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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 27 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

Tuesday 27 January 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I want to note that today is Holocaust Memorial Day. I know that the whole House will agree with me about the importance of remembering the 6 million Jewish people murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed as a result of Nazi persecution, as well as those killed in more recent genocides—Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Members will have an opportunity to make further contributions during the debate on Thursday. For now, I know that colleagues will want to join me in thanking the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for its important work.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Research and Development Bonds

1. **Chris Coghlan** (Dorking and Horley) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the potential merits of issuing research and development bonds of up to £20 billion. [907480]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): Innovation is a key driver of long-term economic growth, higher productivity and improved living standards. That is why this Government are investing more in R&D and why we are committed to maintaining the generosity of R&D tax reliefs. We remain open to new and innovative debt instruments and we review options regularly, but clearly new instruments need to meet a range of criteria, including value for money.

Chris Coghlan: In the 1940s, refugees fled the Nazis and built the atomic bomb; they pioneered a method of public research and development that has powered US economic dominance ever since. The EU Security Action for Europe defence bond fund offers us a similarly transformative opportunity: £20 billion invested in defence R&D could expand our economy by £100 billion. Will we join our Canadian and European allies, end our economic stagnation, and together defend the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I can see that you want to round up your question, but this is more of a statement. You are telling the history, which is important, but I hope there is a question coming now, as there are a lot of other Members to get in.

Chris Coghlan: Will we invest in EU SAFE defence bond fund?

Lucy Rigby: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. Indeed, he and I have discussed this issue previously. We are due to meet to discuss it later this month, and I am very much looking forward to that discussion.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Mersey Care NHS foundation trust has plans for a world-leading mental health research and development facility at Maghull health park in my constituency. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how the Treasury might support investing in such an important research and development project, not least as it is fundamental to the Government's plans for improving healthcare?

Lucy Rigby: My hon. Friend raises an important point. This Government are investing an extra £29 billion in our national health service. I would be happy to meet him to discuss it further.

Regional Funding

2. **Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to provide regional funding. [907481]

6. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to provide regional funding. [907486]

13. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps she is taking to provide regional funding. [907493]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I am very sorry to see your leg in such a way, Mr Speaker.

We are committed to driving growth everywhere. The Budget ensured that Scottish public services are fairly funded, with an extra £820 million for the Scottish Government through the Barnett formula, on top of a record settlement in June this year. We are also investing in transport for city regions, and investing £5 billion in deprived neighbourhoods through the Pride in Place programme, with some of that money going to Scotland.

Kirsteen Sullivan: I welcome the fantastic news that Edinburgh and south-east Scotland will receive £37.8 million from the new local growth fund, supporting infrastructure, business support and skills development. However, I consistently hear from businesses that they struggle to recruit people with the skill sets needed to grow their operations and fuel economic growth. Can the Chancellor set out how this investment will reach beyond the cities to tackle the acute skills shortages in my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for her commitment to her constituency. It is right that the money is allocated through the regional economic partnerships in Scotland, and I have absolutely no doubt that my hon. Friend will make the case for her local area. The regional economic partnerships have already worked together to deliver the integrated regional employability and skills programme in Edinburgh and south-east Scotland, including helping people in her Bathgate and Linlithgow constituency.

Emma Foody: Ministers will be all too aware of my campaign to unlock improvement at Moor Farm roundabout, which is currently holding back growth across the north-east and causing misery to local people on a daily basis. The Government have rightly taken steps to ensure that my region gets its fair share of investment through changes to the Green Book and place-based business cases, but will the Chancellor meet me ahead of the road investment strategy to ensure that we finally get this long overdue investment in a critical piece of north-east infrastructure?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner for the Moor Farm roundabout, which holds back both commuters and businesses, and therefore both growth and prosperity. I will continue to work with her on this. I know that the roundabout is now being properly considered for inclusion in the road investment strategy and I would be happy to meet her to discuss that further.

Elaine Stewart: The Ayrshire growth deal, which was allocated £103 million of UK Government funds, has the potential to make a real difference to our economic prospects. Despite its clear potential, though, delivery on the ground remains far too slow in turning around real progress. What action can the UK Government take to drive momentum, sharpen the strategic direction of the deal and ensure that Ayrshire finally sees the benefits of this investment?

Rachel Reeves: This Labour Government are investing more than £250 million in economic development and regeneration in Ayrshire, including but not limited to the Ayrshire growth deal. My hon. Friend is a great champion of Ayrshire, and I look forward to working with her and my good friend Anas Sarwar in the months and years ahead to deliver for the people of Ayrshire and those right across Scotland.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): According to a report this morning from the Jobs Foundation, the energy sector in north-east Scotland is on a cliff edge, with Robert Gordon University estimating that 400 jobs will be lost every two weeks. Given the importance of that sector not just to Aberdeen or Edinburgh West but to the Scottish and UK economies, will the Chancellor think about providing the regional development support that the Scottish Government are failing to provide?

Rachel Reeves: At the Budget, we published our North sea oil and gas plan and provided certainty by announcing that the energy profits levy introduced by the previous Government will end at the end of this Parliament. At the same time, we are supporting the transition to new jobs in new industries right across Scotland, including in Aberdeenshire, because the opportunities to transition to jobs in clean energy are very real, and we need to ensure that those jobs come to Scotland.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I know the Chancellor would say that the Northern Ireland budget was an exceptionally good one, but would she agree that there are extreme circumstances pertaining to three areas in particular—policing, education and health—at the moment? Will she at least get into

discussions with the First and Deputy First Ministers in Northern Ireland to see what can be done to alleviate the problems that are coming towards us?

Rachel Reeves: My right hon. Friends the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury are in discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive on some of the additional pressures they are facing. We are working through those plans and will have more to say shortly.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Regional funding must not come at the expense of local authority funding and all devolved funding must recognise the realities in the places where funding is needed, yet under the so-called fair funding review, in just three years Herefordshire council will see a reduction in UK Government fundings to 78% of current levels. The Government have also removed the remoteness adjustment for anything except social care, but rurality does of course matter for bin collections, school transport and many other aspects. Will the Chancellor look again at the fair funding review, which is unfair for so many places, like Herefordshire, and ensure that remoteness is properly adjusted for in the calculation?

Rachel Reeves: My understanding is that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is still consulting on this matter, so the hon. Lady and other colleagues will have a chance to feed into that process. In the spending review, we put an extra £600 million into supporting local authorities after the years of austerity under the Conservative Government. While the previous Conservative Prime Minister said he would take money away from poorer areas and give it to Tunbridge Wells, we are investing more fairly in the areas that need it most.

Support for Businesses

3. **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to business rates on the hospitality sector. [907483]

4. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Whether she plans to increase the level of small business rates relief for the hair and beauty sector. [907484]

9. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What fiscal steps she is taking to support the hospitality sector. [907489]

10. **Ollly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to business rates on the hospitality sector. [907490]

14. **Abtisam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking to support small businesses. [907494]

16. **Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to business rates on the hospitality sector. [907496]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

There are a number of questions on this topic, and I am sure there will be more this afternoon when I make a statement to the House on a package of support in relation to business rates, with a particular focus on pubs. As previously announced, we are introducing a support package worth £4.3 billion to support rate payers who are seeing increases in their business rates.

Richard Foord: Joanna Watson runs the Elizabeth hotel and the Kingswood hotel in Sidmouth. She is essentially facing a 20% rise in her business rate costs. Joanna's bills do not reflect what she earns; they stay high all year round, even though there are months like these in winter when income completely collapses. The Government legislated for a 20p reduction in the business rates multiplier for hospitality, and that created an expectation that it would be used. The Minister said that he will make a statement this afternoon, but will he also consider the plight of hotels such as those in Sidmouth?

Dan Tomlinson: We have considered the challenges that hospitality businesses and businesses on our high streets have been facing. That is why we put in place £4.3 billion of support at the Budget. We recognise that there are concerns as to how hotels are valued for business rates, and that will be one of the items I talk about in the statement later.

Paula Barker: I wish your leg a speedy recovery, Mr Speaker.

I recently visited the wonderful Aura salon in my constituency and spoke to the owners Victoria and Janet, who have owned the business for 24 years and are the hub of their local community. They have invested in and trained numerous young hair stylists but now their business rates and VAT are crippling them, meaning that they can no longer take on apprentices. Victoria and Janet told me that the VAT rate that they pay is unbalanced compared with other sectors that claim back VAT. Will the Minister please advise what can be done to help salons like Aura and others that are part of the Save our Salons campaign, and are there any plans for an affordable apprenticeship scheme in the hairdressing sector?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing to champion salons and the beauty industry in her constituency and elsewhere. She will know that VAT is a broad-based tax; in fact, it is our third largest revenue raiser, raising £180 billion last year. That is vital revenue that pays for our public services. There are lots of issues in relation to VAT, including the differential treatment depending on how salons decide to set themselves up and pay their employees. Those are important issues, and we will consider tax changes in the usual way in the run-up to future Budgets.

Sir John Whittingdale: I recently visited the Ship Inn in Burnham-on-Crouch, which has a few hotel rooms, as well as Peaberries, a tea shop on the high street. Both are looking at existential threats as a result of business rates. Can the Minister say whether the package that he will announce later will benefit them as well?

Dan Tomlinson: I do not think that Mr Speaker would like me to pre-empt the announcements that will be made later, but the right hon. Member has given me the opportunity to reiterate that at the Budget we implemented for the first time differential rates of tax—differential multipliers—meaning that the largest businesses now pay 33% more than the smallest high street businesses. That is a big differential that was not there before but which now exists because of the big reforms that we made at the Budget.

Olly Glover: In my Oxfordshire constituency, pubs including the Fox Inn in Denchworth, the White Hart in Harwell and the Fox and Hounds in Uffington are vital to their village communities, yet they face significant business rate increases from April. Given that the chief executive of the Valuation Office Agency told the Treasury Committee that, ahead of the Budget, the VOA warned that over 5,000 pubs would see their business rates double, will the Minister tell the House why the Government decided to press on and create such uncertainty for our hospitality sector in the Budget?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government will have more to say a bit later today when it comes to pubs and the support that the Government can provide for them. We knew that the revaluations would be implemented from 1 April, and that is precisely why we came forward with a significant package of support for all businesses across the economy. We introduced significant reforms to lower the multipliers for businesses like the pubs that the hon. Member mentioned.

Abtisam Mohamed: Sheffield Central businesses continue to face disproportionately higher pressures, with ever-increasing running costs stacking up and a drop in footfall. Businesses like the Gamers Guide Café and the Dove and Rainbow pub tell me that they need much more to survive the dip in foot traffic, so will the Minister set out how he is reducing pressures on high street cafés and pubs, and will he consider targeted relief to ensure viability for hospitality businesses?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her representations on behalf of businesses and constituents in Sheffield. One of the important things to note about the business rates system is that there are many smaller businesses on our high streets that pay no business rates at all. One in three businesses continue to benefit from small business rate relief and an additional 85,000 benefit from reduced bills as that tapers. At the Budget we announced an additional two years of small business rate relief for those businesses that expand into a second property. This will be helpful for small and independent businesses, and will support them to grow.

Marie Goldman: Chelmsford has a vibrant night-time economy. Just last Sunday, I spent the evening at a fabulous local music venue called Hot Box, right in the heart of my constituency. Venues such as Hot Box represent important cultural and social spaces for smaller cities like mine, but many are at risk due to recent Government changes to the business rates system. New analysis puts the average increase in the hospitality business rates bill in Chelmsford at nearly £23,000 over three years. For many, that is impossible to absorb. Another family-run business in Chelmsford that has

been going for 25 years will see its monthly rates more than double from April. It says that it will simply have to close its doors if that goes ahead, resulting in 40 people losing their jobs. Will the Government implement the 20p discount that they have already legislated for and let all businesses in retail, leisure and hospitality get the support that they need?

Mr Speaker: I think the Minister has got the idea.

Dan Tomlinson: I have got the idea, Mr Speaker!

The key thing to note here is that there is a significant difference between the change in the rateable value and the change in the business rates. This year, we have stepped in to cap the increases for bills at £800 for those coming into the system for the first time. For most high street businesses, the increase will be 15%, while the very largest will see increases of 30%. Those are the steps we have taken. When the Liberal Democrats were in government, they chose to increase VAT on businesses up and down the country.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): I wish you a speedy recovery, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister say something about music recording studios, such as the Church Studios, where Annie Lennox recorded “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)”? Could he give me a sweet dream this evening and tell me that my music recording studio is going to be fine?

Dan Tomlinson: I am very fond of my constituency neighbour, who has the privilege of sharing a part of Barnet with me. There will be news this afternoon—I am just trying to find my words, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Everybody’s looking for something! *[Laughter.]*

Dan Tomlinson: I hope the microphone picked that up.

We will make further announcements this afternoon specifically focused on pubs, but I understand that there are businesses across the economy that will have seen increases in their rateable values since the pandemic. That is precisely why we have stepped in with our support package.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab): Here’s another one: what assessment has the Minister made of the impact on really small independent high street bookshops? This is the National Year of Reading; we want them to stay open, not closed.

Dan Tomlinson: Many really small bookshops up and down the country will not pay any business rates at all because they will be in receipt of small business rate relief. Of course, there will be some that will have seen either their rateable value increase, or—because of the Government’s decision to slowly wind down the temporary pandemic support—an increase in their bills. We are capping those increases in this year and in subsequent years so that transition can be manageable for those businesses. Of course we want to support bookshops on our high streets; they are incredibly important, along with all the other high street retailers up and down the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Chancellor promised hospitality firms that she would lower their taxes, but her business rate raid is hammering every town, village, city and high street. This is not just an attack on pubs; hotels, cafés, music venues and many more are being hit. It is two months since the Budget caused huge worry for these businesses, and we await details of this latest U-turn, but the key question is: does the Chancellor get it? Does she get that it is not just pubs but hospitality, leisure and retail businesses that need support because of her terrible choices?

Dan Tomlinson: Conservative Members do not get it, because when they were in government, they set out plans to remove the temporary pandemic rates relief overnight in 2025. That would have seen an increase of 300% in business rate bills overnight for businesses on the high street. We have taken a different, fairer and more proportional approach, phasing out the pandemic relief over a slower time period and extending it into this year.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I wish you a speedy recovery.

We know that pubs have been badly hit by these business rates changes, but businesses right across retail, hospitality and leisure have made investment and hiring decisions based on the expectation raised by this Government that they would get a full 20p discount on their business rate multiplier. Those businesses—music venues, restaurants, soft play centres and hotels—are the high street shops that communities most love. Do Ministers accept that anything less than the full 20p discount for retail, hospitality and leisure will leave the three-to-five-year business plans of those high street businesses in total disarray?

Dan Tomlinson: We announced a 5p reduction in the multiplier on top of the 7p or thereabouts reduction that was taking place as a result of the revaluation more broadly. That is a £900 million transfer of underlying rates liability away from the smallest high street businesses towards the online giants and the largest properties. When the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives had the chance, they kept the tax rates the same. We have introduced significant reform, and we started the work of that reform at the Budget. Of course we will continue our conversations in the months ahead.

Daisy Cooper: Businesses up and down the country know that the Government raised their expectations and then dashed them. This whole sorry saga has been an absolute shambles. The question remains: why were Ministers so blindsided, when the VOA has confirmed that it was providing data drops over a period of 12 months? Will Ministers use the opportunity in 90 minutes’ time to answer all the questions that Opposition MPs have asked and to explain what they knew and when?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, happily.

Government-backed Loans: SMEs

5. Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of providing Government-backed loans for SMEs. [907485]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): The Government provide a wide range of loan support for SMEs through the British Business Bank. This includes the start up loans programme and the growth guarantee scheme, the latter of which recently supported over 4,000 businesses and over 65,000 jobs right across the country.

