for service family accommodation, and I am very grateful to the Government for bringing that in through recent legislation from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. However, single living accommodation is still really poor. Constituents in North Shropshire report rat infestations and being unable to sleep at night. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that single living accommodation also needs to be looked at as a priority?

James Cartlidge: When I was a Minister, the hon. Lady was always raising that point. She has been a passionate defender of her constituents on this matter, and I respect her for that. When we talk about single living accommodation, as opposed to service family accommodation, it is fair to say that there is a different funding structure—it goes through the frontline commands. My own experience is that that can be challenging, as they have their own budget challenges. Hopefully, by taking forward this model we will see clearer lines of finance into housing, but at the end of the day we need to have both SLA and SFA up to a high standard. The hon. Lady is absolutely right.

Let me turn to the Bill’s proposals on drones. We obviously welcome the proposals to give the military greater powers of interception in relation to drones, but we want them to go further. For example, why have the Government not taken the opportunity to put into law measures that provide easier access to testing ranges for our brilliant defence small and medium-sized enterprises? After all, they have delivered some of the best drones used in Ukraine.

Is this not part of the problem? When it comes to procurement, we live in a parallel universe where the Government have delivered—quite rightly, and as we did—drones, munitions and equipment at scale to Ukraine, but at the same time procurement for our armed forces has been almost frozen since the election. There is a reason why the Government’s plans to increase the reserves may not happen for a decade. There is a reason why any defence company will share its immense frustration at the lack of orders coming out of the MOD, whether for drones or for other capabilities. That is because the Government have prioritised a bigger welfare bill over the scale of increase in defence spending that our armed forces require.

[James Cartlidge]

When it comes to defence spending, the Government like to wrap themselves in the comfort blanket of arguments about the past, even when they are wrong. At Prime Minister's questions on two occasions in recent weeks, the Prime Minister has repeatedly misrepresented what Ben Wallace actually said about defence spending. His point was not that defence spending fell under the Conservatives, but that it fell under all Governments following the end of the cold war and the so-called peace dividend. To be partisan about that observation is to hide from the truth that we all have to face up to: that the world has completely changed.

I am incredibly proud of what we did in government to stand by Ukraine before most other nations acted, but, irrespective of what happened before, it must be obvious that we need to spend far more on defence and far more than the Government are planning.

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

James Cartlidge: Wait a minute. That is why Labour is making in-year savings of £2.6 billion at the MOD and has a black hole of £28 billion—because the extra cash it is planning for defence is simply not enough.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I will give way to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) first.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I apologise for interrupting. I fully understand that the shadow Secretary of State wants the Government to spend more on defence, and I think we all share that aspiration, but he must welcome the increase in spending that we have committed to—the biggest increase since the cold war ended.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman does not have to apologise for interrupting. He offered to intervene, and I accepted; that is how this place works, and his intervention was entirely fair. To be frank, yes, spending is increasing, but it is not increasing anything like enough in relation to how much costs are going up. When I first became shadow Secretary of State and was calling for 2.5%, I said that that would only stabilise things—I was very open about that. I did not say that it would lead to a much bigger force and all the other things we would like to see, but we can all see what has happened. President Trump has been very clear that he wants to see NATO members spending much more and much more rapidly. We all know what the reality is: the United States is going to be doing less, focusing on its priorities. We need to do more, which means much higher spending.

Mr Bailey: In the spirit of honesty and accepting past failures, the equipment plan that you presented this Government with had a gap in it of £7 billion to £29 billion in the MOD's view, or £16 billion in the view of the National Audit Office. Do you accept that you handed over a hospital pass?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman should not be directing his comments at me.

James Cartlidge: I am very grateful to the hon. and gallant Gentleman, but when Putin invaded Ukraine, something pretty extraordinary happened: inflation went through the roof right around the world. The whole world was trying to buy defence equipment, and it still is. Guess what? That means a higher inflation rate in defence.

Mr Bailey: Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

James Cartlidge: I am responding to the hon. and gallant Gentleman's first intervention. Anyone coming into government should have had some sense that there was going to be inflationary pressure in the system. That is not the only reason that there is a £28 billion black hole, but it is a key factor.

Mr Bailey: Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

James Cartlidge: I will make some progress.

Sir Julian Lewis: Will my hon. Friend allow me?

James Cartlidge: I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Sir Julian Lewis: It is all well and good to say that defence spending has increased since it was realised that the peace dividend is inappropriate for a post-Ukraine invasion situation, but the fact is that during the 1980s, when we were in the grip of the cold war, we were not talking about spending 5% in 10 years' time or 3.5% in four years' time; we were spending between 4.5% and 5% of GDP every single year.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is right. The last time anyone in this country spent 5% on defence was in 1985, when President Gorbachev entered the Kremlin; spending has pretty much been down since then, under every Government. That is the point I was making.

On the current targets, Labour's vague "promise" is to go to 3% in the next Parliament. We believe the task is far more urgent, and would go to 3% by the end of this Parliament. As a reminder of the importance of 3%—this is critical—when Labour published the SDR last June, its independent authors stated on the same day that the promise of 3%

"established the affordability of our recommendations".

As such, with no certainty over when Labour will get to 3%, is this not why the defence investment plan—which was promised for last autumn—still has not been delivered? In his wind-up speech, can the Minister for the Armed Forces tell us whether the DIP will be published before the spring? I think that is the meteorological spring, by the way.

There is much to welcome in this Bill, but it will not succeed if defence does not have the resources needed to deliver the SDR. We look forward to debating the Bill in detail and doing whatever is possible to make it workable, but for their part, the Government need to do

their bit by finally delivering the step change in defence spending that our armed forces need if they are to do the job we ask of them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Chair of the Defence Committee, Members might like to be aware that there are a lot of colleagues wishing to speak this evening. I am not planning to put a time limit on—yet.

6.33 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): First, on behalf of our House of Commons Defence Committee, I thank the Secretary of State for the memorandum his Department provided to us and for last week's briefing, organised by the Ministry of Defence Bill team. I also put on record our deep gratitude to the British armed forces for keeping us safe and secure—it is a sad fact that our world is becoming a more dangerous place, and I cannot praise enough the brave men and women who face down that danger every day to protect our nation. This is a wide-ranging Bill, and unfortunately, time does not allow me to address all its aspects in detail. I draw the House's attention to my Committee's letter to the Minister for the Armed Forces last week, in which we give more detailed observations on the Bill.

Clause 2 of the Bill expands the armed forces covenant, following the Government's manifesto pledge to put the covenant "fully into law". The Defence Committee held an inquiry into the covenant last spring, in which we recommended that the covenant be extended to all Government Departments and to the devolved Administrations and that its scope be extended beyond housing, education and health into other areas of life where service personnel can experience disadvantage, such as employment and social care.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the armed forces covenant is so important across all our local authority services? If so, does he share my surprise that no colleagues from the turquoise brigade on the Opposition Benches can even be bothered to come into the Chamber and listen to this evening's debate?

Mr Dhese: My hon. Friend is 100% correct. At such times, it is to be expected that all parties attend the debate—that point has been eloquently made by my hon. Friend. If Reform Members are serious about defence, they should attend defence debates and questions on a regular basis.

Clause 2's strengthening of the covenant is welcome.

Mr Francois: On that point, there are rumours that Reform is going to announce a shadow Cabinet. Constitutionally, there is only one shadow Cabinet, which belongs to the Opposition—even the Lib Dems do not have one. Instead, we are going to call it the drinks cabinet, because Nigel likes a drink, and so does Lee. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that drinks cabinet should have a defence spokesman in it?

Mr Dhese: The shadow Defence Minister is right on both counts. There is only one Opposition, His Majesty's loyal Opposition—obviously, that is the Conservative

party at present—and while I certainly would not use the term "drinks cabinet", the shadow Defence Minister makes a very valid point.

The Secretary of State will remember that in our report, we cautioned that those who are expected to deliver the covenant must be involved in co-designing the new duty, and must be appropriately resourced to deliver it; otherwise, there is a real risk of diluting their existing commitments. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State or Ministers reassured the House on that point. The Secretary of State will also be aware that our inquiry concluded that updating the covenant in law is "only part of the change that needs to occur."

During the course of our work, we found that adherence to the existing covenant legal duty is very patchy. Too often, organisations that are subject to that duty do not understand it or, worse yet, disregard it. Understandably, this leads to disillusionment among the forces community, so in his winding-up speech, can the Minister for the Armed Forces please update the House on the Ministry of Defence's plans to improve implementation?

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, which I commend to the wider public beyond this House. In my own area, the local council and many voluntary sector organisations have done a very impressive job of adhering to the armed forces covenant, and are willing to do more. I thank Reading borough council and organisations such as The Forgotten British Gurkha charity. Does my hon. Friend believe there is a role for the organisations that are leading on this issue to share best practice, in order to help raise the equality of adoption of the new measures?

Mr Dhese: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, and I am very pleased to hear that his Reading Central constituents, the council and other organisations are stepping up to the plate. Best practice should indeed be shared more widely to ensure better implementation across our country.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): On that point, I declare my support for Horsham district council's work. It confirmed to me last year that it is examining the cost of exempting military compensation payments from all locally means-tested benefits. Does the hon. Member agree that in the spirit of the armed forces covenant, military compensation payments should be exempted from means-tested benefits nationally?

Mr Dhese: The hon. Member for Horsham makes a strong point. It is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) and I, along with other Members, have discussed in the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces community. I hope that Ministers are listening and will take remedial action. Will the Minister for the Armed Forces also commit to sharing the draft guidance with the House as soon as possible? It will be issued to organisations subject to the updated duty.

Mr Calvin Bailey: The Chair of the Select Committee is making a powerful speech. Part of the challenge with the provisions on the armed forces covenant is that delivery requires other Departments to engage and to

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

deliver their responsibilities. Does he agree that this work needs to be loaded on to those other Secretaries of State by all those Members present today?

Mr Dhesi: I thank my fellow member of the Defence Committee. Indeed, he raises a point that we have forcefully made within our Defence Committee deliberations. I am sure that Ministers will be aware and will take appropriate action.

Turning to the service justice system measures, it is welcome to see that the Government have used the Bill to focus on better protection for victims of serious offences. Ministers know full well how much of a priority that is for our Committee. Victims of appalling crimes, such as domestic violence and sexual offences, have been continually failed by the system, and the measures in this Bill can make a positive difference for them. However, we would have liked to see the Government go further and implement our predecessor Committee's recommendation that cases of rape and sexual assault are automatically heard in civilian courts. That was also the recommendation of the Lyons review in 2018, so will the Minister for the Armed Forces, when he responds to the debate, explain why the Government have decided not to take that approach?

Some of the most significant measures in the Bill relate to the role of the reserves. As the strategic defence review recognises, huge talent is available in our reserves, and defence does not make as much use of that talent as it could. We are pleased that the Bill attempts to change that. However, while the intentions of its measures are clear, their effect is less so. It is not clear how many additional reservists the Government expect those measures to generate, so it is difficult to know whether the Bill will make a meaningful improvement to our defence readiness, which we all know is extremely important, given the geopolitics we face.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking positively about the amazing contribution of our reservists, and I add to that the amazing contribution of our cadets in the Shipley constituency. We have air cadets and Army cadets in Shipley and Bingley. Will he join me in welcoming the proposals to bring together and unify the reserve forces and cadets associations into a single non-departmental public body? Will he also join me in urging the Minister to ensure that that new body continues to value the role of volunteer input from cadets?

Mr Dhesi: I am sure Ministers will have heard the excellent point that my hon. Friend makes forcefully. The Government need to properly model the impact of these changes and share their findings with the House. We also need to know the fitness criteria. I know the Minister for the Armed Forces is very fit, given his recent endeavours, including on Mount Everest, but how will the fitness criteria be applied to individuals subject to the new higher recall age of 65?

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): As it stands, if someone transitions from the regular forces and goes into the reserves, they have to have a separate medical test, even if they are already serving. Does the hon. Member agree that that area perhaps needs some work?

Mr Dhesi: The hon. and gallant Member makes an excellent point, and I hope that the Minister for the Armed Forces will respond to that in his winding-up speech.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): On the proposal to extend the age limit under which reservists can be called back, a small number of them might have attained the extremely high levels of physical fitness of the Minister for the Armed Forces and be suitable for a wide range of roles, but some could be called back for back-office tasks such as analysing intelligence or training people, where the levels of fitness required are far lower than for any kind of combat role. Does my hon. Friend accept that that would release younger people who are currently in those roles to take up roles nearer the frontline?

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Some individuals, especially in the media and on social media, have facetiously referred to it as "Dad's Army", but there is a role, especially behind the scenes, that older reserves can undertake for the defence of our country.

Mr Calvin Bailey: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Dhesi: I must make progress, but I have to give way to my fellow member of the Defence Committee. I hope that the intervention will be brief.

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend will recognise Warrant Officer Bally Flora who, at the age of 66 and with 45 years of service behind him, was not ready to take to the back room. He has taken great affront at the remarks of those calling it "Dad's Army".

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend has forcefully made that point, which reinforces what I just said. Some individuals may seek to be facetious about this, but our reserves are our pride. Regardless of their age, their talents need to be included as we defend our nation in future.

I am pleased to see the Government taking action in clause 3 to address the state of service accommodation. The Defence Committee was pleased that the Government accepted the conclusions of our hard-hitting report on service accommodation, and we hope that the new Defence Housing Service will be able to lead the renewal that is needed. It will be important that the new body can act independently in the interests of the forces community and that it is subject to detailed parliamentary scrutiny in this House.

Furthermore, I must draw the House's attention to clauses 38 and 39, which will remove the existing statutory requirements for Parliament to approve the size of the armed forces. Parliamentary control of the size of the armed forces is a vital and long-standing constitutional principle that dates back to the Bill of Rights in the 17th century. I feel that we must be extremely cautious before proceeding with measures that would diminish that control. The Government say that these changes are necessary to allow more flexibility in how the regular and reserve forces are used. Indeed, my Committee is sympathetic to that aim. However, it is not clear why it requires the removal of the statutory guarantee of parliamentary control. The Government need to justify

why the measure is necessary and consider whether there are other ways of achieving their goals that would uphold the rights of our Parliament.

In conclusion—you will be pleased to hear that I am drawing to a conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker—there is much to welcome in this Bill that will improve service life. I hope that the Government will be able to address the issues that the Defence Committee has raised and, by doing so, build strong cross-party support for the Bill as it continues its passage through the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. May I remind Members to be careful, good-tempered and moderate in their language in debate? If anyone needs any instruction, pages 496 and 497 of “Erskine May” are very helpful.

I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

6.49 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Our British armed forces represent the very best of us—courage, selflessness, and an unwavering commitment to protect our freedoms and our way of life—and they deserve nothing less than our unwavering commitment in return.

The Liberal Democrats welcome significant elements of the Bill. The full enshrinement of the armed forces covenant in law, extending it across central Government, devolved Administrations and local authorities, aligns with our long-standing policy to strengthen the covenant by placing a legal duty on Government Departments. For too long, the covenant has been a promise without proper teeth. The Bill gives it the force of law that it has always deserved, and we look forward to supporting that as the legislation progresses.

We welcome the establishment of the Defence Housing Service and the £9 billion defence housing strategy. Our service personnel and their families should not have to endure substandard accommodation while serving their country. The commitment to upgrade nine in 10 military homes is progress, although I must stress that it is the bare minimum that we owe those people who put themselves in harm’s way for us.

That said, what will matter is pace, transparency and accountability. Given the Ministry of Defence’s long and unhappy track record of wasting public money on failed programmes, the House deserves clarity on how this strategy will be delivered in practice. I hope that the Minister, in summing up the debate, will respond to the following questions. Who precisely will oversee the new body, what will be its relationship with the Department, and where will ultimate accountability lie if targets are missed or standards slip? Without clear governance and rigorous scrutiny, there is a real risk that warm words and large sums of money will once again fail to translate into decent homes for service families.

The reforms of the service justice system are long overdue, particularly the strengthened protections for victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence and harassment. Every person who serves in uniform deserves to do so in safety and dignity. However, the Bill comes against a backdrop of multiple deeply troubling scandals involving abuse within our armed forces, particularly the treatment of women. I do not doubt the commitment of any of

the Ministers to combating it, but it is striking that the Bill contains no specific or targeted measures to address the systemic cultural failures that have allowed such abuse to persist. Without a clear attempt to confront these issues head-on, there is a risk that structural reform will fall short of meaningful change.

Helen Maguire: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill requires the provision of further clarification and detail in regard to service justice? If an offence is committed overseas on a base or during an operation, will a person have a choice between a civilian and a military court hearing? If an offence is discovered after six months, will it still be possible to investigate it, and if so, will it be investigated by military police or not?

James MacCleary: Those are important details, which I hope the Minister will take up in his closing remarks. Justice must be seen to be served wherever our service personnel are in the world.

The measures in the Bill to support victims and strengthen protective orders are steps in the right direction, but they must be accompanied by a genuine commitment to accountability and cultural reform in our services.

We must also be honest about what the Government are not doing. This is a technical renewal Bill, whereas what our armed forces need is a comprehensive fair deal; that matters profoundly for Britain’s security and our place in the world. The Bill is silent on the recruitment and retention crisis facing our armed forces. It says nothing about reversing the devastating troop cuts that have hollowed out the Army. It offers no plan to rebuild regular troop numbers back to above 100,000—a goal that the Liberal Democrats are committed to achieving.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Following that pledge, will the hon. Gentleman outline what the additional 30,000 troops would be roled as?

James MacCleary: I think the question here is more about mass in the armed forces, and deployability.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Mass for what?

James MacCleary: For deployment overseas, so that we can achieve the objectives that we want to achieve. The Conservatives cut troop numbers during the last Government. It is understandable that you are embarrassed—that they are embarrassed—about that, but—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have heard two uses of the word “you”. It is not about me.

James MacCleary: It is understandable that the Opposition are embarrassed about that. We need to get our troop numbers back up to a critical mass that will allow us to carry out our duties overseas.

The Government’s decision to increase the upper age limit for reserves and cadets to 65 warrants serious scrutiny. Ministers must explain whether the change will genuinely enhance operational effectiveness, skills and readiness, or whether it is simply a mechanism to inflate headline recruitment numbers without addressing the underlying retention and capability challenges facing our reserve forces.

[James MacCleary]

That brings me to the important issue of defence spending, which, of course, underlies all of this. The Liberal Democrats support increasing defence spending in every year of this Parliament, and we will explain how to do it. We are calling for a clear, credible pathway to reaching 3% of GDP on defence by 2030 at the latest, backed by cross-party talks to secure long-term consensus. As part of that plan, we have proposed the introduction of time-limited defence bonds—capped, fixed-term, and legally tied to capital investment—to raise up to £20 billion over the next two years. That would allow the Government to accelerate investment in the capabilities set out in the strategic defence review, strengthen deterrence now rather than later, and send a clear signal to our allies and adversaries alike that Britain is serious about its security.

James Cartlidge: I heard the announcement made by the leader of the hon. Gentleman's party about the bonds. Of course, that would still be borrowing the money. It would be added to the national debt, and it would have to be repaid. The question is, where exactly would the money come from? Would it mean cutting spending or putting up taxes?

James MacCleary: These are bonds issued to the public and to funds in the normal way, as all these vehicles are. They would be for people to invest in, so this would not involve cutting anything. It would be short-term borrowing that would fall within the Government's existing fiscal rules, as we explained at the weekend. This is a serious proposal to increase defence spending in the short term, unlike the proposals from the Opposition, which, I understand, are for welfare cuts—a long-term measure that would fall on the most vulnerable in society.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. It is very generous of him. Is he saying that those bonds would not have to be repaid?

James MacCleary: Of course they would have to be repaid, and we have laid out this policy very clearly.

James Cartlidge: Where would the money come from?

James MacCleary: I am happy to send the hon. Member a briefing if that would be helpful to his deliberations, but of course the money would have to be repaid. These are two-to-three-year bonds that would generate an immediate injection of cash to buy the kit that our armed forces need.

In an increasingly dangerous world, standing still is not a neutral act, and warm words without funding will not keep our country safe. That is why I was relieved to see reports over the weekend that the Government are seeking to restart negotiations over UK access to the EU's Security Action for Europe fund, which I hope speaks to a belated and dawning realisation that President Trump is increasingly posing a threat to Britain's security and values. At the same time, I urge the European Union to approach these discussions with pragmatism, to come to the negotiating table in good faith, and to recognise that the UK is an essential security partner. This is not the moment for political point scoring,

for putting domestic protectionism ahead of continental safety, or for setting the bar so high that shared European security is the casualty.

A fair deal for our armed forces community means more than just equipment and strategy; it means treating service personnel and their families with the dignity and respect that they deserve in every aspect of their lives. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a fair deal commission for service personnel, veterans and families to review conditions comprehensively and recommend improvements in pay, housing, diversity and transition services. We would allow families of armed forces personnel access to military medical and dental facilities, and improve mental health support for the whole armed forces community. We would waive visa application fees for indefinite leave for members of the armed forces on discharge and their families, and we would ensure that military compensation for illness or injury did not count towards means-testing for benefits.

These are not fringe issues; they go to the heart of the covenant between the nation and those who serve. If we ask people to be ready to give their lives for this country, we owe them more than warm words. We owe them action. In respect of housing specifically, while we welcome the Defence Housing Service, we need to go further. We would require the Ministry of Defence to provide housing above minimum standards, and to give service personnel stronger legal rights to repair and maintenance. Our recent campaigning secured a Government commitment to assess family military homes according to the decent homes standard. That is progress, but it must be implemented properly and swiftly.

We also support the recommendations of the Atherton report on women in the armed forces, and will work to establish better structures to guard against discrimination and harassment. The armed forces must be places where talent thrives, regardless of gender, and where everyone can serve with dignity.

We owe it to our armed forces to provide certainty, which makes the continued delay of the long-promised defence investment plan all the more concerning. That plan must be brought forward without further delay. We cannot continue a boom-and-bust cycle of defence reviews that leaves industry in limbo, undermines long-term investment, and allows vital skills and supply chains to wither away through uncertainty.

The Liberal Democrats look forward to engaging constructively with this Bill, and to scrutinising its provisions carefully as it proceeds through its remaining stages. We will not stand in the way of improvements that matter to service personnel and their families, but we will continue to press for more, because our armed forces deserve more and Britain's security demands more. We will continue to call for reversing troop cuts, increasing defence spending to at least 3% of GDP, tackling the recruitment crisis and ensuring a comprehensive, fair deal for the armed forces community.

Britain's armed forces are the finest in the world. They represent our values, defend our interests, and stand ready to protect us and our allies. They deserve a Government who back them with resources, strategy and unwavering support. The Liberal Democrats will always champion that cause, and we will always stand shoulder to shoulder with those who serve.

7 pm

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): As Members on both sides of the House have said over many years, this Bill is unlike most others that come before us. It is not simply a piece of Government business; it is the foundation on which our armed forces rest. It is renewed every five years and carries with it a deep responsibility.

I am proud to stand here in support of this Bill, and to reflect the priorities of my constituents in Barrow and Furness, a community whose identity and prosperity are bound with the defence of this nation. In Barrow and Furness, thousands of highly skilled workers design and build the submarines that keep our nation safe. Families move in and out as part of service life, and veterans settle and make their homes. For Barrow, defence is a lived experience, so when this House considers how we support those who serve, people in my community are listening closely.

The Bill comes before us at a time of profound global uncertainty. The security environment has changed dramatically since the last Armed Forces Act was debated, in 2021. We face new global threats and constant cyber-attacks, and those who might wish to harm us are testing our levels of defence and resilience on a daily basis. In this context, the provisions to strengthen the strategic reserve are vital. Expanding the pool of former personnel who can be called on in times of national need recognises the enormous value of their skills and experience. Many veterans possess specialist capabilities in engineering, intelligence, logistics and cyber that cannot easily be replaced. It is right that this country should draw on their expertise in a crisis.

There is another aspect of this Bill that I welcome wholeheartedly: the decision to put the armed forces covenant fully into law. This was a clear manifesto commitment of the Labour party, and I am proud that this Government are delivering it. Unfortunately, the Defence Committee, on which I sit, found that many people in the armed forces community are not aware of the covenant or do not have a clear understanding of what it means for them. That must change.

For too long, the covenant relied on good will alone. Too often, service families and veterans have found themselves at a disadvantage, and have struggled to access housing, healthcare, education or employment because of the unique demands of their military life. Putting the covenant on a statutory footing is not about special treatment; it is about preventing unfair treatment and ensuring that those who serve are not penalised for doing so. In Barrow and Furness, I see why that matters every week. I meet veterans navigating complex systems, and I meet partners trying to rebuild careers after repeated relocations. This Bill offers something that they have long deserved: practical, enforceable recognition from the state.

I welcome the establishment of the new defence housing service. Good-quality accommodation for service personnel is fundamental to morale and family wellbeing. Too many of our armed forces families have been let down over the years by poor housing and inadequate maintenance. An end to the Tories' disastrous 1996 privatisation of military housing, which cost the taxpayer billions, is long overdue.

Labour has always believed in strong defence. We are the party of NATO and understand that our nation's security is the first duty of any Government. We have increased spending on defence to its highest level since the cold war and will increase it further in the coming years, but we also know that strength must go hand in hand with fairness. Supporting our armed forces means more than words; it means decent homes, proper healthcare, fair treatment in civilian life and real opportunities for veterans. This Bill makes progress on all those fronts.

The direction is the right one. We are modernising our armed forces, strengthening support for those who serve, and delivering on the promises made to them. For communities like mine in Barrow and Furness, that matters deeply. I welcome this legislation, and I look forward to working constructively with Ministers as it moves through Parliament.

Our Government were elected with a clear commitment to renew the nation's contract with the men and women who serve in our armed forces, and with the ranks of veterans who have put their lives on the line for the UK. The message to our armed forces is clear: this Government are on your side.

7.4 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate. Unusually, I pay tribute to the Minister for Veterans and People, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), who could be sporting the same colours as me. As a fellow veteran from the finest corps in the country, she will no doubt have many contributions of her own to make.

Today is Australia Day and India's Republic Day. Given that we are talking about the armed forces, it is worth remembering that over the last 100 years it has been very unusual for us to have gone to war without very close allies by our side. In fact, the two largest volunteer armies in the world were the Indian army in the first world war and the Indian army in the second world war.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman gives me a very good prompt, because this morning I was at the war memorial in Bournemouth, where two new plaques were unveiled for the 12 Indian soldiers who died at No. 8A Indian general hospital, which is now Bournemouth town hall. The plaques mark their contribution to Britain's fight in world war one and honour their sacrifice. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the sacrifices of our allies, particularly our Indian allies, have too often been forgotten. Will he join me in commending Ramesh Lal, who has been pivotal in making those plaques happen?

Tom Tugendhat: I absolutely will. I am very grateful for the fact that those soldiers are remembered in Bournemouth, just as they should be remembered across the country.

I crave a personal indulgence and remember Tim Robertson from the Australian special air forces regiment, whom I fought alongside in Iraq. Sadly, he was killed a couple of years ago while fighting fires in northern Queensland. Many veterans serve in many distinguished ways after they leave the service—some even on the Government Front Bench.

[Tom Tugendhat]

We are at a moment when the world has changed. Many of us have just been watching the events in Davos, and three speeches really stood out. The first—the obvious one—is the one that the President of the United States gave, which set out a vision that led many of us to question where this world is going. There were two other speeches, however, that were rather important and, in a way, much more fundamental to the way that we should see Britain and our armed forces. The first was by the Prime Minister of Canada, who set out a very clear warning to us all that the comfort that we had got used to, and the arrangements in which we had luxuriated, are no longer valid for this era. We can talk about spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, and we can talk about spending 3% after the next election, but these are luxury beliefs. They are not realistic and do not account for a changed world.

The third speech, which in many ways was the most challenging, was from the Chancellor of Germany, who correctly pointed out that Europe—he included us in that—has simply not been prepared for the challenges that we face. The Germans have answered that by raising €100 billion, as the Secretary of State knows. We are not in a position to raise money in the same way that Germany does, because our debt has been higher, but the truth is that we are still facing the same threats as Germany—we are just facing them in a different way. We are facing them in the North sea and the Baltic. We are facing them in the Irish sea and the Atlantic, where we see Russian and Chinese vessels scraping our cables and destroying our communications, or trying to do so. We see the ways in which they are attacking our energy infrastructure. They are trying to hit our hospitals through cyber, and to undermine the security of this state in many different ways.

Those three speeches should set the context for this debate. One warned us that our allies may no longer be there for us, the second alerted us to the fact that the comfort is over, and the third was absolutely clear that our contributions must rise. That is where we come to this Bill and these commitments.

I appreciate what the Secretary of State has said, and what my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) has countered with. I do not wish to criticise the Secretary of State for the fact that the defence budget has increased—I recognise that and welcome it—but it is not enough to increase it to the level we would like. It is necessary to increase it to the level that we need, because that is one element of the Budget that we do not choose. It is chosen for us by the threats we face: it is chosen for us by the posture of the Russian and Chinese forces we face.

It is certainly true that we have seen some extraordinary news out of Beijing in the last 48 hours, with generals having disappeared, presumably down a salt mine, as they have fallen out of favour with the chairman of the Chinese Communist party's military committee. It is also certainly true that the Russians are embedded in the most gruesome and horrific war in Ukraine, where they are murdering more of their own people than they are of the enemy, although they are doing their best to kill as many Ukrainian civilians as they can. None the less, it is true that those armies, navies and forces are attacking us, and we need to be ready to face them.

I would like to look at how this Bill provides a response to that. We have quite rightly heard about the emphasis on the reserve, and on the way in which medical teams, interpreters and others have contributed. I would like to pay tribute to the military leadership for the way in which it has looked to change how the armed forces work with reservists with careers or skills that are very hard to get through traditional military routes. In particular, I am thinking of cyber, because we are looking for something very different. I have huge respect for the Minister for the Armed Forces, a friend with whom I served on far too many adventures overseas, for the fact that he can do 30 pull-ups, but how fast can he hack into a Russian terminal? I am not sure it is in his skills set. These are different skills, and we need to look to the reserve to provide such skills.

That is where I look to our young people in this country. I do not know how many Members in the House have read the recent Centre for Social Justice report on the number of graduates claiming welfare at the moment. Apparently, it is 700,000. That is a huge number of young people who have an enormous amount to offer our community, our country and our allies, but who are being parked in a system that does not include them. To come back to what the armed forces are for, they are not just for the defence of the realm against foreign threats; they are for the cohesion of the realm at home, too. They are for bringing us together, making us understand who we are as Brits and making us proud of who we may be as Northern Irish, Welsh, English or Scottish. They are about understanding that we are stronger together and that we are part of a greater whole. Having 700,000 young people parked on welfare is a pretty big indictment of the failure not just of Government, but of our understanding of our own place in this country. I am not saying that the armed forces are the answer to all of that, but they are surely a contributory factor that we need to be looking at.

To turn to another area, over the last few years we have had long conversations about defence resources for Ukraine. We have heard about the shell shortages and the need for armour and next-generation light anti-tank weapons, but what is the real need in Ukraine? It is the need for technology that changes the game. When one talks to a Ukrainian general, or in fact to a more junior officer such as a Ukrainian colonel, one finds that the conversation is not about armour, as it so often is in the UK, or even about submarines—built so brilliantly in the constituency of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Michelle Scrogg). It is about drones and the technology that powers them. I say drones and technology because they are actually separate. The plastic, the rotors and the body—the design—last about nine months on the Ukrainian frontline and the power unit lasts about four weeks, but the technology that allows a drone to defeat the armour, get through the jamming and strike the enemy lasts between seven and 14 days.

That technology is where we need to be advancing fast, but for all our talk of sovereignty, the truth is that only two nations have a sovereign artificial intelligence capability, and that does not include us. They are the United States and China. At the moment, we have only one choice, which is to use the US approach, and that is clearly the right answer for today, but is it the right answer for tomorrow? That is the question we need to

be asking ourselves. We need to be asking ourselves where we can develop that technology and how we can secure—for our own defence, within our own timeframe and within our own resources—the ability to understand a battlefield, shape events and determine the technology that will actually defeat our enemies. That is a huge challenge, and I appreciate that this Bill is not meant to answer all those questions, but this surely has to be the question that the armed forces are asking now.