Jo White: I recently met Matthew Pendleton, who owns Apawtiser, a high-quality dog treat company. The company grew legs because processed dog food had made his pet dog violently ill. Matthew now needs the finances so that he can continue to expand, employ more staff and get Apawtiser on the national pet food map. I want to see businesses such as these succeed in my area, and Matthew's small ask is: will the Government step in with the offer of an underwritten loan?

Lucy Rigby: My hon. Friend is a tireless champion of businesses in Bassetlaw, and I wish her a happy birthday for yesterday. In the recent spending review, the Government extended the growth guarantee scheme, enabling £5 billion-worth of loans over the next four years. This will support businesses like the one she mentioned, and I would be more than happy to meet her to talk about how her constituent might access that support.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): First-of-a-kind technologies such as DRIFT Energy in Bath face serious investment challenges and difficulties in accessing grant funding from any Government Department. DRIFT is a groundbreaking renewable energy innovator that could rapidly scale and contribute to the UK's energy independence. What are the Government doing to ensure that first-in-kind technologies in particular receive the support that they need here in the UK, rather than being forced to go abroad?

Lucy Rigby: The hon. Member may well know that, at the spending review, we increased the financial capacity of the British Business Bank to £25.6 billion. There are a number of ways in which the British Business Bank will support companies like the one she referred to.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As well as the British Business Bank, the National Wealth Fund plays a crucial part in investing taxpayers' money. I welcome the Government's response to the Select Committee's report on that issue. Will the Minister indicate when the National Wealth Fund will have the ability to borrow from private markets in order to increase its independence, secure funding for infrastructure, and get the taxpayer off the hook?

Lucy Rigby: It is absolutely right that we have increased the amount of funding going into the National Wealth Fund. On my hon. Friend's specific question, my understanding is that we have not set a date, but I am more than happy to write to her with further information—to the extent that it exists.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Has the Minister assessed what proportion of British Business Bank grant funding goes to the smallest of businesses? One in four people in my constituency works for themselves or for very small businesses. To what extent is she working to ensure that smaller businesses—those employing 10 people or fewer, which are the very bedrock of our economy in the lakes and dales in Cumbria—know about the availability of those loans and are talked through the difficult process of applying for and receiving them, so that we can invest in rural communities like mine?

Lucy Rigby: On the Government's policies vis-à-vis businesses as a whole, we support the sort of businesses the hon. Member refers to in a whole range of ways. On businesses in his area, 80% of the recent deployment of the growth guarantee scheme was outside London.

Living Standards

7. Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of trends in the level of living standards on the economy. [907487]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): Rising living standards are the ultimate goal of economic policy, and living standards are now rising following the unprecedented fall during the last Parliament. The latest data shows that the average person's real disposable income is £800 higher than in the final year of the previous Parliament.

Luke Murphy: As the Minister says, the previous Parliament was the worst on record for living standards, so my constituents—for many of whom the cost of living is the No.1 issue—welcome the action taken to freeze rail fares, which will save them £350 on average, and to take £150 off their energy bills, as well as today's groundbreaking commitment to cap ground rent, which we will hear about later. Will he confirm that the Government will continue to strain every sinew, clear every obstacle and use the power of government to cut the cost of living and raise living standards for my constituents over the course of this Parliament?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is a powerful campaigner on this issue; week after week, he consistently raises the issue of living standards for people in Basingstoke. He is right to highlight the key role of energy bills in that. The Budget took levies off energy bills to save families £150 on average next year, as part of wider measures to directly cut inflation by 0.4 percentage points, further supporting living standards by making it easier for banks to cut mortgage rates and giving businesses the confidence to invest. Energy bills cut, ground rents cut—change promised, change delivered.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What assessment has the Minister made of the recent trends in household living standards across the United Kingdom, including through discussions with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland? What steps has his Department taken, in conjunction with regional Administrations, to ensure that the Northern Ireland Executive can support households facing rising costs? I know that the Minister gives lots of answers, so will he give us an answer on this one, please?

Torsten Bell: We will always give the hon. Member an answer—and I mean always, at every single one of these sessions. Government Ministers, particularly at the Northern Ireland Office, spend a lot of time speaking to Ministers in Northern Ireland. He is absolutely right to say that the cost of living crisis affects not just one part but all parts of the United Kingdom. To take just one example, the six interest rate cuts since the general election have already made a big difference to those in Northern Ireland whose mortgage renewal is coming up.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Persistently high inflation and fears that things will get tougher for their children are top issues for the British public, but the Office for Budget Responsibility's assessment of Labour's plans was that:

"Growth in real household disposable income per person is projected to fall... to around ¼ per cent a year... well below the last decade's average".

Minister, why is the sum of all this Government's economic policies condemning the British public to such a despairing prospect?

Torsten Bell: Mr Speaker, that is called leading with your chin. Members on the Conservative Benches were in power in the last Parliament, which saw living standards fall by 2.9%. Living standards have already risen under this Government by 1.5%, because we are turning around their mess day after day after day.

Rail Infrastructure

8. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to providing funding for rail infrastructure. [907488]

22. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to providing funding for rail infrastructure. [907502]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Investment in our railways is a crucial part of our plan to unlock economic growth in every nation and region of the UK. Earlier this month, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced our plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail. That transformational programme is backed by up to £45 billion of investment in the long term, which will be key in unlocking economic potential across the north.

Dave Robertson: People across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages are delighted that this Government have funded the midlands rail hub project, meaning a doubling of the number of trains from Lichfield to Birmingham every hour. Ministers could go even further, though, by investigating the reopening of the Derby-Burton-Lichfield line, including a stop in Alrewas for the National Memorial Arboretum. Despite warm words from my predecessor, no business case exists for that. Can the Minister confirm that this Labour Government are not done with investing in transport in the midlands, and will he look again at the Derby-Burton-Lichfield line?

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the value of the midlands rail hub, which we invested in at the spending review. We are determined to invest more in transport in the midlands. Indeed, at the spending review the Government committed to investing £4.4 billion there through transport for city regions funding. My hon. Friend is a great advocate for services that will benefit his constituents, and I will ask the Rail Minister to respond about the specifics of the line that he raises.

Alice Macdonald: I welcome the investment the Government have made in rail, including East West Rail, but there are still several projects that would hugely benefit passengers and the local economy in the east. Those include upgrading the Trowse swing bridge near Norwich and, of course, Ely and Haughley junctions. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury meet me and other colleagues from the east of England to discuss how we can advance those key infrastructure projects for the region?

James Murray: East West Rail is a transformational project that will unlock economic growth and housing. Just yesterday, I was glad to host a representative from East West Rail at an infrastructure roundtable at the Treasury with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. My hon. Friend is another powerful advocate for her local area, and I will happily discuss this matter with the Rail Minister and get back to her.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Last week I met Lawrence Bowman, the chief executive of South Western Railway. I am keen to make sure that all the Government's changes take positive effect in Salisbury and south Wiltshire, so that tracks, signal and stock can be improved. Will the Minister make sure that there is a suitable reference board along the commuting line into Waterloo, so that when Lawrence Bowman's business plan is delivered, there will not be any delays when he has to interact with local authorities—a concern that he raised with me last week?

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the concerns of the services used by his constituents. I can assure him that I will look into those and get back to him.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): The Tarka line in North Devon has seen a massive increase in footfall. However, the line is often closed because of the lack of infrastructure upkeep. Will the Minister meet me to discuss various funding opportunities? It is a rural line that is vital for students to get into Exeter and for people's job opportunities—I know that the Government are all about job growth.

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we are all about job growth. I fear I will be quite busy after this set of questions with taking up projects in different constituencies, but that is absolutely right, because we all want to make sure that we have better investment—particularly in transport and infrastructure—for our constituents. I assure him that I will look into the matter and get back in touch with him.

Energy Bills

11. **Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): What fiscal steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce energy bills. [907491]

21. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce energy bills. [907501]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): Energy bills are too high, and Britain is too dependent on the rollercoaster of gas prices. That is why the autumn Budget reduced the cost of levies on energy bills to save households £150 on average from April this year.

Sally Jameson: I am pleased that the Government are sticking to their pledge on reducing energy bills, as the Minister rightly points out, with an average of £150 coming off annual bills this April. Does he agree that that is a good start, but that we must continue to work across Departments to ensure that we make further progress on the cost of living in this Parliament?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: people need to see inflation come down, and that is what the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Bank of England forecast to happen. As she said, from April our plans for energy bills will save households £150 on average, which is something she has campaigned for over the past 18 months. I am pleased energy companies have confirmed that those savings will be passed on to those with fixed tariffs. She asks that we go further, and I should add that we have extended the £150 warm home discount to a further 2.7 million of the poorest households.

Anna Dixon: I warmly welcome the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget on scrapping the energy company obligation scheme, which will bring down energy bills by £150 on average and support some 5,000 households living in fuel poverty in my constituency of Shipley. The disastrous Tory-designed scheme, ECO4, cost £1 billion per year, yet 98% of the external wall cavity installations were faulty. What further action are the Minister and Chancellor taking to reduce energy bills and ensure that energy companies put people over profit?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Conservatives did not just leave Britain dependent on the rollercoaster of gas prices; they left families paying almost £2 billion on their bills for their failed energy efficiency ECO scheme. The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee described the scheme's failings as the "worst" he had ever seen. That fuel poverty scheme cost 97% of those in fuel poverty more than it saved them, and it damaged thousands of homes. We are scrapping the ECO scheme, and cutting families' bills.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): A new report by the Prosperity Institute is highly critical of the Government's net zero policies and their adverse impact on the broader economy, and my constituents' fuel bills continue to soar because of the Government's reluctance to use more traditional sources of fuel. Will the Minister

commit to raising that with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, because such ideologically driven policies are having an adverse impact on the bills of my constituents?

Torsten Bell: Energy bills are too high because the Tory party left us dependent on the rollercoaster of gas prices. Wholesale gas prices today remain more than double what they were at the start of 2020. If Conservative Members think that is some kind of advert for staying on gas forever, they are living in cloud cuckoo land.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): We have already heard this morning that businesses are suffering harm from business rates and national insurance contributions going up, but on top of that, according to the Office for National Statistics, the energy bills of non-energy intensive industries such as hospitality and retail have increased under this Government by up to 10% in the last year. The Conservative are proposing our cheap power plan, which would save small businesses up to £5,000 a year on their energy bills. What is the Minister doing to help small businesses with their energy bills?

Torsten Bell: What this Government are doing is getting on with building the energy infrastructure that this country needs, and we are not going back to the 11% inflation seen under the Conservative party. This Government are supporting small businesses, because the hon. Gentleman is right on one thing, which is that high energy bills are not in the interests of British industry. That is why we are getting on with fixing the energy system that we inherited.

Covid Counter-fraud Commissioner: Final Report

12. **Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her Department's policies of the final report of the Covid Counter-fraud Commissioner, published on 9 December 2025. [907492]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): This Government are determined to get back all the money that was lost through covid fraud and corruption. That is why I appointed the covid corruption commissioner when I became Chancellor, and we have already brought in £400 million that the previous Government gave up on.

Lillian Jones: This Government have recouped £400 million in covid fraud and error, with HMRC recovering a massive £1.3 billion, as well as aggressively pursuing the firm linked to Baroness Mone, PPE Medpro. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Government's relentless recovery action demonstrates that it is only under Labour that this money is recovered from fraudsters to do what it should do, which is to fund our public services?

Rachel Reeves: Sadly, I cannot comment on any individual cases, but I am absolutely determined to get that money back, because that money belongs in our schools, hospitals and public services, not in the pockets of Tory friends and donors.

FTSE 100 Index

17. **Alison Taylor** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact on the economy of the FTSE 100 index rising above 10,000 points. [907497]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): It is definitely right to say that the FTSE 100 performed strongly in 2025, during which it rose faster than key benchmarks, the United States and the European stock markets, and hit 10,000 points as we entered the new year. The UK is one of the world's leading global financial hubs, and this Government are committed to the sector's enduring leadership.

Alison Taylor: Does the Minister agree that cutting paperwork and speeding access to capital will provide a valuable boost to companies looking to list their shares on the London Stock Exchange? Is she hearing that from the companies that she is meeting, because that is what I have been hearing while I have been out engaging with businesses in Scotland?

Lucy Rigby: I can confirm that I am indeed hearing that. Last week's introduction of the new prospectus rules will mean faster execution, reduced complexity and a simplified route to capital raising. Together with the three-year UK listing relief announced at the Budget, these initiatives will make the UK the most attractive destination for companies to start, scale, list and stay.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Just one pure technology company is now listed on the FTSE 100 and Budget measures, such as cutting venture capital trust tax relief, discourage companies from listing on the UK exchanges. Why are the Government driving away growth and investment?

Lucy Rigby: The entrepreneurship package in the Budget was incredibly important. The aim of that package, which includes the UK listing relief—the three-year stamp duty holiday that I referred to in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor)—is designed to make the UK the best place to start, scale and list a company.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The Chancellor has been very proud that the FTSE 100 has passed through the 10,000-point barrier, citing that as an endorsement of her policies. Does she not realise that that still leaves FTSE 100 on lower valuations than comparable markets and that, in any event, over 80% of the earnings of the FTSE 100 are generated outside the UK? Is it not clear that the FTSE 100 performance is despite this Government's policies, not because of them?

Lucy Rigby: I could not disagree more with the shadow Minister. He is constantly talking this country down. The package of reforms that this Government are making to our capital markets are strengthening those markets, and they are beginning to bear fruit.

Inflation

18. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of her policies on inflation. [907498]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): While the Bank of England has overall responsibility for returning inflation to target, this Government are taking the action that we can: £150 off energy bills from April this year, freezing prescription charges for the second year in a row, and freezing rail fares for the first time in 30 years. As a result, the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast that inflation will be 0.4 percentage points lower in 2026-27 than it otherwise would have been.

Lincoln Jopp: On Friday, I visited Primark in Staines, in my Spelthorne constituency, where the team, led by Luke, is doing a fantastic job in creating a vibrant retail experience. However, the British Retail Consortium has said that the Chancellor's jobs tax is pushing up prices and raising the cost of living, and that the Employment Rights Bill will also be inflationary. When did the Chancellor stop listening to business?

Rachel Reeves: I was at Primark just ahead of the Budget, where we announced that we were going to take action on low-value imports. That was welcomed by Primark and many other retailers who are undercut by foreign importers that do not pay customs duty on what they bring into the country. Far from working against business, we are working in conjunction with business to grow our economy. Our economy exceeded expectations for growth last year, and I am confident that it will do the same this year too.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Conservatives may want to talk down Britain, but Bournemouth is building again, with a £350 million expansion at J. P. Morgan Chase following the Chancellor's visit, a £100 million expansion planned by AFC Bournemouth, a £50 million airport upgrade, £26 million invested in Bournemouth and Poole College, £500 million provided for the Royal Bournemouth hospital development, and new land at Wessex Fields to build key worker housing and medical research facilities. Will the Chancellor continue to prioritise stability, bringing down costs, and the free trade that we need in our world, so that we can continue to protect and expand these investments into Bournemouth?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He did not mention the beautiful Bournemouth pier, which we visited together in August and where we enjoyed a very nice ice cream, but he did mention J.P. Morgan, which has announced record investment in its Bournemouth campus. It is employing a shedload of apprentices on that campus, helping it to grow its business, and after this year's Budget, J. P. Morgan has announced a new building in Canary Wharf. [Interruption.] Maybe Opposition Front Benchers do not like apprentices, but this Government do, which is why we are backing them.

Topical Questions

T1. [907505] **Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves):

This Government have a plan to grow the economy and reduce the cost of living, and it is the right plan for Britain. We are cutting the cost of living and the national debt and creating the conditions for growth in all parts of our country. We have had six cuts in interest rates since the general election, reducing typical mortgage costs by £1,200 a year, and have secured record levels of inward investment and trade deals with countries around the world. The FTSE has hit record highs, and while other countries are increasing barriers to trade, I was in Davos talking to allies about how to reduce them. Our economic plan is the right one to build a stronger and more secure Britain, and I am focused on delivering it.

Paula Barker: While I am looking forward to the statement a little later from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, I would like to push him, if I may. I recently visited one of my local pubs, the Masonic Arms on Lark Lane—which is a fantastic venue—and met Guy and Amelia. Currently, the overall sector picks up 2.8% of UK business rates nationally, but has only 0.5% of the turnover of UK businesses. This is clearly not a fair tax for pubs; it is the result of a uniquely skewed business rates system that actively penalises many pubs. What long-term steps can the Minister take to help pubs like the Masonic Arms and the wider hospitality sector?

Rachel Reeves: As my hon. Friend knows, we have permanently reduced the multiplier for business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure, but my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary will set out the support for pubs in more detail later today. We are determined not only to support pubs, which are the lifeblood of so many communities, but also to support the whole of our retail, hospitality and leisure sector. We are putting more money in people's pockets by cutting energy bills and train fares and getting people back to work, so that they have more money to spend on the things they love, not just on the essentials.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Mr Speaker, I begin by associating Conservative Members with the Chancellor's comments about your leg—we wish it well.

We are waiting with interest to hear the details of the latest U-turn on business rates this afternoon, but if the briefing is to be believed, it will be far too little, too late. The Chancellor simply does not understand the desperate situation so many of our pubs are in. Many pubs are asking why the Chancellor chose to spend billions more on the benefits bill instead of providing proper, permanent business rates support.

Rachel Reeves: Under the previous Government—when the right hon. Gentleman was in government—7,000 pubs closed. We have permanently lowered the tax rate that retail, hospitality and leisure businesses pay. When I became Chancellor of the Exchequer, we faced a situation in which all of the covid support was going to disappear overnight. We have put £4.3 billion of taxpayers' money into supporting our retail and hospitality sector, including pubs, but we recognise the distinct problems that pubs face. That is why, unlike the previous Conservative Government, we are setting out more support.

Sir Mel Stride: They just do not get it. Of course, it is not just pubs; the whole high street—shops, restaurants and hotels—is seeing massive increases in business rates, some well over 100%. Where is the help for those businesses?

Rachel Reeves: Some of the numbers that are bandied around by the right hon. Gentleman do not reflect the reality, because they do not reflect the £4.3 billion of transitional support that we have put in to taper those increases in business rates. I do not think anyone in this House seriously believes that temporary support during the pandemic should continue infinitely. That would not be the right thing, and it would not be affordable for other taxpayers. That is why we are gradually tapering the support, with a £4.3 billion support package in the Budget and some more targeted support for pubs later today. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that he could have taken action when he was in government. Instead, there was a cliff edge, with no support for pubs or any other sector of the economy.

T2. [907506] **Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The three-year local government funding settlement is a welcome return to long-term planning. Newcastle city council faces a 34% rise in adult social care costs, compared with only a 15% rise in core spending power. That is taking more and more money away from the many services that my constituents depend upon. Will the Chancellor work across Government to consider changes to the adult social care funding formula and/or an increase to the recovery grant so that Newcastle city council can meet the costs of adult social care?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): As my hon. Friend sets out, there are significant challenges in adult social care, and we have already made available an extra £4.6 billion, including funding to start to implement the fair pay agreement. As she will probably be aware, Baroness Louise Casey is leading an independent commission to build consensus on reform. Its first phase will report this year, with a focus on how to make the most of existing resources.

T5. [907509] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): While the Chancellor was enjoying her trip to Davos last week, inflation went up, as did unemployment, reversing the progress of the previous Conservative Government. Did the Chancellor or her Cabinet colleagues pick up any ideas in Davos that could reverse those trends, support our businesses and high streets and end the hiring recession that her Budget has caused?

Rachel Reeves: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman thinks that the Chancellor of the Exchequer should not be in Davos, but I think it is important that the Chancellor is there banging the drum for Britain and bringing investment here. While I was in Davos, we secured new investment and worked with our allies on securing new trade deals for Britain. While the Opposition like to talk our country down, we are getting on and delivering a lower cost of living and higher economic growth.

T3. [907507] **Alan Strickland** (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): A recent *Sunday Times* investigation found worrying evidence that multiple businesses run by the Reform leader of Durham county council had

failed, owing hundreds of thousands of pounds in tax and national insurance and an unpaid covid loan. Does the Chancellor agree that it is just more evidence that, just like the Conservatives, Reform cannot be trusted with other people's money?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the House's attention. I cannot comment on individual cases of covid fraud and tax, but that person would not be the first member of Reform who took a fraudulent covid loan—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) is here just in time. I am not sure whether he is still the shadow, shadow, shadow Chancellor or not.

T6. [907510] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Given that the Chancellor has just confirmed that today's U-turn will support only our hard-pressed local pubs, what message does she have for independent restaurants and coffee shops, such as Bones in Twickenham, that are struggling to survive, let alone grow?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): When the Liberal Democrats had the chance, what did they do? They put up VAT on hospitality businesses. Now they are coming up with ideas, without the plans to pay for them. They want to increase borrowing over and over again, rather than ensure that we support businesses in a fair and sustainable way over the years to come.

T4. [907508] **Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents are fed up with seeing more and more dodgy Bob Shops on Hagley Road, Harborne and neighbouring Bearwood High Street. Can the Chancellor say what the Government are doing to tackle money laundering and other financial crimes involving the dodgy shops blighting our high streets?

Rachel Reeves: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and that is why I announced—on the basis of many representations from colleagues, including her—a comprehensive set of measures at the Budget to crack down on illegal high street activity. We want our high streets to thrive, but we must crack down on these illegal businesses selling counterfeit goods and often harbouring more dangerous criminal activity. That is why we put money into that area in the Budget.

T8. [907512] **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): Vast swathes of Bridport, Beaminster, Maiden Newton, Yetminster and Thornford—whole parts of West Dorset—are under water. Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Service is doing an amazing job of rescuing residents who are trapped either at home or in cars, but unfortunately it will suffer a £1.2 million shortfall in the long-term funding settlement because the Treasury's underlying assumptions are incorrect. Will the Chancellor meet me, so that we can show her why this is a problem for the service?

James Murray: Let me start by thanking the emergency services in the hon. Gentleman's constituency for all their work to ensure that people are kept safe, and to respond to the challenges that people face as a result of flooding. We are determined to support public services across the board, and the decisions taken by my right

hon. Friend the Chancellor in past Budgets and in the spending review mean that we have sustainable funding for our public services in all parts of the country.

T7. [907511] **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for bringing us record investment, financial stability and repeated interest rate cuts, but does she share my astonishment that Reform is not only welcoming treacherous Tories who did so much to wreck our economy and public services, but actually entrusting them with economic policy?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is warmly welcoming people who spent 14 years undermining public services, who wrecked the economy, who botched Brexit, and who were booted out by the British people in 2024—and Reform's latest recruit was so bad that she managed to get sacked by Liz Truss.

T9. [907513] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I heard the Minister's words to the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) about the energy company obligation 4 scheme, but the vague promise in the warm homes plan to put right poor-quality work under ECO4 seems like empty words to my constituents who are affected. Will the Treasury consider the only viable alternative to this disastrous scheme, which is redress?

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): That is an important question, because too many people have been let down by the scheme that was introduced by the Conservatives. I am sure that the hon. Lady noted the Energy Secretary's announcement last week about the £15 billion warm homes plan, which will ensure that work to upgrade the quality of British homes continues in the years ahead for all households, but particularly for low-income households. She will also be aware that ongoing remediation work will take place as part of that scheme.

T10. [907514] **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Ben Houchen's Teesworks saga has seen more than half a billion pounds of taxpayers' money funnelled into enriching a few business people, while the opportunity for a sovereign wealth fund investment programme has been squandered. What steps are being taken to ensure that there is meaningful investment for economic growth and development in Teesside?

James Murray: This Government are backing investment in Teesside to create the good jobs that my hon. Friend's constituents deserve. I know that Teesside is very well placed to lead for our country across a range of sectors. For example, £4 billion is going into the UK's first carbon capture, usage and storage cluster in Teesside, including the world's first at-scale gas power station with CCUS.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Ten years ago, this place introduced legislation preventing banks from applying tax deductions after paying compensation for wrongdoing. Now lenders are set to pay out billions of pounds in connection with the motor finance scandal, but they will be able to reduce their tax bills because most of those companies have channelled their money via subsidiaries. Does the Minister agree that that is not in keeping with the spirit of the law, and will the Government do something about it?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

The hon. Member has referred to the motor finance redress situation. As the House would expect, we are monitoring that very closely, and we want to see the issues resolved in an efficient way that provides certainty for consumers and for firms. As the hon. Member knows, seeking to change the rules on corporation tax would mean deviating from our commitment to certainty and predictability in the tax system, as set out in our corporate tax road map.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I wish you a speedy recovery, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the economic steps that the Chancellor has taken against Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, and I encourage her to go further, but does she agree that the British public can have confidence in our sanctions regime only if those in political leadership across all parties, including the shadow Attorney General, do not have ongoing involvement in advising Russian oligarchs?

Rachel Reeves: Like many, I was staggered by reports that senior counsel appointed by Mr Abramovich in relation to proceedings in Jersey include the shadow Attorney General. I cannot speak for the Opposition—I had many years of doing that—but our focus remains ensuring that there is no further delay in proceeds from the sale of Chelsea football club reaching humanitarian causes in Ukraine. If Mr Abramovich fails to act quickly, this Government are fully prepared to pursue legal action to release the funds. We know whose side we are on: we are on the side of the Ukrainian people, and of Britain's national interests.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): More than 80% of households in Bromley and Biggin Hill have at least one car or van—a figure significantly higher than the average in Greater London—so the decision to remove the 5p fuel duty reduction hits them particularly hard. This is the latest in a slew of measures against motorists, including increased congestion charges and the ultra low emission zone charge, which is really hitting them in the pocket. Why does the Labour party continue to use motorists as a cash cow?

Dan Tomlinson: We have extended the temporary 5p fuel duty cut until the end of August 2026, and rates will then gradually return to early 2022 levels. The planned increase in line with inflation will also not take place. That will save the average driver £49 next year, compared with previous plans.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): While pubs may have a large lobby, we know that independents power our local economy. I have looked through the spreadsheets showing the business rates for our independent businesses after the relief has been applied. Businesses in my city will see an increase of up to 93% in their business rates. What engagement has the Minister had with small independents to ensure that they are safeguarded through the relief that he is about to announce?

Dan Tomlinson: It is important to note that there is a 40% relief in the system for smaller and independent businesses. It will be phased out over the coming years; we have put in transitional relief protection. As the Chancellor said earlier, that is reasonable. Members

from across the House will agree that it would not be right to have temporary pandemic support still in place at the end of the decade.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): I will not challenge you to a corridor race today, Mr Speaker, but good luck with your leg.

I wrote to the Chancellor on 8 January, with the support of 7,000 small businesses from across the spectrum—not just pubs. They are concerned about not only rate re-evaluations, and the vicious tax rises that they have had to suffer, but the cost of the Employment Rights Act 2025. When can the 7,001 of us expect a reply?

Dan Tomlinson: I regularly reply to letters and parliamentary questions from the hon. Member and those on both sides of the House.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): There are many small and medium-sized enterprises in advanced manufacturing supply chains in my bit of the Black Country. Does the Chancellor agree that successfully implementing our industrial strategy is vital to securing the growth, through small businesses, that we need to get British industry back on track?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does to champion small businesses, and all businesses in the Black Country, but particularly those in her constituency. Advanced manufacturing is one of our industrial strategy sectors in which we have huge strengths as a country. We are determined to support such businesses in growing and fulfilling their potential.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): What does the Minister say to childminders in Melton and Syston who are concerned about potentially increased administrative burdens and cash-flow pressures, as a result of changes under Making Tax Digital for businesses with a turnover of at least £50,000? It is scrapping the blanket 10% wear and tear allowance, and replacing it with a requirement for line-by-line item accounting, with childminders having to pay up front and claim back later.

Dan Tomlinson: This is an important issue that is of concern to childminders. I have replied to correspondence on this topic from the right hon. Member, I think, and from others in this place. I would be happy to talk to Members about it. I think the change is proportionate and reasonable, and we have engaged closely with the sector to make sure that the burden will be proportionate for those who are affected by it.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Thanks to the policies of the Labour Treasury team, Sandwell will receive £1.5 million to smarten up our towns. Does the Chancellor agree that local people should have a say in how that funding is spent, and will she encourage people in Rowley, West Bromwich and Oldbury to fill in my survey about how we spend this Government cash?

Rachel Reeves: I very much encourage people in my hon. Friend's constituency to fill in her survey. The Pride in Place money, which we are allocating across some of the most deprived parts of the country, will

make a huge difference in regenerating areas left behind by the previous Government. I encourage everyone in all our communities to get involved, and to shape those plans, because those plans can only be improved by direct contact with the people who stand to benefit from them most.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Link has doubled down on its decision not to grant Totnes a banking hub, despite the Prime Minister telling Members at Prime Minister's questions that every community that wants one should have one. Will the Chancellor agree to review the criteria for banking hubs, so that people have access to face-to-face banking services, not just access to cash, when the last bank turns its back on its customers and leaves town?

Lucy Rigby: The Government of course recognise the importance of in-person banking services and access to cash, as the hon. Member and I have discussed. As she knows, in-person services are provided through traditional bank branches, banking hubs, post offices and other means, and I will continue to monitor the situation. As she knows, I have listened very carefully to her concerns, and I am happy to do so again.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Earlier this month, the House of Lords Financial Services Regulation Committee published a report on private markets, highlighting the potential risks to economic stability, and the Bank of England has also undertaken a stress test of the ecosystem. What actions is the Minister considering taking with regulators to strengthen transparency and oversight of private markets, so that we can mitigate any systemic risks?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is right that the rise in private markets has brought benefits, including to growth and financial stability—we have discussed that many times in the context of pensions—but it does come with new risks. The Treasury and regulators have increased their focus on those risks in the non-bank sector in recent years and, as I am sure he is aware, have played a leading role in the response to emerging non-banks' risks internationally. In particular, the Government emphasised in the November remit letter to the Bank of England's Financial Policy Committee that the committee should continue to consider risks in private markets. We are considering the House of Lords Committee's recommendations, and will respond in due course.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): At the weekend, Storm Ingrid caused the sea wall at Dawlish to collapse in two new places, and we wait to see the

damage caused by Storm Chandra today. Both storms are once again exposing the vulnerability of the main rail line to Devon and Cornwall, which is vital for the local economy. Given the reported lack of a Treasury emergency reserve, can the Chancellor guarantee contingency funding for any urgent and unplanned resilience work required and not covered by a fiscal event?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the situation in her constituency. All Departments across Government have had their budgets set, and they include a contingency for covering known pressures. One of the ways that we have managed spending settlements differently from the previous Government is that all Departments must recognise that unexpected pressures will come along. They need to prepare for that, and should have robust plans for responding when such things occur.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Southshore in my constituency has the highest concentration of deprived communities and the most deprived ward in the country. We have developed a local people's plan for work to regenerate the area. Will my right hon. Friend the Chancellor meet me to discuss this plan, so that we can regenerate the most deprived area in this country?