I will close by merely saying that, yes, it is of course true that the numbers are inadequate, and it is certainly striking that in the last few weeks the Iranian regime has murdered roughly the same number of people as are serving in our Royal Navy today, but it is also striking that we are still—and, sadly, increasingly—dependent on foreign technology and not able to meet our own needs, which is where the armed forces and the armed forces equipment deal need to be looking next.

7.16 pm

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in this debate on the Armed Forces Bill. Every five years, Parliament is asked to renew its consent for the maintenance of our armed forces in peacetime. That constitutional requirement, dating back to the Bill of Rights in 1688, is more than a procedural necessity; it is about Parliament renewing the contract between the nation and those who serve it. This Bill reflects the changing nature of warfare, the evolving needs of our service personnel and their families, and our duty—collective and enduring—to ensure that those who defend our country are supported not only in uniform, but throughout their lives.

As the Member of Parliament for Ipswich, I represent a town and a county deeply entwined with the story of our national defence. Suffolk's contribution to the armed forces is profound and long-standing. From Bawdsey on our coast, where the world's first operational radar station became a decisive force in the battle of Britain, to the air bases that have hosted generations of service personnel, our county has quietly but decisively shaped Britain's security and, indeed, our history. The innovations developed in Suffolk saved lives, shortened the war and changed the course of our history.

That legacy reminds us of the fundamental truth that our national security is rooted in people, places and communities, and this Bill recognises that by placing people, service personnel and their families at its heart. At this point, I would like to reflect on President Trump's comments last week. Ipswich's Aaron McClure, of 1st Battalion, the Royal Anglian Regiment, died alongside two colleagues on active service in Afghanistan. He was just 19 years old. His mother, Lorraine, was right when she said that President Trump's comments were an insult to his legacy and that of his colleagues.

Turning to the armed forces covenant, the Bill fulfils a clear manifesto commitment by fully enshrining the covenant in law. It extends the covenant's legal duty beyond local authorities and public bodies to include central Government Departments and the devolved Administrations, and it broadens the range of policy areas to which due regard must be given. This matters deeply. The covenant is a promise from the nation that those who serve or have served and their families will be treated with fairness and respect, and will face no disadvantage because of their service. For far too long,

that promise has been honoured inconsistently: veterans have struggled to access healthcare, families have faced disruption in their education, and housing standards have far too often fallen short of what is acceptable. By strengthening this legal duty, the Bill moves the covenant from an aspiration to accountability, it embeds fairness in decision making, and it ensures that public bodies right across our country take responsibility for delivering it.

That legal framework is vital, but legislation alone is not enough. Covenant delivery also depends on strong community institutions. In Ipswich, one such institution is Combat2Coffee, a community interest company, founded by ex-soldier Nigel Seaman, that has become a national model of veteran-led support. Combat2Coffee exists to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the armed forces community and their families. It does so through something deceptively simple: connection. Through coffee mornings, outreach, volunteering and employment pathways, it rebuilds the sense of belonging that many veterans lose when they leave uniform. In 2025 alone, Combat2Coffee supported more than 200 veterans through outreach activities, with more than 2,000 people attending armed forces community coffee mornings. Earlier this year, the organisation's volunteers were awarded the King's award for voluntary service, which is the highest honour a voluntary group can receive. That recognition reflects not only the scale of their impact, but the depth of their understanding that mental health is not a niche issue but a continuum, and that early community-based support saves lives.

During Armed Forces Week, I was proud to attend Combat2Coffee's "Bigger Breakfast" in Ipswich, alongside the Armed Forces Minister and the former Ipswich Town and England captain, Terry Butcher. Terry has long been a passionate advocate for veterans' wellbeing, informed by his own family's experience, and his support for this work underlines why strong, compassionate mental health provision for veterans truly matters. Hundreds of serving personnel, veterans and cadets came together not for speeches or ceremonies, but to talk, connect and support one another. My hon. and gallant friend the Armed Forces Minister is a highly decorated individual, but should he so wish, I am sure he would have the title of chief barista.

Housing is also critical. The establishment of the Defence Housing Service through the Bill is long overdue. For decades, defence housing has suffered from under-investment, fragmented responsibility and a "fix on fail" culture that has eroded trust among service families. Last year's defence housing strategy represents the biggest change in military housing in half a century. The Bill gives that strategy institutional form. The new Defence Housing Service will be responsible for improving quality, increasing availability, regenerating defence land and, crucially, placing a service ethos at the centre of housing provision. For families posted in Suffolk, that will mean homes that meet modern standards, transparent complaints processes and a system that recognises that housing is not a perk but an operational necessity.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Like many Members across the House, I am on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and I get to meet some incredible people through training, including people who are serving. They are totally committed and ready to serve this country when they may need to.

[David Burton-Sampson]

Does my hon. Friend agree that this provision for decent housing is the least that we can do to thank them?

Jack Abbott: My hon. Friend is completely right. What I was just about to say encapsulates what my hon. Friend says: stability at home underpins readiness, retention and morale.

Readiness itself is another core theme of the Bill. In an increasingly uncertain world, with evolving threats, rapid technological change and heightened global instability, the measures relating to reserve forces reflect the reality of modern defence—that experience matters, that flexibility is essential, and that the boundary between regular and reserve service must be more permeable. By increasing the maximum age of recall, enabling seamless transfers between regular and reserve forces, and granting the Secretary of State power to authorise recall for warlike operations, the Bill strengthens our ability to respond to emerging threats while respecting the voluntary nature of reserve service through appropriate opt-outs.

The provisions on uncrewed devices are similarly necessary. The threat posed by hostile drone activity around defence sites is real and growing, so granting defence personnel the power to use approved equipment to detect, prevent and defeat drone-related offences is not an expansion of power for its own sake, but a proportionate response to a changing and growing threat environment.

From the radar pioneers at Bawdsey to the volunteers roasting coffee for Combat2Coffee in Ipswich and across Suffolk, our local contribution to the armed forces reminds us that defence is not simply confined to bases or battlefields; it lives in innovation, in service and in community. For those reasons, on behalf of the many serving personnel, veterans and families in Ipswich and right across Suffolk, I am proud to support the Bill.

7.24 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): It is a privilege to speak on the Armed Forces Bill, which will shape the direction of this country's armed forces for the next half-decade.

The war in Ukraine should be a wake-up call to all of us, and the world has not looked so dangerous since the end of the cold war. The strategic defence review talks about a whole-of-society approach to making Britain more resilient. The Bill makes no firm commitments on troop numbers or combat, but it does begin to fix some glaring 21st-century gaps in our readiness to defend this country. I have spoken with senior officers who worry that we are poorly prepared to fix the recruitment crisis, stop cyber-attacks or prevent sabotage here in the UK. Some threats will not arrive over the horizon, because they are here already. Giving our forces the tools and authority that they need to protect key infrastructure against drone attacks, as specified in clause 4, to organise reserves and recall, and to support the next generation of recruits, will be critical.

For me, protecting our armed forces personnel is closest to my heart, and that is why it is so important that the Bill enshrines the armed forces covenant into law across Government, and why the new Defence

Housing Service needs to be a success. More than three quarters of our armed forces live in service accommodation. I have done it myself, but I was still horrified by the findings of the service accommodation report published by the Defence Select Committee in December 2024, which detailed everything from rodent infestations to damp, mould and crumbling facilities. The Bill lays the groundwork for the Ministry of Defence to begin to fix that disaster.

I am pleased that the Government have agreed with the Liberal Democrat position that the decent homes standard should be applied to all forces accommodation, and the Bill gives the Defence Housing Service wide-ranging powers to do more. It is the very least that we owe to those in uniform. I hope that when the Secretary of State reports on the progress of the Defence Housing Service from the Dispatch Box, as specified in schedule 1, he will never again have to say that we let our armed forces down so badly.

The Bill clarifies the role of the new Armed Forces Commissioner and gives courts martial the authority to support those who may be suffering from mental health disorders. The requirement in clause 17 for commanding officers to report welfare allegations that have not yet been flagged, even outside their own chain of command, is another important addition that, in my opinion, is decades overdue.

The Bill also introduces measures to bring the powers of the tri-service military police up to date. It creates a stronger framework to stamp out sexual assault, stalking and other offences committed in uniform and by civilians subject to service discipline. I know that the terrible case of Artillery Gunner Jaysley Beck will have been at the forefront of everyone's minds when the Bill was drafted. I hope that she, and many like her, will be our first thought when those clauses are studied in Committee.

The stakes are suddenly very high. This Bill needs to be our best work. We must safeguard every one of our armed forces personnel more than at any point in the last 30 years. They will keep this country safe, and the House owes them our unwavering support in return.

7.29 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. For me, the Bill is personal. My great-grandfather fought in France during the first world war and my grandfather served in Burma during the second world war, both for the British Indian Army, and my uncle served in the Indian army. Across generations and across continents, the same truth runs through my family history: service is not abstract. It is sacrifice. It is long absences, lifelong injuries and families carrying the weight at home. And it reminds us that Britain's story has always been shaped not just on these islands, but by those from across the Commonwealth who stood up in our darkest hours.

That is why how we treat those who serve and those who have served matters so deeply. Birmingham is home to nearly 18,000 veterans and my constituency is proud of its connection to the armed forces community. At the Queen Elizabeth hospital Birmingham sits the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine, where military and civilian clinicians work side by side, delivering world-class care to those injured in service to this country. It is a place where duty meets compassion, where Britain's promise

to its armed forces must mean something real. I know the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), my constituency neighbour, who served this country in uniform, understands that reality not from briefing notes but from lived experience. His service, and that of Members across this House on all sides who have worn the uniform, deserves our respect.

The armed forces covenant is built on a simple principle: that those who serve should face no disadvantage, and that special consideration is owed where sacrifice has been greatest. But for too long, that promise has not been fully kept. In the spirit of Ernest Bevin, a strong Britain honours its armed forces not with words, but with lasting responsibility. The Bill matters because it extends the covenant across Government not as a slogan, but as a duty; a duty that recognises the physical and mental toll of service, the instability of constant moves, and the reality that too many veterans still struggle with housing, healthcare and support long after they leave the forces. In Birmingham, organisations such as the Royal British Legion, Help for Heroes and Fisher House, and countless local volunteers already embody that covenant every single day, supporting families at the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine and providing care when the system falls short. The Bill backs them up with action.

Housing is where the failure has been clearest. Too many veterans have been left in poor quality accommodation or pushed into homelessness. The “Veterans’ Survey 2022” found that one in 400 veterans reported being homeless, sleeping rough or living in a refuge. That is not just wrong; it is a breach of trust. I welcome the Government’s action: investing £9 billion into forces homes over the next decade; renewing 2,500 existing homes in the west midlands; and building 100,000 homes on surplus defence land, with priority for service families and veterans. That is what listening looks like. That is what governing looks like.

This is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about dignity. It is about whether a veteran can get to hospital; whether a family can stay together during treatment; whether victims of abuse, rape and violence get support; and whether service really ends at the barracks gate or the country keeps its word. The Bill sends a clear message: Britain will not turn its back on those who stood up for her. It honours the past, supports the present and strengthens the future. I am proud to support it.

7.33 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary opened the debate by talking about the Bill taking significant steps to improve service lives, but the reality is that the rhetoric is not matched by the record.

Let me take as an example the significant section of the Bill that is devoted to reservists. There are measures that I have no objection to: it allows the recall of those in their early 60s; it aligns the provision across the three services; and it has a new, lower threshold to recall based on warlike conditions, although it does not explain to employers what “warlike” constitutes so that they can know on what basis their staff might be called up. But the reality is that under this Government the number of reservists has actually fallen. It was over 32,000 in October 2023 and under 32,000 in October 2024.

The number of training days has also fallen, from 1.3 million in 2023-24 to 1.17 million in 2024-25. The Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) said that our reservists “are critical” and “absolutely central”:

“Without them we cannot generate mass, we cannot meet the plethora of defence tasks”.

If that is his view—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) spoke about increased risks and the action being taken by other countries—then why is the number of reservists not increasing significantly?

There might be those on the Government Benches who say, “Well, perhaps our record so far hasn’t been great, but don’t worry—the strategic defence and security review promises a 20% increase in our reservists, so perhaps it will improve in future.” First, that starts from a very low base of 32,000, so a 20% increase is around 6,500. Let us put that in context. Even the French—the French, Madam Deputy Speaker!—are more than doubling their number of reservists, and from a higher starting point. They are going from 46,000 to over 100,000 in the next decade. Many other countries have already taken action. The US has half its army and over a third of its air force in its guard or reserve units. Scandinavian and Baltic countries have also taken action. If we want to see what other countries are doing, we can look at the action the Germans are taking, as my right hon. Friend talked about, or at Poland’s defence spending

We have a very weak target of 20% on a low threshold. What is worse is that the funding commitment to that is almost non-existent. The strategic defence and security review has no hard deadline, and it has the caveat

“when funds allow, most likely in the 2030s.”

Some might say, “Well, isn’t that just my view?” It is actually the view of the cross-party Public Accounts Committee. There are 10 Labour Members on that Committee. It is worth pointing out what that cross-party Committee said just a few months ago, in September:

“The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) sets out the Department’s ambition to significantly expand the reserves’ role, including a 20% increase in numbers from the current 32,000 reserves when funding allows, most likely in the 2030s. However, the Department does not currently have funding or a detailed plan for how it will achieve this expansion.”

That is a report from a Committee with a majority of Labour Members of Parliament.

Let us be honest: it is not just on the issue of reservists that there is no action and little transparency on the funding. To give another example, we do not even have the defence investment plan published—it was promised last year. Given what my right hon. Friend said about the funding steps being taken by other countries, let us put that in context. How much money are we talking about? Spending on reserve pay last year, 2024-25, amounted to £135.3 million, with a further £32 million for bounty payments. The Department’s budget is over £60 billion. A 20% increase in pay and bounty payments would be £33.6 million. We have Government Front Benchers saying that this is critical, central and urgent, but we cannot find low tens of millions until the 2030s.

Luke Akehurst: It is an honour to serve under the right hon. Gentleman on the Finance Committee, where we look at slightly smaller-scale issues on spending. He appears to be questioning the Government’s political

[*Luke Akehurst*]

commitment to find the funding necessary for defence. Does he accept that the downpayment on that political will was the very tough political decision of the Government to take an axe to international development funding, something close to the hearts of many Labour Back Benchers, to provide additional funding for the MOD? If a Labour Government are prepared to take a step with that political courage, he should be in no doubt that, as the years go forward, we will find the funding that is essential to deal with the future defence threats we face.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is one of the most astute commentators on the Finance Committee, so I always genuinely listen to what he says. However, the point I am making is on the urgency to address this now and the relative modesty of the sums we are talking about to significantly increase the reserves. We are talking about tens of millions in a budget of over £60 billion. Therefore, if the rhetoric that this is central to our national security is meant, why is the action being delayed? To the hon. Gentleman's point on funding, as a Former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I know that pages 141 and 142 of the Red Book deal with the resource departmental expenditure limit, which I think is at £1.1 billion this year in cash terms, and the capital departmental expenditure limit is at £0.4 billion—so there is more money. From that £1.5 billion, if I was back in the Treasury I would be asking why tens of millions cannot be prioritised for this, if it is indeed a priority?

If we do not want to look at the MOD budget, we could look at the £27 million the civil service spends on diversity and inclusion officers, or some other areas, such as the over £100 million a year those on the Government Benches voted to spend as part of the Chagos islands giveaway. My point is that these are relatively small sums, which give us scale in terms of our ability to respond at pace.

Ministers are right to say that the reserves are critical, but their record is one in which they have failed to act, and there is no timescale to address those points. Just last month, the Minister told journalists that the UK is “rapidly developing” plans to prepare the country for war, and he warned that:

“the shadow of war is knocking on Europe's door once more”.

How is that aligned with the approach of the Government in terms of failing to scale reserves, and in allowing their numbers to stagnate or even fall?

I have a specific question to ask the Minister with regard to the article 3 commitment under NATO, on our ability to defend the UK. Will he confirm that for the duration of this Parliament the current level of manpower available in our reserves is sufficient to meet article 3 and cover all our critical national infrastructure, and that in reaching that judgment, he is not double counting reservists—such as those who are police officers, doctors, nurses or work in our NHS—who could be counted as essential in those tasks as part of our article 3 requirements?

Dr Arthur: The right hon. Member is being generous with his time, but I feel that he is giving a glass-half-empty speech. He will know that overall recruitment to the armed forces has increased substantially. The latest figures,

published in December, are 13% up, and the number of people leaving the forces is dropping. We heard from the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) that when he was Defence Minister he argued inside Cabinet for more money to go to defence. As the right hon. Gentleman was in the Cabinet at the same time, was he joining in those calls?

Steve Barclay: When I was in the Cabinet we were also responding to a global pandemic and to the energy inflation as a result of Ukraine. What I am highlighting is that we have an Armed Forces Bill under the hon. Gentleman's Government in which the Minister is saying that reservists are critical. I am simply pointing to their record and their future plans.

I am conscious of time, so I will move on to housing, which is covered in clause 3. Colleagues will know that just last April *The Guardian* reported the Prime Minister as telling the Cabinet that he wanted to stop outsourcing decisions to quangos, so it will come as no surprise to colleagues across the House that the Bill sets up yet another quango. In fact, the last Armed Forces Bill took a year to pass, so this quango will not be in place until more than halfway through the Parliament, on an issue which Ministers themselves could be making decisions on. The Prime Minister is telling his Cabinet one thing, and the Bill is doing the exact opposite.

More importantly, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) spoke about how Ministers will have oversight of the new body in terms of the targets. I am afraid I have some news for him: I struggle to find any targets in the Bill. I asked the House of Commons Library what the targets were for this Parliament on housing, and the answer came back that there were none. There are no targets, and yet housing is apparently a huge priority. One could perhaps take comfort at least from whom the Government have put in charge of the housing improvements, as they have appointed a new permanent secretary, but the cross-party Public Accounts Committee published a report just last week—I have not had to go through the archives—in which its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), says:

“I have served on the Public Accounts Committee for twelve years. In all that time a 98% failure rate in a public sector initiative amounts to the most catastrophic fiasco that I have ever seen on the Committee”.

The report itself says:

“The Department designed the schemes in a way that exposes it to both poor quality work and fraud...There was virtually no attention from senior officials and the Department did not know whether the scheme as a whole was or was not working for at least two years”.

It therefore seems a surprise that just three months ago, the Defence Ministers appointed the permanent secretary of that Department to be the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defence, in charge of its flagship programmes, including a housing programme. I ask the Minister, had he read the National Audit Office report when the permanent secretary was appointed?

I have a specific question for the Minister regarding clauses 28 and 29. Can he confirm whether any review has been conducted of Army discipline since the general election? If so, was it published, and if it was not, why not and will it be published before Committee stage? In his summing up, can the Minister explain how a Bill

that speaks so much about the importance of the military covenant is consistent with removing protections from our Northern Ireland veterans?

On the issue of veterans, the Minister announced Operation Valour last May. The Department took six months before it put out a job advert, and it has still not appointed or announced anyone in that post. Can the Minister advise the House why it has taken nine months to appoint someone and when that appointment will be made? Finally, where are the incentives in the Bill? Where are the incentives for employers to recruit reservists—where are the tax incentives and the join-up across Departments?

7.46 pm

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I am proud to speak in support of the Armed Forces Bill on Second Reading, and I do so as the Member of Parliament for Aldershot, the home of the British Army. In my constituency, service is not an abstract concept. It is lived, every day, by families who accept unique pressures on their time, their family life, their careers, their children's education and their health. Our duty in return is clear: fairness, respect, and practical support that works in real life.

I will begin with housing. The last Government left defence housing in an absolute mess, with satisfaction levels for service family accommodation hitting the lowest level on record. I hugely welcome the creation of the new Defence Housing Service and the direction of travel the Bill sets. My patch will be one of the biggest recipients of these changes, as there are more than 1,800 service family homes in Aldershot. That is thousands of families who should never have had to put up with the basics being a battle.

For too long, I have had conversation after conversation with service personnel and their spouses about housing that is not fit for purpose, and a repairs system that feels like a maze. People have described the nightmare of trying to get even straightforward repairs done, and the frustration of being treated like the problem rather than the customer. Again and again, families say to me that they miss the days when there was an estate manager on site who could fix problems quickly and take responsibility. I am delighted to see the Bill deliver that, restoring a service that is accountable, visible and on the side of forces families.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I agree with everything that the hon. Member has said about service family accommodation, but the investment in single living accommodation is unlikely to keep up. As we have heard, that is the responsibility of frontline commands that are unlikely to prioritise it. Does she think that there could be the unintended consequence that people want to move out of the block and even enter relationships in order to move into the much better quality service family accommodation?

Alex Baker: That is a fair point. I know that the Defence Committee will be holding Ministers to account on single living accommodation as much as we are on SFA. They both need to improve very quickly.

The second and central point that I want to focus on is the covenant. It is absolutely right that it is strengthened and put on a clear legal footing. The covenant is the nation's promise that those who serve and their families

should not be disadvantaged because of service life. If that principle means anything, it must apply consistently across the whole of Government and the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Defence Committee has heard powerful evidence of how inconsistent the covenant can be in practice and how families often feel they are left to fight their corner alone. I will give just one example. We heard evidence from someone serving who moved from Scotland to the south of England while waiting for an NHS specialist appointment. They had been told that their place on the waiting list would transfer under the covenant, but instead they were put to the end of the queue, with the local trust stating that it did not recognise or follow the covenant. That is just one story among hundreds.

The Committee heard that significant proportions of serving personnel feel disadvantaged when trying to access healthcare, education and housing, and that challenge is not limited to service personnel themselves. We also heard how service life affects spouses and partners, from difficulties transferring professional roles to families being denied remote working arrangements when posted abroad.

The most worrying conclusion the Defence Committee reached was not simply that disadvantage exists, but that there is no clear single shared understanding of what the covenant actually means on the ground, either among providers or within parts of our armed forces community itself. That gap in understanding is exactly where good intentions go to die.

While I strongly support putting the covenant into law, I urge the Government to go a few steps further. If we are creating a stronger legal covenant, we should take the opportunity to set out a clear, positive, public commitment: what the armed forces community can expect, what "no disadvantage" actually means in practice, and what will be delivered consistently across the UK. It should include clear standards, practical guidance for those delivering services and proper mechanisms for accountability and learning so that best practice is shared and poor practice is tackled quickly. Legislation alone will not fix inconsistency if the people responsible for implementation do not know what is being asked of them or if families cannot see a straightforward route to challenge decisions that plainly ignore the covenant.

Lastly, we should set out a clear vision for how the armed forces covenant is made real in communities across the UK. This really relates to our commitment to a total society approach to defence, particularly within the strategic defence review. That is why I am campaigning for Aldershot to be officially recognised as an armed forces covenant town. I want to create a national movement of covenant towns, cities and villages committed to delivering the covenant consistently across local services and organisations. I am working with the Royal British Legion on what that looks like. Towns like Aldershot, where civilian and military life are inseparable, already understand what it means in practice. By establishing places like ours as covenant towns, cities and villages, we can kick-start a national effort to ensure that respect and fairness for the armed forces community are not just a box-ticking exercise, but embedded in the beating heart of our communities.

In Aldershot and Farnborough, families do not ask for special treatment. They ask for fair treatment and for a system that recognises the reality of service life.

[Alex Baker]

This Bill, with a renewed approach to housing and a stronger covenant, is a major step in the right direction. I welcome and support it and will keep pushing to ensure that its promise is felt by forces families not just in speeches this evening, but in their everyday lives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I intend to introduce a five-minute time limit after the next speaker.

7.54 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The SNP is broadly supportive of the contents of the Bill. It is an important Armed Forces Bill; it is hard to remember another Armed Forces Bill that stepped into such a yawning breach between the armed forces capabilities that we have and the armed forces capabilities that we need. Notwithstanding the fact that clauses 5, 9, 48 and 49 and schedule 2 and elements of schedule 3 will not have effect in Scotland, much of that which is in the Bill is long-overdue legislation that begins to address the systemic problems of the recruitment, training and upkeep of our armed forces, what we expect our armed forces to do and the conditions in which we expect them to live.

I will restrict my remarks to the measures that address the important elements of housing, sexual harm and the numbers within our armed forces. I will not labour the point, except to say that the provisions for sexual harm prevention orders and sexual risk orders in clause 5 are still sadly very much required. We must have confidence that our young people who decide to join the armed forces can do so knowing that while it may or may not prove to be the career or job for them, they can sign up, train, qualify and serve in the knowledge that they will not be preyed upon by either their peers or their superiors. Clause 5 will not directly apply in Scotland, but will of course benefit from legislative consent motions in order that a similar effect will be established there for the safety and security of our uniformed personnel.

The Bill needs to address the recruitment crisis in our armed forces, so it remains a concern that the Government are seeking in the Bill to ensure less parliamentary scrutiny over the size of the armed forces instead of facilitating more. The most recent targets were set in 2021. Currently, the UK armed forces overall are 6% below target at almost 9,000 personnel short—a loss of 11,128 personnel across the UK since 2014. In April 2014, there were 11,100 regular armed forces in Scotland; in April 2021, that had gone down to 10,440. In 2014, the UK Government committed to increasing the number of Scotland-based personnel to 12,500—I would be interested if the Minister could advise what the figure is now.

The UK has a relatively small per-capita standing army by European standards, so it was disappointing that the SDR merely recommended no further reductions in the size of the regular forces, instead of showing the patently required ambition to grow in order to ensure that our armed forces are able to maintain the defence and resilience of the homeland and our commitments to NATO.

I support the taking back into public ownership of service accommodation and the ending of the appalling commercial contracts, which have been well documented

in countless debates in this place. I also welcome the Government's establishment of the Defence Housing Service. However, in March 2025, the MOD could not confirm via written parliamentary questions how much would be spent on maintaining and improving SLA, with the amount ranging from £445 million to £619 million. I wonder whether the Minister can narrow that figure down for the House this evening.

Moreover, those figures have not been broken down to differentiate between Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As such, there is no confirmation of how much will be spent on SLA for personnel serving in Scotland. The House of Commons Library confirmed in 2024 that the MOD managed 47,700 properties, 91.5% of which were in England and Wales, with 6.6% in Scotland. How will these much needed and urgent improvements be marshalled across each establishment and each nation?

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish the Minister every success with the Bill.

7.58 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. and gallant Members across the House who have brought to the debate personal experience of serving this country in the armed forces. I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) for his insightful speech, in which he talked about some of the threats we face.

It was mentioned earlier in the debate that there are no Members present from the Reform party. I think that their apparent lack of interest in defence matters could partly be because, while most of us across the rest of the House have sleepless nights worrying about the threat to the United Kingdom and its allies from Russia, Reform Members do not actually accept that that threat exists; they are on a spectrum that ranges from thinking it is all Ukraine's fault that it was ever the subject of two invasions and the threat of a third, through to their Welsh leader actually accepting money from the people whose military threat we are trying to counter.

For many families across North Durham, the contract between the state and the brave men and women who serve in our armed forces is a key issue—one that they sent me here to focus on. One in every 10 households I speak to in North Durham has a veteran or serving member of the armed forces. When I am campaigning on people's doorsteps, I often play "spot the cap badge", as many homes have different badges just inside the door as mementos, and if I manage to recognise it, it helps to strike up a conversation.

Across my constituency are people who have served in all three services and many different units, but North Durham has a particularly strong connection with the Durham Light Infantry—also known as the DLI or Faithful Durhams—and its successor regiments following amalgamation. I pay particular tribute to the Durham Light Infantry Association for its role in my constituency.

For my constituents, having proper housing, social care, justice and other support for veterans is not just about making a pledge; they must be a reality for them and their loved ones in order to get on with life. Since being elected, I have tried to use my role in this place as a platform to stand up for our armed forces and veterans and call for greater investment in defending our country. In an increasingly turbulent world, the importance of the

invaluable efforts of our servicemen and women is clearer than it has been at any time since the end of the cold war.

I am proud that we have a Labour Government who are showing through this Bill that we are on the side of our armed forces. I was elected on a manifesto that promised to renew the nation's contract with those who serve through better housing, services and protections for our forces and their families. The Bill will do exactly that. It will also renew, as is done on a five-year basis, the existence of standing armed forces—a tradition that has gone on since 1688. I am sure Members will be unsurprised to hear that I am happy for this country to have standing armed forces. As others have said, I hope that the standing armed forces will grow and that we will attain the kind of mass that we need to deal with the threats we face.

The Bill forms a key part of a wider picture of a Labour Government who are delivering on the defence of this nation. I spoke about the tough political choices that we are making to obtain the funding that is needed for that, but landmark deals have also been secured to protect British jobs and help keep the world safer from hostile actors. We secured an £8 billion deal with Turkey on Eurofighter, which I spoke about in a Westminster Hall debate late last year, and we have seen the selection of the UK's Type 26 frigates by Norway. Incidentally, I consider Norway to be one of our key strategic partners in defending the north Atlantic bastion.

As parliamentarians, we all have a duty to deliver a renewed covenant with our armed forces. We must do that for the brave men and women in North Durham who were willing to put their lives on the line throughout history and do so even now for the good of the rest of our constituents up and down the country. We must do it for the current generation in active service, who are safeguarding the nation from threats, wherever they come from. We must do it for the entire population, who rightly expect that their Government will do all that they can to keep them safe from any risk of conflict and bloodshed.

8.3 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I will use my time in this debate to highlight an injustice that strikes at the very heart of the armed forces covenant: the injustice suffered by a legendary Eastbournian, Staff Sergeant Pauline Cole.

Pauline served our country during the Aden emergency in 1967, and she wrote about her experiences in her book "Army Girl: The Untold Story". She developed skin damage and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her military service. After tribunals rightfully awarded her compensation for those lifelong conditions, she should have been able to live with greater financial security in her retirement. Instead, the opposite happened. Military compensation is treated as income when calculating pension credit, so most of what Pauline won at tribunal was effectively taken away by the Department for Work and Pensions. Her pension credit fell from £77 a week to just £11 a week. Pauline was financially punished for being injured in the service of her country.

This is not just Pauline's story; the Royal British Legion estimates that over 50,000 war disablement pensioners of retirement age face the same perverse outcome. What makes it worse and even more outrageous is that

civil compensation is not treated as income for pension credit; only military compensation is penalised in this way. It is also outrageous in the light of the fact that LGBT+ veterans who received compensation following the Etherton review were explicitly, and rightly, told that their payments would not affect their benefits. We have to ask: why are injured veterans under the war pension scheme treated differently, and why does our system force our poorest veterans to use compensation awarded for pain, injury and lost quality of life to cover basic living costs?

I was proud to use my first ever question to the Prime Minister in this place to raise this injustice at the highest level, and I was proud to leverage a meeting with the Pensions Minister to discuss it further. There were many, many warm words but no action. I promised Pauline that I would do my very best to fight this injustice on her behalf. With huge sadness, Pauline died on 30 November last year, without seeing the justice that she was so determined to secure. At her funeral earlier this month, I restated to her sons Les and Simon Haffenden and to all her loved ones gathered there my promise to continue to fight tooth and nail for Pauline and veterans like her. To that end, this week marks my tabling of my armed forces compensation scheme and war pension scheme report Bill—Pauline's law—as a step toward correcting the injustice permanently.

As this Government's Armed Forces Bill progresses through Parliament, the Minister has an incredible opportunity—a duty, in my view—to act through his own legislation to correct this gross injustice. I urge the Government to amend the Bill to ensure that no veteran's pension credit, or indeed any benefit, is reduced because they received compensation for serving their country.

I would love to work in a cross-party way on this issue. I know that the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) is passionate about this issue, as are the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) and many others. Indeed, it was mentioned by our spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary).

We owe our veterans nothing less than the dignity, security and fairness that they were promised when they signed up to serve. Pauline deserved better, our veterans deserve better, and this House must do better.

8.8 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Bedworth in my constituency hosts the largest armistice parade in Britain. It is truly the town that never forgets. Today I want to pay tribute to all the veterans across North Warwickshire and Bedworth, especially those who lost their lives in Afghanistan, including Sergeant Simon Valentine.

When I speak to people across my constituency, they tell me that they are proud of their armed forces. Just last week I met a constituent on a visit to Parliament who proudly told me about his time serving in the RAF. At a time of growing international turbulence, we need more people who look to our armed forces with national pride and who can see a future for themselves in our armed forces.

For too long, those opportunities were undermined by years of under-investment by the Conservatives. In 1996, the Conservative party privatised military housing.

[Rachel Taylor]

This decision cost taxpayers billions and left too many service personnel and their families living in substandard conditions. Between 2018 and 2023, military families lodged almost 53,000 complaints about their housing. By 2023, satisfaction with service family accommodation had fallen to the lowest level on record, with only one in five service personnel satisfied with the repairs and maintenance carried out. This Labour Government have started to turn the tide. We have brought 36,000 forces family homes back into public ownership, saving over £200 million a year in rent payments. These savings are already being invested in fixing and improving military housing, but we need to do so much more.

In the run-up to the election in 2024, we promised to extend the armed forces covenant to every area of Government. Through this Bill, we are delivering on that promise. The armed forces covenant promises to deliver fairness for serving personnel, veterans, families and the bereaved, and for the first time, this Government will extend the covenant across social care, employment support and other public services, placing a legal duty on them to consider the unique circumstances faced by forces personnel and their families. It will deliver better support for tens of thousands of service personnel and veterans across the country. As part of improving that help, I am proud to have supported Op Valour, which is extending more support for veterans and their families in my constituency.

All those who serve our country must be able to do so with dignity and respect. They deserve confidence in a service justice system that stands with them and that supports victims and delivers justice. That is why the Government are ensuring that the service justice system can better protect those who experience the most serious offences. It will give the military police enhanced powers to investigate wrongdoing, provide service courts with stronger tools to hold perpetrators to account and, crucially, improve the experience of victims as they navigate the justice process. I am proud to stand behind this Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls, and this Bill will help us in that mission, because it includes a comprehensive set of measures to protect those at risk of violent behaviour, domestic abuse, stalking and sexual abuse and harassment.

I also want to see this legislation protecting our armed forces in their role combating terrorism at home and abroad. The first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe. Today, the threats we face are growing closer and closer to home. We have seen Russia's illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine, and we have seen the rules-based international order fracture and strain. In response, we have to strengthen our armed forces and ensure that we are prepared for an era of ever increasing threat.

Finally we have a Government who are standing side by side with our armed forces through real, tangible measures, backing our armed forces, supporting their families, treating them with dignity and respect, giving them choices and ensuring that our nation's security is fit for the future.

8.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I want to thank the Minister and the Government for all they do. I mean that genuinely,

because the Bill before us has lots of good things on which we should be encouraged to support the Minister. I am also pleased to see the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), in his place. I look forward to his comments at the end.

I want to declare an interest as a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years and a member of the Territorial Army for the Royal Artillery for 11 and a half years. As a former serviceman, I know very well the impact of being well funded, because that means being well supported, emotionally and practically, and that applies never more so than this week when our brave troops have been disparaged as they have been. It is imperative that this House refutes and repudiates that smear on the brave young men and women who gave their all. I mentioned that in an intervention, and I say it again for the record.

I think of Corporal Channing Day from 3 Medical Regiment, who was killed in Afghanistan on Wednesday 24 October 2012 while on patrol in the Nahr-e Saraj district of Helmand province. She was a 25-year-old Comber girl, my constituent, who paid the ultimate sacrifice and gave her life while helping others. She was not somewhere in the background, to quote President Trump. She was on the frontline, and her mum and dad, Rosemary and Leslie, still grieve for her today. She and others in the armed forces were the best in the world, and their brothers and sisters in arms continue to uphold their legacy and sacrifice and the motto that she served under in the Medical Corps: "Faithful in adversity". We need to be faithful in adversity for her and for all the others who have served. The Bill before us today reminds us of our duty to be faithful to them and I therefore support it.

I work closely with the veterans champion for Ards and North Down borough council, Alderman Trevor Cummings, who over the years has highlighted the disparity in the application of this duty in certain areas. It is my desire, and indeed that of the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes, that this disparity is stamped out and that the application of obligations is accepted and implemented UK-wide, so my ask of the Minister will be in my next comment. As we all know, in Northern Ireland the treatment of our armed forces greatly varies across the Province. This was demonstrated in the abuse received by British Legion supporters at a Tesco store in Newry just last year. It is little wonder that veterans feel unsupported in certain areas when local charity fundraisers are treated in this manner.

There is a real requirement for this legislation to apply foundationally across the United Kingdom. As Help for Heroes has stated, this Bill has the potential to strengthen legal protections where public bodies fail to consider properly the needs of the armed forces community in policy, funding and service decisions. My ask of the Minister is for improved consistency and fairness across the United Kingdom, so that when things happen in Northern Ireland that should not be happening, recognition will be for all. We also need to reinforce accountability and delivery at national and local levels, and it is our job to ensure that the Bill does just that.

I am aware that our Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone—the Secretary of State referred to him earlier—is working on models to improve the treatment of Northern Ireland veterans at governmental

level, acknowledging the unique position that Northern Ireland finds herself in. I believe that the Bill will aid him in trying to ensure that every governmental Department abides by our obligations from this House and not by its own personal desires.

That also leads me to ask the Minister to outline whether the Bill will ensure that the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner is on an equal footing with the rest of the United Kingdom Commissioners. It is currently a non-statutory appointment, which means that the post lacks the formal legal powers and duties that statutory commissioners in other parts of the United Kingdom may possess. I hope the Minister does not mind my asking that question directly, and I would like to have an answer, please.

I further support Help for Heroes in its three asks of the Bill. The first is that the duty should apply to all relevant public bodies. For consistency and accountability, the legislation and subsequent regulations should ensure that the duty applies across the full delivery system of all four nations. The second is that statutory guidance must be clear and enforceable by clearly setting out expectations, responsibilities and minimum standards, underpinned by formal monitoring and reporting arrangements. Thirdly, veterans should have clear routes to redress where the duty is not met, and Parliament should be able to scrutinise delivery effectively. A robust evidence and accountability framework is essential.

Time has beaten me, Madam Deputy Speaker, but what a time this is to remember just how much we have to be thankful to our armed forces for. They are the best in the world, and their training, courage and fortitude are the stuff of legend. They deserve the certainty that this nation, this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, will do right by them and their families while they serve and when they retire, no matter where they retire to.

8.18 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Portsmouth North knows the value of service. We are a proud naval city, home to serving personnel, reservists, veterans and their families, and to the many charities and individuals who support them. We are a city whose identity is inseparable from the Royal Navy. More than 9,000 veterans of all services live in Portsmouth. Thousands more serve at His Majesty's Royal Naval Base, Portsmouth, and many families in my constituency move where duty sends them, putting down roots again and again in the service of this nation. That is why the Armed Forces Bill matters so deeply to Portsmouth North. The Bill renews the nation's contract with those who serve. It delivers better homes, stronger protections, fairer support for veterans and serving personnel and greater readiness at a time of global threat.

Let me start with housing, because for far too long forces families were badly let down. Under the Conservatives, satisfaction with service family accommodation collapsed to record lows as families lived with damp, mould and unsafe conditions. This Bill draws a clear line under that failure. Indeed, I am proud to see that this work has already begun under this Government, with real change to be seen in houses in areas such as Hilsea. I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for visiting and seeing this change.

But we are going to do more, by establishing a publicly owned Defence Housing Service and backing it with a fully costed £9 million defence housing strategy. Change under Labour is real. This investment will directly improve service family accommodation in Portsmouth, which will improve retention and provide stability and quality of life for those who serve and live in our almost 700 local homes. That is also only possible because we ended the disastrous privatisation of military housing and brought 36,000 forces family homes back into public ownership, saving £200 million a year—money we are now reinvesting for our service personnel.

I am proud that the Bill delivers on a solemn promise that we made at the general election: for the first time, the armed forces covenant will be extended across every part of government. Central Government, local authorities and public bodies will be legally required to consider the unique circumstances of service life. For Portsmouth North, where thousands of veterans and service personnel rely on local healthcare, housing, employment and support, that will end the postcode lottery and deliver fairness for those who are serving and those who have already given up so much. I ask the Minister to tell me in his summing up how clear statutory guidance with practical examples will support consistent delivery on the ground and give confidence to those responsible for making the covenant work. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) and join her campaign by making Portsmouth the national covenant city, alongside Aldershot's covenant town.

Those who serve our country must be able to do so with dignity and respect. This Bill strengthens the service justice system, improves support for victims and ensures that serious offences are dealt with swiftly and properly. It also delivers new protections against sexual violence, domestic abuse, stalking and harassment in line with our mission to halve violence against women and girls. Supporting victims and raising standards does not weaken our armed forces; it strengthens them.

In conclusion, the Bill exposes a clear divide between those who back our armed forces and those who prefer slogans to substance. The Tories talk tough on defence, but their record is one of abysmal failure. Their 14 years in government left morale at record lows, forces housing in a shameful state, our services decimated, and the no-detriment service of our service personnel unrecognised, unknown and, for many, invisible. But there is another group I must mention: Reform UK. Reform Members speak loudly outside this Chamber about patriotism and respect for the armed forces. Yet when this House debates housing, welfare and legal protection for those who serve and have served, they are conspicuous by their absence. On debates marking D-day, VJ Day and moments of enormous significance to my naval city and to veterans across the country, Reform Members are shamefully not here.

Rachel Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that given that Reform is in control of more than 10 county councils up and down the country, which will be responsible for implementing the armed forces covenant in areas such as education and social welfare, the inability of its Members to show up today is shameful?

Amanda Martin: Absolutely, which is why I ask the Minister how we can ensure that the covenant is statutory across all our local authorities.

[Amanda Martin]

Patriotism is not a slogan or social media post. It is showing up, voting for better homes for forces families, backing the armed forces covenant, strengthening the protections for those who serve, and listening and supporting individual constituents as an MP and collectively as Government. Help for Heroes, the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity and the Naval Children's Charity have all welcomed the direction of the Bill and stand ready to support its implementation so that lived experience continues to shape delivery.

This is a Bill for homes fit for heroes and for fairness for thousands of veterans in Portsmouth and for those serving. I am proud to say that two special naval personnel are in the Gallery today: my son and his girlfriend. I want to give them and all others who serve and have served dignity, respect, support and readiness in an increasingly dangerous world. Since being elected, I have stood up proudly for my armed forces community, alongside a city that has always stood up for our armed forces. Today this Bill ensures that Government will do the same.

8.23 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am absolutely honoured to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin). I am pleased to see this Bill seek to fill the gaps in the armed forces covenant. I should declare a personal interest as my husband Paul is a Royal Navy veteran, my daughter Abbi is a current Army reservist, I am a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and my husband is the armed forces champion at Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council. My husband's last day of service was the day before we got married—denying me those amazing wedding photographs. The primary reason he decided to come out before we married was because, at that time, the support for families was weak. He told me that he did not want to receive a "Dear John" letter or miss the birth of his children. The armed forces covenant was supposed to fix that, but I have heard from service families that that is not yet the case.

One of the clearest examples of where families feel let down is in education. Although our schools are required to prioritise the children of military personnel in their admissions, and they do, so many children with special educational needs fall through the net. The process is supposed to take a matter of months, as we know, but it often takes closer to a year, and many children find themselves moved from one local authority to another part way through, leading to a need to repeat assessments and to lengthening delays. We know that specialist school places are as rare as unicorn manure, and I have heard that many families feel they cannot move with their serving member as they cannot afford to risk that change. I hope that the Minister will work carefully alongside the Department for Education on this.

Peter Swallow: What the hon. Member is saying is so important—more important than party politics. Fundamentally, as we work to fix the special educational needs and disabilities system, we must bear in mind the unique circumstances of those who serve our country. I thank her for raising that important point.

Vikki Slade: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I have met service children as I have visited my schools, and I always pay special attention to the service they are giving through their parents being away.

It is not just in education; we know that dentistry is in crisis, and Dorset has often been mentioned as a dental desert. While serving personnel can access excellent GP and dentist services on their bases, that does not extend to their spouses and children. Most NHS dentists are closed to new patients in my area, so families arriving in the county face the prospect of losing their dentist. Is the Minister considering extending service dentists to support the wider armed forces family? How will he work with the Department of Health and Social Care to amend NHS contracts, because dentists are private businesses within the system and are therefore not, as I understand it, within the scope of the armed forces covenant? We must ensure that these children are not disadvantaged by regular moves around the country.

That brings me to the quality of accommodation, which has a significant effect on wellbeing. I welcome the Defence Housing Service and the commitment to upgrade 90% of military family homes, but when we turn to single-person and training facilities, the housing problems are immense. Through my involvement with the armed forces pension scheme, I have visited numerous establishments—Royal Navy, Royal Marine and Army—and I am constantly shocked by the experiences shared with us of no running water, cold showers and toilets that do not flush. I recognise that our incredible military will be living in far more basic circumstances when on manoeuvres, but it is simply not acceptable for their day-to-day lives. What plans does the Minister have for the upgrade of single-person accommodation and training establishments that are not covered? I am concerned that if that provision comes from individual budgets, commanding officers will be expected to choose between the equipment that keeps our military safe and safe military accommodation.

Another aspect of the Bill that raises interesting questions is the extension of the special reserve. Although some former members of the armed forces would be more than happy to go back and do their bit, others do not feel that way. One local resident told me that he has done his fair share and does not see why he should be called up again up to the age of 65. I know that my husband would be happy to go back, but I suspect, given his recent attempts to get fit, that he is very unlikely to reach the threshold. What assessment has the Department undertaken of how many in that cohort will be physically able to serve, and what else might they be able to do to serve their country?

Rachel Taylor: Might I recommend that the hon. Lady's husband regularly run parkrun with the Minister? It may get him up to a level of fitness nearing the Minister's.

Vikki Slade: I have just discovered that the Minister's children live in my constituency, so I may well take him up on that offer.

To come back to a more sober point, against that backdrop, it is important to remember why all this matters—the Minister knows who I am going to speak about. In the light of the President Trump's disgraceful comments last week, I put on record my thanks to all

those who choose to serve; to their families, whose lives are turned upside down; and in particular to people such as my constituent Toby Gutteridge, a royal marine and member of the special forces from Poole. He survived a catastrophic injury in Afghanistan that left him paralysed from the neck down. Despite being permanently reliant on a ventilator, he has gone on to achieve academic qualifications—including a first-class honours degree from Bournemouth University—formed a charity called Bravery, and inspired others through his public speaking. For anyone in doubt about the sacrifices our troops made or their immense bravery, I recommend his book, “Never Will I Die”, which I understand is set to be turned into a film about his life and service.

Toby’s story is a reminder of the resilience at the heart of our armed forces community, and underlines why we must ensure that the facilities, care and equipment that support service personnel match their dedication. I look forward to supporting the Government as the Bill progresses, and will seek ways for us to improve it wherever we can.

8.30 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in support of the Bill, which renews not just the legal basis of our armed forces but our nation’s contract with those who defend it. In my constituency, the armed forces are our

neighbours and our friends. From the families who live on the Dreghorn military estate to those based at the Colinton and Dreghorn barracks, we see them daily around the barracks, picking up their kids at school, and buying food at the supermarket. When the weather is bad, they deliver groceries to the community’s older people. Today, this Labour Government are telling them: “We have your back.”

For too long, the standard of military housing has been a national scandal, as we have heard. We cannot expect people who would gladly risk their lives to protect this country to live in accommodation that is damp, mouldy or cold. That is why I am incredibly proud to welcome our £9 billion military housing strategy—the biggest settlement in a generation. It will lead to the renewal of more than 3,000 military homes in Scotland alone. Most importantly for my constituents, up to 415 homes in Edinburgh South West could—and, I hope, will—benefit from that landmark investment. This is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about dignity. The provision is backed by action on household budgets, too, with more than 10,000 military personnel in Scotland getting the biggest pay uplift in two decades. We are putting money in their pockets and a decent roof over their heads.

Let me turn to veterans, of whom there are tens of thousands across Scotland. The armed forces covenant has for too long, been a “best effort” rather than a guarantee. I join others in paying tribute to the many people across the UK who were concerned by the American President’s comments last week. Many constituents got in touch with me to say that they were offended. They will remember that, back in 2009, the 3rd Battalion, the Rifles, deployed to Afghanistan as part of a 1,400-strong battle group. When the battalion returned to Colinton, 30 personnel had lost their lives—the biggest loss of life in a single battle group in 60 years.

Thousands of people lined the streets as the battalion marched the streets from the barracks down to Colinton parish church. We have heard calls for Aldershot to be made a covenant town, and for Portsmouth to be made a covenant city, so I think that Colinton should be a covenant village, given its support for the armed forces—not just then, but always.

At the general election, we promised to extend the covenant to every area of Government, and the Bill delivers on that promise. For the first time, this Labour Government are extending the covenant’s legal duty across all areas of central Government, and we are working with devolved Governments and local authorities to make it happen in their areas, too. That means that social care, employment support and other public services will be legally required to consider the unique circumstances faced by forces personnel and their families, particularly in respect of schools.

Unfortunately, while the Labour Government use the force of law to protect our veterans, there is concern in Scotland that the SNP Government in Holyrood has been cutting dedicated veterans’ support since 2023. We need only consider NHS Lothian, in which Veterans First Point, which provides support for veterans, has been cut. Many people are concerned about that, including members of the Scottish Government Cabinet with whom I have discussed it. It feels as if the Scottish Government are managing decline and scaling back support, but I hope that we will set an example for them today.

The investments from the UK Government come at a time when the stakes could not be higher. We face the most serious set of geopolitical threats for at least a generation, and Scotland will be a key part of the home front in the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war. When I speak to members of the armed forces in Edinburgh South West, they look at what is happening and the geopolitical situation with tremendous professionalism. By fixing housing and boosting pay, we are enshrining the covenant in law and ensuring that people at the heart of our defence are ready for the challenges ahead.

8.34 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Let me begin by associating myself with the remarks of several hon. Members in repudiating the outrageous slur on our armed forces by the President of the United States in respect of service in Afghanistan. Our soldiers were not shirkers, they were heroes. One of them was young Private Phillip Gillespie from Galgorm in my constituency, who for his service lost a leg and is permanently disabled as a result. He typifies many who gave so much in that regard.

Most of my remarks will relate to the armed forces covenant. I have heard it said more than once in this debate that the Labour party’s manifesto pledged that the armed forces covenant would be applied to every area of government. It is a good pledge, but sadly the Bill does not deliver it. Within the Bill, there is a notable and deliberate exception, which is the 11 local councils in Northern Ireland. Clause 2 sets forth what a “local authority” means. For England it is county councils, district councils, boroughs and so on. For Wales it is “the council of a county or county borough”,

[*Jim Allister*]

and for Scotland it is

“a council constituted under...the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994.”

For Northern Ireland the Bill states:

“In relation to Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.”

Where are the 11 district councils of Northern Ireland, and why are they excluded from the ambit of the Bill? Why is the armed forces covenant not to be applied to them? Is it because some of those councils, unhappily, are dominated by Sinn Féin? Are the Government running scared of offending Sinn Féin with the armed forces covenant, remembering of course, that Sinn Féin is the party of the IRA and those who took out so many of our gallant citizens and servicemen in Northern Ireland?

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Far be it from me to speak in the Minister's place, but surely the hon. and learned Gentleman has answered his own question. In forcing local authorities that are controlled by Sinn Féin to give due regard to veterans would we not be giving away the identity of those veterans to Sinn Féin controlled councils that may pass them on to unsavoury friends?

Jim Allister: Not all councils, happily, are controlled by Sinn Féin. There are 11 councils, many of which are not. Perhaps through the First Minister's office—I do not know, but perhaps at its behest—the councils have been excluded. I am disappointed that the Government's manifesto has been disappplied when it comes to Northern Ireland, where the covenant has been abysmally implemented.

I turn to the “Armed Forces Covenant annual report 2025” and go to almost any page. I read:

“Healthcare services for veterans in England”

or “in Wales” or “in Scotland”, but nothing for Northern Ireland. I go to education and read about the

“service pupil premium in England”

or the Welsh Government education service for children. But there is nothing for Northern Ireland. I turn to homelessness, and there is a section on “Homelessness in Wales”, and “Homelessness in Scotland”, but nothing on Northern Ireland. There is “Resettlement in Scotland”—all that is there, underscoring that the armed forces covenant has not been adequately applied in my part of the United Kingdom. And now the Government are exempting the whole level of local government from the implementation of the covenant. That is not just disturbing—it is quite appalling.

Why should a veteran who lives in my constituency not have the same protections, opportunities and guarantees as a veteran who lives in the constituency of any Member from Great Britain? There can be no justification for that, and yet that is the import of the Bill. I trust that the Government will make good that default and will ensure that that loophole is closed.

We are in a bizarre situation in Northern Ireland because of the implication of EU regulations, including those concerning ozone-depleting substances. Believe it or not, that means that Chinook, Dakota and Merlin helicopters, and many more, might land in Northern Ireland, but they cannot be based in Northern Ireland

because it offends an obscure EU law—that is what happens when you hand away the sovereignty over part of your own territory. I say to the Secretary of State that it is time that was rectified as well.

Maybe that is why our military presence is fast diminishing. A recent answer to me showed that there were five Royal Navy personnel, 70 RAF personnel and only 1,230 Army personnel stationed in Northern Ireland. Why? We were meant to go back to peacetime levels under the Belfast agreement, but we have not. Are this Government running down military presence in Northern Ireland?

8.41 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): As a Back-Bench Member of Parliament, I understand that it is rare to see a ten-minute rule Bill progress all the way into law. That is why I was so pleased when I learned that the Armed Forces Bill has incorporated the proposal from my Bill to bring Royal Fleet Auxiliary personnel within the remit of the new Armed Forces Commissioner. When the Armed Forces Commissioner Act 2025 received Royal Assent at the end of last year, it created for the first time an independent statutory voice for service personnel, reporting directly to Parliament. However, the RFA did not get that protection, despite the vital role that its crews play in supporting our armed forces.

Falmouth is home to the Bay-class RFA ships, and I have spent time with their crews in Falmouth docks. RFA personnel are not armed combatants, but they are deployed in warzones and they face danger, and there is no doubt that they are absolutely vital to the UK's defence, security and maritime power. They have been deployed all over the world on anti-narcotics missions, following earthquakes, providing support during the Ebola crisis, and recently in operations apprehending shadow vessels and protecting our subsea cables. Crews face challenging conditions, including an ageing fleet and staff shortages. Personnel regularly have long sea tours, with less time off per day worked than any other sector. This Government have been working with the RFA and its unions closely on improving terms and conditions, and I hope that will be concluded speedily.

Mr Francois: As the Minister who oversaw Operation Gritrock, when RFA Argus was deployed to Freetown as part of Britain's relief effort to fight Ebola in Sierra Leone, may I endorse everything that the hon. Lady has said and pay a personal tribute to the wonderful work that the RFA did to help combat that wicked virus?

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I remember the ship sailing from Falmouth and coming back.

Clause 30 of the Armed Forces Bill now delivers what I argued for and formally brings RFA personnel within the scope of the Armed Forces Commissioner. The reform does not change the RFA's legal status or distinct identity, which is very important, but it finally gives the men and women who sustain our Royal Navy and Royal Marines an independent route to raise concerns about bullying, unsafe conditions, discrimination or misconduct.

Schedule 4 sets out in detail the new powers and responsibilities of the Commissioner in relation to the RFA. These include promoting welfare, improving public understanding of the RFA's challenges and investigating

systemic issues, such as staffing, crew fatigue and safety. It also gives the Commissioner the authority to enter RFA premises, request evidence and issue recommendations that the Secretary of State has to consider. It is worthy of the contribution that the RFA makes, and I am glad to have helped in a tiny way to secure it. The contract with those who serve should not end at the gates of a naval base or the stern of an auxiliary ship. RFA personnel serve this country with dedication and often without recognition, and it is right that our policy reflects their contribution.

I welcome the wider reforms in the Armed Forces Bill, which will benefit thousands of service personnel and more than 30,000 veterans across Cornwall, many of them in Truro and Falmouth. The Bill extends the covenant across all levels of Government so that no one falls through the gaps, and it strengthens the service justice system to ensure fair treatment and proper accountability. It also provides for the publicly owned Defence Housing Service, which will benefit 12,334 homes in the south-west, many of which are in my constituency.

The provisions in the Bill are accompanied by initiatives such as the fantastic Operation Valour, and there is a bid for my constituency to become a hub. Cornwall has the second highest number of veterans of any local authority area, so we believe that it would make a lot of sense to have that provision there.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) made a point about young people. The Government announced an armed forces gap year plan over Christmas to give Britain's young people under the age of 21 a taste of the extraordinary skills and training on offer across the Army, the Royal Navy and the RAF. It is a really important scheme.

I had very little experience of the military before I met my ex-husband. Everybody knows about the potential risks, but there are huge positives and opportunities that many are not aware of. People can do all sorts of things in the forces—they can learn to be a pilot, a medic, an engineer or even a champion snowboarder—and they gain connections that last a lifetime. My Navy friends are like family to my son, and I consider myself very lucky to have been part of a forces family.

Cornwall has a proud military heritage. Many families have someone who served or is still serving. They make extraordinary sacrifices to keep this country safe, and they deserve safe homes, fair treatment and a system that understands the unique demands of military life. I am pleased that the RFA is included in the Bill and that I have played a tiny part in shaping it. I am also pleased that those who keep our armed forces moving around will now be properly recognised and protected. As a Government, we promised to renew the nation's contract with those who serve, and we are delivering on that.

8.46 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I genuinely welcome this Bill. As an Army Cadet Force instructor, I also welcome the new unified organisation for cadet forces.

Somerset has a higher-than-average proportion of veterans and those in the armed forces community, including in Taunton and Wellington. At Norton Manor camp in Taunton and Wellington, we have 17 trees that

were planted to represent the Royal Marines from 40 Commando who lost their lives in Afghanistan. Let me add to the comments earlier that the fact that President Trump was so dismissive of that service and those lives is contemptible.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It seems to have been indicated a couple of times during this debate that President Trump has apologised. As far as I can tell, he has not apologised at any point for his disgraceful comments. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in encouraging President Trump from this place to do so publicly and quickly?

Gideon Amos: I certainly encourage President Trump to apologise. I invite him to listen to the relatives of those who died in Afghanistan, whom I talk with and listen to at remembrance services in Norton Fitzwarren, near 40 Commando camp, on a regular basis. Perhaps he would then understand the sacrifice that people made for freedom—the freedom for which Americans and Europeans died and were injured. His remarks are utterly contemptuous, and he should be ashamed of them. That shows what an unreliable ally he is to our United Kingdom.

I welcome the additional support for the covenant and for those who will be supported by it in Somerset. Through its guaranteed interview scheme, Somerset council has taken the covenant very seriously and is delivering it, but it will be effective only if the resources are there for the public services to stand behind it, as has been said by the director general of the Royal British Legion. He said it is “vital” that those delivering services are

“resourced with funding and training so that they can fully understand the purpose of the Armed Forces Covenant to ensure this change makes a meaningful difference to the lives of all those in the Armed Forces community”.

Our servicemen and women and our veterans deserve that support.

Our veterans certainly do not deserve to be considered as in any way equivalent to terrorists in Northern Ireland who sought to undermine peace and law and order, so it is right that last week's vote overturned the provisions of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 that gave immunity to terrorists. We need protections that will stand up in court, unlike the failed legacy Act, and I urge the Government to seriously consider the Liberal Democrat amendments to the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), which would put in place far stronger protections for our veterans than are currently in the Bill.

Returning to the Armed Forces Bill, as the Lib Dem housing spokesperson, I was pleased to table an amendment to the Renters' Rights Bill to ensure that service family accommodation meets the decent homes standard. That amendment was ultimately adopted in section 101 of what is now the Renters' Rights Act 2025, but timelines matter. Given past promises, the importance of meeting that standard is set out in the defence housing strategy:

“Promises have been made time and again...All homes would meet the Decent Homes Standard. That didn't happen.”

That was under the Conservatives; let us hope that in this new era, this Government's promises are not empty.

[Gideon Amos]

The new duty in the Renters' Rights Act requires the MOD to report to Parliament on progress towards achieving the decent homes standard for service family accommodation, but the first report does not need to be made until March 2027, and the defence housing strategy contains no targets for how long it will take for service family accommodation to meet the decent homes standard. I urge the Government to give a timeline for this important commitment to our service families—our original amendment would have instituted a duty to upgrade immediately. As other hon. Members have said, we also need timelines on single living accommodation.

The Bill's new defence housing body comes as part of a £9 billion, 10-year strategy. That is very welcome—it sounds very good—but how much of that £9 billion will be spent on civilian housing, and how much of it will be spent on service family accommodation? These questions matter. For example, the 2025 armed forces continuous attitude survey found that nearly one in three respondents described armed forces accommodation in negative terms, and nearly two thirds of respondents listed the impact on family and personal life of service accommodation as one of the top reasons influencing them to leave the armed forces. One respondent said that

“lack of assistance has significantly contributed to my decision to leave military service.”

In summary, we need to see real targets for when the decent homes standard will be met for service families and when single living accommodation will be upgraded in an organised way.

Mr Calvin Bailey: One of the critical points of the armed forces covenant is that it extends across Government to all Government Departments, and it particularly requires our local councils to play their part and intervene. Based on the points that the hon. Gentleman has just made, can he provide some guidance on how his council will ensure that the covenant is delivered?

Gideon Amos: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am pleased that Somerset council is leading on things such as the guaranteed interview scheme and the research it has done recently on how the delivery of NHS services to veterans matches up. There is a whole set of recommendations that I refer him to, and I am delighted that my colleagues at Somerset council are playing such a leading role in delivering the covenant. I believe we are already a covenant county—a covenant village, a covenant town and a covenant county.

We need a firm commitment, not just to deliver on the covenant but to get troop numbers back up to more than 100,000. To make that happen, the Liberal Democrats would create a £10,000 signing bonus and a £20,000 re-enlisting bonus. We also need to see the defence investment plan, so that companies such as Leonardo in Somerset maintain our vital helicopter manufacturing capacity in this country.

Mr Bailey: On that point, Somerset is a very important county for defence—Leonardo has a strong history of building helicopters there. Being able to bring about the investment that Leonardo requires is a key part of the defence investment plan. Will the hon. Gentleman give

his views on the defence, security and resilience bank, which might be a method of bringing forward that investment without putting it on to the Government's already indebted balance sheet?

Gideon Amos: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution about the investment bank. I welcome any commitment that will secure the ability of the UK to manufacture helicopters at Yeovil in Somerset. That is vital not only for the medium lift helicopter, but for unmanned, uncrewed helicopters. Losing that facility would be devastating for the United Kingdom defence industry, as well as for the community around Somerset and the 3,000 jobs involved. It is vital that the defence investment plan comes as soon as possible.

Unless we fix housing, we will be undermining recruitment and retention.

8.55 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): In my constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale, 5.5% of residents are veterans. That is higher than the north-west average and much higher than the national average of 3.8%. In fact, one in 10 households in my constituency contains a veteran. That is why our promise at the general election to extend the armed forces covenant to every area of Government was so important to me. Through this Armed Forces Bill, we are delivering on that commitment.

My constituents served in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Northern Ireland. One veteran who I first met in 2023 helped to liberate Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, defending democracy, protecting the vulnerable, defending our country and, of course, standing shoulder to shoulder with our allies. This is a fitting time to recognise the 457 British troops who died in Afghanistan and to have in our thoughts those still living with the injuries and the memories from that conflict, including our Minister for the Armed Forces, who served five tours in Afghanistan, and our Minister for Veterans and People, who also served in Afghanistan, as did other Members of the House.

The armed forces covenant is the promise between our nation and those who put themselves in harm's way to protect it.

Mr Brash: Like my hon. Friend, I have many veterans in my constituency, and when I speak to them, they often talk about how lip service is paid to the armed forces covenant. Does she therefore agree that we must ensure that when it is extended to every public sector organisation, they are held to account in delivering it?

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. No longer can we just have warm words and lip service; we need action, because this contract says something very simple: “If you're prepared to serve your country, your country must serve you properly in return.” For too long, our country has failed to honour that commitment. The latest armed forces continuous attitude survey revealed that only a quarter of our service personnel believe that they are valued by society. Let us think about that for a moment: only one in four of the men and women who wear our uniform believe that their country truly recognises what they give. That is a sign of a profound political failure over the past two decades.