Rachel Reeves: We were pleased to be able to allocate Pride in Place funding to my hon. Friend's constituency, in recognition of its levels of deprivation. That comes alongside policies such as getting rid of the cruel two-child benefit cap, which the previous Government introduced, and investing record amounts in social housing. This Government are delivering for the people of Blackpool. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Constituents of mine have restored the Alyth hotel. It has gone from near dereliction to being an outstanding venue for dining and drinking, and a hotel. However, they are smothered by the compound burden of VAT rates, wage costs, duty increases, employer national insurance contributions, energy costs and the squeeze on spending. That is why there were 8,000 fewer jobs in hospitality in December than in November, and 20,000 fewer than in September. Will the Chancellor consider reducing VAT on hospitality to the 7% it is in Germany, the 9% it is in Ireland, or the 10% it is in Spain and Italy?

Rachel Reeves: I suggest that the people of Scotland ask who was in charge in Scotland for the last two decades, kick them out at the next election, and give Labour a chance.

Commonhold and Leasehold Reform

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the statement on commonhold and leasehold reform, I once again note, for the second day in a row, my disappointment about briefings to the media before important announcements are brought to the House. As the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee recently stated, “making the most important statements in the first instance to Parliament means doing so before they are made to the media and not at the first available opportunity thereafter”.

Those are the Government’s rules in their own ministerial code, and they must do better. I am defending Back Benchers on both sides of the House. They have been elected here to hear it. Hearing it on Sky News and the BBC is not the way we do business. If there are issues of market sensitivity, or indeed any other sensitivities, Ministers are welcome to seek advice through my office or the Clerks on how the best balance of these sensitivities might legitimate the need to update me before the media. We have to work together on this. The message is clear. I am not in charge of the code; the Prime Minister is. He needs to take the code more seriously.

12.46 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): My Department always strives to ensure that the House is updated at the earliest possible opportunity. I note and appreciate fully the points you have made, Mr Speaker, and will ensure that they are passed on to my ministerial colleagues.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government’s draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill. We made a clear and unambiguous commitment in our manifesto to act where previous Governments had failed and finally bring the feudal leasehold system to an end. We did so on the basis of a firm conviction that it is only by extinguishing fully the historical iniquities on which the present leasehold system rests that we can ensure that the dream of home ownership is made real for millions of households across the country.

Today, the Government have published and laid the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. This ambitious piece of legislation will modernise property law, deliver a fair and efficient modern housing market and, most importantly, transform the experience of home ownership for millions of leaseholders across the country.

The draft Bill includes the following key provisions: a new legal framework for commonhold to reform and reinvigorate this radical improvement on leasehold ownership; a statutory restriction on new leasehold flats to ensure that, in future, commonhold is the default tenure; a new process for converting to commonhold from leasehold to make conversion easier, so that more homeowners can enjoy this improved form of ownership; the abolition of leasehold forfeiture and its replacement with a fairer system of lease enforcement; the repeal of draconian powers relating to rent charges on freehold estates; and the capping of ground rent for older leases at £250 a year, changing to a peppercorn after 40 years.

Let me expand briefly on each of these core measures, beginning with commonhold. Commonhold is a modern home ownership structure that is widely used around

the world. It is not merely an alternative to leasehold ownership, but a radical improvement on it. At the heart of the commonhold model is a simple principle: the people who should own buildings and who should exercise control over their management, shared facilities and related costs are not third-party landlords, but the people who live in the flats within them and who have a direct stake in their upkeep. Commonhold ensure that the interests of homeowners are preserved in perpetuity. It transfers decision making to them so that homeowners have a greater say over how their home is managed and the bills they pay, as well as the flexibility to respond to the changing needs of their building and its residents.

For a variety of reasons, commonhold failed to establish itself following its introduction in 2004. As a result, there are fewer than 20 commonhold developments in existence today and the 2002 legal framework is hopelessly outdated. The provisions in the draft Bill build on the publication of our commonhold White Paper in March last year, which confirmed the detail of our commonhold reform programme, and responded to the Law Commission’s thorough and expert review of commonhold law. The result is legislation that will reinvigorate commonhold through the introduction of a comprehensive new legal framework that will enable commonhold to be used in the widest possible range of settings.

To ensure that commonhold becomes the default tenure, as our manifesto promised, the draft Bill also includes provisions to ban the use of leasehold for new flats. Once enacted, this will ensure that, other than in exceptional circumstances, all flats are provided as commonhold. The provisions will work in tandem with the ban on the use of leasehold for new houses contained in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

Alongside the publication of the draft Bill today, we are publishing a “Moving to commonhold” consultation, seeking input from industry and consumers on precisely how we implement the new ban. The feedback we receive will ensure that we can proceed with a smooth transition to commonhold for new developments, while at the same time protecting the supply of new homes and determining whether there is a case for any justified exemptions.

The draft Bill also includes measures to make it easier for existing leaseholders to convert their buildings to commonhold. The existing law already sets out a process for conversion, but it is one that requires consent from everyone with an interest in the block. This sets an unacceptably high bar and means that commonhold is not achievable if even a single unit owner, lender or the existing freeholder objects. The draft Bill will introduce a new process for conversion, one that brings conversion into line with wider enfranchisement processes and will make conversion possible if at least 50% of qualifying leaseholders agree.

The previous Government’s Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act does provide leaseholders with important rights and protections, but on the Labour Benches we have always maintained that it was a distinctly unambitious piece of legislation that left untouched serious problems, including the disproportionate and draconian threat of forfeiture as a means of ensuring compliance with a lease agreement. For too long, outdated forfeiture laws have allowed landlords to threaten people with losing their home and hard-earned equity over small debts of as little as £350, or any amount if left unpaid for three

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years. The draft Bill contains provisions to abolish forfeiture and replace it with a modern, proportionate lease enforcement system that addresses breaches fairly, with appropriate safeguards and judicial oversight.

Mr Speaker, you will know that before Christmas we launched two comprehensive consultations, seeking views on how best to implement new consumer protections for homeowners on freehold estates and the ways in which we might reduce the prevalence of privately managed estates over the coming years. To further enhance protections for homeowners on freehold estates, the draft Bill will also repeal enforcement powers that apply to estate rent charges on them. These powers, often difficult to find in deeds and poorly understood by buyers, can lead to rent charge owners taking possession of, or granting a lease over, a freehold home as a result of small sums outstanding. That is not just unfair; it creates real barriers to home ownership and property sales. We will remove these wholly disproportionate and outdated remedies for enforcing rent charges by repealing sections 121 and 122 of the Law of Property Act 1925, including estate rent charges.

The Government are acutely aware that the cost of living remains a pressing concern for leaseholders across England and Wales, and that those who remain subject to unfair and unreasonable practices need urgent relief. That is why last summer we consulted jointly with the Welsh Government on strengthening leaseholder protections over charges and services. That consultation included proposals to reform the section 20 major works procedure, increase transparency over service charges, and enhance access to redress through the relevant provisions in the Act. We thank all those who responded to the consultation and will set out details of how we intend to implement the measures in question as soon as possible. However, the Government are determined to go further to alleviate the cost of living pressures facing leaseholders. In our manifesto, we promised to tackle unregulated and unaffordable ground rent charges. The draft Bill honours that commitment.

As the House will know, historically, ground rents, which often entail no service being provided whatsoever, were of low or nominal value. However, over the past two decades a practice has developed of freeholders including high and escalating ground rent clauses in leases. Such clauses are causing leaseholders considerable financial strain and some are unable to sell or remortgage their properties as a result. The draft Bill will cap ground rents at £250 a year initially, changing to a peppercorn after 40 years. This will provide immediate financial relief for leaseholders with high and harmful ground rents, while the longer-term change to a peppercorn cap will eliminate the two-tier market between new and older leases, delivering a fair and efficient modern housing market.

The reforms will necessarily have effects on existing contractual arrangements and investments—something that the Government do not undertake lightly. However, the Government have a clear mandate to tackle unregulated and unaffordable ground rent charges, and our approach has been designed to strike a fair balance between the interests of leaseholders, freeholders and investors, maintaining the reputation of the UK as a safe place to invest.

Finally, as I have made clear to the House on previous occasions, the last Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act contains a number of specific but serious flaws that prevent certain provisions from operating as intended and that need to be rectified via primary legislation. While not included in the draft Bill, our intention is to rectify those flaws in primary legislation. Among other things, that will allow us to commence the 2024 Act's enfranchisement provisions, making it cheaper and easier for leaseholders to extend their lease or buy their freehold.

To conclude, the publication of the draft Bill today is an historic moment. It marks the beginning of the end for the feudal leasehold system that has tainted the dream of home ownership for so many. I look forward to working closely with the Select Committee as it performs its invaluable role of scrutinising carefully this draft legislation, and I encourage hon. Members across the House to engage with it and the accompanying consultation on banning new leasehold flats. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.55 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I thank the Minister for his remarks and for advance sight of his statement. Progress on leasehold reform is to be welcomed. Labour promised that when it stood for election 18 months ago, so it is about time it got on with it, as the previous Conservative Government had started to do.

The previous Conservative Government began the process of fundamental reforms to the existing system of leaseholds by making it easier to extend a lease or to buy a freehold, increasing the standard lease extension time to 990 years, and giving leaseholders greater transparency over their service charges. His Majesty's Opposition remain committed to giving leaseholders a fair deal, want householders to have security for the future and will continue to hold the Government to account on that.

The Government made big promises to leaseholders at the last election. Do they believe that the Bill is the summit of their ambitions? What about the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024? What are their plans to implement secondary legislation? There are opportunities to improve leaseholder situations that are available to the Government now. Why have they not implemented those changes? Surely, if they were serious about reform for leaseholders, they would have picked up the 2024 Act and run with it, rather than doing nothing until now. The Minister just said:

"I have made clear to the House on previous occasions, the last Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act contains a number of specific but serious flaws that prevent certain provisions from operating as intended and that need to be rectified via primary legislation."

He went on to say:

"While not included in the draft Bill, our intention is to rectify those flaws in primary legislation."

Perhaps he could tell us what those flaws are. If the Government have already identified them, why are the corrections not included in the forthcoming Bill? Surely now would be the time to rectify them. So if not now, when?

I would be remiss not to comment on one of the central principles of housing reform: there actually needs to be some housing in order to reform it. The Labour Mayor of London is delivering the lowest house building in London since 2009, while Labour's national housing delivery is nowhere near where it needs to be to meet its 1.5 million homes target. What is Labour doing to ensure that there are strong incentives to build more? Where is the second planning Bill that the Government briefed out to the media that they will need to introduce because of their failure to get the planning reform right first time? The Conservative party is pro-development, which is why we have announced both a plan to review the London plan to improve on Labour's failings in London and to ensure that national development is done on a brownfield-first approach.

Now, it is true that ground rent is an additional cost to leaseholders, but it is reported that the Chancellor is against capping ground rents because she believes it will deter pension fund investors. What does the Minister have to say to that?

The Government are claiming that these measures will reduce people's bills, which would of course be welcome, but if leaseholder ground rent bills are simply replaced by soaring council tax bills, with some local councils now facing more than 30% rises in council tax due the Government's grossly unfair funding review, how will people be better off? In inner London, which has a high proportion of leasehold flats, residents in councils such as Wandsworth, Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea are facing the double whammy of staggering rises in council tax and a council tax surcharge on top. Are the Government in fact claiming to cut a cost on one hand, while knowingly replacing it with even more costs on the other?

I would be grateful if the Minister answered those points in his reply. We will scrutinise the Government's forthcoming commonhold and leasehold reform Bill, and we will hold the Government to account on their promises on leasehold reform and housing. We look forward to studying the details, and to the debates that will follow.

Matthew Pennycook: I note the initial positive tone from the shadow Minister in welcoming the draft Bill. I am slightly reluctant, on what is usually a matter of cross-party consensus, to be too critical of him, but it is a bit rich to criticise this Government, given that the previous Government cherry-picked reform in a way that was at odds with the Law Commission's recommendation to treat all three of its reports as a holistic package, and left us with an Act that we will have to make a series of changes through primary legislation to fix so that we can implement the remaining provisions. I will, therefore, not take any strictures on ambition from the shadow Minister when it comes to leasehold reform.

I say plainly to the shadow Minister that we have switched on a number of the 2024 Act's provisions already. On coming into office, we immediately enacted a series of provisions on rent charge arrears, building safety legal costs, and the work of professional insolvency practitioners. On 31 October we enacted further building safety measures; on 31 January we switched on the two-year qualifying exemptions for leaseholders; in March we switched on the right-to-manage provisions; and we are working at pace to take forward the rest of the

significant package of secondary legislation that was required. However, some parts of those provisions require us to make fixes to the Bill—sadly, something that the previous Government left us with.

The shadow Minister mentioned housing supply, but again, I am loath to take lessons from a party that torpedoed housing supply in the last Parliament by making a series of anti-supply changes to the national planning policy framework, including the abolition of mandatory housing targets. The shadow Minister's criticism could be taken a little more seriously if his colleagues did not come to me week in, week out, objecting to housing applications, telling me how our reforms will make it more permissive in their local constituencies.

We are getting on and taking forward the reforms to the leasehold system that are already on the statute book. Through this Bill, we are bringing forward the wider reforms necessary to bring that system to an end, which will be to the lasting benefit of millions of leaseholders across the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the Minister for his hard work in getting us to this stage. There were a few occasions when he saw me and went the other way, because he knew what I was going to ask him, but we would not be here without his tireless work. I also highlight what the Minister said about this being a cross-party issue, and pay tribute to the former Member for Worthing West, Sir Peter Bottomley, for his work chairing the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform.

For far too long, many leaseholders up and down the country have been caught up in this medieval system, leaving them with soaring rents and unreasonable fees—people who bought their homes in good faith and have seen a nightmare transpire. It is right that the Government are finally bringing in a change that will help millions of people up and down the country. The Minister has agreed to support the Committee's inquiry with the necessary evidence. Can he also confirm that he will support us by providing the Government's response to the 2023 ground rent consultation in the coming days, so that we can get a better understanding on how that underpins the Government's decision to cap ground rents at £250?

There were some things that we were expecting to see in the draft Bill—yes, I have read it—that are not there, including the Law Commission's unimplemented recommendations on enfranchisement and the right to manage, and Lord Best's recommendations on managing agents. Lord Best has called for a regulator with teeth for proper enforcement; can the Minister clarify what work the Government are doing to ensure that this will be in the final version of the Bill, or if it will be addressed elsewhere? The Minister also outlined a rough timeline for implementation. Can we get more clarity on when we expect to see that, so that those leaseholders around the country who have been waiting for a long time will finally get the help that they desperately need?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, for those fair and pertinent questions. I will answer each of them in turn. We published a whole

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series of documents at 7 am, including a copy of the draft Bill. That also included a policy document setting out our rationale for the £250 per year ground rent cap, but we will make available to the Committee other information, evidence and documentation as needed and at the earliest possible opportunity.

As for the other recommendations made in the three reports from the Law Commission, the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 implemented a significant number of the Law Commission's enfranchisement recommendations, a small number of its right-to-manage recommendations, and none of its recommendations on commonhold. We cannot do everything in this Bill; hon. Members who have had a chance to look will have seen that it has a large number of clauses already. But we are committed to enacting those remaining recommendations relating to leasehold enfranchisement and other things over the course of the Parliament.

On implementation, different provisions will come into effect at different times. For example, we aim to switch on the rent charge provisions I described soon after Royal Assent. Other measures will require secondary legislation. We expect the ground rent cap to be in place in 2028. We will work with the Committee to ensure that it can do the fullest and most robust job possible when it comes to giving the Bill the enhanced scrutiny it deserves.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the introduction of a commonhold framework, the abolition of leasehold for newbuild flats, and the end of forfeiture—all these are positive steps in the right direction. Our manifesto has been calling for an end to unfair residential leaseholds since Lloyd George called it “blackmail” in his 1909 People's Budget. But while I welcome those measures, we should be going much further.