My constituents in Morecambe and Lunesdale know the value of our armed forces. In 2025, 30,000 people attended Armed Forces Day in Morecambe. This year, we are having Armed Forces Day over three days, and I am sure that any Front-Bench Member would be welcome to come. Local organisations such as Healthier Heroes, the Rawthey Project, Morecambe FC Community Foundation and Bay Vets all do fantastic work supporting veterans in our area.

The armed forces covenant is also our nation's commitment to fairness for those who serve, for our veterans, for their families and for the bereaved. That is not just in combat, but in housing, in hospitals, in jobcentres and in homes across the country. The renewal of that contract has to start with the Government. It has to be built into our law, the decisions we take here and the funding that we give. There is no better place to start than in housing, because for too long service families have been left in damp, cold and mouldy homes. That is a betrayal of their service.

Labour has therefore ended the failed privatisation of military housing, saving more than £200 million a year, and we are reinvesting that in fixing homes. This Bill creates the publicly owned Defence Housing Service, renewing nine in 10 armed forces homes and delivering the biggest upgrade to military accommodation in more than 50 years. Of course, fairness for those who serve cannot just stop at housing. The Bill extends the armed forces covenant across government, making public services legally bound to consider the unique needs of service personnel and their families. That was a manifesto commitment from this Labour Government, and we are delivering it. The Bill also strengthens the service justice system, giving service police and courts greater powers and putting victims first, with new protections against sexual violence and abuse. I recognise the first steps made by the previous Government in that regard.

Peter Swallow: It is so important, is it not, that we recognise, when setting out to tackle violence against women and girls, that that must extend across all of society. It cannot be right for those who are bravely serving in our armed forces to be victims of sexual violence in their workplace while they are doing the most important job there can be—defending our nation.

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree. Our mission as a Government is to halve violence against women and girls, and that, of course, must include the women who serve in the armed forces. No one should be unsafe when serving our country. No one should be subjected to violence and abuse.

In this more dangerous world, the Bill expands our reserve forces and improves mobilisation. The voluntary increase in the recall age, for instance, will ensure that vital experience is not lost, and we know that many reservists have been asking for that. Recruitment and retention reforms are already working: recruitment is up, outflows are down, and the number of applications across the service is rising. That, of course, sits within a wider reset. For 14 years the Conservatives hollowed out our armed forces, putting plans in place without funding and overseeing record lows in military morale. They may talk about supporting the armed forces, but in government they did not put their money where their mouth was. And what do we see on other Benches?

The Reform Members have not even bothered to show up today. Perhaps they are too busy making Cameo videos, or forgetting to declare hundreds of thousands of pounds of extra income and gifts. Their plastic patriotism shows no real desire or ability to make things better, just a continual desire to do our country down while listening to big money and foreign Governments, not our country and our people.

Labour, however, is making great strides to turn around the failed Conservative legacy, and is committing itself to the biggest sustained expenditure on defence since the end of the cold war. We know that we need to strengthen our armed forces in order to deal with the uncertain world that we are seeing, with its shifting geopolitics. The defence industrial strategy will ensure that the increased spending goes towards British jobs in British businesses in British towns, and I am also proud of the pay increase that we gave our armed forces.

Too often, when we speak about military heroics and service, our stories are confined to the past, but our armed forces are serving us right now, across the world. They are helping Ukraine to defend herself against Russian aggression, and, in doing so, providing a bulwark against those who would weaken democracy as a whole. They are strengthening Britain's ties in the Indo-Pacific with the carrier strike group led by HMS Prince of Wales. They are serving in NATO missions, contributing to UN peacekeeping, de-escalating tensions in the middle east, and, of course, protecting our shores at home. To meet their dedication and commitment, the Government must deliver our side of the contract, and that is what this Bill does.

9.3 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Let me start by referring to an email that I received today from a Hartlepool veteran whose name is Ian. In it, he told me that he had put his life on the line in the Falklands, in Northern Ireland, in the Persian gulf, in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and that he was disgusted by the comments of President Trump. Indeed, he wrote:

"An apology from Trump to the UK publicly should be forthcoming".

Let me put on record again that the United States President has not apologised for the disgraceful things that he said about our service personnel and the service personnel of our allies. Let me also pay tribute to the leadership, in recent days, of our Armed Forces Minister, who I know has brought a great deal of comfort to veterans who have been very distressed by what they have heard on the news.

Lizzi Collinge: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is really important that those on the Labour Benches include hon. and gallant Members who can give us a real taste of what life in the armed forces is like? For civvies like me, it is all fine and well to be making decisions, but we need to listen to people who have served or who are serving.

Mr Brash: I absolutely agree that the Labour Benches are strengthened by having hon. and gallant Members, such as the Armed Forces Minister, to help lead this country. His actions in recent days are in stark contrast to the weasel words from some so-called leaders who refuse to call out the US President in the way that we all should.

[Mr Brash]

I welcome the direction of travel set out in this Bill for our serving personnel, our veterans and their families. After years of neglect and cuts, our armed forces are finally receiving the focus, attention and respect that they deserve. When this Government came into office, they delivered the largest pay increase for our armed forces in 22 years. That matters, not just in pounds and pence but because of the message it sends that this country values their service, sacrifice and commitment. Those pay rises stand alongside wider reforms to improve everyday service life, including action on forces housing and the strengthened armed forces covenant. For the first time, public bodies will be required to properly consider the unique pressures faced by service families when making decisions on housing, healthcare, education and other essential services. This is long overdue.

The reforms are further reinforced by Op Valour, the Government's plan to deliver joined-up regional support for serving personnel, veterans and their families. Hartlepool is home to some 4,000 veterans. As part of a wider north-east bid, led by the extraordinary team at the East Durham Veterans Trust, we are aiming to secure a Valour support centre in the Middleton Grange shopping centre, at the centre of Hartlepool. This is truly a team effort, with the support of my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Stockton North (Chris McDonald); our local NHS; our armed forces liaison group; the development corporation, which has provided the space rent free; our armed forces champion, Councillor Chris Wallace; and our council, which under the leadership of Councillor Pamela Hargreaves is providing free car parking for any veteran who uses the centre. Hartlepool is united in support of our veterans.

The main reason I wanted to speak in today's debate is so that I could discuss the Bill's proposed reforms to the service justice system, particularly those relating to victims of service offences. These provisions are vital, but they must be shaped by the lived experience of those the system has failed. The case of my constituent Richard Lee shows just how badly things can go wrong. In 1981, Richard's two-year-old daughter Katrice disappeared while their family were stationed in Germany. For more than 44 years, the family have lived not only with the pain of that loss, but with the compounded trauma of how they were treated by the Royal Military Police. They were not treated as victims; they were treated as a nuisance.

In 2012, the Royal Military Police issued a written apology, but not to the family, and they acknowledged the failings of the investigation. Yet those failings have never been fully explained, and neither has there ever been the transparency and accountability that the family deserves. Even more distressingly, a former investigating officer publicly admitted those failures last year on "The Patch" on BBC Radio 4, stating that there had not been "enough searching" and that the Royal Military Police

"had not considered that someone would abduct a child."

Yet again, that admission was not made to the family themselves.

When I was elected, I arranged for Richard to meet the then Veterans Minister, who is now the Armed Forces Minister, and the Victims Minister. It was a remarkable

moment, and I pay tribute to my colleagues for their compassion, decency and openness in that meeting. We jointly agreed that a visit would take place to the defence serious crimes unit in Portsmouth to discuss the case further. The visit was arranged by the Royal Military Police, but they failed to invite the Ministers. Once again, Richard and his family felt let down, and I hope the visit can now go ahead as promised.

Richard and his family are victims. The system admits that it failed them, yet more than four decades on, they are still seeking justice, still seeking answers and still seeking basic respect. That is why the provisions in this Bill that relate to victims of service offences matter so much. A statutory victims code for the service justice system could be a major step forward, but only if it is built around the voices of the victims themselves.

9.9 pm

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome this Bill as an opportunity to renew our nation's contract with those who serve and to provide further protections for our personnel and their families. As a veteran who endured the consequences of the 2010 strategic defence review, I am proud to be part of putting this right. Due to time, I will focus on just two aspects: the extension of the armed forces covenant duty and the reforms being made to our reserves.

Under this Bill, the covenant will apply to all Government Departments and policy areas vital to service life. From my work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces community and on the Defence Committee, I know that the covenant's application has far too often been patchy, leaving people disadvantaged by service life. One clear example is its limited application to the Home Office and to UK Visas and Immigration. About 8,000 members of our armed forces are non-UK personnel—more than one in 20 of all trained regulars—yet too many still face needless barriers to building a stable life in the UK. This Government's commitment to removing visa fees for non-UK personnel who have served four years or more is welcome, but we can and should go further.

Under the current indefinite leave to remain process, applicants can be left unable to work while their cases are processed, creating real financial hardship at the point of transition and exit from the service. That was the case for Sergeant Richie Lumsden, who, after 20 years of service to this country, found himself worrying about keeping a roof over his head simply because he came from Trinidad. With the MOD increasing the proportion of non-UK service personnel to 12%, more people will be affected unless we act. The Home Office needs to think differently, including about an opt-in system that properly reflects service. If we do not make the path fairer for our Commonwealth service personnel, they will stop coming here, which would be a failure of both fairness and foresight.

Reserve forces are critical to our strategic depth. Reservists serve under NATO command structures and are integral to how we fight wars. However, for too long the reserve offer has been disjointed and inflexible. The reforms in this Bill—increasing the upper age limit to 65, harmonising recall liability and allowing veterans to opt in—are sensible changes that reflect modern working lives.

Richard Foord: The hon. Member comes at this not only from having served, but from now serving on the Defence Committee. On that point about the age limit for recall liability, does he know whether any modelling has been done on what impact it might have on recruitment?

Mr Bailey: I do not know, but perhaps the Minister could expand on that in his response. However, I do have experience of people such as Flight Lieutenant Mark Raymond, who served under me on the airdrop team that delivered lifesaving aid to the Yazidi people. He was eventually retired at the age of 64, but only after having to apply for annual extensions each year after turning 60. That was not because his capability had diminished, but because the system would not allow otherwise. It was probably also because the Conservatives deleted the C-130, which was a very bad mistake. Reservists and planners have long argued for a more individualised approach to service, recognising experiences and skill rather than forcing people out at an arbitrary age. When war comes, it does not discriminate, and it will require the contribution of the whole of society, so our armed forces must be structured to draw on all the talent we have.

I welcome the fact that this Bill makes it easier for people to move between regular service careers and the reserves. A zig-zag model of service reflects modern careers and helps us retain invaluable experience, rather than losing it altogether. This Bill provides a platform for an armed forces model fit for the future, and one that rewards service, supports families and ensures that the covenant is real across Government. Our service people deserve nothing less, and I commend this Bill to the House.

I hope some of the issues I have spoken about, particularly those about the support of other Departments and the changes those Departments must take on board, are acknowledged by all Members in the House this evening, and that they champion them, and go out and do the work necessary to highlight such cases, particularly the examples I have mentioned. I look forward to hearing how extensions under medical capacity could benefit our service families, particularly for dental health, and how this support can be extended into parts of our nation where service numbers are high but the local populations are low.

Alex Baker: My hon. Friend talked about a total society approach to defence, related to the strategic defence review. Does he agree that we need a total Government approach to defence if we are to deliver on both the strategic defence review and these covenant commitments?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend, who represents the covenant town of Aldershot, for her powerful intervention. She is entirely right; it is imperative to recognise that it is nations that fight wars, not the military. In my constituency of Leyton and Wanstead, I look with great admiration at those who service the trains that run into Europe. Those trains will take our tanks and troops, in the moment of crisis, all the way up to Estonia, but that requires the Department for Business and Trade to recognise that necessary contribution, and invest in and understand the permanent structured co-operation—PESCO—offer from the European Union.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) made an incredibly important and powerful point earlier. The military and our defence forces do not just protect us abroad, but help to galvanise us and draw us together as communities, giving people meaningful work and a meaningful existence. If we do that, we will be stronger not only at home but abroad, we will make a meaningful contribution to the EU and to NATO security, and we will be able to meet our commitments far and wide, from the GIUK gap to Estonia and up into Finland. For those reasons, I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to speak today, and I commend the Bill to the House.

9.17 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): As the MP for Sandhurst, which is in my constituency, I am incredibly proud to represent the home of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and I am proud to speak today on a Bill that delivers on our commitment to our armed forces. The Bill fully enshrines the expanded armed forces covenant into law, increases protections for those who serve, including from sexual and violent behaviour, and establishes a publicly owned Defence Housing Service, which is backed by a £9 billion strategy to end the shameful record of the Conservative party and make sure that our service people and their families have the homes they deserve. In the south-east alone, we will see more than 14,000 military homes renewed, including in my constituency.

The Bill looks outward as well as inward. It rises to the gravity of the threats that we face as a nation today. In order to protect us, our service people must be supported, housed decently and listened to. They must also be equipped to meet the challenges before them. I am pleased that the Bill contains ambitious measures to grow and sustain our nation's readiness in these turbulent times. The Bill will enhance our ability to mobilise rapidly by expanding our reserve pool, through increasing the maximum age limit for recall to the reserve forces, and giving my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State the power to authorise recall in a conflict scenario. I especially welcome that these measures are a direct response to the strategic defence review's call for transformation in the way that our defence and security is organised and delivered.

Lizzi Collinge: In Morecambe and Lunesdale we have some absolutely fantastic cadet corps. The lord lieutenant of Lancashire is looking at how to extend these cadet corps into cyber-security, which is really exciting. Does my hon. Friend agree that those cadets are vital to the future of our armed forces?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely. As well as our reservists, there is a huge role for cadets to play. I am so proud that the Government are committed to expanding the cadets by 30% by 2030, including by ensuring that there are more opportunities for cadets to learn science, technology, engineering and maths skills, as I am hearing they are in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr Bailey: At the other end of the scale, we have seen a significant expansion of the service life that we can offer members of the armed forces. Flight Lieutenant Phil "Popeye" Powell was a special forces pilot for nearly 30 years. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that people like Popeye should be given as much time in the service to practise their craft?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely. Many serving in my constituency are right at the start of their careers, but I recognise that the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst would not function were it not for the many armed forces personnel who spend a significant portion of their careers dedicated to training the next generation of Army leaders. I pay tribute to them for all they do.

I hope the powers in the Bill are never needed, but we owe it to our brave armed forces to be prepared for any eventuality. We cannot pretend that we are not living in a more dangerous world than even a few years ago, with war returning to Europe following Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The spheres in which warfare can play out are no longer limited to the physical, and by that I mean in the sky, the sea and the land. It is a fact that our information and online spheres are constantly under attack by those who would wish to see us weakened. We must go further and faster to robustly defend our society and security in all quarters.

New and developing technology is changing the nature of the threats we face constantly. It is right that measures are taken to protect security at our military bases by permitting the use of approved equipment to prevent or detect drones being used near these sensitive sites. I welcome the moves that the Government have taken to ensure that we have a modern, world-class cyber and specialist operations command, because threats to our British values, our democracy and our way of life are increasingly cyber-threats.

A nation's defence is only as strong as those who serve to uphold it. The Bill bolsters our armed forces, and it gives personnel and their families the support they deserve, just as they support our most vital national interests every day. This is a Bill from a Government who take their responsibility to our security and to our service people seriously. I am proud to back the Bill.

9.22 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this evening's debate on the Armed Forces Bill, which shows that this Labour Government put our forces and veterans and their families first.

In the light of recent international events and increasing global instability, we have an almost daily reminder, when we turn on our televisions screens, that our brave men and women are the first port of call and our last line of defence in times of conflict and instability, so it is entirely right that as we increase our investment in equipment and defence facilities, we also invest in our No. 1 military asset: our defence personnel. We should also be clear, in the light of the recent reprehensible comments from President Trump, that UK and other NATO country military personnel have always been there when called upon. They are the best and bravest among us, and they continue to put their lives on the line for our collective security in the west. I am proud of them and I know this House is proud of them. The Bill is part of our re-commitment to them not just in words, but in action.

Uxbridge and South Ruislip has a proud and long military history and connection. It was a key base from which we fought and won the battle of Britain, and today it is part of our present and future armed forces capabilities. It is home to RAF Northolt and the nearby Northwood Headquarters military base, and it has a significant military community.

I welcome the creation of a new, publicly owned Defence Housing Service, backed by a £9 billion armed forces housing strategy to build, renew and repair thousands of military homes. In Uxbridge and South Ruislip we have 518 military family homes, which is the fifth-largest military housing stock of any UK constituency. Having spoken to many families over recent years, and having seen at first hand the conditions they have to live in, I find it shocking that their experience of military housing often falls far below what we in this House would all expect for our own homes. Damp, mould, disrepair, cracks in walls big enough to put your hands in—it is truly shameful. I am therefore particularly pleased that through this Bill the Government are delivering on their commitment to reverse decades of under-investment and to end the scandal of poor-quality military housing.

Although there is light at the end of the tunnel for military families living in forces accommodation, it is deeply shameful that we ever got to this place. The Conservatives left defence housing in an absolute mess. In 2023, satisfaction with service family accommodation hit a record low, with one in five service personnel satisfied with repairs and maintenance. Only now, under a Labour Government and with a deal negotiated in the first six months of office, have nearly 36 forces family homes been bought back into public ownership and we are rightly improving their condition. As a result, nine in 10 military homes will be modernised and upgraded with new higher standards, lifting the living standards of hundreds of families in my constituency.

We saw that change start to bear fruit towards the end of last year, and I was pleased to welcome the Secretary of State to view 100 properties being modernised in my constituency, with new doors, windows, decoration, kitchens and other improvements. It was an absolute privilege to see that work take effect. I hope that the new housing service will have a broader remit than just bricks and mortar; I hope it will also be about investing in the places where these homes exist, in play facilities for children and in utilities, such as fibre-optic broadband, which are often missing in our defence personnel housing.

I welcome the Bill and the improvement to existing homes, as well as the commitment to better use under-utilised land to generate capital receipts to reinvest and provide much-needed homes for local people. I hope the Minister will confirm that the new housing that is delivered will also be given as first preference to military and former military personnel. Our cadets, reservists, and armed forces personnel and their families are absolutely vital to our national security. I strongly support the progress of the Bill, so that we honour our commitment to them that they will have the pay, conditions, homes and equipment that they need to continue to perform their vital role.

9.26 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): Like so many Members who have spoken in this debate—and I have heard every contribution—I wish to pay tribute to those who serve, to veterans, and to their family members. Those who serve do an extraordinary job, and they do so at our direction and on our behalf. It is therefore our moral duty, which we are reaffirming tonight, to ensure that we give them everything they need to do that job safely and to the best of their remarkable ability. That includes everything from equipment, to training to housing.

We have heard a lot about housing in this debate, but I am going to say one more thing. I am delighted that the Government are bringing forward the biggest overhaul of military housing in a generation, and I look forward to working on that with various teams in my Colchester constituency and the garrison there.

The work of our armed forces is extraordinary for another, very singular reason, which is that it requires the laying down of life. The Parachute Regiment is based in Colchester, with links to other garrisons across the country. During the Afghan conflict, 37 members of the Parachute Regiment gave their lives, and many more were injured. Their selfless sacrifice deserves the upmost respect from us in this country, and from all our allies, including the United States.

I close by commending the Bill to the House, and by commending an outstanding Front Bench Defence team, who brought the Bill forward and are doing so much to lead our country in this way.

9.28 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my fellow Essex MP, the hon. Member for Colchester (Pam Cox), not least as she has the privilege of representing Merville barracks, which I have visited a number of times down the years and which is the home of our elite unit, the 16 Air Assault Brigade. I have to be careful in saying that, because I have a former royal marine, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), sitting on the Benches behind me.

I thank the Minister for the helpful briefing on the Bill that he arranged for me at the Ministry of Defence last week. I am prepared to admit to the House that there was a slight communications mix-up. When I was originally invited into the Department, I left my phone in my office, thinking I was going into a briefing about events in Iran. I was both surprised and delighted when I was ushered into one of the historical rooms at the MOD to be pleasantly confronted by the entire team of officials responsible for the Bill. I am grateful to them for their subsequent briefing, which was extremely helpful.

The Armed Forces Bill is a very necessary piece of legislation that has to be passed by Parliament at least every five years. By tradition, this quinquennial Bill is relatively non-controversial. In that spirit, as the shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), said, just as we did with the Armed Forces Commissioner Act 2025, the Opposition see our role as that of a critical friend to the Bill by engaging in debate with an aim to improving it where possible—although we do, of course, reserve the right to hold the Government to account on a variety of matters. I may take the liberty of returning to two such matters in particular.

Although the Bill's 55 clauses and seven schedules cover a variety of topics, with everything from drones—a particular hot button for the Minister, and indeed for my line manager—to powers of commanding officers, the Bill mainly encompasses four principal areas: reserves in clauses 31 to 37; defence housing and other property in a lengthy clause 3; the armed forces covenant in an equally lengthy clause 2; and potential changes to the service justice system, which is covered in several clauses, but principally clauses 5 to 16 and 20 to 26. I should like to say a little about each of those areas in turn.

Before I do, though, I place on the record that in this debate on the Armed Forces Bill—a very important piece of legislation regarding the future and welfare of His Majesty's armed forces—not a single Reform MP has been present in the Chamber, let alone made a speech. If these people want to wrap themselves in the flag, they should at least take the trouble to turn up to support those who actually defend it, both in this country and around the globe. Reform Members have been too busy today spreading misinformation about my party's attitude to Northern Ireland veterans—another reason, I suspect, that they did not want to come into the Chamber and face the music.

Tom Tugendhat: The shadow Minister will remember that one of the first things I did on leaving the Army in 2013 was to write a policy paper for Policy Exchange titled "The Fog of Law" on lawfare—that legal intervention on the battlefield that causes confusion and leads so many down a terrible path, of which Northern Ireland is one example, although there are many others. He will remember that our party has been on this for years, trying to clear the obstacles that have been created by various different constructs such as the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights. I am sure he will now be one of the champions, along with the Leader of the Opposition, on finding a proper solution to answer that. Will he agree that this is how real government is done—by doing the hard work over many years to find the real answers that apply, and not simply by shouting at others?

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend is right. There is an old saying in politics that the world is run by those who turn up. Well, Reform did not turn up.

On the reserves, I should first declare an interest. I served as a Territorial Army infantry officer in the 1980s in the 5th Battalion of the Royal Anglian Regiment, a NATO-roled battalion that formed part of the 49th Infantry Brigade, which in turn was part of the 2nd Infantry Division, whose core mission was essentially to reinforce what was then the British Army of the Rhine, or BAOR, in the event of world war three. Including service in the Officers' Training Corps prior to joining 5 Royal Anglian, I did some seven years in total. I was on Exercise Lionheart in 1984 as an officer cadet and also exercised in Cyprus and West Berlin as a junior officer.

Nevertheless, I was at no time deployed on active service and so, unlike the Minister, I have no medals at all, because I never did anything that merited one. Despite that, I am still proud to carry the late Queen's Commission, and I like to believe that had the balloon gone up, our battalion would have done our best to defend the bridge over the Leine river, which was our wartime task.

Peter Swallow: Can I just say, as much as we have occasionally sparred across the Chamber, what the right hon. Member just said speaks volumes for the role that our reservists play up and down the country? Whether or not they are deployed or get medals, so many ordinary men and women step forward to say that they would serve this country if push came to shove—and I say that as somebody who has not done it myself, and I hold my hands up to that. That is so important, so I want to pay tribute to what the right hon. Member said and to all our reservists.

Mr Francois: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind intervention. It is true that we have sparred in this Chamber—famously, on one occasion—but I utterly agree with the spirit of his intervention, which I am sure carries the support of the entire House tonight.

There are a number of measures in the Bill to improve reserve service, which was mentioned by multiple Members, including the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), and the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome). The measures cover the potential transition to war and the regularising of call-up liabilities across all three services. We think that the proposals largely make sense—though I have to confess that I recently turned 60, and seeing that the Minister wants to extend the call-up liability to 65, I had best dust off my old set of webbing at the back of the garage somewhere just in case.

Richard Foord: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: I want to make a bit of progress, but perhaps later if I have time.

Turning to housing, I should declare a different interest, as this was an area I cared about very much when I served as an MOD Minister. When I left ministerial office in 2016, the then Prime Minister Theresa May commissioned me and a small team to write a report about military recruitment, including terms of service such as service housing. We eventually entitled it “Filling the Ranks”, and it was submitted to the Prime Minister, with a copy to the Defence Secretary, in 2017. The report made 20 recommendations for improving recruitment, ranging from better advertising and further expansion of cadet units through to taking a more realistic approach to minor medical ailments such as mild eczema and temporary childhood asthma. Nineteen of the recommendations were accepted and actioned, to varying degrees, but unfortunately the one that was not was to consider sacking Capita—or according to Private Eye “Crapita”. Unfortunately, I never managed to persuade our Ministers to do that, despite the company’s truly awful record on Army recruitment.

The peer review of “Filling the Ranks” was positive. However, as we were making visits to military establishments and interviewing everyone from privates to very senior officers, including on many of the issues contained in the Bill, in nearly every case within 15 minutes of talking about recruitment, we found ourselves involved in a related conversation about retention. In simple terms, we learned very quickly that there was no point widening the aperture of the recruitment tap if we could not put a retention plug in the sink.

We were, therefore, delighted to be recommissioned to undertake a second report specifically into retention, which we subsequently entitled “Stick or Twist?”, as we thought that that encapsulated the serviceman’s dilemma, and which was eventually submitted to the new Prime Minister—one Boris Johnson—in February 2020, a month before the country went into lockdown. This report touched on a number of facets of the armed forces covenant, which are also part of the Bill. I have copies of both reports here with me.

Quite a few of the recommendations in “Stick or Twist?” were adopted, and the then Defence Secretary Ben Wallace used it to persuade the Treasury to provide

some extra tens of millions of pounds to improve childcare facilities at a number of bases around the country. It was worth doing the report if only for that. I should like to pay tribute to the small team that helped me to compile the two reports: Colonel—now Brigadier—Simon Goldstein, himself a former distinguished reservist; and my two researchers Mrs Sophie Doward-Jones and Mr Rory Boden, who worked tirelessly to produce two documents written in a Select Committee style, with all the work that that entails, for the attention of the Prime Minister and Defence Secretary.

Again, however, the most controversial suggestion in “Stick or Twist?” was not adopted. It was a proposal to form a forces housing association and thus bring in expertise from the registered social landlord sector to better manage service families accommodation—SFA. Frankly, at the time this was simply too much for the vested interests in the MOD’s Defence Infrastructure Organisation to accept. Nevertheless, I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge), the shadow Defence Secretary, announced a few months ago our intention to introduce such a body if we return to government. The Armed Forces Bill has much to say on this topic—as indeed have many Members this evening—especially in clause 3, which heralds the creation of a defence housing service. This is conceptually similar in some ways to what was first recommended in “Stick or Twist?” six years ago, but with some important differences. I genuinely look forward to debating the respective merits of the two approaches with the Minister in Committee.

The Bill also touches on the issue of the armed forces covenant, which is a matter that we have discussed in this House on many occasions. In essence, the intention is to spread the authority of the covenant to cover other Government Departments, including Education and the NHS. We have a number of suggestions for how this process might be improved—for instance, in special needs education, which we hope to explore in Committee. I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for what she said about the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham. I had the privilege of visiting the military unit there on two occasions—once in the company of His Royal Highness, the then Prince of Wales, now His Majesty the King—and I echo everything she said about the excellence of that department at that hospital in caring for those who have served their country.

The Bill goes into some detail about potential improvements in the service justice system. This touches in part on a number of quite sensitive areas, not least those highlighted by my former Defence Committee colleague Sarah Atherton in what became known as the Atherton report. We shall again attempt to explore the merits and details of those proposals in Committee.

Before I conclude, I want to refer to the remarks of President Trump about the brave soldiers who fought alongside the United States and other allies in Afghanistan. Would that he had not said such things, especially as our troops also fought with the Americans in Iraq and in the caves of Bora Bora in 2001 after the United States invoked article 5 after 9/11—the only nation ever to do that. We traditionally avoid discussing royal matters in this House, but if it is true that President Trump’s volte face on this was in some way due to royal intervention, all I can say is: God save the King.

We should endeavour to take a broadly positive attitude to the Bill, but I must caution that there are two areas where the traditional consensus might struggle. First, the Government claim to be fully committed to the two principles of the armed forces covenant—namely, that no members of the wider armed forces family, be they regulars, reservists, veterans or their loved ones, should suffer any disadvantage as a result of their military service, and that special treatment may in some cases be appropriate, especially for the wounded or bereaved. All that rings hollow, however, when we see what the Government are currently doing to our brave Northern Ireland veterans—a matter we were debating in the House just last Wednesday evening over Labour’s remedial order to undermine the Conservative legacy Act, which protects our veterans. Over 100 Labour MPs failed to back that order on the night, including, interestingly, the Prime Minister himself, who abstained, as did over half the Cabinet, including the Defence Secretary and even the Armed Forces Minister. The Government have performed 13 U-turns in the past few months alone, and we very much hope for a 14th U-turn over two-tier justice and facilitating lawfare, especially against our own vital special forces, allowing our brave Northern Ireland veterans to live out their lives in peace instead.

Mr Calvin Bailey: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: No.

Secondly, with regard to readiness, as the international skies darken, we fail to see how we can improve our deterrence posture through the Government’s imposing £2.6 billion of in-year spending cuts in the MOD’s operating budget this year, thus reducing training exercises, sea days and flying hours, all in the name of short-term cash control. The Government constantly claim that they are increasing defence spending while concurrently slashing our own armed forces’ operational spending and also stalling on the defence investment plan, which we were faithfully promised last autumn. Similarly, we have been promised a defence readiness Bill, which is not ready yet. It is like a serious defence strategy turning into “Waiting for Godot”.

With those two important provisos, we welcome the Bill. I genuinely look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply, including on why he abstained last Wednesday.

9.44 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): It is a true honour to close the debate. I thank hon. Members across the House who have spoken well in support of our brave servicemen and women, upholding Parliament’s proud cross-party tradition of expressing our profound gratitude to those serving in the UK’s armed forces. It is not lost on me who is not here today.

I appreciate that some in this Chamber have raised questions about the measures in the Bill or about defence in general, so let me address some of the questions. The hon. Members for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) rightly mentioned our service in Afghanistan, as did many others in the House. It is not lost on me that when 9/11 took place, it is the only time when article 5 has been called. The US relied on us collectively not just for

a military response, but for an inter-agency response to build the functions and capability to deal with terrorism, which is so successfully dealt with today. It is also not lost on me that per capita, the Georgians, the Danish and the Estonians lost a significant amount of souls in that conflict. I often say that those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, and I think we saw an example of that.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) highlighted issues with the covenant, but also highlighted accommodation and the move towards the next phases of any review. The single living accommodation strategy is well under way. On that note, I pay tribute to Natalie Elphicke and the whole team, who put an in amazing effort on the defence housing strategy, which has resulted in some of the findings, in particular the creation of the Defence Housing Service, which will alleviate for the Defence Infrastructure Organisation some of the pressure of looking after housing and professionalise the service as we move forward. I also support the hon. Member in her support for Toby Gutteridge, an individual I know well and who needs our support as he continues with his standard of life.

I welcome Opposition Members’ comments on Ukraine. This is a bipartisan issue—it is an idea bigger than ourselves. We welcome and thank them for their support on Ukraine in the early days, which we took on and have continued after the change in Government.

My hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Barrow and Furness (Michelle Scrogg) and for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) all highlighted issues with the covenant, as did many others. The reality is that it is moving from three areas of Government all the way to 14. It will be significant, but it will take time to put it in place. We have to accept that at the moment, the execution of the covenant results in a postcode lottery across the United Kingdom, but there is a requirement of adherence to the legal duty. There will be a communication and education plan to ensure that everyone knows the standards we need to live by. There will be statutory guidance, training and briefings. Indeed, some of the other projects like Operation Valour that we are rolling out will help us police the delivery of the covenant across those councils.