The Housing Secretary this morning called ground rents “money for nothing” and a “scam”, so why should leaseholders continue to pay £250 for nothing? The Government's proposals need to go further. For freeholders trapped in the fleece-hold of unscrupulous property management companies, the blackmail of the great property rip-off is set to continue. There is nothing that will cap those charges in these proposals. Since residential leaseholds will still be with us for some time, millions of leaseholders need better protection from landlord costs being passed on to them. They need the capping of excessive service charges, like £400 to change a lightbulb and £4,000 to mow the grass. Help is also needed for those trapped in unsafe and defective buildings, hundreds of thousands of which are excluded from the building safety regime.

Will the Minister take forward Liberal Democrat proposals and immediately abolish residential leasehold charges, set ground rents at a peppercorn now, and regulate property and estate-management companies as recommended in the Best report, capping unreasonable service and estate management charges?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesman for those questions. He often mentions Lloyd George, and I share his passion for Lloyd George's radicalism on property law and other measures. I will

address the specific points that he raised. During the passage of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, I was clear that my instinctive preference when it comes to ground rents was for a peppercorn cap, fully eliminating ground rents. The changes that we are making ensure that, after 40 years, that change occurs.

Having considered all the analysis and advice available to me as a Minister, including the evidence gathered in response to the previous Administration's 2023 consultation, I believe that we have set out the right policy. It is clear that an immediate peppercorn cap would carry significant risks, including some that might impact on leaseholders. The Government also recognise that there is a significant difference between regulating the creation of new leases, and intervening to affect existing contracts and investments.

On the functioning of the cap itself, I want to make clear that it is a maximum cash cap. If someone's lease is below £250 and does not include escalating clauses, their ground rent will not rise to £250. If someone's ground rent is over £250, at the point that the measures are brought into force they will see an immediate reduction. That will benefit millions of leaseholders across the country. It is a huge cost-of-living intervention, and I hope the House can get behind it as the most just and proportionate way of addressing unregulated and unaffordable ground rent terms.

The hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) will know that we ran a consultation last year on how we can standardise service charges and increase their transparency to ensure that leaseholders can better challenge the reasonableness of service charges at tribunal. However, we do not intend to bring forward a cap, not least because doing so could harm leaseholders, particularly those in enfranchised buildings, who may need to raise sums beyond the cap to carry out essential maintenance works on their buildings.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this extremely welcome statement. I know how much work he has put into this. We know, however, that vested interests have repeatedly resorted to lawfare to block such measures, and may do so again; we have already seen the scaremongering begin, with outrageous claims that these changes will impact on lifesaving building safety work. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that the Government will not waver in the face of such threats, but stand firm and ensure that the will of this Parliament prevails? I take exception to objections from those on the Opposition Benches, who did nothing on rent caps in their time in Parliament.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my right hon. Friend for her kind words. She was an incredible champion of the reform agenda for this legislation when she served as Secretary of State. She raises the matter of vested interests. I hope that the House—and you, Mr Speaker—will take from the Government's robust defence to the legal challenge brought against the 2024 Act by a group of claimants who are owners of freehold and other arising interests of dwellings that we will robustly defend the legislation. The High Court, incidentally, comprehensively dismissed that challenge, allowing us in due course to take forward the relevant provisions. I simply say to my right hon. Friend—who embodies this herself, so she is well aware—that taking on vested interests that are opposed to change that will bring about improvements in the lives of working people is what Labour Governments do.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): As a leaseholder, I understand the issues that leaseholders face, and I look forward to carrying out pre-legislative scrutiny on the HCLG Committee. The conveyancing process also needs to be looked at, as I am not sure that solicitors and managing agents point out considerations such as historical service charges, whether the property has a sinking fund and how much service charges have gone up. Will the Minister assure me and my constituents that that part of the process of buying a leasehold property will also be looked at within this legislation?

Matthew Pennycook: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Gentleman and his service on the Select Committee. He has a lot of expertise in this area. I would say two things in response. First, we published two consultations on the home buying and selling process to try to modernise that process, and we are looking at some of those issues as part of that. Secondly, on service charges, one reason we had to hold quite a complicated and technical consultation on the implementation of the 2024 Act's service charge provisions is precisely the complexity and the number of factors to deal with. We received incredibly useful feedback in response to that consultation, and that will shape how we take those measures forward. I want to be clear, though, that we are talking about how and not whether we take those measures forward; I want to see them brought forward at the earliest possible opportunity, because we absolutely know the impact that high and rising service charges are having on leaseholders across the country.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): People in Stockport and Greater Manchester have suffered for many years with poor service and unfair treatment by managing agents. Does the commitment by the Government to protect leaseholders mark a break from years of weak regulation by the coalition and then Conservative Governments?

Matthew Pennycook: We did see a considerable amount of deregulation under the coalition Government and their successors. I will give the previous Government credit, as I have done before, for bringing forward the 2024 Act; it does include some limited relief for leaseholders and some new rights and protections. However, we need to take it forward and finish the job, as I made clear in opposition that Labour would. As I said, we are consulting on changes to increase protections over service charges—incidentally, that same consultation included a number of proposals recommended by Lord Best in his 2019 report, “Regulation of Property Agents”, including the introduction of mandatory qualifications for managing agents. We are clear, though, that that consultation and the measures within it are not the final step in the regulation of managing agents, and we will continue to reflect on the various other recommendations made in Lord Best's report.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Unlike the Chair of our Select Committee, the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), I have not read the full draft legislation published at 7 o'clock this morning. I can confirm that she did indeed feel a bit unloved whenever she saw the Minister running away from her. On the statement, I think the Minister referred, in a previous answer, to ground rents and the transition from £250 to a peppercorn

being effective in 2028. At the point that it becomes effective, will he look to backdate it or will tenants have to continue to pay their bills up until the legislation becomes effective?

Matthew Pennycook: The House can, of course, help us to speed up the progress of the Bill; 2028 is only a rough estimate based on the time it will take for the Bill, once it has passed its draft phase and scrutiny from the Select Committee, to be introduced in its final form and to get through both Houses. We will then also have to switch on the necessary secondary legislation. Up until that point, people will continue to pay their existing ground rents, but, as I say, the cap will apply once we bring those measures into force. For lots and lots of leaseholders around the country—I am sure the hon. Gentleman has many in his constituency—who are paying onerous, high ground rent terms way above £250, that will be an immediate financial relief that will be hugely beneficial to them.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Since I was first elected in 2010, I have seen the misery caused for constituents in Great Park, Moorfields and Grove Park, who suffer high ground rents, hikes in service charges, threats of forfeiture and a total lack of accountability of the maintenance companies. I therefore strongly welcome today's announcements and truly thank the Minister for listening to calls for change. However, many will still find themselves living in existing leasehold houses and will remain trapped in this old, unfair and very frustrating system. They are asking me what the Government will do next to support them. Could the Minister explain that?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to have a separate conversation with my hon. Friend about the specific conditions pertaining to leasehold houses. She will know, of course, that the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022 made a number of changes in that area. In general, we want to arrive at a situation, once our reform agenda is enacted, where existing leaseholders can choose to remain in leasehold ownership but can take advantage of the new rights and protections made available to them, including a cheaper and easier enfranchisement process if they want to extend their lease or buy their freehold, or convert to commonhold. That is why it is so important that the Bill contains an easier mechanism to convert to commonhold, which, as I said in the statement, we are clear is not only an alternative to leasehold ownership but a radical improvement on it.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I welcome the introduction of this draft Bill and, as a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I look forward to scrutinising it. I wonder whether the Minister will make available to the Committee evidence around the peppercorn rent and the 40-year requirement. I suspect it is to do with investor confidence, but could that time period be brought forward? My overarching feeling, which I know will be reflected in my inbox when I get back to my office, is that people across the country would have expected to see within the draft Bill action on service charges; we are consistently contacted about managing agents not performing their duties and charging too much for it. The Bill was meant to be presented at the back end of last year and I know that the Government

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concluded a consultation in September. We want service charges to be addressed as soon as possible. Will we be able to get an additional clause on this issue into this legislation?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I gently say that I want to get everybody in, but I cannot do so if people are going to make longer contributions? I know there is a 40-year clause in the legislation hon. Members are discussing—I don't want us to hit that today!

Matthew Pennycook: It is clear that this draft Bill cannot do absolutely everything, and it is the Government's considered opinion that we do not need provisions on service charges in this Bill—not least because, for the reasons I have set out, we do not intend to implement a service charge cap—and that the provisions in the 2024 Act will do the job. Help is on the way, though, and I want to ensure that those provisions are switched on at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on the magnificent job he has done with this legislation, as well as the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), who has pushed him and bothered him all the way down the corridors for months on end!

It is now eight years since the previous Committee looked at this matter and recommended radical reform of leasehold. One of the challenges in my constituency—still—concerns individual householders who try to buy their freehold and find that the freeholders will not even respond to their requests, and then push them through complicated and expensive procedures before they can get their entitlements. Can the Minister give us an assurance that that procedure will now be simplified and cheapened?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words on my role in developing the draft Bill. I can say to him very plainly: yes. If he looks at the consultation on service charge protections that we released last summer, he will see proposals that specifically address non-litigation costs and other measures. However, as I said, it is our intention to ensure that in the enfranchisement process, it is not only cheaper but easier for leaseholders to make use of their new rights and protections if they intend to buy their freehold or extend their lease.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I am pleased that the Government have finally published their plans to reform the leasehold system, and I look forward to scrutinising those plans on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. In my constituency, we have a range of issues with property management companies, whether it be the mismanagement of the Clock Tower in Maybury or the proposed 30% increase in the service charge at Brookwood Farm, and all are unacceptable. Please will the Minister explain why he is not using the draft Bill to end the wild west of unregulated property companies?

Matthew Pennycook: We launched two comprehensive consultations before Christmas, in respect of how we switch on the consumer protections set out in the 2024 Act for those living on freehold estates and, more widely, on how we end the prevalence of private management arrangements of the kind that I think the hon. Member is referring to. The draft Bill does not have to do everything, but relief is on the way through the new consumer protections for those living on freehold estates who suffer from management companies levying unfair charges.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on resisting the calls from those who have exploited leaseholders for far too long and on capping ground rent. I welcome the assurance that we are moving from the outdated feudal system of leasehold to a proper commonhold future to give the full rights of ownership to leaseholders, but my hon. Friend will know that those who have taken money for no service or for poor service will resist this with all their might. A loophole may still exist for enfranchisement when developers put up a new building with a proportion of commercial property in its base, so can my hon. Friend address that, specifically in order to stop them using such a loophole?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend and I both served on the Public Bill Committee when the Bill that is now the 2024 Act was going through the House, and we discussed many of these issues then; I can assure him that we have given consideration to all of them. He is right that we are now on a path to a commonhold future. As I have said, this is a radical improvement on leasehold home ownership. In general, while we will obviously ensure that leaseholders who wish to remain under leasehold ownership benefit from new rights and protections, it is the Government's intention to try to persuade as many leaseholders as possible to convert to commonhold and to enjoy the benefits that it provides.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for all his support with the issues we have had at Park25 in Redhill; I very much appreciate that he has taken residents' concerns seriously. Which of the changes will be most beneficial for my Park25 residents, and has the Minister given any more thought to my suggestion of mandatory adoption of communal land by local authorities?

Matthew Pennycook: I must say, without getting into the detail of the circumstances of the hon. Lady's constituents, it is hard to know which of the measures will benefit them most. If they are subject to high ground rent charges, the cap on introduction will benefit them hugely on its introduction. If they have suffered from the threat of forfeiture, which is a draconian and disproportionate means of enforcing lease terms, they will benefit in myriad ways from the legislation.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement and thank him for it. Like thousands of long-suffering leaseholders across Southampton Itchen, I warmly welcome this announcement. Residents of the Sapphire Court development have already been paying ground rent that is higher than the cap, and there is a plan to double it, but thanks to the action of

this Labour Government that will not happen. How soon will Southampton's leaseholders will get the rights, protections and securities that they have been waiting a long time for and that they deserve?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said, it is the Government's intention to ensure that the draft Bill, and the final product that eventually comes forward after scrutiny by the Select Committee, is made law as soon as possible so that leaseholders can benefit from the new provisions. In general terms, no one will pay more than the ground rent cap that we are introducing, but millions of people will pay less. Approximately 770,000 to 900,000 leaseholders with ground rents over £250 will see savings in this Parliament, and others will see savings in greater amounts in Parliaments to come.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the news of the capping of ground rents for existing contracts, and I thank the Minister for the time he gave me last year, but he will recognise that many city centre developments require ongoing investment from pension funds, so could he say a little more about how his announcement will not spook the City and how he will ensure that there continues to be a flow of investment into our high streets?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Member for his fair and reasonable question. The Government consider the intervention on ground rents that we are making through this draft Bill to be a justified and proportionate approach to the specific problems that leaseholders face as a result of high and harmful ground rents. We are introducing the reforms to deliver on specific commitments in our manifesto and in the context of a significant number of wider reforms to the leasehold market. We have carefully weighed the different options to meet our manifesto commitment on ground rents and we have taken investors' concerns into account when developing the policy, which we believe strikes a fair balance between leaseholders, freeholders and those invested in ground rents. We recognise that the reforms will have a significant impact on freeholders and investors, but we consider this a justified and proportionate response.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I should first declare that I am a leaseholder. I welcome very warmly the Minister's statement, particularly the measure on commonhold, which is something that we Co-op MPs have been campaigning on for a long time. We also welcome that the cap on ground rents is in sight. There are issues in my constituency relating to the fact that a lot of my leaseholders are shared owners. Could the Minister tell us now—or write to me with the details—how shared ownership might be impacted by the changes? Could he also reassure us, given the complexities, that there will be some Government support, such as an advice hub or something to point people in the right direction, when it comes to how people will move from where they are to commonhold?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to write to my hon. Friend about the issue of shared ownership specifically. She will know that through our £39 billion social and affordable homes programme, we are making improvements to shared ownership as a tenure model. More widely, I can assure her that the provisions in the draft Bill will benefit leaseholders in her constituency in

the way that she makes clear. I am happy to have a further conversation with her about how the reforms will benefit her constituents and what advice leaseholders can draw on, including the Government-backed Leasehold Advisory Service.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I thank the Minister for announcing this Bill to Parliament, and I broadly welcome the provisions within it, particularly the proposal on conversion from leasehold to commonhold—I think that is excellent. By my count, there are about 4.8 million leaseholders in England. Do the Government envisage driving this process so that people are empowered and encouraged to make that conversion, and when does the Minister think that we will get rid of the last leasehold in England?

Matthew Pennycook: I think that leaseholds will exist for some time to come. Indeed, people in various buildings may not, for whatever reason, wish to convert to commonhold, but it is absolutely our intention to make it easier to do so and to encourage as many leasehold homeowners as possible to make the change, because it is a radical improvement on leasehold ownership, not just an alternative to it.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Residents in Chelsea and Fulham have experienced years of poor service and unfair treatment from managing agents, so I know how pleased they will be by this Government's determination to do the right thing by leaseholders after years of, sadly, weak regulation under the Conservatives. May I take this opportunity to tell my hon. Friend how much residents in Chelsea and Fulham are looking forward to the further steps on service charges and managing agents that he has outlined? More, please.

Matthew Pennycook: We are absolutely committed to strengthening regulation of managing agents. Some proposals on charges were set out in the consultation on protections for leaseholders, which we released last summer, but there is more to come.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Hundreds of thousands of freeholders up and down the country who are locked in financial arrangements with unaccountable estate management firms will be very frustrated by this statement, because it focuses solely on leasehold. Will the Minister very clearly set out the next steps to tackle this enormous travesty, which involves fleecing and estate management companies?