I have been a long-standing fan of the reserves, and I have to admit that I have a conflict of interest: I am a reservist. The Army, Navy and Air Force always respond to crisis, but the reality is that economies, industries and societies win conflicts. We can all learn the lesson from Ukraine that reservists often fill the ranks more the longer a conflict goes on. I will come later to comments about how reservists are being funded and how we will improve that process to ensure that the nation is ready should a crisis befall us.

I turn to the fitness application. I have met individuals who have destroyed a hundred tanks and individuals who have killed hundreds of Russians who could not pass a fitness test in their life. The reality is the changing character of conflict requires different skills. That is why things like cyber direct entry and different skills are just as applicable as being able to run or do pull-ups and push-ups. We have already got rid of 100 outdated medical requirements on the medical test. There is a long way to go on that, and I would like to see us open it up as we move forward, and we will see some of that in the Bill as it progresses.

[*Al Carns*]

I welcome the support from the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) on housing. The scrutiny and governance of that will absolutely be controlled by our Secretary of State. Within the covenant, the ability for us to produce an annual report to ensure that we are reporting to Government on the standards of adherence to the covenant and legal duty will be pushed every year. He mentioned a cultural change in the service justice system, which is far broader than what is in the Bill and is required. It is worth noting that Raising our Standards, the violence against women and girls taskforce, the zero tolerance policy and our tri-service complaints process are just some of the things that we are progressing outside legislation. The Bill goes further within legislation. Individually and collectively, the measures will be significant.

The right hon. and gallant Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) mentioned several speeches in Davos. There are two quotes that I think it worth repeating here:

“A world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile and less sustainable”,

and we must not

monetise...relationships. Allies will diversify to hedge against uncertainty.”

Those two quotes from Davos are worth remembering. We have an idea far bigger than the dollar sign, the euro or the pound, which is a moral obligation towards decency, transparency, the right to self-determination and, of course, democracy.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) for his tribute to the armed forces and in particular for mentioning Combat2Coffee and its indomitable member Terry Butcher, who pushes so hard to support the armed forces. More importantly, I would like the Combat2Coffee shop in the Ministry of Defence to be replicated in all Government Departments—perhaps we can take that on as a separate little task.

I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) for his support for the Defence Housing Service. The House will be delighted to know that family satisfaction with defence housing has gone up to the highest level since 2021. There is a long way to go, but we are heading in the right direction. Similarly, recruitment is up 13%, and outflow is down 8%.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for her constant support for all varieties of veterans across her constituency, and for being the MP of a constituency neighbouring mine. When people question whether we were on the frontline in Afghanistan or in any other conflict, I suggest one visit: to Birmingham’s Selly Oak hospital. The nurses, doctors and carers are second to none, and they have seen stuff that would shock us all. If there were any need for better validation of who has been on the frontline and who has not, Selly Oak hospital is the place to go.

The right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) highlighted that the rhetoric is not matched by the record on reservists. I would say that, in some cases, his narrative is not matched with his experience. All the facts are useful, but unless he connects them together, he does not necessarily have the understanding. Some of his comments were absolutely on the money,

but one of the biggest problems with the reserves is to do not with finances but with the complete and utter mess of bureaucracy when trying to join the reserves.

Steve Barclay: Does the Minister not accept that the number of reservists and the number of training days have both fallen on his watch, and that the sums of money to significantly increase them is modest relative to the £60 billion-plus that the MOD spends?

Al Carns: In the strategic defence review, we have committed to an increase of 20%. First, reserve spending went up in 2023-24 from £189.9 million to £202.4 million, so what the right hon. Gentleman says is factually incorrect. Secondly, on personnel statistics, in the last quarter our trained strength in the reserves has risen from 28,000 to 29,000. I think we need collectively to check our statistics.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that to stand here and tell the world about our ability to respond to article 3 would be slightly misguided. He mentioned the creation of quangos, but if he had read the Bill fully he would recognise that the reserve forces and cadets associations are going from 13 to one so-called quangos, with an increase of one in the Defence Housing Service, which is absolutely required to deliver an effective housing service. He will also know that Op Valour means more money for veterans than ever before. Tranche 1 of the funding has now been closed, and recruitment is fully under way. If he would like to talk through why the recruitment has been paused in the past, I am more than happy to talk about that offline, but I want to ensure that the right person is in the right job, so that the programme is a success.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) for her passionate and unrelenting support, which is not lost on me—it is second to none and super impressive. My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) has such a resounding history in the armed forces—it really is impressive. I know that supporting everyone in that constituency is a passion of his.

Will the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) please write to me about the issue with Pauline? I would like to look at it in detail, as I know would my hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans and People. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) welcomed the support for Op Valour. Her support for the Bill as it progresses is useful, and she always champions our armed forces constituents.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was, as always, articulate and to the point. I have spoken to Ministers in Northern Ireland and to the armed forces Veterans’ Commissioner, and while the covenant is applicable to the whole United Kingdom, we must consider how it is executed within the devolved Administrations. I am willing to work with the hon. Gentleman and a collective group of Northern Ireland MPs to ensure that we implement it as best as we possibly can, while accepting that there are nuances with security and how it needs to be implemented as a whole.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister—that is a superb response. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), David Johnstone,

and the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) are the people with whom, if possible, we would have that meeting, and constructively work together to do better for our veterans in Northern Ireland.

Al Carns: The hon. Member has my word that I will continue to engage with him and move that forward.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) that there is no Navy without the Royal Fleet Auxiliary—it is as simple as that—so well done for pushing that ten-minute rule Bill and including in it delivering support to the RFA that is truly needed. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for her support for the armed forces. It is consistent and super powerful, and I appreciate it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) for his kind words and, importantly, his impressive support for veterans and the roll-out of Op Valour.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) has continually supported the covenant and the armed forces as a whole, and the impact on immigration is something we need to look forward to as the covenant rolls out more broadly. I agree that the removal of the C-130 was a bad thing. The continual support of my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) for the cadet forces and the armed forces community is second to none and really impressive.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) for his support for the armed forces community and, in particular, for housing, which has been impressive throughout. Indeed, we saw the first few houses in the roll-out of 1,000 houses getting renewed—the Secretary of State and I were there to see the good, the bad and the ugly, and it was great to see that we had landed on the good with so many houses for armed forces personnel in his constituency. Finally, the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox) for parachute battalion 16 Air Assault Brigade, and in representing serving families and veterans, is second to none.

From my perspective, it is quite simple: the Armed Forces Bill is moving forward in four key areas. First, for defence housing, we are creating the Defence Housing Service, moving it away from the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, increasing capacity and upskilling professionalism as we look at defence housing as a whole. For the reserves, it is about extending service from 55 to 65 for those individuals in specific roles who can still add value to the military up to that age. It is also about making the transfer more seamless, and standardising the recall from six years to 18 years consistently across the Army, Navy and Air Force.

The Bill is about better support, with the covenant moving from three to 14 Departments and policy areas. It is about us renewing the contract with those who serve. Finally, the Bill is about better protections. It is about sexual risk orders, domestic abuse protections and orders, and stalking protection orders. Indeed, it boils down to the ability of victims to have choice. Since the Lyons review in 2018-19, we have changed defence significantly when it comes to how we look at serious crime. We created the serious crime unit under the previous Government, and it has gone from a fledgling organisation to one with a fully upskilled and up-gunned ability to deal with the most serious crimes. It is deeply impressive,

so if anybody has any concerns about how we are dealing with the most serious issues across defence, they should please come and see me, the Secretary of State or the Minister for Veterans and People, and organise a visit. We will happily deliver that to ensure that hon. Members can go and visit it.

In summary, this Bill garners support from Members from all parts of the House. There are some issues that we will debate repeatedly over the next several months, but I think that we will get to a really good place that supports our serving armed forces across the Navy, the Army and the Air Force, our reservists, our service families, our veterans and our whole armed forces community, including all the charities that support them as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ARMED FORCES BILL: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces Bill:

Select Committee

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Select Committee.
- (2) The Select Committee shall report the Bill to the House on or before 30 April 2026.

Committee of the whole House, Consideration and Third reading

- (3) On report from the Select Committee, the Bill shall be re-committed to a Committee of the whole House.
- (4) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House on recommitment, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.
- (5) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings in Committee of the whole House are commenced.
- (6) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

Programming committee

- (7) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (8) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Armed Forces Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

- (a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown or the Defence Council, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the motion in the name of Secretary John Healey relating to Armed Forces Bill: Carry-over.—
(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL: CARRY-OVER

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Armed Forces Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL: SELECT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill:

(1) The Committee shall have 17 members, to be nominated by the Committee of Selection.

(2) The Committee shall have power—

(a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from day to day the minutes of evidence taken before it;

(b) to admit the public during the examination of witnesses and during consideration of the Bill (but not otherwise); and

(c) to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity relating to the provisions of the Bill.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Chargeable Amounts) (England) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 15 December 2025, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

MEDICAL DEVICES

That the draft Medical Devices (Fees Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 16 December 2025, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 28 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

JOINT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Charlie Maynard be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Charlotte Cane be added.—
(*Gen Kitchen, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

NHS Urgent Care: Staffordshire

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Stephen Morgan.)

10.2 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate on NHS urgent care in my brilliant county of Staffordshire, and particularly on what that means for my constituents in the towns and villages of Cannock Chase. I start by paying immense tribute to the dedicated staff who work in our NHS and in social care. From district nurses and general practice, through to care homes and A&E departments, the passion and expertise that they bring enriches and saves lives.

When I was elected, I knew that there were many local issues that I would need to get to grips with quickly, but among many priorities, I knew that I had to campaign on urgent healthcare first. It is a subject that my constituents have raised with me frequently, on doorsteps, in emails, at surgeries and in conversations with local clinicians. It goes right to the heart of whether people feel confident that our NHS will be there for them when they need it, and that our area is well served.

Before being elected to serve Cannock Chase, I worked in the NHS, not in a clinical role but in communications, and that experience has very much stayed with me. It means that I approach debates like this with a great deal of respect for the people working in the system, and with an understanding of just how complex it is. I know how difficult decisions can be, how stretched staff are and how long it can take to move from strategy to delivery, but I also know that delay and uncertainty have consequences for patients, staff morale and public trust.

For my constituents, uncertainty around access to urgent care has become an all too familiar experience. The minor injuries unit at Cannock Chase hospital was temporarily closed in March 2020, so that staff could be redeployed to the covid wards at New Cross hospital. At the time that decision was entirely understandable and widely supported locally. The NHS was facing an unprecedented emergency and staff stepped up in extraordinary ways to protect lives.

At the same time, it was said that the closure was temporary and that the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust planned to reopen the MIU once pandemic-related workforce pressures eased, but, nearly six years on, that temporary closure feels anything but temporary. In fact, two years after the closure, in March 2022, there was significant fanfare around the possibility of a reopening that summer. Many residents understandably took that as a sign of progress, but ultimately nothing came of it.

After more than two years of radio silence, in August 2024 the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent integrated care board announced a wholesale review of urgent care services across the county, in the light of new national standards for urgent treatment centres. Although the proposals are to upgrade urgent care facilities in other hospitals in Stafford, Burton-upon-Trent, Lichfield, Tamworth and Stoke-on-Trent to meet those UTC standards, they included the permanent closure of Cannock's minor injuries unit, which would effectively end the remaining hope among my constituents and others in neighbouring constituencies that urgent care

will come back to our area. The reasons given included a belief that need from the Cannock Chase area was already being met by other nearby hospitals and, above all, a refusal from the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust to support urgent care provision at Cannock Chase hospital. A comment made to me by a member of the ICB's staff was, "They just aren't interested".

The way that these proposals were communicated locally was very poor, and I have been very frank with the ICB about that. The reaction of the people who saw the ICB's document was understandably one of huge concern, particularly among older residents, people with chronic conditions and those who cannot drive. The ICB planned only one public engagement event in my constituency, which was in the afternoon on a weekday, and even that attracted far more people than it had planned for. Although many did not get to hear about the event, the room was still packed, and very frank views were given. At my request, the ICB held a second event, which was on an evening, and I am told that that was well attended too.

We were told that the ICB expected to take its final proposals to health scrutiny at Staffordshire county council in the spring of last year, with a full public consultation in the summer if the committee deemed it necessary, yet months passed without any update, adding to the uncertainty and frustration locally. Let me be clear that I am not standing here to criticise the ICB for the sake of it; I meet it regularly, and at those meetings we have serious, detailed discussions about patient flow, demand, workforce and outcomes.

I understand that good decision making in the NHS takes time, but I believe that prolonged uncertainty comes at a cost. Every month that passes without clarity leaves patients unsure where to go when they need care, staff unsure what the future holds for their workplace, and communities feeling that decisions are being made far away, rather than with an understanding of local reality.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I note what my hon. Friend says about his integrated care board. I have very positive meetings with my ICB, but a similar situation is affecting the town of Rugby, which I represent. The urgent treatment centre is nurse-led, and we very much want there to be a doctor-led treatment centre. A review is under way, but my constituents and I are simply not aware of its end date. That causes the kind of concern around services that you talk about—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): He!

John Slinger: That my hon. Friend talks about.

Josh Newbury: I saw a post from my hon. Friend on Facebook earlier today about this very matter. I know that he is fighting very hard on that on behalf of his constituents. I hope that my integrated care board listens to the concerns of my constituents, and I hope that that is reflected in Coventry and Warwickshire and that he can get some progress on a doctor-led unit.

For the past six years, people in Cannock Chase have had to travel to Stafford, Lichfield, Walsall or Wolverhampton for care that they would once have accessed locally. That is not simply an inconvenience; it undermines the objectives of urgent care reform, increases

[Josh Newbury]

pressure on neighbouring hospitals and pushes more people into A&E. That is exactly the opposite of what the urgent care review is supposed to achieve.

Most worrying of all are those who are not seeking care at all. Not everybody can drive and not everyone has access to reliable public transport, particularly in places such as Staffordshire. When patients are faced with long, complicated journeys for what should be straightforward local treatment, many simply put it off; conditions then worsen, complications develop and people ultimately end up needing an ambulance for something that could have been treated earlier, more cheaply and closer to home.

At the engagement events and in conversations with me since, constituents have told me that the MIU was a lifeline when they did not need A&E but their GP felt they needed to go to hospital. Cannock Chase hospital is very close to a bus station, and most people locally can catch a single bus to reach it; in contrast, travelling by bus to MIUs in Lichfield, Stafford, Walsall or Wolverhampton can be difficult, often involving multiple changes and long journey times. As a result, many of my constituents are paying for taxis instead, which is a significant financial burden.

The issue becomes even clearer when we look at the demographics of my constituency. It has a slightly older population than the national average, with more than 19,500 residents aged 65 and over—around a fifth of our population. Almost half of those older residents—more than 9,300 people—are living with a long-term health condition, a higher proportion than we see nationally. These are the residents who are most likely to need timely urgent care, who are more vulnerable to deterioration if treatment is delayed, and who often face the greatest barriers when services are not available locally. The NHS's own data shows higher attendances at both surrounding MIUs since ours closed, but not by the total amount of previous activity at Cannock Chase hospital, backing up what residents have been telling us about not always seeking care.

We can also see how these pressures play out in practice at nearby hospitals that many of my constituents rely on when local urgent care is not available. Although Royal Stoke University hospital is not in my constituency, it is a key part of the wider system and serves residents right across our county. In the final quarter of last year alone, that hospital saw more than 33,000 A&E attendances, and over 6,800 patients waited more than 12 hours to be admitted or discharged. That is more than one in five attendances—double the national average—placing the hospital among the most pressured in the country.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Royal Stoke hospital is in my constituency, and one of the things its staff tell me is that if it were not for the Haywood walk-in unit up in Stoke-on-Trent, Leek Moorland hospital or Stafford MIU, the A&E would simply fall over. Naturally, people in Staffordshire gravitate to the A&E when they want help, and the fact that my hon. Friend's constituency is without an urgent treatment centre has a ripple effect across the county. Will he join me in asking the Minister to say when she winds up whether she has any data demonstrating the impact that the lack of a facility in Cannock is having on neighbouring

hospitals, and therefore on the services that are experienced by my constituents and those in constituencies across the county?

Josh Newbury: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Staffordshire MP for his intervention. He has highlighted a critical point: every part of our NHS can have a knock-on effect on the others, so the system needs to work as a whole. We cannot just focus on individual services; we have to see how it works in the round. That is what the review is trying to do, but of course, many of us feel it is not hitting on what it needs to.

I do not raise these figures to criticise staff, who are working under immense strain, or the Government, who are making strong progress on addressing the pressures I have described. I raise them to underline a simple point: as we have heard, when local urgent care is unavailable, demand does not disappear, it is concentrated elsewhere. Making sure patients get the right care in the right place is critical—too many people end up in A&E not because they need to be there, but because there is nowhere else for them to go. Perhaps in the past, our MIU was not always used for its intended purpose, but even that was often a symptom of failings in community care.

Urgent treatment centres will be a vital part of the fabric of our NHS, sitting between primary care and emergency departments. Not having that service for a population of over 100,000 people is a real challenge, and it weakens the wider system. In the 17 months since the review of urgent care was unveiled, I have had many conversations with our ICB about urgent care more broadly, as have GPs, councillors and campaigners. I know that they are putting in place services that make good on the Government's commitment to shift care from hospitals out into the community. I welcome the introduction of a wound care local enhanced service, which recognises that wound care was previously a key reason for patients to access the MIU, even though their homes are a better place for that care to take place. This shows that sustained conversations about our local health needs and inequalities are starting to translate into results.

I hope that building on this, Cannock Chase can be a forerunner in the roll-out of multidisciplinary neighbourhood teams. The health inequalities we sadly have locally, coupled with the distance to many secondary care services that I have referred to, means that we would benefit hugely from that model of supercharged community care. Better than having to catch a bus to Lichfield or Stafford would be heading to Cannock Chase hospital, but better still would be getting that care at home. That is what I am calling for, and will continue to fight for, on behalf of my constituents.

There are areas where Staffordshire is performing strongly. Urgent community response services are exceeding national targets, winter planning has helped to stabilise hospital stays during periods of peak demand, and vaccination programmes are having an impact on admissions. This is not an argument against reform; it is an argument for consistency and fairness. If urgent care reform is about reducing avoidable A&E attendance, improving patient flow and ensuring equitable access across the system, then Cannock Chase cannot continue to remain an outlier.

Crucially, this is not just about rhetoric. The Government are making huge strides in the NHS nationally, backed by reform, investment and a determination to ensure that people get the right care in the right place at the right time. That is why I welcome the investment already being made in the Chadsmoor medical practice, the Rawnsley surgery and the Red Lion surgery in my constituency. That will make a huge difference to people's everyday experience of the NHS that they can see and feel. Strengthening primary care does not remove the need for local urgent care—one cannot simply replace the other.

My ask today is simple and constructive. I am not asking the Minister to pre-empt the outcome of the ICB's review—I know that she cannot do that—and I am certainly not arguing against the reform of urgent care that prompted this review. I am calling for clarity, fairness and alignment between national ambition and local delivery. If we believe in shifting care out of hospitals and into communities, if we believe in reducing avoidable A&E attendance and if we believe in equitable access to urgent care, then Cannock Chase must have that as part of its future.

I hope that 2026 can be the year that sees an expansion of urgent care back into my part of the world, and I urge the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust to make better use of Cannock Chase hospital, which many residents feel remains underutilised compared with how things were under the former Mid Staffordshire NHS trust. I would welcome the Minister's assurance that local voices will continue to be properly heard, that decisions will be communicated clearly and promptly, and that the Government will work with the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB to ensure that communities such as mine are not left without urgent care provision.

Urgent care, at its simplest, is about whether someone with a broken wrist, a deep cut or a worsening infection knows where to go and can actually get there. I look forward to continuing to work constructively with the ICB, the Minister and colleagues across the House to ensure that urgent care in Staffordshire truly works for the communities that we all serve.

10.16 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) for securing it and raising in a constructive way the important matter of urgent care in Staffordshire. It is always good to have more proud NHS non-clinical bureaucrats in this place to pursue these issues.

This Government are clear that the patient should expect, as my hon. Friend says, high standards of care. We recognise that that has not always been the case in recent years, with too many people waiting too long to access the help they need, but we are determined to change that. We are taking serious, sustained action to restore timely access to high-quality urgent care across the country. Our urgent and emergency care plan for 2025-26 sets out that clear path to strengthening urgent care outside hospitals, so that patients can access timely, appropriate support without needing to attend A&E unless clinically necessary. We are increasing the number of patients treated closer to home by scaling up our urgent community response teams providing rapid two-hour

care, expanding virtual wards to provide hospital-level treatment at home and growing multidisciplinary neighbourhood teams that intervene early and prevent avoidable deterioration.

We will support patients to book into the most appropriate urgent care service for them, whether via 111 or the NHS app, and we are using data from shared patient care records and digital tools to support better triage, to join up services and to anticipate pressures before they arise. That is backed by £2 billion of investment in NHS digital infrastructure. We are also investing £250 million to strengthen same-day emergency care and urgent treatment centre provision, helping systems across the country to avoid unnecessary admissions and supporting the same-day diagnosis, treatment and discharge of patients.

Turning specifically to my hon. Friend's constituency, I know the work that he has done with his local NHS to ensure that his constituents' voices are heard. In preparing for this debate, I also met the local NHS to understand better the situation that he describes. It is taking steps to strengthen urgent care capacity and to improve patient pathways, in line with the policy outlines that we have made. I am also aware of the concerns about the closure of the minor injuries unit.

As my hon. Friend said, following the closure during covid the ICB undertook a review of whether the service should be reopened. The review concluded that demand previously met by the Cannock Chase minor injuries unit was being met elsewhere. In that time, the NHS has strengthened the wider urgent care offer for local people. It includes enhanced primary care—my hon. Friend talked about wound care, which is very important to local people—as well as GP out-of-hours services accessed via NHS 111, urgent community response services, and access to urgent treatment centres in other locations. Those arrangements ensure that patients can receive timely and appropriate care.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, neighbourhood integrated teams will be scaled up, delivering more proactive and preventive care in order to intervene earlier and reduce avoidable deterioration. Those teams, as he outlined, are central to shifting care out of hospital and towards community care support. Urgent treatment centres do play a vital role in the wider urgent care system, providing timely assessment and treatment for patients whose needs are urgent but not life-threatening. The system is therefore ensuring that those centres meet national standards, improving consistency and simplifying access for the public, to help divert activity away from type 1 emergency departments and ensure that more patients receive the right level of care closer to home. Let me say in response to my hon. Friend and also his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), that it is important for Members in the area to understand that that wider movement of capacity will ensure that they have the necessary information.

I am pleased to report that the system in Staffordshire has become the first in the midlands to establish a 24/7 integrated care co-ordination centre, which provides a single access point for clinicians, co-ordinates urgent community services, and prevents unnecessary A&E attendances. Nearly half the calls to the service are now successfully redirected away from hospital, which helps patients to access help more quickly and eases the pressure on A&E departments. Moreover, capacity has

[Karin Smyth]

been increased in urgent community response services, virtual wards, same day-emergency care and intermediate care. Urgent community response performance is particularly strong, with more than 78% of referrals seen within two hours—well above the national ambition of 70%. Additional clinical resource has been put in place to meet rising demand and support resilience through the winter.

This work sits alongside strengthened pathways for people whom my hon. Friend described—especially those who may be elderly and experience falls, those who may be frail, those who need end-of-life care, and those in care homes. We need to ensure that those patients in particular receive timely and appropriate support and are confident that the service is there for them in that time of need. Together, these integrated services are helping to manage demand in A&E departments, improve patient flow, and make best use of urgent care capacity across Staffordshire, including in Cannock Chase. As my hon. Friend rightly said, those improvements must be felt by the people of Cannock Chase, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central also pointed out, we need to ensure that demand is well managed and to support people across Staffordshire.

We are planning for the future as well. Our 10-year health plan sets out the long-term vision for urgent and emergency care reform. As I have said, a central priority is to shift care from hospitals into the community, and that will be driven by continuing to expand urgent care through urgent community response, virtual wards, rapid access clinics and better co-ordination through neighbourhood-based care.

Our plan is working: in the past 18 months the Government have invested a record £26 billion in the NHS, delivered more than 5 million additional appointments, cut waiting lists by 312,000, and launched the 10-year health plan to deliver more care in the community. We know that there is more to do, but our investment and modernisation are making a difference, and the NHS is showing clear signs of recovery. Thanks to these steps, this winter ambulances are arriving faster, A&E waits are shorter, and more patients are being treated closer to home.

I pay tribute to NHS staff across Staffordshire and across the country. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, healthcare assistants and support staff continue to show exceptional commitment, often in the most challenging circumstances, and they deserve our thanks and support. We know that

the NHS is under pressure, but this Government are taking decisive action through our urgent and emergency care plan, our winter preparations, and our long-term reforms. We are putting the service back on its feet, and ensuring that patients receive timely, high-quality care.

As we make the NHS fit for the future by making the changes we need to move care out of hospital and into communities, and by making the switch from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention, we have to communicate better with patients and the public, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase has clearly outlined this evening. That includes keeping MPs well informed of the proposals.

Gareth Snell: I want briefly to highlight the fact that one of the perverse things in Staffordshire is that my constituency is serviced by the Royal Stoke hospital, as is Stafford. Its headquarters are within the ICB that funds it. Some of the places that the Minister has mentioned this evening include Cannock, Burton and Tamworth. Their hospitals are smaller and are linked to a much larger acute hospital in a trust that is headquartered outside the ICB. That is a perversity for cross-border invoicing, and it sometimes make us wonder what the incentive is for some of the trusts. Could a group of us MPs meet the Minister to discuss that?

Karin Smyth: When I became a Minister, my hon. Friend was one of the first through the door to share some of the issues in Stoke. In my meeting today, in which I had my map in front of me to point out some of the journey times, his comments were in my mind.

As I said, it is really important that we take local people with us as we move the system on the basis of the best clinical evidence. For me, that includes making sure that MPs are well informed of the proposals and the rationale behind them. As we have heard today, MPs are willing to be very constructive advocates for local systems on behalf of their constituents. I welcome the engagement with Members on this issue, and I am very happy to continue working with my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase, other colleagues in Staffordshire and NHS leaders on how we can further strengthen emergency care services for people in Cannock Chase and, indeed, across Staffordshire.

Question put and agreed to.

10.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 26 January 2026

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

Key Stage 1 Curriculum

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on 2 September 2025, on State of Play: Play, HC 1122.]

4.30 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 729440 relating to play in the key stage 1 curriculum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Barker, and a real privilege to present this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Before I turn to the detail, I want to set out three key points that frame the debate. First, England is now an outlier in the United Kingdom as the only nation with no statutory expectation that play-based learning should continue beyond age five. Scotland and Wales already have legal frameworks and national strategies that embed and protect play into the early primary years; only in England does the statutory requirement for learning through play effectively stop at the end of reception, creating a cliff edge between reception and year 1. Nobody's brains, let alone four or five-year-old children's brains, respond well to cliff edges. Such an approach runs counter to everything we know about children's developmental needs and the evidence on how young children learn.

The second key point is that play-based learning is not the same as enrichment, which usually means activities that sit alongside the core curriculum such as clubs, sport, music, trips or recreational time. Those activities are valuable, but they are by definition additional. Play-based learning is something quite different: a structured, evidence-based way of teaching the core curriculum itself. The Government's response to the petition appears to misunderstand that distinction and thereby misses the point.

Thirdly, we must distinguish between two different but equally vital kinds of play. There is purposeful, guided play in the classroom as a core teaching method; and free, social, physical play in playgrounds and outdoor spaces. I happen to live next door to a primary school and can vouch for the fact that the latter is a great deal noisier than the former, but it is a joyous and happy noise—the sound of childhood. Both kinds of play are essential and both are currently being squeezed to the detriment of our children.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency of Horsham we already see the positives that play-based education can bring, with organisations such as Woods for Learning, which is a forest school catering for children with special educational needs and other children. The effectiveness is clear enough. Would my hon. Friend agree that the time has come to look at bringing that approach into the classroom, too?

Dr Savage: Woods for Learning sounds marvellous. We know that time spent in nature punches above its weight in terms of psychological and physical benefits for children, so I absolutely agree.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for highlighting the importance of access to play. Something that many children and parents have raised with me in Hastings and Rye is how many playgrounds have closed or fallen into disrepair in my constituency. I have done an audit of all the playgrounds and found that eight have closed since 2015 and more than half need upgrading. Many of them are run by housing associations that neglect their duty to maintain them. Does she agree that we have to do better and ensure that the playgrounds, often in the most needy parts of our constituencies, are properly maintained so that children can enjoy them?

Dr Savage: I absolutely agree. I have encountered similar challenges in my constituency of South Cotswolds when playgrounds are not well maintained, or when developers, having promised to provide them, shove them off into a muddy corner of a field that is entirely inappropriate for children's play. It is essential for the sake of our children that we make sure that safe, enjoyable and not-too-muddy spaces are provided.

I thank the creator of the petition, Ruth Lue-Quee, who is in the Public Gallery with many others who feel passionately about this issue; Ruth is a former deputy headteacher and now an education consultant. I also thank the more than 106,000 people who signed the petition, including more than 200 people from my South Cotswolds constituency. That scale of support reflects a widespread sense that our education system, as it is currently structured, fails too many children. At the all-party parliamentary group on play last week, I heard even more from education experts on that very point. One experienced schoolteacher told me bluntly that the present model works well for perhaps 10% of pupils, but not for the majority. That is not because teachers lack skill or commitment—they have those in abundance—but because the system is fundamentally misaligned with how a child's brain works and learns.

On a personal note, I should say that this debate goes to the heart of why I decided to stand for Parliament. The preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution commits us, as a party, to building a society in which no one is

“enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity”

and in which every person is empowered to develop their potential to the full. The journey towards fulfilled potential begins in childhood. Play is one of the primary ways in which human potential, creativity and confidence are formed; that is why I was keen to put my hand up to introduce this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Let me return to that first key distinction: the difference between enrichment and play-based learning. Enrichment, as I have said, means activities added on around the edges of the school day. Play-based learning, on the other hand, is about how learning itself is designed and delivered. It is a planned, teacher-guided pedagogy in which reading, writing, arithmetic and wider knowledge are learned through exploration, talk, movement, construction, role play and problem solving.

[Dr Savage]

Teachers are not stepping back—far from it. They are actively shaping the environment, setting challenges, modelling language, asking probing questions and intentionally extending children's thinking while giving them genuine agency over how they engage in an embodied and creative way. Practitioners give powerful evidence of what that looks like in practice. In one platinum-rated primary school that uses a play-first model, the headteacher told me that children must complete all must-do tasks, which are aligned with national expectations, but the children get to choose when and how to do them during extended play-based learning sessions.

The school has academic standards at or above national averages. Attendance is described as “through the roof”: the children cannot wait to get there in the morning and they are a bit reluctant to leave at the end of the day. Behaviour problems fall and children almost cannot wait to participate. Globally, across more than 2,000 schools and 1.8 million children using high-quality play approaches, we see the same pattern emerging: higher engagement, better attendance, fewer behaviour issues—because children are not wired to sit still for hours a day at age five—and much greater professional satisfaction for teachers, who see their students really thriving.

That brings to me to the second distinction: guided play in classrooms and free play in playgrounds. Guided play in the classroom supports cognitive and language development. Children experience what psychologists call “productive struggle”. They plan, manage resources, seek help when they need it, collaborate, persist and reflect. They develop independence, motivation and embodied understanding, not simply compliance and conformity. Free play, especially outdoors and in nature, serves a different but equally vital purpose. It is where children develop physical confidence and learn to negotiate rules, to resolve conflict, to take manageable risks and to build friendships while experiencing a real sense of autonomy. Free play supports mental health, resilience and social intelligence in ways that no formal lesson, no matter how well designed, can fully replicate.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I have been to see the OPAL—outdoor play and learning—programme at Brookside primary school in East Leake in my constituency. The teachers there are finding that the outdoor play element means that they are spending more time successfully teaching in the classroom because there are fewer issues and disputes to resolve. Does the hon. Lady agree that teachers and schools are pushing for those things both indoor and outdoor, because together they ultimately result in better learning for children?

Dr Savage: I wholeheartedly agree. The evidence is incontrovertible: free play benefits students, teachers and parents.

The two forms of play are complementary, but not interchangeable; a truly child-centred system must value and protect both. Neuroscience helps explain why that matters so profoundly. Play activates almost every region of the developing brain, strengthening connections between emotional, social and cognitive systems. It stimulates dopamine and serotonin, creating what might be called a happy, relaxed, learning-ready brain. Those rich, flexible neural networks support memory, creativity

and adaptability. By contrast, chronic stress and over-formalisation create rigid neural pathways that inhibit curiosity and learning, and create more stress that is not conducive to a receptive brain. In simple terms, joyful, playful brains learn better.

The issue is not just about short-term wellbeing; it is about future-readiness in the age of artificial intelligence. The skills that will matter most in the future are not rote recall, but creativity, adaptability, collaboration, emotional intelligence, imagination and the ability to navigate uncertainty. Those are precisely the same attributes that high-quality play develops. If we want children to thrive alongside AI, rather than be diminished by it, we must nurture the uniquely human capacities that play supports.

However, practitioners have told me that teacher training in England contains remarkably little on child development, neuroscience or the pedagogy of play. Many teachers know how play works, but feel constrained by rigid tests and by inspections that prioritise uniform outcomes and control rather than curiosity and agency. That contributes not only to poorer outcomes for children, but to burnout, demoralisation and a recruitment and retention crisis across the teaching profession.

It is also vital to remember that the effects of depriving children are not equally felt. Children in low-income families or those with special educational needs and disabilities are most likely to experience barriers to play while also being the children most likely to benefit from it. If the Government are serious about taking into account the educational needs of each individual child, play must form a vital part of their SEND strategy and curriculum reset. That is why the petitioners are not asking for just warm words; they are asking for statutory recognition for play-based learning and continuous provision to be embedded in the national framework, and for every single school to have a proper strategic plan for play, just as they have plans for literacy, safeguarding or special educational needs.

Finally, I return to the three points with which I began. England is still the only country in the home nations with no statutory expectation that play-based learning should continue beyond age five. That is a policy choice, not an inevitability. Secondly, play-based learning is not enrichment; it is different. It is a core pedagogical approach grounded in evidence about how young children's brains develop and how deep learning takes place. Thirdly, guided play in classrooms and free play in playgrounds are not luxuries. Together, and complementing each other, they build the cognitive, emotional, social and creative foundations that children need—not only to pass tests, but to flourish as human beings in a rapidly changing world.

I hope that the Minister will respond directly to what the petitioners are asking for: for the Government to recognise play-based learning as core and not peripheral; to address the reception-to-year-1 cliff edge; to strengthen teacher training in child development and play; and to ensure that our curriculum and accountability systems give every child the chance to grow into a confident, curious, resilient and creative adult.

If we want a generation who are able to think, collaborate, imagine and thrive in a world shaped by AI, we must start by taking play seriously. Play is not a distraction from education, but one of its most powerful enablers.

4.45 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing this debate, and the 106,082 people who signed the petition, of whom 182 are my constituents. I pay tribute to the campaigners, who are here today, for their important work on this topic.

There is a huge body of evidence that demonstrates the paramount importance of play in early childhood. When my two-year-old next door neighbour visited for tea over the Christmas recess, he announced as he stepped through our door, “Where are the toys?” If any of us has any doubt about the paramount importance of play, that is a particular experience that he was looking for on his visit and looks for wherever he goes.

I pay tribute in particular to the work of PEDAL—the centre for research on play in education development and learning—which is a part of the faculty of education at the University of Cambridge. PEDAL is dedicated to amassing evidence on the importance of play and is developing a wealth of resources for practitioners in all aspects of childhood. PEDAL highlights the important role of play in developing relationships and secure attachments for young children, in supporting physical and mental health, good development, learning and communication, and in building good foundational social relationships.

I have had the privilege of visiting many early years settings and primary schools in my constituency and across the country, and I have seen many brilliant examples of play-led learning, particularly in the many schools that that now have forest school programmes that give children the opportunity to go into the outdoors and learn from each other and the natural environment, outside of the formal classroom. The best teachers and early years practitioners make play a part of the curriculum, and work to make all learning fun.

This topic is relevant to aspects of the Education Committee’s current and recent work. We are midway through a big inquiry into the evidence on what makes for good support across the early years. We have undertaken some work to scrutinise the curriculum and assessment review—a topic I will return to—and last year we undertook a major piece of work on SEND, focusing on creating inclusive learning environments for all children and looking at the evidence on the very high number of children who are being failed by a system that is not properly geared to meet their needs. As part of that work, we identified transition points in education as requiring particular attention as the Government consider SEND reform. The transition from the early years foundation stage to key stage 1 is important in that respect.

We are also undertaking work on child poverty. Although play is important in education settings—in formal settings—in early childhood to reduce the attainment gap, access to high-quality play experiences in communities is also vital. My constituency is in the eye of the storm of the housing crisis, with so many families with young children who are not adequately housed and are living in overcrowded, cramped accommodation. For those families in particular, being able to access high-quality play equipment in their local community close to home is vital to their children’s development.

I will briefly pay tribute to a much-loved and much-missed Member of this place, the late right hon. Frank Dobson, who was passionate about play. Under the previous Labour Government, he helped to deliver a step change in investment in play equipment in our communities, and he continued to correspond with me about this topic until he was very near to the end of his life. The erosion of council funding under the Conservative Government for 14 years of course made it harder for councils to keep pace with investment in this space, and in recent years we have seen too many examples of play equipment that has fallen behind best practice and even fallen into disrepair.

I welcome the curriculum assessment review and its focus both on restoring creative subjects to the heart of the curriculum and on reducing the burden of assessment. These are important reforms and they are very welcome. Of course, the curriculum is a framework; it does not dictate individual lesson plans or teaching methods. Consequently, I hope that as the Government continue to develop the guidance around curriculum reform, there will be creative responses to these reforms that give some prominence to play, particularly in key stage 1.

Finally, I will highlight a conversation I had recently—last week, in fact—with the Estonian Education Minister. As we know, Estonia’s education system achieves excellent outcomes. In the early years, it focuses almost entirely on the social and emotional development of children in early childhood as the foundation for more formal learning. The Estonian Education Minister told me, “School is tough in Estonia. We expect children to work really hard. We give them a great deal of content. But they do that on a foundation in the early years that means that they are good co-operators and collaborators with their classmates, that they are good at working in teams, and that they are good at managing their own emotions to engage with learning to the fullest extent.”

This Government have an ambitious programme of reform for education, and a clear commitment both to making childhood better across our country and to investing in the services that support children, particularly in their early years. I hope that as the Government bring forward more detailed guidance to support these reforms and move towards the publication of the schools White Paper, which we expect shortly, the work of the petitioners on the topic of play in the key stage 1 curriculum will be at the forefront of their thinking. Play is important for children’s development, for their engagement in education and for discovering a lifelong love of learning, and the evidence to support that view is very strong.

Several hon. Members rose—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I suggest an informal time limit of four minutes per speaker, because of the popularity of this important debate. I hope that Members will help each other out by keeping speeches to four minutes, please.

4.53 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Barker, and I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for presenting this petition on behalf of the petitioners.

[Rebecca Smith]

Hopefully, I will not take four minutes to speak, because I am no expert on this topic. I am here today because 389 of my constituents signed the petition, which means that South West Devon had the fifth-highest response rate in the country. As a Member of Parliament, I always feel that when we are sent that little table telling us how many of our constituents have signed a petition, it is great, where it is possible to do so, to come and represent their views. I have also heard from two or three parents directly about this topic.

In addition, teachers have contacted me, including Cari Dyson. I have to say that if not for Cari, I probably would not be here this afternoon. She is a key stage 1 teacher who uses a play-based approach in her classroom. She told me that this petition

“is not asking for KS1 to reduce essential academic content”.

Instead, it aims to ensure that core knowledge can be taught using

“purposeful learning through play; structured enabling environments; and skilled adult interaction.”

Cari is one of the signatories to the petition who does not agree with the Government response to it, and perhaps she will not agree either with the official Opposition response, but I want to express her views this afternoon. I am certainly very grateful to her for sharing her expertise and experience.

I draw attention to one school in my constituency, which I had the privilege of visiting towards the end of last year. Sparkwell All Saints primary is a very small rural school, and such schools can deliver this programme, which larger inner-city schools might struggle with. I put on record how impressed I was with what Sparkwell All Saints provided. The school starts with the Montessori-style nursery and continues that through into key stage 1. If I had children and I lived in the village, I would be queueing at the door to get my kids into the school, which is delightful to visit. Mr Cole, the headteacher, is inspirational, and the value of the play-based, hands-on teaching method that nurtures children from my constituency is clear to see.

I understand the arguments for play, but we have to ensure that any increased emphasis on it does not hinder the teaching of a rigorous, knowledge-based curriculum, because, at the end of the day, we are preparing children to go through other key stages. However, as a non-expert in the room, I will say that I absolutely see both sides of the coin.

One thing that will come up in the course of this debate—I think it was highlighted by the Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)—is that often the schools that offer play are particularly beneficial for children with additional needs or special educational needs. One question I have for the Minister is: how do we ensure that, when this approach is used in local primary schools, we are creating a fair playing field? We do not want a situation where a few schools deliver an amazing, creative environment for children who might struggle in more academic mainstream schools, but on the other side, negatively impact SEND provision more broadly across the community. I absolutely recognise the value of play, but a school could potentially become

known as being particularly good for SEND children and end up with a higher-than-average cohort of children who meet those criteria.

Ultimately, I am completely compelled by what I have heard this afternoon. I hear all the arguments and I have seen the value of play for myself. I am slightly cautious and sceptical, given my past role as a governor in a primary school in a more urban setting that had a more traditional curriculum; none the less, it is important that we have been able to debate this topic this afternoon.

Is it the Government's view that a one-size-fits-all approach is right, or is it right to have differences in the school system? The new Labour Government want to halt the progress of free schools, which could provide this alternative form of education within the state system, and they are not keen on multi-academy trusts, which perhaps also offer a different way of teaching. I am interested to know the Minister's thoughts on that one-size-fits-all approach, or whether there should be space in our state education system for different ways of teaching and learning.

4.57 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. I congratulate the Petitions Committee on focusing on such an important debate, the 216 of my constituents who made the case through the petition, and the teachers and support staff who have very much brought this to my attention. I raise for the record that my sister works in early years, and every night when I go home from this place, she tells me about the importance of play. I have no better counsel than her.

The pedagogies that are integrated into our education system will determine the long-term outcomes of a child's learning and development. It is only natural for a child to engage in explorative, creative and imaginative play when engaging with language and new concepts. It is play that helps a child to process their learning, reinforce its application and take pleasure in the process—of course, roleplay plays a vital role as well. It is during play that a child also learns wider physical and social skills. They will be connecting the neural pathways in their brains and embedding principles deep in their mind.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Many constituents have contacted me about this important debate, and as a mum of three children, I have seen for myself just how important play is and how much it has helped them to understand teamwork and problem-solving. It is not just me who says that; UNICEF tells us how much it helps resilience, reduces stress and supports emotional wellbeing. Does the hon. Member agree that there are so many ways that play could be integrated into the key stage 1 curriculum as part of education?

Rachael Maskell: I completely agree with the hon. Member. She made the point so powerfully, not least because of her own experience.

It is really important that we embed play as a fundamental principle in the curriculum. For far too long, play has been seen as a process of reward or enrichment, not as a fundamental part of a child's learning, but it is vital throughout childhood for that purpose. To deny play as a core learning approach for

improving reading, writing or maths is to not understand education. Helping a child find their own creativity will help them find themselves.

Play-based learning is purposeful. Teachers have to really prepare when they integrate play into their work: they have to set the right environment, introduce the right medium, equip the learning space, indoor and out, and integrate that with the interests of the children to optimise the environment and ensure that they really grasp the concepts that they are being taught. As we have heard, England is an outlier in this area, and we have to catch up.

When I visited Carr infant school, I saw the contribution that play made to every part of the curriculum. When the school centred learning on play, its outcomes improved. Burton Green school has created environments where children can explore and engage. Whether it is Osbaldwick, Acomb primary or Westfield community school, so many schools across York have totally embraced the evidence of the importance of play.

The neuroscience very much determines that play is central. My constituent Charlotte Davies regularly reminds me of the importance of motor and sensory integration so that the brain can be trained to help a child's ability to play. That is often lost as children are forced away from the right pathways for their education. We need to develop the right pedagogies and ensure that we are creating the physical and mental opportunities to learn.

The Government are grappling with the opportunities around developing a proper SEND programme, which we know is important, but if we are going to divert children from just spending time on their screens, creative play, integrated into learning, will make a difference. My plea to the Government is this: follow the evidence, and when it comes to assessments and examinations, let us drop those SATs and ensure instead that we have a proper approach to education.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but I am going to have to take the limit down to three and a half minutes. It is an informal limit; if we can stick to it, I will not have to impose a formal limit.

5.2 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I congratulate the petitioners on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on her excellent speech introducing it.

We have already heard some great speeches on the benefits of including play in key stage 1 education. We have a wealth of academic evidence on the subject that makes a compelling case—for example, the finding that children's learning through play produces a 90% retention rate, compared with just 30% through reading and watching. Arguably even more persuasive are the testimonies of parents who stress just how vital play is in their children's lives and how important it is for play to be properly incorporated into their learning. I want to add that play is fun, and children deserve to have fun in school. Hopefully, it will help them to like and enjoy school, and learn better throughout their school life.

Becky from my constituency is a parent of two young children and a teacher at Ely St John's community primary school. She contacted me recently to stress the importance of play-based learning in key stage 1. She wrote:

"I am confident that this approach is not only effective but also essential for young children's learning and well-being."

She has found already that the children are thriving and that feedback from parents has been very positive. However, she also wrote of her disappointment that she thought hers was the only school in the area able to offer this approach to children. In her opinion, the pressure is coming from the curriculum and from Ofsted.

A further pressing concern, as we have heard, is the Government's strategy on SEND. The upcoming White Paper is expected to call for greater inclusion in mainstream education, yet part of the reason for the strain on local authorities dealing with SEND has been the lack of resources among mainstream schools already under pressure. As teachers like Becky recognise, without the necessary resources, schools feel the pressure from Ofsted to just stick to the basics of the curriculum.

We want our schools to be inclusive, to recognise and accommodate the differences in how each child learns, and to emphasise the importance of nurturing natural curiosity, creativity and critical thinking. Adopting a play-based learning approach in key stage 1, and giving each child the space to develop and engage with their education on their own terms, is crucial for that. If the Government are willing to listen to those who know that from experience, the schools White Paper could truly be a turning point; if they are not, serious questions for the future of our children, our schools and proper provision of SEND support will remain.

Can the Minister provide details on how the Government are engaging with experts, teachers and parents on play-based learning for key stage 1 children? What consideration is being given to its inclusion in the upcoming schools White Paper?

5.5 pm

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing the debate so comprehensively, and pay tribute to Ruth Lue-Quee and all those in the Public Gallery who have campaigned so hard to make it happen.

Ruth says that right now in England, at the end of foundation stage, when they are just five years old, children hit

"a policy cliff edge and practice becomes inconsistent."

She says we need

"teacher-planned, curriculum-aligned play-based learning and continuous provision in the classroom. It's how young children learn best, achieve best and build strong foundations."

I agree with Ruth. I speak as a dad of two young boys who I know for sure would have benefited hugely from continuous provision in key stage 1; as a former teacher, sure that I would have seen the benefits in my classroom; as the husband of a teaching assistant who knows that it would help the children she supports; and, first and foremost, as the MP for St Helens North, certain that this would help every child in my constituency and across the country.

[David Baines]

We all need to be clear what this campaign is and is not about. It is not about the early years, it is not about enrichment or extracurricular activity, and it most definitely is not about lowering standards in any way. It is about bringing England into line with the rest of the UK and closer to countries such as Finland and Singapore. It is about following the evidence. It is about doing what is best for all children, our schools and, as a result, society.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): My constituent Julia has been a teacher for more than 20 years. She wrote to me to share the benefits of play-based learning for children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Given the increasing prevalence of cognitive and language disorders in young children, it is really important that we get this right. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when assessing the benefits of play-based learning, we should carefully consider the experience of teachers, as well as all the academic evidence available?

David Baines: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I completely agree that there is a huge body of evidence behind the petition, which I will touch on later, and we need to follow the evidence, especially on something as important as our children's education.

Sir Ken Robinson, someone I am a big fan of, described play as “a fantastically serious activity”, and he was right. Some schools in England already have continuous provision throughout key stage 1, and they show that it works. People might wonder why we are asking for it to be statutory, if schools can already do it. The answer is that every single child in every single school should be given access to the best possible education. It should not be a postcode lottery. We also know that in high-pressure environments, which schools undoubtedly are, it is optional practice that gets squeezed first. Schools default to what feels safest for accountability and what feels familiar. Statutory expectation protects and encourages what works.

Key stage 1 is what Ruth Lue-Quee calls the “missing middle”. The early years foundation stage is protected in policy and key stage 2 is SATs-driven, but key stage 1 has the least protection for children's developmental needs, despite being a vital stage in every child's life. There is a huge body of evidence showing that putting five-year-olds in more formal classroom settings and removing continuous provision from the equation is not in their best interests, so why do we do it? The good news is that we do not have to. The Government have an opportunity here, and the timing could not be better, with the curriculum and assessment review and the schools White Paper coming forward.

I mentioned at the start that I am a dad and have two children. My youngest is nine today, and I am missing his birthday party at home. [HON. MEMBERS: “Aw!”] I know. Part of me wishes I was there, but I am glad to be here to speak for him and his friends. I know that the change we are debating, with a different approach in key stage 1, would have massively benefited my son and his friends. It might be too late for them, but it is not for others.

I have already raised this point with Ministers, and I will carry on making it. I would be grateful if the Minister would commit to further meetings and discussions

both with her and with her colleagues. It is our job to figure out how we prepare children for the mid-21st century. We do not know what that will look like, but we can be sure that we will not prepare our children for that future by doing what we have done in the past. The Government have rightly said that we want to give every child the best possible start in life. Learning through play until the age of seven would help with that. I thank Ruth and all others who have supported the campaign; they have my support and they should have the support of everyone in this Chamber.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Many happy returns to your son.

5.10 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for her exceptionally detailed and very interesting opening speech.

I have had the tremendous privilege of visiting several schools in my constituency, and I think all Members will agree that there are a few things that warm the heart more than seeing happy children, particularly children who are learning in a safe and pleasant environment. East Tilbury primary school, which has taken part in the Outdoor Play and Learning programme, has really stood out to me. I am proud to share the fact that that delightful school achieved the platinum award, which is the highest level in the programme and is attained by around only 2% of schools nationally. OPAL now works with more than 2,000 schools, so that is no small achievement. Although we do have many educators in the Chamber, for those who are not quite so fond of mental arithmetic, that puts the school in the top 40 out of 2,000, so it really is quite an achievement.

I was struck not just by the surprisingly natural equipment that was being used—trees for climbing, tyres, sand pits and wildlife areas—or the simple ball games, but by the confidence, co-operation and genuine joyfulness that the programme produced in the children. I spent time observing, and playing and speaking with the staff, the pupils and the OPAL representatives, and it was clear to me that high-quality play directly supports wellbeing, social development and readiness to learn, as Members have already stated with some impressive statistics.

Crucially, the programme is not about lowering standards elsewhere or replacing learning with play; it is about using play intelligently to reinforce the core skills of communication, resilience, problem-solving and teamwork, particularly within the early years. I think that is why we can all agree that this is a win-win. As we have seen elsewhere across Europe, play can build the foundation for more advanced learning as children go through the key stages.

Importantly, East Tilbury's success was driven not by top-down prescription, but by school leadership, staff commitment and community buy-in. That is a valuable lesson for us as policymakers, and I hope the Minister pays particular attention to that point. I urge the Government to focus less on rigid mandates and more on sharing best practice, supporting schools that want to innovate and trusting professionals to decide what works for their pupils. Done well, play is not a distraction from learning, but a foundation for it, and East Tilbury primary school is living proof of that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. After the next speaker, there will be a formal time limit of three minutes.

5.13 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), as well as Ruth and all the campaigners who have turned out in good numbers to bring this important debate on play-based learning to the House.

Growing up in today's world is difficult for children, and it presents unique challenges for our brilliant early years sector. Too many children start school without the fundamental skills that they need. Often, they are not school ready, toilet trained or able to use a knife and fork; they are unable to focus, pay attention or concentrate; and they do not have the speech and language skills or the ability to play and form friendships. Those are fundamental skills. Without them, far too many children struggle to thrive and flourish, and it can scar the rest of their school years.

Early years provision should embrace how young children learn best. The move from the play-based early years foundation stage into the far more formal structure of key stage 1 can be abrupt for many. Play-based learning is statutory only up to the end of reception. Once children enter key stage 1, there is no requirement in the national curriculum to continue that approach, despite clear evidence that five, six and seven-year-olds still learn best through exploration, collaboration and carefully planned play alongside direct teaching.

This issue matters enormously in communities like mine in Wolverhampton and Willenhall, where schools are working hard to close early attainment gaps and to support children who face disadvantage. While phonics and early attainment results are improving, too many children still arrive at school without the secure foundations they need. If we are to tackle lifelong barriers, we must get the early years of formal schooling right, which is why I welcome the Government's actions under the leadership of the Secretary of State.

Significant steps in the right direction have been taken to better support early years childcare and education, including the roll-out of Best Start hubs and Families First partnerships. But we have to focus better on school readiness, supporting early speech and language development, and further strengthening early years provision. The Government are taking practical steps to ensure that children are equipped with the skills they need. The initiatives to improve phonics, early literacy and teacher training reflect a clear commitment to building solid foundations for all children, but we must recognise the importance of play and holistic development.

Play is not just a "nice to have"; it is a foundation of language and literacy development, as the National Literacy Trust has highlighted. High-quality play is especially vital for disadvantaged children, helping to close early language gaps and give every child the tools to thrive. Simply put, play is the rocket fuel of learning. I support children's health and wellbeing and urge the Government to listen to parents and early years

professionals and take meaningful steps to embed play and continuous provision within the key stage 1 statutory framework.

5.16 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Play is firmly back on the agenda in this Parliament, as symbolised by the new APPG on play. On Wednesday last week, we heard from, among others, Ruth Lue-Quee—My Mummy Teacher—about the importance of this petition.

In England, we rightly pride ourselves on an early years foundation stage that places play-based pedagogy at the heart of learning, but for children, that approach ends abruptly at the school gate of year 1. My constituent Rachel Peck, a key stage 1 teacher and early years practitioner, says:

"The need for play doesn't suddenly disappear at five. Removing play so early removes the very opportunities children need to develop creativity, collaboration, problem-solving and communication."

My constituent Louise Jane tells me:

"Children in Key Stage 1 are still so young. Sometimes it feels like the system sees them as numbers and data—when they are so much more than that."

We know that active play stimulates the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, which supports memory, focus and neuroplasticity. Put simply, we know that movement helps the brain to grow. We also know that play offers challenge and risk, so that children develop self-regulation, emotional resilience and the ability to manage stress—essential social skills that cannot be taught by a child sitting down with a worksheet.

My constituent Rachel Peck says:

"We spend the rest of children's school lives trying to teach skills that should have been naturally developed through play alongside their peers."

I agree. Yet when children enter key stage 1, we find that play becomes a reward and its withdrawal a sanction, without realising that it is often the absence of movement and play that drives the behaviours that then get punished. My constituent Kate Bethune, whom I met at one of my surgeries, told me:

"We are crushing children's natural creativity and curiosity because we are obsessed with compliance and early testing. Many children are simply not developmentally ready to sit still and write for long periods."

So what do we need? We need to make play-based pedagogy and continuous provision statutory in key stage 1, thereby creating a clear national expectation that play is a developmental need, not an enrichment activity.

I want to thank Veronica Woodward of St Walburga's, Leanne Dixon from Stourfield junior school, Pauline Sweetman from Stourfield infant school, Vanessa Webster from Epiphany, Michelle Dyer and Imogen Bull from the Avonbourne academies, and Chris Jackson from Avonwood school. Last Friday, Chris hosted us for one of my SEND roundtables, so that we could hear from teachers and headteachers about what future reform should look like. They were convinced that play-based pedagogy is critical for supporting children's wellbeing and trying to address some of the issues that occur in later life. Just this morning, I was at St James' school and spoke with the headteacher, Mr Brown, and the assistant head, Mr Parsons, who is also a key stage 1 teacher, and they too agree.

[Tom Hayes]

We are in a rare reform window. The decisions that are being made now on curriculum and assessment will shape classrooms for years, and with them children's confidence, wellbeing and attainment. This is not about choosing play over learning; it is about choosing play because it is learning.

5.19 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing this important debate.

I know how important this issue is for my constituents from speaking to children, headteachers and parents. Play should not be seen as an enrichment activity; play helps us to learn. The greatest breakthroughs in scientific endeavour, including Einstein's theory of relativity, came as a result of people being able to think creatively. Physical expressions such as dancing, creating music and making up stories are not childish things to do. For example, there is evidence that listening to music enables children to engage with patterns and sequencing, which are fundamental to the basics of maths.

One of the best parts of this job is going to visit my local schools. Worthington primary school in my constituency has rolled out a free breakfast club. But it was not the breakfast that was fascinating; it was the fact that kids were sitting around playing with Lego—they were just expressing themselves without needing to conform. The headteacher said that that is improving their overall behaviour in classrooms, because they are so much more relaxed going into formal lessons.

One of my local district councillors, who is a former GP and psychotherapist, shared this with me:

"I was sitting in a primary school class as a School Governor some years ago. The topic was 'materials' and how they change. The teacher was using ice/water and melted/chilled chocolate to explain the topic. All well and good. In the corner of a classroom one of the hen's eggs had only just hatched. A child wanted to talk about this exciting change in materials. That, I am sorry to say, was not allowed as it did not concord with the Lesson Plan."

The campaign for play-based learning is not about increasing playtime; it is about ensuring that learning is delivered in a way that aligns with how children grow, develop, think and ask questions—just as they asked why an egg had hatched but the others had not yet. One of my earliest memories as a parent is visiting a science museum. The hatchery needed to be visited several times a day, and the excitement increased more and more as the day continued. Children will direct us in how they want to learn, and we have to give them that opportunity to express themselves.

Learning through play is not a new idea, but we have been rolling back on its importance. We know that we are now the outlier in the UK: Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have already embedded play-based approaches into their curricula at an early school level. We are falling behind and letting our children down. It is important that we value play by recognising it in the curriculum. It would be useful to hear from the Minister on that specific point, given that play is not an added extra but an important part of component learning for our children.

5.22 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Barker. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on her excellent speech—although the "productive struggle" she referred to sounded rather like a slogan from my trade union days. I wholeheartedly support the petition, and I thank all the campaigners behind it for ensuring that we are debating this important subject today.

I have heard from so many parents across North East Hertfordshire that over-formal academic approaches do not suit their children. Our whole society is missing out on the vast untapped potential of children who are never going to thrive in a sedentary environment. The valorisation of that model, and the expectation that all children can be measured against it, teaches many from the youngest age that learning is a struggle to be resented, not an exploration to be enjoyed. Politicians so often speak about the importance of education equipping children with skills that businesses require, but frankly I think it is a lot more important that five, six and seven-year-old kids are happy and healthy.

Fortunately, we do not need to choose between an education that is fun and inclusive, and one that equips pupils with essential knowledge and skills, as has been so powerfully proven by Unplugged Tots, which is run by my brilliant constituent Hannah. Unplugged Tots supports children to be the problem solvers, inventors, engineers, scientists and technologists of tomorrow by equipping them with the skills they will need through accessible, fun, engaging activities that are screen-free. Hannah is proving that we can teach children as young as two and half the foundational skills and critical-thinking abilities for coding through play—and without any screen whatsoever. It is a genuinely inspiring model that I hope the Minister will look at closely, and that could benefit schools across the country.

I will give the final word to Hannah, who says:

"Today's children are tomorrow's future and equipping them for this rapidly changing future is essential. If we want to build capable citizens for tomorrow, we must take play in Key Stage 1 seriously...Play supports the whole child, providing an equitable starting point for all children, regardless of background. When play is integral to the curriculum, we raise standards by nurturing confident learners prepared for a rapidly changing world equipped with a lifelong love of learning."

5.25 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. I extend my congratulations to the campaigners for securing this debate, and particularly to the 442 people in my constituency who signed the petition.

As many Members have pointed out, play-based learning is not about lowering attainment or standards. Indeed, countries that prioritise learning through play, such as Finland, Norway, Sweden, Japan and New Zealand, consistently score highly in international rankings. That is echoed in their attainment levels at 16 and beyond, not just at key stages 1 and 2.

Play-based learning has the ability to be truly inclusive learning. I understand that an inclusive schooling model is being strongly considered in the Government's upcoming White Paper. A way to achieve that at key stage 1 is by incorporating play-based learning.

Play-based learning supports early language development. The charity Speech and Language UK estimates that the needs of around 2 million children in the UK with a speech and language challenge are not always met. For about 30% of children with a SEND need, speech and language difficulties are the primary cause of that need. Play-based learning allows children with a speech and language challenge to take time to really come to grips with it. It supports their speech and language learning and allows them to develop the skills that will be crucial to them as they continue their journey through education and into employment, and throughout their life. There is a real opportunity to turn things around for those children.

In the context of inclusive schools, play-based learning asks who we really want to see in the classroom. Who are classrooms for? They are not just for children who can sit still, rigidly listen to lessons and learn by rote. They are for all children—for all young minds. Play-based learning encourages curiosity and creativity, and therefore sends a signal to all children that they are welcome in our classrooms and our schools, and that however they learn they will be supported.

I join the many Members who have made powerful statements about why play-based learning should be adopted. I urge the Government to use this moment, when we are looking at how our education system can best deliver for children, families and society, to grasp the nettle and embed play as learning in key stage 1.

5.28 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for opening the debate with such a well-argued and passionate speech that went to the heart of this debate. I commend Ruth Lue-Quee and all the petitioners for starting the petition, and the 106,082 people who signed it. I also wish the son of the hon. Member for St Helens North (David Baines) a happy birthday.

What is play for? What benefits can it bring to children? And why is it more important than ever that we enable children to learn through play, both inside the classroom and out? Most importantly, perhaps, why should educational play stop at age five in England? Anyone who has spent time watching children play can see that they are learning all the time: their young brains are puzzling over how to do something and they collaborate with friends, finding solutions to whatever challenges they have set themselves, building resilience and learning the art of perseverance.

As someone who has recently welcomed a grandchild into the family, the algorithm has found me, and I now regularly see posts about Montessori play on my feeds. There are brilliant ideas for simple activities in which young children can engage that are fun, that are absorbing and that teach them crucial skills that they will carry with them as they grow. The best bit about it is that children do not know they are learning. They are not being told to sit down, be quiet or work at a set pace. They are enjoying themselves, going at their own speed, working things out as they go and quietly developing their little brains as they play.

We often say in this place that high-quality education is the best possible investment we can make in the future of our country. As the bedrock of everything that follows,

the early years are crucial, laying that foundation stone for learning, wellbeing and opportunity. From ages four to seven, significant socio-emotional and physical changes are taking place. For example, at four years old, children start to expand their vocabulary and express their needs through words rather than actions. At five, they start to develop empathy for others and, at six, they begin to experience multiple emotions simultaneously. These are crucial and long-standing developments that shape a child's character for life, so it is vital that during these formative years children have access for the most appropriate learning methods that nurture their curiosity, creativity and critical thinking—the skills that will help them thrive as adults.

Evidence suggests that during this period of a child's life, play-based learning can have a positive impact on communication, as well as emotional and physical development, but being outside, getting wet and muddy, sliding around, climbing over things and exploring their world is just as important as sitting inside playing with building bricks or doing puzzles.

Children develop their knowledge and skills in the most meaningful way by doing things that they want to do. The Lego "Play Well Report", based on nearly 13,000 responses from parents and children, found that 83% of children say they learn better when it "feels like play". Through play, children have the space and time to make connections in their learning, try things out, make mistakes and learn how to do better next time. Hon. Members from across the House have shared personal experiences, input from teachers and academic evidence that all show the importance of learning from play.

Parents in this country recognise that play helps build the skills that lead to academic success, as well as how important play is to foster creative, sociable and emotionally resilient adults. Critics of play in the classroom often have the misconception that play is only unstructured fun—noisy children mindlessly running around like headless chickens without a care in the world, but as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds explained, that is not what we are talking about today, as important as it is.