Matthew Pennycook: I must correct the hon. Gentleman: it does not solely deal with leasehold, as I made clear in the statement. The draft Bill will repeal sections 121 and 122 of the Law of Property Act 1925, ending the disproportionate remedies that give rent charge owners access to a draconian enforcement regime on freehold estates. As I have said, we are doing more, through the two consultations launched before Christmas in particular, to give new consumer protections to those living on freehold estates. I hope the hon. Gentleman will take part in and respond to that consultation.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The capping of ground rent at £250 will give certainty and relief to leaseholders in Llanelli, who face unpredictable and unjustifiable hikes in ground rent and for whom the

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

reform simply cannot come soon enough. Will the Minister give us a bit more detail on the timetable for the Bill and assure us that he will do everything he possibly can to ensure that the cap is brought in as soon as possible?

Matthew Pennycook: I agree with my hon. Friend. She, like me, will have constituents who are subject to high, unfair ground rent charges and, in some cases, to escalating ground rent charges, particularly those that are inflation-linked. People across the country see those ground rent charges stack up to significant amounts and they will benefit from the cap once it is implemented. We estimate that the cap on ground rents will take approximately 12 months to introduce after Royal Assent, but that is all subject to parliamentary timings. If, as in the past, there is cross-party support on this issue, we can all work together to ensure that the Bill makes speedy progress.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Leaseholders in Bristol Central are being ripped off. I am disappointed that the Minister and the Government will not enforce peppercorn ground rents immediately, although a £250 cap is an improvement and the movement towards commonhold is really welcome. However, there are big problems for leaseholders that are still unaddressed. Will the Minister please commit to tackling the soaring insurance premiums that have left homes unmortgageable and leaseholders trapped, unable to sell and move in the wake of the cladding scandal?

Matthew Pennycook: I detected an unusual amount of support in that question from the hon. Lady, which I welcome. On the specific issue of insurance charges, again, there was a consultation on switching on some of the provisions in the 2024 Act that relate to insurance commissions. I am more than happy to write to her to set out further detail, but we need to bring those into force and it remains our commitment to do so at the earliest opportunity.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the statement. Although, as he has pointed out, this cannot all be fixed in one go and there are other levers that he will put in place for leaseholders, will he give some reassurance to leaseholders in Gravesham who have experienced poor service that this is about rebalancing power so that they are protected going forward?

Matthew Pennycook: All manner of provisions in the draft Bill that we are discussing are absolutely about rebalancing leasehold and freehold interests. To take the example of forfeiture, freeholders have often been in an unassailable position of strength vis-à-vis leaseholders. That is what we are trying to address by introducing the Bill. I thank my hon. Friend for her support.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I hesitate to add to the Minister's in-tray, but he will know that we have existing protections of some sort for leaseholders and freeholders, as right as he is to want to go further. Residents in the Cooden area of my constituency have been sent letters by a company called Asset Invest Ltd demanding thousands of pounds, which it says is to

regularise covenant breaches. That, to me, seems unjustified and has some of the hallmarks of the unregulated charges that leaseholders have faced in the past. This is probably an issue that affects MPs across the House. Will the Minister be so kind as to meet me to explore how we might address this issue as well?

Matthew Pennycook: I will happily meet the hon. Gentleman. As I have said, it is our intention as a Government to end the unjust and discriminatory practices from which leaseholders suffer. As I hope I have made clear, over the course of the Parliament we intend to end—finally, once and for all—this iniquitous system. That will take some time; it cannot happen overnight, but that is our intent. Leaseholders across the country, including those in his constituency and mine, will benefit from that.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on freeing so many of my constituents from the historical and, indeed, feudal injustice of the leasehold system. I urge him to ignore the clarion complaints of those freeholders who predicated their business model on the continued exploitation of working people through extortionate ground rents. The Minister is familiar with the predicament of my constituents who are unable to extend their leasehold or buy their freehold because of the actions of the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust. What hope can he offer them?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is right: there will always be vested interests that resist reform of the nature that we are trying to take forward, just as there will always be naysayers out there for whom nothing we do is ever good enough. This package as a whole, as I have said, will end the leasehold system in its entirety and in a single Parliament. That will be a huge achievement for this Government and we will succeed on that basis where other Governments have failed.

I am aware of the specific issue my hon. Friend raises and we have had many discussions about it. The provisions to address it are not in the draft Bill, but my officials and I are giving serious consideration to how and where we will resolve the matter that my hon. Friend has campaigned on for so many years.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the Bill, but I take this opportunity to urge the Minister to go further and faster on rip-off service charges. That is the thing that is clogging up my inbox—so much so, in fact, that I will hold a service charges forum in Oxford in a few weeks' time. One group in particular—social housing tenants—is under-protected. The Minister will know that under the 2024 Act, there is more transparency in their service charges, but they do not have anywhere near as strong a hand as others in seeking redress. Will he meet me following the forum so that I can relay to him the issues that my constituents, particularly the social housing tenants, are having?

Matthew Pennycook: I can feel the glare of my private office as I agree to meetings across the House, but I am happy to do so. The matters that the hon. Lady addresses are in the consultation we brought forward last year. It is an incredibly technical consultation on standardising and making more transparent service charges across the

country, which are not uniform in any way as things stand. However, as I have said, we want to introduce those protections as soon as possible.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Today, I think of one of the very first constituents I saw at one of my surgeries, who was trying to sell one of her leasehold properties just to help fund the care of her mother. Will the Minister take this opportunity to reassure my constituent that this Labour Government are on her side and are doing all they can to free her and others from what has become a nightmare?

Matthew Pennycook: I say to my hon. Friend that we are on his constituent's side. It is because so many leaseholders across the country are suffering from unjust and discriminatory practices that we have to overhaul and ultimately end this feudal system.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne's leaseholders are being ripped off. The current leaseholder landscape has bred an industry of property management companies, such as FirstPort and Eagerstates, that prey on powerless leaseholders by charging eye-watering service charges, making opaque calculations of those charges and bullying residents into submission. In failing to cap service charges, and without the 2024 transparency rules in place, today's reforms still leave thousands of local leaseholders unprotected. When will the Minister finally crack down on exploitative property management companies?

Matthew Pennycook: I have made it clear to the House that we have already set out proposals to strengthen the regulation of managing agents. Those proposals are not the summit of our ambitions; there is more to come. I say to the hon. Gentleman and generally to the House that managing agents will play an even more important role as we progress towards a commonhold future. We must therefore end the abuse and poor service from unscrupulous managing agents that so many leaseholders face.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his diligent work on this issue. I know that we all appreciate his expertise, as will my constituents in Walthamstow who are leaseholders with Clarion and who, in the last year, have seen their ground rents go up from £200 to £650 and now this year to £857, including an admin fee. What can the Minister say to reassure my constituents that there will not be loopholes in the cap and that we will ensure that all charges are included in the £250 limit?

Matthew Pennycook: It is certainly not our intention to allow any loopholes into the legislation. That is precisely why we have brought forward a draft Bill rather than a final product. Such is the complexity and technical nature of the reform we are enacting that the additional and enhanced scrutiny to be provided by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee will be invaluable.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I welcome the Minister's announcement and I know that it will bring some joy, particularly with the further announcements he is going to make later in the Parliament, to many of

the residents in my part of the west country. May I draw his attention to the housing with care sector? I am talking not about those gated communities that have a caretaker or somebody who cuts the grass, but about charities such as the St Monica Trust that provide some affordable rents and shared ownership but mostly provide leasehold purchase with a guaranteed buy-back and resale. This gives them a way of updating their contracts for residents and maintaining affordability. These organisations are really concerned that there will be an unannounced ban on new leasehold care-led retirement living apartments. What consideration has the Minister given to the housing with care sector having some protection, and his attention?

Matthew Pennycook: The draft Bill, as published, includes exemptions that mirror the ground rent exemptions for new leases entered into since 30 July 2022, based on that previous Act of Parliament, but we will consider through the pre-legislative scrutiny process whether other exemptions would be appropriate for a small number of leases granted for specialist purposes. I can assure the hon. Member that I have given consideration, and will give further consideration, to the matter she raises.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Since I was elected, so many constituents have raised with me the absolute nightmare of being trapped in leasehold and freehold, so I wholeheartedly congratulate the Minister on the action he is announcing today, particularly on capping ground rent, ending leasehold flats and the transition to commonhold. On the transition to commonhold, previous Governments have attempted to make this easier. Will he say a bit more about what the Bill will do to ensure that this Government make the transition happen, rather than failing as previous Governments have done?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For various reasons, commonhold failed to take off after its introduction in 2004 and the legal framework is now hopelessly out of date. That is why we have to reform and reinvigorate commonhold as a tenure. We want to put in place an easier conversion mechanism. We have given a great amount of thought to the Law Commission's recommendations in this area, and we have tried to strike the right balance to ensure that our approach meets those objectives, but my hon. Friend is more than welcome to contribute to the scrutiny process for the draft Bill outside the Select Committee, and I hope that she does so.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): In my constituency, managing agents are still imposing excessive service charges with very little transparency. Flats in retirement developments often will not sell, even at well below the market value, and families are left paying deceased relatives' service charges. Restrictive lease terms ban rentals, trapping those families with empty, unsaleable homes. I note the Minister's commitment to the consultation on service charges, but will he hurry up with the action?

Matthew Pennycook: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are going as fast as we possibly can, but I hope she would not want us to follow the example of the previous Government, who rushed forward legislation that contained serious specific flaws that a future Government—this Government—would have to fix in due course.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today's announcement is life-changing for many of my constituents, and this is why we elect Labour Governments. I want to ask the Minister about residents in leasehold complexes, where decisions are often delayed because of absent landlords and Airbnb owners. Will he ensure that when decisions are being made about the transfer to commonhold, those who do not respond do not hold up the decision to make the transfer?

Matthew Pennycook: I very much agree with my hon. Friend that the draft Bill will be life-changing for leaseholders across the country, freeing them from the unjust and discriminatory practices that so many of them face, and from the financial cost of high ground rent terms. I am more than happy to write to her on the specific issue she raises. It is these nuanced points that we want to work through, and that is why we have brought forward a draft Bill for enhanced scrutiny.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome many of the Government's announcements today. Across Twickenham, I hear regularly from leaseholders who suffer when service charges are jacked up without any notice or transparency, often for spurious maintenance issues. I note that the Minister has said that he does not want to cap service charges and that help will be on the way at some point, but he has refused to put a timeline on that. Why does he not use this Bill as a golden opportunity to bring forward Lord Best's recommendations on having a property regulator that can look at this area in a nuanced and sensible way?

Matthew Pennycook: We have given serious consideration to how we will take forward Lord Best's recommendations from his 2019 report and, as I have made clear, we are taking some of them forward already. This Bill introduces reform in a number of specific areas and, as I have said in response to previous questions, it does not need to do everything. There are other pieces of legislation, not least the 2024 Act, that do lots of the work that hon. Members are calling for, but we want to ensure that the whole agenda is a comprehensive one that benefits leaseholders in the way that the hon. Lady and I both want.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Minister's work, which I know will bring real relief to many of my constituents. However, leaseholders in the Riverside Exchange development are being blocked from securing their right to manage because of absentee leaseholders. This has left them trapped with eye-watering service charges, which have increased from £1,900 to £5,500. Can the Minister set out how the upcoming legislation will reform and reduce the minimum qualifying threshold for the right to manage, which is currently set at 50%?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend will be aware that there were very few provisions relating to the right to manage in the 2024 Act. We are committed to enacting the remaining Law Commission recommendations relating not only to the right to manage but to leasehold enfranchisement. I am more than happy to write to her to try to get at the specific issues she raises in relation to the building in her constituency.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I too welcome the Minister's statement today on leasehold reform, but I must press him and ask him what the Government's plans are in respect of service and maintenance charges, so that I can provide at least some reassurance to my constituents.

Matthew Pennycook: Hopefully the hon. Gentleman heard my answer to a previous question. We intend to switch on the 2024 Act provisions that standardise service charges and increase transparency around them, so that people can more easily challenge unreasonable charges at tribunal. I will not put a time on that, because I do not have an exact date in mind, but I can assure him and other Members across the House that we are working as fast as possible to bring forward the necessary protections to ensure that leaseholders are protected from high and rising service charges.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I have heard from so many residents across Marton, Guisborough, Skelton, Hemlington Hall and elsewhere about issues with leasehold and freehold, so what message does the Minister have for my constituents that he will tackle both of those issues and protect my residents from unfair service charges?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have made clear, there are measures in this draft Bill that will provide enhanced protections for residential freeholders on freehold estates, but we are taking other action, and I refer him—as I have other hon. Members—to the two comprehensive consultations we launched before Christmas, one of which deals exclusively with switching on the consumer protections for those people living on freehold estates.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): My constituents trapped in freehold schemes—freeholders on privately managed estates—will still be exposed to escalating, unregulated service charges and have no way of ensuring that the work they are paying for is actually done. The Minister has talked about the consultation and promised that help is on the way, but can he promise protection from this exploitation for my constituents in this Parliament?

Matthew Pennycook: Yes.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this statement and congratulate the Minister. Does he agree that strengthening and simplifying the route to commonhold will shift power away from distant freeholders and back to residents, and that for leaseholders in Birmingham Edgbaston, this will mean control over service charges, repairs and management for the first time?

Matthew Pennycook: Absolutely. Commonhold is a purpose-built tenure designed specifically for people to own and manage a shared building without a third-party landlord and without a ground rent. We want to see its uptake grow significantly over this Parliament, and that is what the measures in this draft Bill are designed to provide for.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement. It is indeed a joy to have some good news in the Chamber for everyone out there, and we welcome that. Thank you for that, Minister, and

for the Government's proposals. The Government have an interest in Northern Ireland, and while homeowners in Northern Ireland have the ability to buy out leaseholds under the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, that Act does not provide for a cap on ground rent in its calculations. Will the Minister undertake to discuss these proposals with the devolved regions to enable a blanket costing to apply UK-wide at this time of austerity?

Matthew Pennycook: I always thank the hon. Member for his constructive contributions. As he knows, England and Wales can learn lots from Northern Ireland, but, as ever—particularly in relation to our reforms to housing and planning, as well as to leasehold—there are many things that Northern Ireland can learn from our reforms. I can give him the undertaking that the devolved Administrations will be kept up to date with what we are doing.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I am delighted that we are moving forward on capping ground rents and abolishing the feudal leasehold system. I have been supporting hundreds of residents across Exeter in fighting terrible practices by management companies, and I know that these measures will put money back into people's pockets. Does the Minister agree that the age of the exploitative leasehold system—and the ripping off of residents—is finally over, and that it is thanks to a Labour Government?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are calling time on the abusive practices of unscrupulous property agents and on the leasehold system as a whole. That is down to a Labour Government finishing the job that the previous Government were unable to complete.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It would be helpful if Members asked very short questions so that I can get them all in.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement; the measures will radically improve the system. He will be aware that over 170 houses in my constituency have had their freeholds purchased by Andrew Milne, who is now demanding that residents pay sums sometimes exceeding £25,000 to buy out the freeholds, and is threatening forfeiture and High Court action if they do not pay up. I welcome the Minister's commitment to ending forfeiture, but will he set out what additional steps that Government are taking to regulate rogue freeholders?