Guided play within the classroom gives children the opportunity to learn and develop in a no-pressure environment, approaching tasks at their own pace and in their own way. The 2023 Ofsted report "International perspectives on early years" agrees with this, highlighting how teaching and play are difficult to separate, with adults likely to be teaching children during play—whether that be free or guided, or unconsciously or consciously.

Other countries have play embedded in their curriculum. In Sweden, the curriculum guidance explicitly states that both free and guided play should be a part of education, and that a child has a right to both these types of play. In Finland, school does not start until age seven, but high-quality early years education is widely available and affordable. Finnish early years programmes focus on children's holistic development, with an emphasis on play as the primary mode of learning, where teachers act as guides for the child's exploration.

However, we do not need to look only overseas for inspiration; we can also look at alternative approaches to education here. I recently visited a school in my constituency that follows the play-based Steiner-Waldorf education system. That approach focuses on holistic

[Caroline Voaden]

development through self-directed imaginative play, fostering creativity, social skills and nature connection before age seven. Children are encouraged to engage in uninterrupted free play, nurturing their creativity and allowing them to form and then express their own experiences. Teachers function centrally as role models, teaching not through instruction but through action, which children can then imitate.

Crucially, the Steiner approach includes significant amounts of time spent outdoors, regardless of the weather, to ensure that children connect with nature, improving their physical health and providing them with wonderful educational opportunities. It also helps build that deep connection with nature, which we will need for future generations to care about and promote the protection of our natural world. I commend all the schools in South Devon that prioritise forest school as a way of teaching and nurturing children so well through outdoor play.

I am convinced that there are aspects of the Steiner style of teaching that should be considered more seriously by our mainstream education system, especially for little children in their formative years. It may be dismissed by many as weird hippy nonsense, but it is much more serious than that. We should keep an open mind when approaching how we best educate children during this crucial period of their lives.

The Liberal Democrats believe in broad, balanced and forward-looking early years education that prepares students to excel, both in school and outside the classroom. Play-based education must be a part of that, and should not stop at five years old. Playing is important throughout life, though it might change somewhat as the years progress. As this petition highlights, the Government acknowledge the importance of play in achieving this in their early years foundation stage statutory framework. The framework details how play is essential to children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems. Children learn by leading their own play, by taking part in play, and through learning that is guided by adults.

A child's fundamental development does not stop when they leave reception, so why do the Government think that play is important only until the age of five? Why is England lagging behind the other nations of the UK? To address those inconsistencies, the Liberal Democrats call on the Government to explore how play-based learning could be effectively implemented within the key stage 1 curriculum in England, including through consultation with teachers and schools. This is not about enrichment, but play-structured learning in the classroom.

I hope the Government will take a good, hard look at how play can best be incorporated into our curriculum, given the extensive benefits it can provide, as hon. Members have laid out so eloquently.

5.35 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker, and to take part in this debate on play in the key stage 1 curriculum.

First, I thank the 106,082 signatories of this petition, including the 200 signatories from my constituency. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for her opening remarks, and I also wish the son of the hon. Member for St Helens North (David Baines) a very happy birthday, on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition. I am sure that is all he ever wanted.

I praise the contributions from all hon. Members. It has been a thoughtful debate, which covered a whole array of issues. We may not agree on all aspects, I found it very fruitful to consider the different points of view. In particular, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), who made an excellent contribution, highlighting the need for consistency; I echo her question for the Minister on that point.

Having heard hon. Members at length today, it is quite clear that we all accept that play has an important role in children's cognitive and social development, particularly in their early years. There is strong evidence to suggest that play is an important factor in a child's development. It teaches young people resilience, problem solving and social skills, enhances cognitive development and so much more. Dr David Whitebread of the University of Cambridge argues:

"Play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. Indeed, without play, none of these other achievements would be possible."

That is why the early years foundation stage statutory framework includes play in delivering learning and development. The official Opposition support that framework, which sets out this responsibility for early years education providers. As a father of two young children, I recognise the importance of play. I know that key stage 1 is a crucial time in a child's learning and development, when children are set up for future academic success based on the foundation of knowledge and learning skills they receive when they first start school.

It is thanks to the knowledge-rich curriculum, underpinned by phonics, introduced by the last Government under the excellent leadership of Lord Gove and Sir Nick Gibb, that primary school children in England are now the best readers in the western world, with 80% of six-year-olds now reaching the expected reading standard, compared with only 58% in 2012. Millions more children are in good or outstanding schools, with tougher exams, better teaching standards, a rigorous curriculum and thousands of new academies.

I say that because, having heard the debate, it is important to be clear about what we are discussing. While play should certainly be part of that delivery, we believe that schools are best placed to decide how the curriculum is delivered to their pupils, and it is important that precious time in the classroom is not missed out on. I know that many hon. Members have pointed out that that is not what they are talking about, but there must be clarity about how play is delivered, because we all agree that we are preparing our children for the future.

That desire for freedom is why the official Opposition strongly oppose parts of the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that restrict academy freedoms and seek to impose a one-size-fits-all approach on our education system. Why does the Education Secretary think that centralising decision making in Whitehall is more effective than empowering school leaders? The transfer of power from headteachers to unelected officials

at the Department will be deeply damaging for children, and will see their education suffer as a result. It is not just the Conservatives who believe this. It was Sir Tony Blair whose Government championed the initial academisation of schools. I know he is greatly concerned about this, because it is a reversal of 30 years of consensus around academic achievement and development.

Although we also welcome the curriculum review, I have worries. It was a relief that the Government chose not to follow the example of their counterparts in Labour-run Wales by dropping phonics from the curriculum. However, as the Opposition have stated at the Dispatch Box, if everything is a priority, nothing is. If the Government want more play, they need to make clear which part of the curriculum has to be pushed to the side, and will stand to suffer, as a result. If the Government truly want to give children the freedom to learn and grow through play, they should confirm that they are committed to ensuring that the core skills of reading, writing and numeracy, which children need to succeed, will be part of that.

If more play is needed for children, there is another way of achieving that. I would like to talk about the use of screens by children. According to Ofcom, 25% of children—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. May I bring the shadow Minister back to the issue of play, please?

Saqib Bhatti: Absolutely, Mrs Barker. The point that I was going to make was that if children are not using social media, that will free up more time for play. That is why that issue is really important. We all want to achieve the same things: more resilience and more capability. Hopefully the Minister will confirm whether the Government agree with us that the use of screens at such a young age can have a detrimental effect, and confirm whether they will progress with the evidence.

I accept that many parents are simply trying to do their best, and they want to have the best opportunities for their children. That is why I implore the Government to take a deep, hard look at the official Opposition's approach to the use of screens and social media, and to the use of phones in schools. We have called for the use of phones in schools to be officially banned to allow for greater standards in schools. We are worried about the fact that children now spend more time online. Just last week I read reports that some young people try to swipe, and even tap, on books because they use digital devices.

Tom Hayes: This is a debate about whether play ought to be a mandatory part of key stage 1—do the official Opposition support that?

Saqib Bhatti: I made that very clear. We support the education statutory framework as it is, but I think that the questions around social media and the use of phones are really pertinent. That is what parents are writing to us, as Members of Parliament—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. I ask the shadow Minister to bring his remarks back to the petition, please.

Saqib Bhatti: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, and those people who signed the petition. The Opposition recognise the importance of play, which is why we challenge the Government to give further clarity on the development of the curriculum review, and what will be part of it. If everything is a priority, nothing is, so what will be part of that debate? I also challenge the Government to give more clarity about the freedom of schools, as asked for by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon.

5.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank all hon. Members who have attended and contributed to this important debate, and thank all those who signed and engaged with the petition, particularly those who are in the Public Gallery to listen to the debate. I know from conversations with the Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould), who has responsibility for this area but is unfortunately unable to attend this debate due to a prior commitment, that this subject has drawn much attention and support from many constituents.

My primary goal as an Education Minister is to give every child the best possible start in life. I have had the pleasure of visiting primary schools and early years providers across the country, including many wonderful examples in my constituency of Reading West and Mid Berkshire such as Theale Church of England primary school, and Calcot junior school, whose pupils are coming to Parliament later this week. It was clear on all my visits how important play is to younger children's wellbeing and development. Some of my best days in my job as Minister for Early Education have included being attacked by plastic dinosaurs and racking up my dry cleaning bill in muddy outdoor play areas. It has been a privilege to listen to hon. Members' thoughtful contributions and hear about the excellent work being done in their constituencies.

The hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) started off the debate wonderfully by reminding us that the best sound in the world is that of children playing at break time and lunch time—I wholeheartedly agree. She also drew on a theme that was important throughout the debate: the distinction between play-based learning and enrichment. The Government accept that distinction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) has been running a fantastic campaign in her constituency against the closure of playgrounds. The Government are determined to do something about such closures, and we committed £18 million to that very issue in the Budget. Other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), touched on that issue.

We have had fantastic contributions, which I enjoyed listening to, from my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) and for Thurrock (Jen Craft), the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (David Baines) on the importance of play. Of course I add my birthday wishes to my hon. Friend's son; I hope he gets a chance to have a good play with his new toys.

[*Olivia Bailey*]

There have also been important contributions on play and screen time and on school readiness from my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge). On the question of ensuring that screens are not displacing play, the Government are determined: we will bring forward the first ever guidance for parents on screen time in early years, take tough action to ensure that there are no phones in any schools so children are not disrupted from play or learning, and work with parents and families to find the right balance so that children at school or nursery are doing what they should be doing: playing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock touched on the importance of play for early language development. That is very much part of this Government's plans for school readiness as we strive to ensure that record numbers of children are ready for school. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood remembered the great Frank Dobson—a huge advocate for play—and I thank her for bringing his memory to the debate.

England's early years foundation stage statutory framework recognises the importance of play, setting out that play, both indoors and outdoors, is essential for children's development, including physical development, communication and language. I agree with colleagues that the impact of play on children's development and wellbeing does not stop when they reach school age. We will help schools to decide how best to support children's transition from the early years foundation stage into key stage 1. Some schools continue elements of the pedagogical approach of the EYFS, including play, into year 1 to enable a gradual transition.

Ultimately, however, we believe that teachers are best placed to apply their professional judgment and creativity to meet the pupils' needs in this area. It is important that teachers have the flexibility to adapt their approach to best support each pupil to obtain the knowledge, skills and understanding that they should do during their education. We re-emphasised that principle in our response to the curriculum and assessment review last November, and that is why it would not be right for us to legislate to make play and continuous provision statutory in the key stage 1 curriculum.

That does not for a second mean that we expect children in year 1 to spend all day every day sat inside, and it certainly does not mean that play is no longer on the agenda. The Government have committed £18 million to upgrade 200 playgrounds across the country, we are amending the national planning policy framework to protect play spaces and my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care have published the first national guidance on commissioning and delivering health play services. In education, we are also acting to provide children with opportunities outside the classroom. I recognise the important distinction that colleagues have made, but enrichment is also important in schools. We will set out a new core enrichment offer that every school and college should provide for every pupil, delivering access to civic engagement, arts and culture, nature, outdoor and adventure, sport and physical activities, and wider life skills.

Our free breakfast clubs are also a brilliant opportunity for schools to incorporate more play into each day, offering 30 minutes in the morning where children can explore a range of activities, whether kicking a football around or building a Lego masterpiece, in a supportive and calm environment. Across the country, I have seen breakfast clubs where schools are using this Labour Government's investment to help children explore their imagination and creativity. Of course, breakfast clubs also help to drive improvements in behaviour, attendance and attainment, and provide families with more affordable childcare choices.

I will briefly mention our curriculum reforms. This Government recognise that our children are stepping into a world of huge opportunity, but also of immense change and challenge. We want our new national curriculum to arm them to thrive, building skills that have been spoken about in this debate, such as communication, creativity and social and emotional skills, which can be developed through play and a wide range of enrichment activities.

In conclusion, this Government are serious about the importance of play in childhood, and across Government Departments we are investing in the infrastructure of play and in a transformed early years system. Although we do not agree with the specific suggestion outlined in the petition that play and continuous provision should be mandated as part of the national curriculum at key stage 1, we trust teachers to make the best choices for their students. We thank everyone for coming today and for their thoughtful—

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Olivia Bailey: My hon. Friend has got me right at the end of my speech, but I will give way to her.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she go back to the Department and ask people there to engross themselves in the evidence, which overwhelmingly shows the importance of integrating play with learning, and to ensure that we take an evidence-based approach to policy making?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her last-minute intervention and I can reassure her that we in the Department are immersed and engrossed in the evidence. Our view is that play can be a very important way of helping children to learn. However, we do not think that it is right to mandate it at key stage 1, because we believe that it is important for teachers to have flexibility themselves. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend knows—and as her sister, a fantastic superhero working in early years, will know—play is embedded as part of the EYFS curriculum.

Mrs Barker, I will leave it there.

5.51 pm

Dr Savage: I again thank the amazing petitioners and all my colleagues who have contributed to this important debate.

I echo the request already made, that the Minister go back to her Department to reconsider this issue. I feel passionately about it; I have spoken with many educators over the last few weeks in preparation for this debate and they have educated me, deeply impressing on me the critical value of play within the curriculum as a

pedagogical method. Wales and Scotland are already aware of that, as are many countries in Scandinavia, and the evidence suggests that they are raising children who are happier and more engaged in their lessons and are doing extremely well. This feels like a critical moment for the debate; with AI so high on the political agenda, we really need to nurture those skills of creativity, confidence and imagination—all those essentially human things that AI cannot produce.

The Minister spoke about giving teachers the flexibility to introduce more play to the curriculum if they think it is appropriate, but play should not be a postcode lottery. It should be a right for children in schools across the entire country. I urge and beseech the Minister, please, to take these passionate requests from Westminster Hall today back to her Department.

James McMurdock: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for giving way at this last moment. Does she agree with me that these debates are called debates for a reason, and that where there is an overwhelming outcome to a debate—one way or the other—we expect the Minister, regardless of who they are or what party they are a member of, to take that outcome away and implement it quite directly and quite heavily, wherever possible and wherever appropriate? Does she agree that in debates such as this one we expect a relevant outcome and not just an exercise in hearing our own voices?

Dr Savage: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reiterating that point. I hope that I speak for the entire Chamber when I urge the Minister, one final time, to convey this message to the rest of her Department.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 729440 relating to play in the key stage 1 curriculum.

5.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Animal Rescue Centres

[SIR ALEC SHELBOOKE *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 718660 relating to the licensing and regulation of animal rescue centres.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank the petitioner Paul Watkinson and his colleague Niki Roe for their hard work in gathering almost 110,000 signatures for this petition, which is a fantastic achievement. The petition, which is entitled “Introduce Licensing and Regulation for Dog and Cat Rescues to Protect Welfare”, states:

“Many UK animal rescues operate without clear legal oversight, creating opportunities for unethical practices. Some rescues have been linked to supporting irresponsible breeding, neglecting animals, or misusing public donations.

Without enforceable standards, there is a risk that animals suffer in poor conditions, and public trust is undermined. We call on the Government to introduce mandatory licensing and regular inspections to ensure rescues operate transparently and uphold high welfare standards. Regulation is essential to prevent cruelty, improve accountability, and ensure all rescued animals receive proper care.

By introducing clear legal requirements, the Government can safeguard animal welfare, protect public confidence in rescues, and prevent organizations from operating irresponsibly.”

However, it is important to acknowledge that most animal rescues do great work.

Many activities associated with animals must already be licensed under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, including selling pets, providing boarding for cats and dogs, hiring out horses, dog breeding and keeping or training animals for exhibition. It is clearly not unusual for animal activities to be licensed, so the petitioner and many others believe that rescue and rehoming centres should be the next step.

In England, there is currently no statutory code for rescue centres; there are only voluntary frameworks. They include the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals code of practice for animal welfare establishments and the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes standards, to which the Government’s response refers. However, Scotland has already introduced a licensing system for dog and cat rescues under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (Scotland) Regulations 2021. Similarly, Wales has had a code of practice for animal welfare establishments since 2020. Its consultation on licensing animal welfare establishments found that 82% of respondents were in favour of licensing; the Welsh Government announced in June 2025 that they would prioritise taking forth the proposals of the consultation. England now has a great opportunity to join the rest of Great Britain and catch up with licensing these organisations.

There are many establishments that are not meeting standards but have good intentions. Well-meaning individuals can find themselves out of their depth and have no structure or training to know what is best. Once organisations are known to be local rescues, they can be inundated with animals left on their doorstep. A lack of

[Irene Campbell]

knowledge and training is putting animals at risk, along with staff exhausted by malpractice and people who choose to adopt from the rescue. It is important for the law to draw a distinction between being a cat lady and being an unofficial rescue that is overcrowded with animals. Unfortunately, there are also cases of people running rescue homes with financial and malicious motivations. The worst scenarios include very dangerous practices, including rogue traders masquerading to the public as something they are not.

Nobody wants to close small organisations, so it is important that smaller dog and cat rescues be supported through a transition and that cats and dogs be moved to other rescues where it is completely necessary. Rescuers should have the opportunity to move through legislation and structure and be supported with grants, for example from the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes. Work is already going on between small organisations and the bigger charities: larger groups can advise and support the smaller organisations. That would continue as we transitioned to a licensing model.

Under the current laws, anyone can set up a rescue. I think we would all agree that is not acceptable. The fact that there are no standards or training can lead to the illegal import of animals, the outbreak of disease and poor hygiene standards. Without regulation, those dangerous practices will only continue. Nor have we any data on how widespread they may be, as without legislation there is no formal tracking of dog and cat rescue homes across the country.

We know that the current system is not working, as we know of many sorry cases in which it has failed. When I met staff from the Blue Cross, they told me about the many animals that they had found being kept in inappropriate circumstances for long periods. For example, one dog had lived in a blank kennel for eight years with no kind of enrichment. The rescue thought that the dog was simply sedate, but really he had just given up on life. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 is not sufficient: it keeps an animal alive, with a safe environment, diet and housing, but it does not address the specific issues that arise in rescue shelters, such as the spread of disease.

Dog and cat rescues should ensure that pets are safe and suitable to go back into the public domain, and that they have a good quality of life over long periods. The Animal Welfare Act states that local authorities

“may prosecute proceedings for any offence under this Act”,

But that relies on individuals whistleblowing on offending organisations. That can allow suffering to carry on far too long.

There are already many examples on which legislation could be based—Scotland’s legislation, the Welsh code of practice, the RSPCA standards and the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes standards. The foundations are already there. The sector is aligned on the need for action, as I am sure the upcoming consultation will show.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I thank the 145 signatories to the petition from Bournemouth East; I also thank Staffie and Stray Rescue, Waggy Tails Rescue Dorset and Margaret Green Animal Rescue, alongside Cats Protection and the RSPCA, for all that

they do in my constituency. My hon. Friend mentions the Government’s recently announced plan to consult on the issue. Does she agree that we need a publicly accessible national database of animal welfare establishments? That is the only way in which the rescue and rehoming centres that ensure that abandoned or lost animals have a safe place and a second chance can truly be supported.

Irene Campbell: I agree that that would be a good step forward. It is also important to strike an appropriate balance when setting regulations. If regulations are too exacting, people may begin to shop rather than adopt, possibly importing from abroad. Another common issue is that dog and cat homes often end up taking in other species—so-called exotic pets or wild animals, for example—that they may not be qualified to take in. In future, it may be worth looking at regulating all forms of animal rescue centre to prevent the abuse of all species. The enforcement of any future animal welfare legislation is key, because otherwise new licensing will not be effective. It is important that the local authorities that will inspect the organisations be upskilled and capable of dealing with new, rigorous systems.

Although the petition closed in October 2025, the Government responded in July 2025, advising that all animal rescue organisations have to meet existing protections under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, and that individuals contact the local authority if an organisation is not meeting them. Their response also advised that members of the public can check whether a rescue centre is a member of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes, which has standards for rehoming, neutering and training, among many other matters.

It is important to consider that the Government’s new animal welfare strategy, which was launched in December 2025, addresses the topic of dog and cat rescues. I am happy to see the actions outlined in the strategy, including the commitment to launch a consultation on licensing rescue and rehoming organisations and developing the evidence base on welfare issues.

Rescue animals are some of the most vulnerable animals. It is important that as lawmakers we do our best to fully protect them. Being a registered rescue should not be voluntary, and the Government are right to take steps to address the issue. It is important that when we set goals such as these, we have a clear road map. I look forward to the Minister’s response and am keen to hear the timelines associated with the consultation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to catch my eye, and that if they wish to be called to speak they must have been present at the start of the debate. It may help Members and those viewing the proceedings to know that I shall call the Front-Bench spokespeople by 7 pm. Not many people are in for this debate, so I am sure that all the points that Members want to make can be explored.

6.9 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank everybody involved with the petition, whether they put their name to it or got it off the ground.

Just outside my constituency of South Basildon and East Thurrock, there was an incident in which the remains of 37 dogs were found, along with 20 other living dogs, in varying states of ill health. It should go without saying that this was a deeply distressing incident locally and for everyone who became aware of it. Rightly, it shocked residents, generated significant local concern and led to more than 1,000 of my constituents signing this petition. Animals suffered, and that must never be minimised.

What troubled many people locally was not simply what happened, but the response. Basildon council confirmed to my office that no licensing breaches had occurred—not because conditions were acceptable, but because animal rescue and rehoming centres do not currently require any licensing at all. That immediately raises a serious question: was this a failure of the law, or a failure of the use of laws that already exist?

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, there is already a clear legal duty on any person responsible for animals to ensure their welfare, including through proper care, a suitable environment, protection from suffering and timely veterinary treatment. The Act provides powers for enforcement, improvement notices and prosecution where standards fall short. Local authorities also retain powers on environmental health and on statutory nuisance and partnerships with police and animal welfare bodies, where conditions pose a risk to animals or the public.

The Environmental Protection Act 1990, the public health Acts, the Housing Act 2004—if the animal welfare unit is a domestic premises—and the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 are all additional existing laws that are in effect and which could be used in scenarios in which we believe that animals are being mistreated. Yet, in this case, concerns were reportedly raised months before any meaningful action was taken. That points not just to a legislative gap, but to questions around resources, clarity of responsibility and enforcement confidence.

I am instinctively cautious about expanding licensing regimes. The animal rescue sector is overwhelmingly run by people motivated by compassion, often operating on shoestring budgets and good will alone. Heavy-handed regulation risks driving good actors out of the sector, reducing rehoming capacity and ultimately harming the very animals that we seek to protect. That is why the right starting point is to ask, “Are existing powers under the Animal Welfare Act being used consistently? Do councils have sufficient clarity and resources to act early? Are we confident that additional regulation would prevent harm rather than simply adding bureaucracy?”

I welcome the Government’s commitment to consult on the issue. I urge that the consultation focus as much on enforcement effectiveness and unintended consequences as on new statutory schemes. Regulation alone is not a guarantee of better outcomes if it is not properly resourced or proportionate. We must be careful not to do more harm than good, particularly in a sector that depends on trust, volunteerism and public confidence. Animal welfare matters deeply to my constituents—that is evident from the 1,000 people in my constituency who put their names to the petition—but so does getting this right. I genuinely want to strike that balance, and that is why I put this speech together in the way I did. I thank everyone for hearing these words.

6.13 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing the debate. I was privileged recently to meet the lead petitioners—Paul Watkinson and Niki Roe of Jack’s Giant Journey, who are in the Public Gallery today—to discuss the issues that dog rescue centres face. I also thank the 175 constituents from Newport West and Islwyn who signed the petition.

Although animal welfare is a devolved issue, Scotland is currently the only constituent nation of the UK in which animal rescues and shelters are licensed. There is much to be learned from that experience as Welsh and UK Government Ministers develop proposals for licensing regimes in Wales and England respectively.

I greatly welcome the Welsh Labour Government’s commitments to introduce regulations for animal rescues, sanctuaries and rehoming centres, following clear support in consultation in 2024. The measures will go a long way toward protecting animals and ensuring effective minimum standards for those sadly much-needed institutions. I look forward to taking those commitments to doorsteps across Casnewydd Islwyn ahead of May’s Senedd elections. I encourage the Minister, when taking proposals forward in England, to look at the responses to the Welsh Government’s 2024 consultation and to talk with Welsh Government colleagues about the work that they have already done in developing a licensing scheme. Let us learn from one another as we work together to level up animal protections across the UK.

Currently in England and in Wales, anyone, regardless of competence, premises, finances or track record, can set up a rescue and take in animals and charge fees, and they will face scrutiny only once things have gone badly wrong. We have all seen the most extreme cases pop up on our TV screens and news apps. The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) mentioned the 37 dead dogs and 20 live animals seized in Basildon and Billericay in May last year, and almost 100 animals were seized from an animal sanctuary in Lincolnshire in 2024.

Although these extreme cases of animal abuse are shocking, there is a more sinister side to the regulatory desert in which rescue centres in England and Wales operate. Too often, when adopting an animal, members of the public do not know what they are getting and from where, because of the lack of a mandatory licensing and inspection regime. Seventy-eight per cent of the public believe that minimum standards are already in place. That leaves animal abuse hidden and allows families to be taken advantage of or even put at risk. Voluntary-only standards, such as those operated by the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes, are well intentioned but unenforceable. Rogue providers ignore them, while responsible rescues already comply. Only a nationwide licensing framework will provide consistency and accountability.

Unfortunately, too many animals being rehoused from animal shelters are, unbeknownst to the adopters, from puppy and kitten farms. Others rehoused via rogue rescues were stolen. With no law to compel rescues to check where a dog came from, paperwork can be limited. The issue is best highlighted by the case of Maggie, a King Charles spaniel adopted from a dog rescue centre. Unfortunately, little did her adopter know that Maggie

[Ruth Jones]

was the product of a puppy farm. That was known by the rescue centre, but not discussed. Maggie was later found to have more than 20 rotten teeth, facial paralysis and a heart murmur. She also had a shoulder injury possibly after being kicked. Worryingly, one in every four rescues is unknowingly rehoming puppy-farmed dogs like Maggie. A new licensing scheme must prevent that by ensuring proper record keeping, microchip scanning and veterinary assessment.

Animals also often arrive in pseudo-rescue centres after being imported from abroad in a practice denounced by the RSPCA as “Deliveroo for dogs”. With the Naturewatch Foundation reporting that four in every five dogs in the UK have no verified origin and the numbers of animals entering Britain doubling in the last decade, this is of grave concern.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a real champion of these issues, so I thank her for her work. My constituency is home to the Radcliffe animal centre. It is the only RSPCA animal centre in Nottinghamshire, but what most people do not realise is that the centre is still funded individually—independently—not by the national society, and it costs £800,000 a year to run. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a need to invest in the capacity of the sector and to look at funding of these centres, to ensure that we reach the standards that she is describing?

Ruth Jones: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is about consistency, levelling up and ensuring that across the UK we are all operating to those standards, so I thank him for that intervention.

People need to know the animal they are adopting. A lack of screening also presents major biosecurity concerns. A University of Liverpool study found that 15% of imported dogs that were tested had *Leishmania infantum*—a parasitic disease uncommon in the UK—despite 93% of the tested dogs’ owners believing that a vet had given their dog a clean bill of health. Any new licensing regime must ensure that rescue centres accept only animals imported with full documentation verifying origin and veterinary health. Medical checks must also be undertaken prior to rehoming.

Rogue operators often rehome animals with no regard for their behaviour, putting vulnerable people at risk and potentially worsening the surge in dog-related violence we have seen in recent years. Hospital admissions for dog bites have risen by 47% over the past 10 years, costing the NHS more than £71 million a year. In my county, Gwent, 539 dog attacks were reported to the police last year, an increase of more than a quarter on 2024.

We cannot allow the supply of dogs to become dominated by dodgy breeders and rogue rescue centres. That is why any new licensing regime must be outcome-focused, with minimum requirements for enrichment and behavioural support, as well as a behavioural assessment prior to rehoming. Rehoming animals with unaddressed behavioural issues only puts people at risk.

In introducing such a scheme, UK and Welsh Ministers must learn the lessons from Scotland. Small, independent foster-based rescue centres are a critical part of the animal welfare landscape, with independents outnumbering the major charity sites by almost 10 to one. In Scotland,

many of these were forced to close after 2021, when the Scottish Government tied licensing to charity status and a minimum turnover of £5,000. Those closures came despite many foster-based rescue centres having excellent welfare standards. I urge the Minister not to replicate this mistake, and to ensure that any new licensing regime incorporates smaller rescue centres. In recognising this diversity of high-welfare provision, I also ask the Minister to consider a tiered approach to any new licensing fees, thereby reducing the disproportionate burden that could be created for smaller, high-welfare rescues.

In closing, I emphasise that the case for change is urgent. We need licensing schemes in England and Wales that people can trust. The rules must be robust and enforced.

6.21 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for securing this debate on a very important issue to many of my residents.

The discovery of dozens of deceased dogs at the South Essex rehoming facility last year brought the consequences of the lack of regulation for animal rescue centres into sharp focus. That case is progressing through the courts, and I know that many constituents have closely followed developments, including my daughter, who is probably monitoring my attendance here. I used to be the most important male in her life, but I have been replaced by Caesar, a five-year-old ragdoll cat. Anyway, I digress.

While most rehoming and rescue centres operate to high standards, I share the concerns of residents who feel that without regulation, both animals and their owners face unnecessary risks. In the UK, we have robust animal welfare laws that regulate services including pet boarding and breeding, yet oversight of rehoming centres remains a blind spot. As it stands, anyone in England, Wales or Northern Ireland can set themselves up as a rehoming organisation without any licensing or inspection requirements. The decision to hand over a pet to a rehoming centre is an incredibly hard one to make, and those who take that decision deserve to have full confidence in the quality of care that they are promised.

I welcome the Government’s work on an integrated approach to improving animal welfare, including tackling puppy smuggling and puppy farming. I hope they will pay adequate attention to the regulation of rehoming and rescue centres. The thousands of signatures that this petition has collected, including 647 from Southend East and Rochford alone, demonstrate the scale of concern. I am grateful that the issue is getting the attention it deserves.

6.23 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for securing this debate. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cats.

Across the United Kingdom, nearly 60% of households own a pet, and around 10.2 million of those pets are cats. They bring comfort, companionship and a great deal of amusement to millions of families. I know that personally, because I am owned by two rescue cats, Clement Cattlee and Mo Meowlam. Vital to the welfare of those pets and their future are our rescue and rehoming centres, such as Johnstone Cat Rescue in my constituency. Those organisations carry out extraordinary work, but beyond the duty of care established in the Animal Welfare Act, there are no specific statutory requirements governing how those services operate. As a result standards vary wildly across the sector. That is deeply unfair to the many outstanding providers that deliver a genuine and professional service through the dedication and compassion of their staff and volunteers.

Sadly, as so often is the case, it is the few that fall short that cast a shadow over the many, and it is because of such cases that we are debating this issue today. Too often, lack of training, resources or proper oversight means that even well-intentioned providers fail to meet the standard of care that our cats deserve. In more troubling cases, animals are placed in foster or rehoming centres where due care and attention are simply not given.

I will give one example. Linda, a volunteer at her local cat protection charity, saw a photograph of a kitten advertised by a local rescue centre and wanted to offer it a loving home. She completed an online form and later received a brief telephone call. During that call, she was not asked about her lifestyle, her living arrangements or whether she had any other pets, and she was given no meaningful information about the kitten's health, background or needs; she was told only that it was three months old. She paid an adoption fee over the phone and was given an address from which to collect the kitten a few days later.

When Linda arrived, she was not allowed into the property. Instead, the fosterer came outside, closed the door behind them, took the cat carrier from Linda's hands, pushed the cat inside and handed the carrier back to her. There was no opportunity to see the kitten's living conditions, to see its mother and assess its health, or have any conversation about its needs or care. She was then told, almost as an afterthought, that the kitten had not been neutered or vaccinated.

That is why regulation matters. We need clear, enforceable, baseline minimum standards that protect animals, support responsible rescue centres and give the public confidence in the system. That must be backed by properly trained inspectors and meaningful oversight.

As has been mentioned, the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes has standards that could provide a good basis for the licensing of rescue and rehoming centres and help local authorities to enforce any licensing regime. The Association of Dogs and Cats Homes has 153 rescue centres already following those standards, which have been enforceable since 2015 and are self and externally audited. They cover the management and governance of centres, as well as the health and welfare of the cats and dogs in those centres and transported to them. The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 should also be considered when looking at existing standards, as they also cover wildlife.

I welcome the Government's recent animal welfare strategy, but I confess that I was disappointed to see no clear detail on how they intend to consult on the licensing of animal welfare establishments. Through my work as chair of the APPG on cats, I know that the sector is ready and willing to engage; the Government should be equally willing to listen.

If new legislation is to genuinely improve standards, we must also learn from the experience in Scotland, where it has become clear that without effective enforcement, adequate funding and properly trained inspectors, legislation alone does little to improve the lives of animals in substandard establishments. Scotland's two-tier licensing system has also caused confusion for both rescue centres and local authorities. That is a lesson that we should take seriously, so that any system introduced in England is clear, workable and accessible for those who operate within it.

Our rescue centres do remarkable work; our cats deserve the highest standards of care, and the public deserve to have confidence that, when they open their homes and their hearts to animals in need, the system behind that decision is worthy of their trust.

6.28 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for securing the debate. I pay tribute to the campaigners, who are with us today, for the opportunity to raise this issue, which is of deep concern to many of my constituents, as well as to people across the northern parishes and indeed the whole country.

Across all our communities, rescue centres play an extraordinary role: they step in when animals are abandoned or neglected, or when they can simply no longer be cared for. They do so largely through the dedication of volunteers, through donations and through good will, and their work is often unseen but invaluable.

However, unlike kennels and breeders, animal rescue centres in England currently operate without a clear, consistent national licensing framework. There are proposals that would address that gap, using the model that already exists under other legislation. That would not create a new system from scratch, but extend a familiar and well-understood framework to a sector that is currently insufficiently regulated.

We know that that approach can work, because it works elsewhere. As has been mentioned, Scotland already has licensed animal shelters, and I am reliably informed that Wales is committed to introducing legislation too. That means that England is now the only part of Great Britain without a formal system of oversight. Introducing such a system would simply bring England into line with best practice across the rest of the country.

There is strong support for that across the rescue and veterinary community. The RSPCA and Dogs Trust have publicly welcomed the discussion about licensing, and colleagues across the House have also expressed their support. This is an issue on which there is genuine cross-party and evidence-based agreement, focused solely on improving animal welfare.

Across Southport and west Lancashire, we are fortunate to have several rescue organisations that do excellent work. I visited one of those, the Woodlands Animal Sanctuary,

[Patrick Hurley]

only a couple of weeks ago. It provides a safe and caring environment for animals during some of the most vulnerable periods of their lives. It already operates to high standards and would have nothing to fear from proportionate regulation.

However, not all rescue centres are able to meet the same standards. Many of them, despite the best intentions, are run from spare rooms or garden sheds. They are driven by compassion, but lack the facilities, training or support necessary to guarantee the best outcomes for animals. Without sufficient formal oversight, conditions can vary widely; in the most extreme cases, that has led to the tragic consequences we have seen across the country.

At a time when the cost of living crisis is forcing more families to make heartbreaking decisions about their pets, the pressure on rescue centres is growing. That makes it even more important that animals are placed in environments that are safe, suitable and properly supported. This is not about burdening good organisations with too much regulation; it is about giving them recognition, consistency and reassurance, while ensuring that every rescued animal receives the care it deserves. I hope that today's debate can be a constructive step towards achieving that shared goal, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

6.33 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair this evening, Sir Alec. I thank the Petitions Committee for enabling this debate, and the 201 petitioners from Glastonbury and Somerton.

For many years, the UK has enjoyed the reputation of being a nation of animal lovers, with over half of us owning a pet. Indeed, I am owned by three Patterdale terriers, George, Bert and Griff, who keep me on my toes, and a farm cat, Thomas, who spends less and less time up at the farm.

The UK was the first country in the world to start a welfare charity for animals. That concern to rescue and care for animals led to the formation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. A 2025 survey by the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals found that 17% of dog owners and 33% of cat owners got their pet from a rescue centre. The RSPCA collects an abandoned animal every hour during the summer, and an estimated 250,000 animals go to rescue centres every year, which equates to 700 per day.

The cost of living crisis has undoubtedly increased the number of animals being abandoned, with the RSPCA recording a 24% increase in pets being handed over in 2022. Many rescue centres reported increased pressure because of the covid pandemic, which changed the landscape and increased the number of abandoned pets. Many covid dogs were sent to rescues with major separation anxiety, having never been away from their owners. Owners clearly had to go back to work, which put untold pressure on them as well, as they had to give up their dogs.

I put on record my thanks for the incredible work that rescue centres do. Somerset and Dorset Animal Rescue, based near Wincanton, has been run by Liz and Colin Stewart for more than 30 years. In their time, they have saved the lives of more than 34,000 animals,

including dogs, cats, ponies, chickens and rabbits. In 2007, in recognition of their work, Liz was invited to the House of Lords to receive the award for international animal rescuer of the year. They run a charitable non-profit organisation. They have no full-time paid staff and rely on support from volunteers, but the costs of running such an operation are significant, with veterinary and food costs rising every day.

Some centres do not have the experience and knowledge of Somerset and Dorset Animal Rescue, and many exist without the facilities and resources to ensure that animals receive the right care and support. However, the lack of regulation surrounding animal rescue centres means they can operate without a licence as long as they do not report making a profit.

James Naish: The hon. Lady touched on the costs generated by animal centres, and earlier I mentioned the £800,000 running costs of the Radcliffe animal centre in my constituency. I put on record my thanks to David Carter of Gamston in my constituency, who has lit up his house every Christmas for a decade to raise money for the local animal centre. However, does the hon. Lady agree that relying on people like David to generate funds for these centres puts their regulation and licensing, and the way they look after animals, at risk?

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I thank Mr Carter for all his amazing work to support the financing of these important rescue centres. Many people across the country do exactly the same thing.

Despite having the best intentions, some establishments take on too many animals or animals they do not have the specialist knowledge, expertise or resources to help, which often results in devastating situations where animals are sadly left to suffer. Donna, a constituent from Street, wrote to me recently about the heartbreaking situation at Save A Paw in Essex, where 40 dogs were sadly discovered.

If regulation is not in place, not only are such awful situations allowed to occur, but major health risks can be posed due to poor biosecurity. Pets should be spayed, wormed, de-fleaed and vaccinated while at a rescue centre, but there is no regulation to ensure that they are. Indeed, some animals in rescue centres are becoming infected with diseases that will need lifetime treatment, which is obviously an additional cost to the owners who take them on. There is support in the industry for measures to be implemented, with an RSPCA survey finding that 82% of wildlife rehabilitators believe welfare standards are inconsistent across the sector, and that more than 68% feel statutory licensing is important.

Earlier today, I spoke to Zoe, who runs Rushton Dog Rescue in my constituency with her mum, Cindi. They have operated for nearly 20 years in Langport, and have rescued thousands of dogs, along with horses, ducks, cats, ferrets and other animals, keeping them at their 15-acre centre. Zoe told me they believe that licensing would be good for the centre, and that unregulated pop-up rescues, sometimes operating out of people's homes, can leave animals without the care and proper expertise they need.

Concerns also exist over those who use animal rescue centres as a front to run unscrupulous puppy breeding businesses, which leave legitimate animal rescue centres

to pick up the pieces. In fact, Zoe told me that that was her No. 1 concern, so I would appreciate the Minister's comments on the extent to which her Department is aware of the issue, given its admission that it lacks a complete picture of rescue centres in the country.

The Tories pledged to pursue licensing requirements in 2021 and 2023, and confirmed that they would look to consult on the matter, but ultimately failed to act before the last general election. The Liberal Democrats have called for a comprehensive national strategy on animal welfare that secures Britain's place as a world leader on standards. As such, we welcome this Government's commitment to ensure rescue centres have the right checks in place to protect the welfare of the animals they care for, but we are clear that any potential new licensing requirements must be properly enforced. There is also a need to ensure that regulations actually result in welfare improvements.

Zoe was also keen to stress that the Government must give existing rescue centres the financial support they need, to ensure they can follow new regulations to bring about improved welfare at animal rescue centres. The RSPCA has been clear that if that does not happen, many smaller rescues, set up with the best of intentions but lacking specialist resources, would be forced to closed, and the lack of capacity would place an unsustainable burden on those remaining in the sector. In turn, that would result in a lowering of animal welfare standards as remaining centres were overwhelmed and unable to care for their animals. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that and on whether the Government would be willing to provide the support the industry requests.

I was also able to speak with Nigel, who runs the Somerton branch of Service Dogs UK, a charity dedicated to supporting armed forces and emergency services veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder by matching them with rescue dogs from across Somerset and the south-west. It uses rescue dogs from Dogs Trust, and applies strict rules, including background and household checks, before matching dogs. Nigel feels that regulation could ensure that rescue centres are properly inspected, while helping animals to receive the medical treatment they require. However, he noted that three out of 15 dogs in the Service Dogs UK system were found unchipped and abandoned on the street, which highlights the scale of the problem rescue centres are trying to deal with.

Nigel also highlighted concerns over individuals who set up centres and bring in dogs from overseas, putting them into British homes without proper controls. Vets and other public health experts have expressed concerns about the health and wellbeing of dogs and animals illegally imported into the UK, as well as the potential infection of animals already resident here.

The Liberal Democrats believe it is important to improve the welfare and quality of life of household pets, while ensuring that all animals are treated equally in legislation. That is why I am really proud of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), whose Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025 will transform animal welfare in the UK and eradicate cruel practices that should have been wiped out years ago.

It is right that we now look to take action on this important matter, and I hope the Government come forward urgently to launch their consultation. There is

strong support from the public and industry, and as the number of abandoned pets sadly increases, the problem will only grow.

Animal cruelty must be considered unacceptable, because animals are sentient beings with the capacity to feel pain and suffering. They have a right to live in decent and humane conditions, and it is crucial that we change the law to better protect them from harm. I hope today's debate serves as an important step on the road to higher welfare for animals who find themselves in the care of rescue centres.

6.45 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Alec. It is also a pleasure to hear from the Petitions Committee, and I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for outlining the petitioners views. There were almost 110,000 of them across the country. Some of them are here today in the Public Gallery. Led by Paul and the other campaigners, they have driven so hard to get us to where we are today—not just this debate in Parliament or with the private Member's Bill that I introduced, but in actually seeing that consultation brought forward by the Government, which is very much to be welcomed.

I begin by thanking hon. Members from across the Chamber: the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock); the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones); the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba); the chair of the APPG on cats, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter), and the hon. Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) contributed in a really valuable way to this debate. It is without doubt that the breadth and strength of those contributions have demonstrated why this issue of licensed animal shelters and rescue centres matters so deeply to communities right across the country.

Now, it might be highly unusual to have the shadow Transport Secretary speaking in a debate on a subject for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I requested this one personally, given the fact that an incident that has been referred to, and that sparked off this position, happened in my own constituency at Crays Hill. Many Members will be aware of that and have made a reference to that horrible and tragic case—the appalling discovery of dozens of animals found dead at a property which was presenting itself as a rehoming centre. Some animals were taken back alive. Yet even when they were taken alive some had to have the most horrendous operations done to them, including one having to have its eyes removed because it was so badly maltreated. I was inundated with correspondence from my own constituents and people across the country who are determined to see high standards brought in for this sector and proper, meaningful oversight delivered.

I thank those 2,600 of my constituents who responded to this petition—more than any other constituency in the country. They are the reason that we are where we are today and the reason I brought forward my private Member's Bill for establishing a licensing regime for animal shelters. Only by setting clear standards, and, crucially, as Members have said, by having them properly enforced, can we actually protect animals. That is why I am determined that, hopefully, with the Government's

[Mr Richard Holden]

consultation coming forward soon, we arrive at a licensing regime that puts animal welfare at its heart—and I look forward to hearing a few more details from the Minister in her response and very much welcome the proposal's inclusion in the animal welfare strategy. That licensing regime must be one that clamps down on malpractice and bad actors while protecting and supporting the many kind-hearted individuals and organisations—from small individuals right through to some of our largest national charities—which provide safe, caring and responsible environments for animals and often animals in real need.

We have heard passionate speeches from right across the House in support of those small, often individual institutions in Member's constituencies. I am heartened by the depth of experience and expertise that exists in the sector to help us get this licensing regime right as well. I place on record my thanks to the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes, Farplace Animal Rescue and so many others for their outstanding work and leadership in this area. I obviously also have to pay tribute to Paul Watkinson. His dogged determination to protect animal welfare and ensure that high standards are there across the board also deserves recognition in this House, as do local campaigners in my constituency.

As the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford said, the problem, as has become painfully clear, is that anyone, regardless of their experience or their intention, can put up a sign and declare that they have an animal rescue shelter or rehoming centre. They will not face routine inspection, be subject to monitoring or be required to apply for any form of licence. That gap in oversight has led to consequences that are as clear as they are troubling: it has undermined public confidence in the integrity of the sector; placed intolerable pressure on reputable charities that are trying to get on with their meaningful work and that already face additional costs; and most importantly, it has resulted in animals suffering—not only dogs and cats but horses and the other animals that have been mentioned.

We know that it does not have to be this way. As we have heard, in Scotland, a licensing regime provided a clear bulwark against malpractice and has been in place since 2021. As was mentioned, in Wales, the Government have made plain their intention to move in the same direction. It is therefore vital that England, which is currently an outlier, moves in the same direction. To continue as we are at the moment is clearly not sustainable, and there is a clear advantage to addressing this issue now. As we set about fixing the problem, we are not starting from scratch. As hon. Members have mentioned, we can draw directly from the experiences of those who have gone before us to get it right. I have spoken to many animal welfare charities based in Scotland that are adapting to the legislation and want to see updates. We can help get it right. We can get it even better here than those charities have managed. That is why it is so important that we act now.

It is important to recognise that many rescue and rehoming centres already operate to the highest of standards. A significant number are subscribed to the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes voluntary code. That framework is the gold standard and was developed

over many years with considerable care, expertise and sector-wide input. I am sure that the Minister will look closely at the voluntary code and work constructively with the association and the wider sector to ensure that the policy is delivered properly. At its best, the sector shows us what good looks like. The task before us is to ensure that those standards are applied fairly and right across the board, so that wherever they are, animals get gold-standard treatment.

The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South mentioned the fact that, for licensing to succeed, it must be proportionate and, crucially, properly enforced. One message I have heard repeatedly from across the sector is that regulation without enforcement is no regulation at all. Clear standards must be matched by trained inspectors, adequate local authority resourcing and a system that allows concerns to be acted on before situations deteriorate into crisis, as clearly happened in my constituency.

Any effective system must reflect the realities of modern rescue and rehoming, including foster-based rescues and online rehoming operations, as well as reflecting the work of organisations facilitating rehoming more broadly. The ADCH standards are excellent and many responsible rescue centres have rightly adopted them, but a voluntary system alone will always leave gaps, as rogue operators can simply opt out. That is why I welcome the Government's commitment to consult on a licensing regime for rehoming organisations, but that consultation must be followed by real clarity. The sector has been ready to engage for many years. What it needs now is a timetable and a clear scope, and there must also be reassurance that wildlife rescue centres will not be left outside of any framework and that there will be support for smaller organisations during any transition.

What happened in my constituency last year is not just deeply disturbing; it is a crime, and the man who was arrested for it has recently pleaded guilty and is now awaiting sentencing. I am glad that he will be brought to justice. The situation has galvanised campaigners, charities and Members from across the House to work together to ensure that this issue receives the attention it deserves. There is a clearly a broad consensus across Parliament, the sector and the devolved Administrations. The case for licensing is well made, but what is now required is genuine action.

Animals entering rescue and rehoming centres are, by definition, already the most vulnerable. Many have been abandoned, neglected or mistreated before. The very least we owe them is a system that keeps them safe and properly cared for, and we must hold those whose care they are put into to clear and enforceable standards. I urge the Government to ensure that England embarks on a structured roll-out of a licensing regime that is proportionate, inclusive and centred on animal welfare, regardless of the size of the organisation involved, at the earliest opportunity to ensure that the dogs at Crays Hill did not die in vain and we can prevent other tragedies in future.

6.55 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Alec—my first time, I think; I am sure there will be many more. I thank the Petitions Committee

and everyone who signed the petition for raising this important issue, especially the 164 from my own constituency of Wallasey. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee in the way that she did. The strength of public support behind the petition reflects a clear and shared concern. There was certainly cross-party consensus in the debate today about the state of sections of the rescue and rehoming sector, and I welcome this opportunity to discuss the proposal to introduce licensing and regulation for dog and cat rescues. I also want to reiterate the Government's commitment to boosting animal welfare across the board.

Animals play such an important role in our lives. They enrich our homes, support our wellbeing, and in return they deserve the highest standards of care and protection. We are a nation of animal lovers, so we have to ensure that our policies uphold our commitment to their welfare at all stages of their lives. The Association of Dogs and Cats Homes reported that almost 35,000 dogs and 69,000 cats were rehomed by its member organisations in 2024. It found that more pets were being abandoned due to the cost of living crisis, something that has been mentioned by hon. Members across the House during this debate.

The Government are concerned about the neglect happening in organisations that pose as animal rescues and about the lack of transparency in the rescue and rehoming sector itself—again, an issue brought up by many who spoke in the debate today. I was horrified, as was everyone else in this debate, by the case in Billericay in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden); the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) also referred to it. In May last year, 37 dogs were found dead in the care of a man who was pocketing donations for his so-called animal sanctuary. It was a shocking act of neglect and lack of humanity from the man entrusted to care for those animals.

As the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay said in his wind-up speech, the man has pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing next week. That points to the fact that there are rules and regulations currently around the treatment of animals in rescues, even though there is not direct licensing in England at the moment. So it is not true that absolutely no rules apply, although the Government and I accept that we need to consider what we can do to increase the protection for animals that find themselves in that position.

Organisations may present themselves as rescues but fail to meet even basic welfare standards. There are also cases of well-meaning individuals willing to take in animals in need, but despite good intentions they lack the capacity to care for the animals properly. We have to make sure that the public can trust in the safety and legitimacy of animal rescue shelters in their area. We are taking seriously the risks posed by illegitimate rescues, whether that is financial exploitation, inadequate disease control or the rehoming of animals with unmanaged behavioural issues, all of which are risks, as many right hon. and hon. Members pointed out in this debate.

Most rescues operate responsibly and act with genuine intentions; we will crack down on those that do not. Last month we published our animal welfare strategy, which sets out the priorities that will deliver by 2030.

It delivers on our commitments to introduce the most ambitious reforms to animal welfare in a generation. The Secretary of State launched the strategy at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, an organisation that delivers crucial work rescuing and rehoming dogs and cats while also promoting best practice and knowledge, providing training and grant funding to animal rescue partners and offering online pet advice and training to anyone who needs it.

The Government recognise the incredible work that people across the country, including those at Battersea, do to protect our animals. That work, often done on a voluntary basis, ensures that the animals taken into the care of those organisations are offered the opportunity of a forever home. We also value our strong relationships with those who work in these key sectors, and are proud of the work we have already achieved through partnerships with such key stakeholders. Our history of delivering positive outcomes for animals would not be possible without the dedication of the organisations and individuals we work with and their expertise across many species and complex areas.

I am sure many Members will have attended the engaging Westminster Hall debate on the animal strategy last week. It further demonstrated the cross-party support and real dedication and commitment from across the country to ensuring the welfare of animals. As the pet population continues to grow, it is essential that our welfare standards keep pace, ensuring that all animals are safeguarded throughout their lives. To that end, the strategy will deliver on our manifesto commitments to end puppy smuggling and puppy farming. We will ensure that existing legislation is up to standard and work with local authorities and the sector to ensure that it is effectively enforced; as hon. Gentlemen and Ladies from across the House know, if the most perfect legislation in this area is not enforced, it might as well not exist.

We have come from a period when enforcement suffered enormously because of cuts to local authorities. It is harder, and it has been much harder recently, for enforcement to happen in a reasonable way. We have to make sure that we close the loopholes. As part of the animal welfare strategy, we have been very clear that we will launch a consultation on licensing domestic rescue and rehoming organisations. That would ensure that set welfare standards were being met and enforced across the licensed rescue centres. That could include, for example, requirements for training, for the environment the animals are kept in and for standards of care.

Today, hon. Ladies and Gentlemen from across the House have pointed out the need to ensure that we strike the right balance. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) talked in particular about a mistake that she said the Scottish Government made when introducing their licensing regime, which had the unintended consequence of closing down quite a lot of facilities that might have sensibly been able to survive. It is important that this Government learn the lessons of the unintended errors made in trying to regulate appropriately in such a diverse sector. The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock made a similar point in his remarks.

We do not want to have such a fantastically sophisticated licensing regime that we put a lot of very good organisations that are doing a valuable job out of business. We are aware that many small rescue and rehoming organisations

[Dame Angela Eagle]

rely solely on donations and volunteer efforts. Any new licensing framework must therefore be proportionate, and we will carefully consider the variations in types of rescues and animals that they look after.

I know that many of our constituents will be keen to engage with the consultation at the appropriate point. We will share details about that, including scope and timings, as the policy is developed. The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock asked a series of questions about that, but many of those questions are on points that the consultation will be trying to tease out, so that we can come to an appropriate decision about the best way to license and regulate in this area and we do the most good and the least harm.

I want to be clear that animal rescue organisations, as we have all contemplated following the horrible events in Billericay, must already meet statutory welfare requirements. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, any person responsible for an animal, whether on a permanent or temporary basis, has a duty to ensure its welfare. Companion animal rescue and rehoming organisations in England and Wales must therefore comply with the statutory welfare requirements set out in the 2006 Act. Members of the public can also check whether a rescue centre is a member of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes. As has been pointed out in this debate, that group has set clear standards for animal assessments, neutering and rehoming procedures to which all its members adhere. The Government will continue to promote the work of that group and to encourage the public to source pets from responsible rescue and rehoming organisations in the United Kingdom. Many animal welfare organisations work hard to promote more responsible sourcing practices, and we will continue to promote their efforts.

We know that some individuals choose to rescue pets from abroad. Bringing animals from overseas has increased animal health and welfare risks. We will continue to

develop the evidence base on the welfare issues associated with international rescue and rehoming. We have already commissioned the University of Liverpool to assess the impact on dog welfare, both for the dogs rehomed from abroad and for the domestic population. We expect to publish that research later this year.

I hope that everyone will agree that we must move forward, both with our banning of puppy farming and with the licensing of rescues, so that we modernise our animal welfare laws in this very important area and ensure that all animals, whether they lose their first home and must be rehomed or not, can look forward to acceptable standards of care and welfare before they find their new forever home.

7.6 pm

Irene Campbell: I very much welcome the Minister's response. This has been an important and informative debate. The animal welfare strategy is a big step forward in the right direction, and I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are taking steps to correct some of the gaps in our animal welfare legislation. We have a massive opportunity to create change and I am looking forward to the consultation that is coming soon from the Government, as we have just heard.

I once again thank the petitioner, Paul Watkinson, and his colleague Niki Roe, as well as the groups that I met in preparation for this debate. I also thank, as ever, the staff of the Petitions Committee for all their hard work in organising these debates. As a final point, I should probably have mentioned that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for dog advisory welfare.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 718660 relating to the licensing and regulation of animal rescue centres.

7.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 26 January 2026

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

National Cancer Plan: Care and Early Diagnosis

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): The Department of Health and Social Care will soon publish the national cancer plan. While more people survive cancer than ever before, progress has slowed over the last decade and England remains behind other comparable countries with working-class communities being failed most of all. This plan will change that.

The provision of cancer services varies significantly across the country. We will work to end the variation and ensure that access to the best cancer diagnosis, treatment and care is possible for everyone.

The national cancer plan will include a set of policies specifically focused on tackling geographic inequalities in cancer care, including:

More cancer care medical training places will be allocated to rural and coastal areas, particularly in areas where there are high numbers of vacancies, or areas with poor performance.

Improved scrutiny and support of cancer services, including increased data transparency on the quality of care and performance to drive up standards across the country. Where people live should not determine whether they get high-quality treatment when they need it.

Patients to get access to cutting-edge early cancer detection technologies regardless of where they live, as NICE begins to assess technology as well as medicines, which, if approved, would be available on the NHS in the same way that already applies to medicines.

Cancer alliances will receive funding and work proactively with local communities and providers to improve early diagnosis rates, including for rarer or less survivable cancers. They will focus on increasing awareness of cancer symptoms, supporting primary care to spot signs of cancer early, and reducing the gap in screening uptake between the most and least deprived areas, with particular efforts to reach ethnic minority and underserved communities.

Further to this, we know that early diagnosis is crucial for improving survival for cancer, for all cancers, including bowel cancer, which is the fourth most common cancer in the UK, impacting 40,907 people in 2023.

Which is why the national cancer plan will include actions to ensure more bowel cancers are caught at an earlier stage, rolling out changes to our bowel cancer screening programmes that are expected to save more than 5000 lives by 2035.

The NHS bowel cancer screening programme offers people aged 50 to 74 screening every two years, faecal immunochemical test kits are sent to people's homes.

The NHS in England is improving this offer by rolling out increased sensitivity in bowel cancer screening, the programme will lower the threshold from 120 ug/g to

80 ug/g to bring the sensitivity in line with Scotland and Wales. When fully rolled out from 2028, this is expected to catch cancer at an earlier stage for over 600 people per year, treating it faster and saving lives.

Going further, we will roll out letters and invitations on to the bowel cancer screening programme via the app. This will make it easier for individuals to access screening programmes, and give patients control over their health.

The national cancer plan, which will be published shortly, will provide further details of how we will seek to improve early diagnosis of all cancers, and deliver high-quality cancer care to everybody, no matter where they live.

[HCWS1271]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Review of Disclosure and Fraud Offences: Government Response

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The first report of the independent review of disclosure and fraud offences —“Disclosure in the Digital Age”—was presented to Parliament in March 2025. Since then, the Home Office, the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Justice have worked together on a joint response to its 45 recommendations. The Government are grateful to Jonathan Fisher KC for his thorough analysis of the criminal disclosure regime.

Building on that foundation, the Government are committed to modernising disclosure so that it is fit for purpose in the digital age. In particular, the review identifies practical opportunities to deploy technology in criminal cases to manage digital material more effectively, reduce administrative burdens and release police time for frontline duties. Any adoption of new tools will be underpinned by robust safeguards and full regard for the rights of the defence and the interests of justice.

The programme of reform is designed to strengthen the justice system as a whole: streamlining investigations and prosecutions, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and improving consistency across agencies, while maintaining fairness for all parties. Any delivery will be taken forward in partnership with law enforcement bodies, the Crown Prosecution Service and wider criminal justice stakeholders to ensure that changes are workable, proportionate and sustainable in practice.

The Government will publish its full response to the independent review by 20 May 2026, aligned with wider reforms across the criminal justice system. This response will include careful consideration of any linkages to the recommendations made in part two of Sir Brian Leveson's independent review of the criminal courts on efficiency. Further updates will be provided to the House in due course.

[HCWS1272]

Petition

Monday 26 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Green belt protection

The petition of residents of the constituency of Cheadle,

Declares that the green belt is under unprecedented threat from short-sighted planning policies that prioritise profit over people and concrete over countryside; further that once the green belt is gone, its biodiversity, beauty and balance are lost forever; and further that the Government must be held accountable for the systematic erosion of these protected spaces, which were established to preserve nature, safeguard our heritage and maintain the health and wellbeing of communities across the UK.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to schedule a debate in the House on the protection of the green belt, and to resist destructive plans to sacrifice green fields, woodlands and wildlife habitats to unsustainable and unnecessary development, in favour of investing in sustainable housing solutions and protecting our natural environment for future generations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Tom Morrison, *Official Report*, 16 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 882.]

[P003149]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government have a brownfield-first approach to development, and we want to see such land prioritised wherever possible. The national planning policy framework makes it clear that substantial weight should be given to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements, including the development of under-utilised land and buildings to meet the need for homes and other uses.

The Government recognise that urban areas should be the focus for growth and have been clear that brownfield land must, wherever possible, be prioritised for new development. Through the revisions made to the NPPF on 12 December 2024, we broadened the definition of brownfield land, set a strengthened expectation that applications on brownfield land will be approved and made it clear that plans should promote an uplift in density in urban areas.

However, we know that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable and in the right location.

The Government's new approach to the green belt, including prioritising the release of lower quality grey belt land and introducing "golden rules" to ensure that development benefits communities and nature, is set out in the revised national planning policy framework, published on 12 December 2024.

On 27 February last year, planning practice guidance was published to assist local authorities and other decision makers, and to support a consistent approach to determining whether land is grey belt. This new guidance will support authorities in producing local plans while also making sure that planning applications and development on suitable grey belt land can proceed in the short-term in areas without an up-to-date plan.

The Government have also provided 133 local planning authorities with £70,000 of pump priming funding each to contribute towards the costs of carrying out green belt reviews in their areas.

Where land is identified as grey belt, that does not mean it is automatically granted planning permission. The potential consequences of any planning proposal should still be assessed in the light of all relevant local and national policies. Our changes do not weaken existing protections for the natural environment, such as national landscapes, or the importance of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

On 22 September 2024, the Government published a brownfield passport policy paper, inviting views on how we can further prioritise building on previously used urban land, and how we can make best use of land in accessible locations, such as around train stations.

The Government are currently consulting on a new national planning policy framework that draws on the proposals outlined in that policy paper and the feedback received to it. It includes proposals designed to further strengthen support for development on brownfield land, support the intensification of urban and suburban areas, and enable more development in sustainable locations.

Our consultation proposals also include wider policy changes to strengthen support for conserving and enhancing the natural environment. We are proposing revisions to reflect local nature recovery strategies and align with current approaches to working with nature, including a stronger focus on green infrastructure and nature-based solutions. We have also set clearer expectations for how development proposals should conserve existing natural features such as chalk streams and contribute positively to nature's recovery, such as by incorporating swift bricks where appropriate.

I hope the petitioners will consider participating in the consultation on gov.uk, available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system> This remains open until 10 March 2026.

Written Corrections

Monday 26 January 2026

Ministerial Corrections

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Capture Redress and Horizon Shortfall Schemes: Chair of Independent Panel and Independent Reviewer A

The following extract is from the written statement entitled "Capture Redress and Horizon Shortfall Schemes: Chair of Independent Panel and Independent Reviewer A" made on 16 December 2025.

Blair McDougall: On 29 November, I launched the Capture redress scheme to provide payments to postmasters who suffered as a result of the Capture software...

[*Official Report*, 16 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 55WS.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall):

Blair McDougall: On 29 October, I launched the Capture redress scheme to provide payments to postmasters who suffered as a result of the Capture software...

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Maternity and Neonatal Care

The following extracts are from Health and Social Care questions on 13 January 2026.

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

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

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):... We have invested more than £131 million to improve neonatal care facilities, brought in a new maternity care bundle, implemented a programme to reduce the two leading causes of avoidable brain injury during labour, and increased maternal mental health

services. There is so much more to do, however, to guarantee safety now and into the future, and also to ensure truth, justice and accountability for past failures. [*Official Report*, 13 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 734.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting):

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):... We have invested more than £131 million to improve **maternity and** neonatal care facilities, brought in a new maternity care bundle, **we are implementing** a programme to reduce the two leading causes of avoidable brain injury during labour, and we have increased maternal mental health services. There is so much more to do, however, to guarantee safety now and into the future, and also to ensure truth, justice and accountability for past failures.

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

Wes Streeting: Let me just point out that in the 18 months for which I have had the privilege of holding this post, we have invested more than £131 million in 122 infrastructure projects across 49 NHS trusts to improve the safety of neonatal care facilities. We have implemented a new programme to reduce the two leading causes of avoidable brain injury during labour...

[*Official Report*, 13 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 737.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care:

Wes Streeting: Let me just point out that in the 18 months for which I have had the privilege of holding this post, we have invested more than £131 million in 122 infrastructure projects across 49 NHS trusts to improve the safety of **maternity and** neonatal care facilities. **We are implementing** a new programme to reduce the two leading causes of avoidable brain injury during labour...

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 26 January 2026

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WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 26 January 2026

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PETITION

Monday 26 January 2026

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**not later than
Monday 2 February 2026**

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