Matthew Pennycook: I will be careful in what I say in respect of that particular case, but a meeting with my hon. Friend and other Sheffield MPs was postponed because this legislation was being brought forward. I will ensure that that meeting goes back in the diary as soon as possible.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Today's news is welcome for leaseholders in my constituency, whose ground rents—often of £400 or £500—escalate throughout their leases. The measures will save them thousands of pounds throughout their leases. In my time as an MP, I have been shocked by the behaviour of managing agents. There is strong support in this place and the other place for Lord Best's recommendation for

a proper regulator of managing agents. Will the Minister outline what steps will be taken, and what the timeline is, for action on managing agents?

Matthew Pennycook: We are clear that we need to strengthen the regulation of managing agents. I appreciate the strength of feeling, across the House, on the matter. As I have made clear, we will continue to reflect on the various recommendations made in Lord Best's 2019 report, and I am more than happy to engage with my hon. Friend on his private Member's Bill, which I know deals with some of these matters.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, which demonstrates how Labour stands up for people against vested interests—my constituents will thank him for it. On the ongoing problems with unadopted estates, which I have been raising with him since before my election, I would be extremely grateful if he agreed to visit my constituency to see the difficulties that homeowners face.

Matthew Pennycook: I think that I have already committed to ensuring that a visit to her constituency is on the very long list of requests that I have received, but I will bear her request in mind.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I commend the Minister for bringing forward these brilliant measures to protect leaseholders. Constituents across Hampton own the freehold to their homes but pay several levels of service charge—first, to managing agents such as FirstPort, which is supposed to be responsible for unadopted roads, and secondly, to Hampton Estates, which covers lots of the public open space, parks and drainage. As part of our reforms, how will the Government ensure that multi-level service charges like those are addressed, particularly in areas for which they were never supposed to be adopted?

Matthew Pennycook: Again, I refer my hon. Friend to the two comprehensive consultations that we launched before Christmas. We need to establish the new regulatory framework to provide consumer protections for residential freeholders on freehold estates. We are also consulting on how to reduce the prevalence of such private management arrangements, which are at the core of so many of the unjust practices that residential freeholders face.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I have heard too many horror stories from leaseholders in Bournemouth West. One constituent, Jeremy Green, described feeling like a second-class citizen subject to the total autocratic control of his freeholder landlord and its managing agent. Will the Minister assure me that this Labour Government are getting on with reform and giving leaseholders the protections and dignity that they deserve?

Matthew Pennycook: Given their experience of the leasehold system, it is completely understandable that Jeremy and other leaseholders across the country feel that the dream of home ownership has fallen so short. That is why we have to end the system in its entirety. This draft Bill goes a long way towards ensuring that we do just that.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): This package of measures will transform the lives of thousands of my constituents. On freehold, residents in Forge Wood are paying thousands of pounds for services that other constituents receive for free. Can the Minister confirm that he will act as quickly as possible following the end of the consultation?

Matthew Pennycook: We want to act as quickly as possible, particularly to bring in the new consumer protections provided for by the 2024 Act.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the statement and the progress that it represents, and I put on record my thanks to the National Leasehold Campaign, which has spent many years campaigning tirelessly on behalf of existing leaseholders, who have been trapped in an unfair and archaic system. For the benefit of Warrington South leaseholders who are trying to understand the 40-year peppercorn cap, will the Minister explain how the 40-year cap was arrived at and whether there is any scope for the transition to be brought forward so that relief is felt sooner?

Matthew Pennycook: I echo my hon. Friend's remarks about the NLC. I also thank others, such as the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, Sir Peter Bottomley, who has now left this place, and other champions, including my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), who has stood up for leaseholders so vocally over many years. The rationale for the ground rent approach that we have chosen is set out in a policy paper that we published this morning. The Select Committee will be able to scrutinise the draft Bill and provide suggestions—that is the whole point of the pre-legislative scrutiny process.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the Minister's great work. Leaseholders and freeholders across my constituency, in places like Greenhithe, Ebbsfleet and Stone, will hugely welcome the cap on ground rents and the rest of the detail on the draft Bill. May I impress on the Minister the need for us to go further on supporting those who live on unadopted or freehold estates, and to address poor practices by managing agents?

Matthew Pennycook: I am acutely aware of the strength of feeling on freehold estates. It cannot be an either/or when it comes to ensuring that residential freeholders and leaseholders get the rights and protections that they need. I can assure my hon. Friend that we are taking concerted action on both fronts.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): This is an historic day for leaseholders, many of whom were let down by a lack of action from the previous Government, which left them on the hook for exploitative levels of ground rent. One 90-year-old constituent of mine was hit with a 9,000% increase in his ground rent—that cannot be right. I am really glad that the Minister has shown such leadership to ensure that we put that right today. I know he agrees that we need to go further on unadopted estates, too, so will he meet me to ensure that we bring those protections forward as swiftly and effectively as possible?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend has been an incredible champion for residential freeholders and leaseholders in his constituency. It is precisely because

of ground rent increases of that scale that we are imposing, via this draft Bill, a maximum cash cap. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss the draft Bill and related matters.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I declare that I am a leaseholder. Correspondence from leaseholders in my constituency, which makes up a lot of my inbox, mentions poor service, rising charges and homes that they can no longer remortgage or sell, causing financial difficulty. They will very much welcome today's announcement, but will the Minister reassure them that the Government will rise to all the challenges that they face, swing the balance of power back towards homeowners, and tackle the real problem of service charges, through which leaseholders are being fleeced for poor-quality services that are often not even delivered?

Matthew Pennycook: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. His constituency is just over the river from mine, and is, in many ways, very similar. Day in, day out he will receive, as I do, complaints about service charge increases and onerous ground rent terms. That is precisely why we are taking action, in this Bill and elsewhere, to provide the kind of relief that he seeks for leaseholders. As I said, over the course of this Parliament we will end the system for good.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Since my election I have worked to support leaseholders across my constituency, meeting residents at Maple Court, Budenberg and St James Court. When I surveyed local leaseholders on what they needed from the Government, the most common response was a reduction of the unfair charges that they face. Does today's announcement not show that we finally have a Government who are listening to leaseholders and putting money back in their pockets?

Matthew Pennycook: That is absolutely right. In this area and so many others, the cost of living and addressing the affordability crisis faced by so many families across the country is the Government's driving mission. For leaseholders, the reforms in the draft Bill will be transformative, particularly on ground rents, and will also introduce other protections.

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his genuinely groundbreaking statement. It feels like a little while ago that he visited Ipswich to talk to local people about the building safety crisis and leasehold. He was a shadow Minister and I was a parliamentary candidate at the time. Now we are capping ground rents, making it easier to move to commonhold, and scrapping leasehold for all new builds. Is this a case of a Labour Government keeping their promises and making a real change for many people up and down the country?

Matthew Pennycook: That is absolutely right, and I can assure my hon. Friend that we have given consideration to building safety remediation in the design of this legislation. I should make it clear that freeholders' obligations to ensure that their buildings are safe are not related, for example, to the right to collect ground rents. Many buildings already operate a peppercorn ground rent, and they are subject to the same legal obligations as other buildings. We do not want to see the impact that some in the country may be concerned about.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My constituents in Hartlepool are facing outrageous estate management charges, including a 49% increase in the administration fee by management company Sela just this year on the Marine Point and Longbranch Homes estates, as well as ongoing charges by Praxis on the Wynyard Mews estate. We have heard that time and again from Members today. When will we switch on the protections of the 2024 Act, and give the powers necessary for homeowners to challenge unfair charges, hold estate management companies to account and prevent families from being unfairly burdened?

Matthew Pennycook: I simply say to my hon. Friend: as soon as possible. Through these new consumer protections, we are bringing into force a regulatory framework that takes some time to get right, but I want those protections in place as soon as possible, so that we can provide protection to his constituents and others across the country who are suffering from the set-up that he describes.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Yet again, we have the wonders of hindsight from the Conservative party. In the immortal words of Beverley Knight, “‘Shoulda woulda coulda’ means I’m out of time”, and the Tories certainly were. I thank my constituents, including Rob from Heath Hayes and Daniel and Rebecca from Brereton, who have written to me to stress the need for these reforms. Like them, I very much welcome the draft Bill. Given that these proposals will not only reform a feudal system but cap ground rents at £250, does the Minister agree that this is another way in which this Government are putting money back into the pockets of families struggling with the cost of living?

Matthew Pennycook: I do not want to be too critical of the Conservative Government, because they did bring forward the 2024 Act, and they did move the dial when it comes to the public conversation about things like ground rents. But ultimately, they did not finish the job, and it will fall to a Labour Government to do so.

Business Rates

2.2 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): This Government want the best for Britain’s high streets. We know how central they are to the strength and vibrancy of our villages, towns and cities. We know how hard small business owners work, and we know how badly they were let down by the previous Government; shops were shuttered, council funding was cut, and business rates were left totally unreformed. We will not let decline continue, and we are already taking steps to arrest it.

We are protecting high street businesses from upward-only rent review clauses, and we are introducing a strong new community right to buy to help communities safeguard valued community assets, such as pubs and shops on their high streets. We are pushing ahead with high street rental auctions, which are helping to bring long-term empty shops back into use. Where premises have been vacant for too long, councils can auction the right to rent them; they can offer one to five-year leases to new businesses and community groups, helping to create more vibrant high streets. We also launched the winter of action to combat retail crime, a nationwide crackdown on crime and antisocial behaviour to protect shoppers and retail workers.

As well as that, we are investing in local communities through the £5 billion Pride in Place programme announced last September, and we are investing to support growth, including through the new local growth fund. Around one in three businesses continue to benefit from small business rates relief and do not pay any business rates at all, and 85,000 benefit from reduced business rates as this relief tapers. At the Budget, we extended the small business rates relief second property grace period for another two years, which is a really important change; it means that businesses expanding into a second property will retain the support as they grow.

We know that there is more to do. Before I turn to today’s announcements, I want to run through the three main components of the changes to business rates that are taking place in April for all businesses, and to explain the steps that the Government took at the Budget last year on business rates. The first change is the underlying, significant reforms to the system that the Chancellor set out as part of our commitment to transform business rates in England over this Parliament. We have implemented permanently lower multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties; the multiplier will fall by around 12p or 25% on 1 April. Some of this is a result of the overall reduction in multipliers between revaluation periods, but the further 5p reduction announced by the Chancellor is, on its own, worth nearly £1 billion for the 750,000 retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that are the lifeblood of our high streets.

We are paying for this support for the high street through higher rates on the top 1% most expensive properties. That includes many large distribution warehouses, such as those used by online retail giants. Let us be crystal clear: before our reforms, a mid-sized high street business faced the same multiplier or tax rate as a warehouse used by an online giant—that was the system we were left with. Now, the mid-sized high street business will pay around 38p in the pound, and the

[Dan Tomlinson]

large warehouse will pay around 51p in the pound. That is 33% more. This is a sizeable reform, and it is here for good.

The second component of business rates announced at the Budget was the revaluation. All non-domestic properties are revalued independently every three years for business rates purposes. New valuations will come into effect in April. I thank the independent valuers in the Valuation Office Agency who carry out the work. The Government did not take the easy approach of kicking the post-covid revaluation into the long grass. Instead, we introduced a significant transitional support package, because we knew that some sectors were seeing large increases in their rateable values after the pandemic. We are capping bill increases in each of the next three years for those with the largest rises, and we are spending a total of £4.3 billion on that and other interventions.

The Government recognise that the rateable value of hotels has increased significantly since the pandemic, so our caps on increases are particularly important for them, but it is right that we look at this further. We will therefore review the way that hotels are valued, to ensure that it accurately reflects the market for this sector.

The third important context is the tapering away of the temporary pandemic relief for high street businesses. The previous Government went into the election with plans to withdraw that relief overnight in 2025. That would have been a harsh and sharp removal of support, pushing up bills for independent high street businesses overnight by 300%. That is reckless and irresponsible. Instead, we have taken a different approach. We extended the retail, hospitality and leisure relief this year—it is set at 40%—and we are unwinding it over the coming years. The jumping-off point for any business currently receiving a 40% discount is their current bill, not their bill without relief.

The Budget decisions led to the following outcomes. First, for over half of ratepayers, bills will be flat or will fall next year. Secondly, of the properties whose bills will increase from 1 April, most will see their increases capped at 15% or less, or at £800 for the smallest. Thirdly, bills will adjust to new valuations, but because of our caps, this will happen gradually, and high street businesses will benefit from permanently reduced multipliers for the long term. That is a fair and reasonable approach. As set out at the Budget, in total we are spending over £4 billion in the next three years to limit the scale of bill increases for those who are either losing reliefs or seeing their rateable values increase.

In the coming financial year, because of our interventions, the business rates system will raise the same amount of revenue as it was forecast to raise in spring 2025, before the Budget—not billions and billions more, as Opposition Members seek to claim. The forecast is more or less the same. That is the shape of the policy that we set out in the Budget. I hope you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I wanted to set that out in full, because business rates are rather complicated.

This Government want to go further to support pubs. Pubs are the cornerstone of so many communities, and they are essential to the social and cultural life of so many places across the country. I have heard clearly from Government Members just how important pubs

are. I thank colleagues who have engaged constructively and privately with me on this issue in recent weeks. Whether they represent constituencies in coastal or rural communities, towns or cities, their representations have been invaluable. Their constituents should know that most of the politics that they see in the papers is not what matters; it is the conversations and the advocacy of MPs in the corridors of this place that can make the difference. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) has been a relentless advocate for businesses in his constituency, as have my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley), and for Redditch (Chris Bloore). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for her engagement on this issue, in her role as chair of the all-party group on pubs.

For too long, under the Conservatives, pubs have not had the support they needed. Opposition Members claim to care about pubs, but where were they when the number of pubs fell by 7,000 between 2010 and 2024? They were in government, and they let the number of pubs in our communities fall by a fifth. The Conservatives also allowed the revaluation to go ahead with a business rates methodology for pubs that no longer has the support of the sector. Before the Budget, every pub sector body was broadly signed up to the methodology used for valuing pubs, and lent its support to the principles set out in the Valuation Office Agency's guide. Since the Budget, the same sector bodies have withdrawn their support. The Government acknowledge their concerns and will therefore carry out a review of the pub valuation methodology. The review will report in time to be implemented at the next revaluation.

While that review is ongoing, and given the challenges that pubs faced over the long term under the previous Government, we are stepping in to provide support for pubs in the next three years. Today, I confirm that, from April, every pub in England will get 15% off its new business rates bill, on top of the support announced in the Budget. Pubs' bills will then be frozen in real terms for a further two years. That support is worth £1,650 to the average pub next year. It will mean that around three quarters of pubs will see their bills either fall or stay the same next year. This decision—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I say very gently to the Minister that it was always open to him to ask for extra time, but we cannot find any record of him having done so. He has already got to 10 minutes, and he seems to have three more pages, so I will allow the Opposition spokespersons more time as well. This is an important statement, and I think that the hon. Member wants to finish, but it is very unfair to exceed the time by what I reckon will be 50%.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Last orders.

Dan Tomlinson: Let me apologise profusely for not letting you know in advance, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the first time I have done one of these statements, and I will not make the same mistake again. I am glad that the same courtesy will be afforded to the shadow Chancellor, and I look forward to hearing a full 15 minutes of remarks from him. I am sure that they will be entertaining for us all. [Interruption.] I will make progress now, and we will hear more from the shadow Chancellor.

This decision will mean that the amount of business rates paid by the pub sector as a whole will be lower in 2028-29 than it is today. This is Independent Venue Week, so it is particularly appropriate that our package will apply also to music venues. Many live music venues are valued as pubs, and many pubs are grassroots live music venues. It would not be right to seek to draw the line in a way that includes some and not others, and I thank MPs who have made constructive representations on this issue in recent weeks. In the meantime, we are pressing ahead with wider regulatory reforms, building on the new licensing policy framework in the Budget, and we are working with the sector to ensure that local authorities are using that to ease licensing decisions on the ground. As part of our ongoing licensing reforms, for home nation games in the later stages of the men's football world cup this summer, pubs and other licensed venues will be able to open until 1 am or 2 am, depending on when the game starts. We will legislate to increase the number of temporary events notices for pubs and other hospitality venues, whether to help them screen world cup games, or for other community and cultural events.

This Government are committed to helping pubs build sustainable business models over the long term. In the spring we will consult on further loosening planning rules to benefit pubs, helping them to add new guest rooms or expand their main room without planning applications. We will also continue to engage with the sector to ensure that other retail leisure and hospitality premises have planning flexibility—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not acceptable. I have to be quite honest, because the other Front Benchers need time to respond. When a statement is meant to take 10 minutes, that is meant to be 10 minutes. If Ministers tell me otherwise in advance, I am willing to work with them, but they cannot just carry on speaking. Minister, I take it that you are now coming to the last page of the statement, not the middle pages—[*Interruption.*] No, I want you to bring it to an end, and quickly.

Dan Tomlinson: May I apologise, Mr Speaker, for not letting you know in advance that the statement would be running over 10 minutes?

Mr Speaker: Can I just ask, gently, have you not been advised that this is meant to be 10 minutes? Departments have people who are meant to advise Ministers on how long they have got. How on earth have you got a speech that is longer? It could be 20 minutes. It is unfair to the Members present, and there is other business. Please, this House should be shown the respect it deserves, and unfortunately we are not getting it. I am here to protect Members, not allow Ministers to take advantage.

Dan Tomlinson: Mr Speaker, I will wrap up very quickly, and I apologise again.

This Government also understand that things are not easy out there. Today's announcement is about additional support for pubs, but we understand that this is a tough time for other businesses on the high street. We have already taken significant steps to acknowledge that and support businesses, including £4.3 billion of business rates support in the Budget. Over the past decade, consumers have changed their habits and are increasingly working from home and shopping online, and these trends continue to make it harder for high street businesses. I am therefore announcing today that later this year the

Government will bring forward a high streets strategy to reinvigorate our communities. We will work with businesses and representative bodies to bring that strategy together. It will be a cross-Government strategy, and we will be looking at what more the Government can do to support our high streets.

To conclude, this Government have already started the work of reforming our business rates system, and any potential changes to business rates will be considered at the Budget in the usual way. Labour Members have the right economic plan for Britain and will back our high streets and our pubs every step of the way.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

2.17 pm

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Mr Speaker, I think the mood of the House is that 10 minutes from the hon. Gentleman is more than enough, although I am grateful to him for having given me advance sight of his statement.

Mr Speaker: You can have some extra time, if you need it, and the same applies to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sir Mel Stride: That is much appreciated, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker, was that it? After all this time, and weeks of telling our local pubs that help was on the way, this is all they get—a temporary sticking plaster that will only delay the pain for a few, while thousands of businesses despair as their bills skyrocket. The Labour party manifesto promised to completely replace the business rates system. Labour Members said that they would create a system that levels the playing field for our high streets and supports entrepreneurship and investment. Well, we are waiting.

So far, what we have seen is the exact opposite of what our local businesses were promised, with business rates soaring across the board. Despite the temporary relief announced today, pubs will still end up, in time, with bills more than 70% higher than they are today. The Federation of Small Businesses has calculated that the business rates of a typical medium-sized shop or restaurant with a rateable value of around £50,000 will increase by 71% over the coming years. For hotels, it will be over 100%.

Ministers expect those businesses to be grateful for some temporary relief, tweaks to multipliers and changes to licensing, but the Conservatives have been clear: support must be permanent. We have to cut business rates for our high streets to give certainty to local businesses. Measures must be far wider than those that the Government have announced today, applying not just to pubs but to the whole of the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, which bring life to our high streets and town centres. We would not just introduce temporary reductions in rates, but completely abolish business rates for thousands of pubs, shops and restaurants across our country.

These huge tax rises introduced by this Government are a choice, but it does not have to be this way. The Government have chosen to increase spending by vast amounts, including on the benefits bill, with a benefits giveaway of over £3 billion at the Budget to abolish the

[*Sir Mel Stride*]

two-child cap. These choices are why bills are going up, businesses are going under, jobs are being lost and our high streets are being hollowed out.

Let us not forget that this is not an isolated issue. Businesses are having to shoulder not just business rates rises, but a long list of other burdens that are being piled on by a Government who simply do not understand how businesses work. Many of those facing the highest increases in their business rates were among the worst impacted by the Chancellor's jobs tax. They have already seen their business rates go up by as much as 140% last year, and they face yet more costs and red tape from the Government's employment rights legislation. Analysis by UKHospitality suggests that, on average, as many as six hospitality venues could close every single day this year. That is a tragedy for our high streets and our communities. It is also a tragedy for our young people, many of whom look for their first job in the local pub or coffee shop, and who will find those jobs simply do not exist any more.

I ask the Minister, where is the help for the wider retail, hospitality and leisure sectors? Does what has been announced today include gastropubs, pubs with hotel rooms, bars, nightclubs and private clubs? Why are the Government happy to stand by and watch while businesses close and jobs are lost? When will the guidance be published for businesses, so that they know whether they will be eligible for this further relief and what their bills will be over the coming year? Why did Ministers not come forward with this relief for pubs at the time of the Budget, when they knew the level of increases that many businesses were facing? No new information has been provided between the Budget being announced and this statement. Can the Minister confirm that because this relief was not accounted for at the Budget, today's announcements will need to be paid for through yet more borrowing?

The Government have proved today that either they do not understand the damage that they are doing or they do not care. Today's announcement is far too little, far too late.

Dan Tomlinson: Apologies again, Mr Speaker; it will not happen again.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate that, but when Madam Deputy Speaker is in the Chair, I expect her to be given the same respect, so that when she says that time is up, you do accept that ruling. She felt that you were not stopping in time. I do not want to get into it now, but I will be speaking to the Chief Whip later.

Dan Tomlinson: It is just not credible for the shadow Chancellor to say that he would scrap business rates. What did the Conservatives do over the 14 years that they were in power? They kept business rates in place, they did not reform the system and, year after year, they introduced temporary reliefs that did not work or last. Some 7,000 pubs closed under their watch, in communities up and down the country, and they expect this House to believe that they were just getting around to it. Well, we do not believe that and we will not stand for it. Instead, this Labour Government will get on with the work of ensuring that we can get our public finances in order,

getting borrowing down and continuing to support businesses, as far as we reasonably can, with our £4.3 billion of support.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the guidance. That guidance will be published today—I hope it has been published already, but if not it will come very soon. Bills will be landing in the inboxes and on the doormats of businesses across the country in the coming weeks, and will reflect the changes that have been announced today. Yes, this will be scored in the usual way at the Budget. He talks about borrowing, but his plans to scrap business rates entirely, funded by made-up savings in other parts of public spending, would mean an increase in borrowing of £30 billion or so, which we could not afford.

The Labour Government have set out significant plans today to support pubs and those businesses that are the heart of our high streets that have been affected by the particular way that they are valued. As I said in my statement, pub business rates valuations are not the same as those for the rest of hospitality: pubs are valued on their takings, whereas other hospitality businesses are valued on their bricks and mortar. Industry bodies have highlighted concerns about how the costs are accounted for in this methodology. The Government want to look at that more closely, which is why we are launching the review and have come forward with this significant package of support for pubs today.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the support for music venues as well as pubs in my constituency. I also welcome the Minister's engagement and willingness to speak to the Select Committee and to be questioned by us. I am sure, Mr Speaker, you would agree that it would increase the Minister's favour in your eyes were he to do that with dispatch and not leave it for too many weeks, so I thank the Minister for his engagement on that.

On the wider issues of business rates, changes have been announced, but will the Minister outline the timeframe within which we will see a significant change? It was a Labour manifesto commitment to change business rates, but it will take time because of the valuation procedure. Does he propose to change that wholesale, and in what timeframe? Businesses of all types, including pubs, need certainty most of all, so that they know the trajectory in good time and can plan.

Dan Tomlinson: The review of the methodology for pubs that we have announced today will be conducted as rapidly as possible, and I hope that it will conclude this year. We also want to look closely at the methodology used to value hotels, which is similar but not quite the same as that used for pubs. I am sure we will get into that in Committee in due course. We want to ensure that those reviews about the changes to the methodology conclude in good time for the next revaluation, which is set to come into operation in 2029. My hon. Friend asks about the Government's ambition to rebalance the system. As I outlined, last year's Budget introduced a significant rebalancing, with the largest businesses having a tax rate multiplier that is 33% higher than that of typical businesses on the high street. I look forward to continuing to engage with hon. Members and businesses on business rates in the run up to the Budget in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): If the Government are serious about saving the high street, then these measures can only be the start. Since the Government's first Budget, we Liberal Democrats have been warning that high streets were at risk if the Government did not make the various changes that they have made over the past 18 months.

A number of questions arise from today's statement. There are 11 pubs in my constituency, not all of which could be described as large, that have a rateable value of more than £100,000 because of the ridiculous valuation system, and they will still see their rates bills go up. There will be such pubs across the country, but is it correct that they will get only half of the percentage relief? Pubs can already have 50 temporary event notices a year, so extending that is simply a soundbite solution without a problem.

I am glad that the Government are looking at hotels, but what is the timeframe? The Samuel Ryder hotel in my constituency tells me that its bill is going up by 157% in the first year alone, and it will not be the only such hotel. Will the new formula for hotels be in place in April, or will they be left in limbo?

The statement still offers nothing for the rest of the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors—the restaurants, soft play centres and high street shops that made business, investment and hiring decisions based on the expectation of the full 20p discount. I welcome the announcement of a high street strategy, which we Liberal Democrats will engage constructively with, but will the Minister start now by heeding our calls to direct the Competition and Markets Authority to look at the energy market, which is blocking hospitality businesses and other sectors from getting the best energy deals? Will he also look at our fully funded proposal to slash VAT until April 2027, to give our high streets a boost?

Over the past few weeks and months, getting answers and data from the Government has been like getting blood from a stone. Just 90 minutes ago, I asked the Minister if he would tell us what he knew and when; he said he would, but he has not.

Finally, on the methodology for pubs, the use of fair maintainable trade—turnover—has long had its day, but may I urge the Minister to allow for parliamentary scrutiny? None of the current legislation relating to pubs or business rates allows for any scrutiny in this House or the other place. I asked the Government about the valuation methodology back in July 2024; it was one of my first written questions after the general election, but it has taken 18 months for the Government to listen. Will they please allow this House to scrutinise their plans so that we can get a long-term fix to save our pubs?

Dan Tomlinson: The 15% reduction will apply to all pubs. As the hon. Member knows, there are different caps for pubs depending on their size, but if bills had been frozen, no bill would have fallen next year. Instead, because we have decided to apply the 15% reduction, around 75% of pubs will see their bills either stay the same or fall. I acknowledge what she says about the very largest pubs, but we will still significantly reduce the increase that they would have expected this year. Their bills will then be frozen in full in years two and

three of the period before the revaluation review—I am glad that the hon. Member is able to welcome that review. Its results will be implemented for future revaluations.

The hon. Member mentioned temporary event notices. We are trying to implement the recommendations of the licensing review, which was carried out in conjunction with pubs and other businesses in the sector, so although she may think that changes such as these do not touch the sides or make a difference, pubs themselves told us that—in addition to ensuring that we could support them in the right way fiscally—such changes would be welcome. I hope that pubs that are able to make use of them will do so.

The hon. Member also asked about the 20p multiplier. She is right that we legislated for a reduction of up to 20p, but we have to see these things in the balance. The decision to reduce the multiplier by 5p came with a £900 million price tag; reducing it by the full 20p would cost significantly more. Taken in the round, our package of support has a lower tax rate within the system—a lower multiplier—but also steps in with caps to support businesses if they are experiencing increases in their values or having to adjust to the slow unwinding of the pandemic relief.

The hon. Member asked about VAT. All I will say—she will expect this—is that when the Liberal Democrats had the chance in government, they put VAT up; now, they seem to be calling for it to go down.

Finally, on the question of what I knew and when, as the VOA set out, Ministers were provided with details of the increases in the valuations. However, at that time, we did not foresee—I did not foresee—that after the changes in the rateable values that were published at the Budget, pubs and their representative bodies would want to withdraw their support for the independently and previously agreed methodology. Given that and the Government's judgment that there are issues, to which the hon. Member has referred, we thought it was right to pause, review the methodology and ensure that it is fit for the future for pubs and hotels.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We will run this statement to about 3.15 pm, so we can all help each other. Jim Dickson is going to be a good example.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. The pubs in my constituency, from the Growler Stop and Ivy Leaf in Dartford to the Bull in Stone and the Spring River in Ebbsfleet, are the heart of our community. Does the Minister agree that it is crucial that we find ways to protect them as places for people to come together and build communities, and that the package he has announced today—with its 15% reduction on the revalued bill and protection for the next three years—makes a big contribution to that goal?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for his engagement on this matter on behalf of the businesses in his constituency. We are making a significant intervention for pubs because we understand the concerns that have been raised about the methodology. As we have heard from my hon. Friend, pubs play a central role in his community in Dartford, as they do elsewhere,

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and they are important to the health, life and vibrancy of high streets, towns and villages in constituencies across the country.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Putting up a sticker saying “No Labour MPs welcome here” is obviously a successful strategy if you want to get a change from the Treasury. However, what we have ended up with will lead to real complications on our high streets, because a pub that is helped by today’s announcement will be next door to a restaurant that serves alcohol and occasionally has music, which in turn will be next door to a music venue. Businesses on the high street will now be treated in a range of different ways, so why has the Minister chosen to single out pubs and music venues?

Dan Tomlinson: There is a significant overlap between the pub sector and live music venues. Many pubs serve as grassroots live music venues, with the result that they are often valued in a similar way for business rates purposes. We did not think it would be right to draw the line so tightly that some music venues, which happened to be valued as pubs, received the relief and others did not. We think this is a fair and reasonable way forward that reflects the reality on the ground.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for this statement—it is welcome news, and many of the pubs in my constituency will welcome it. I received an email from the general manager of the Hampton by Hilton London Waterloo, who outlined that its business rates bill would increase by £296,000 next year and rise to £399,000 by year four. They want additional support, not just for the hospitality sector but for hotels. As the Minister knows, hotels contribute a lot to the local economy—they employ local people, their supply chain is local, and they house many of the people who come to visit our pubs, restaurants and other venues. Many of the hotels in my constituency house many MPs as well. Would the Minister be happy to visit one of those hotels along the south bank and have a discussion with its staff?

Dan Tomlinson: As a London MP, I do not get the joy of staying in a hotel in my hon. Friend’s constituency—instead, I get the joy of the Northern line on the route home. She asks an important question about hotels, which are valued in a different way from some other sectors. Their methodology is well established, but as with pubs, specific concerns have been raised, and the Government think it is right to review how hotels are valued for business rates purposes to ensure their valuations accurately reflect the market for those sectors. I intend to engage with hotel businesses and their representative groups on this important issue. Any future changes to business rates for hotels or other businesses will be considered in the usual way as part of the usual Budget processes.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Can I respectfully remind the Minister that when Jonathan Russell from the Valuation Office Agency came before the Select Committee, he was very clear that the impact of the rate rises was made known to the Treasury before the Budget? The VOA provided data drops over 12 months, which did not

detail the rates for individual properties, but provided a clear overview at a central level and revealed that 5,000 pubs would see their rates double. It is just not credible for the Minister to say that the Treasury did not know what was going to happen, is it? It had a very clear view of the impact of the changes that it was imposing.

Dan Tomlinson: We were aware of the changes to rateable values that were going to be published at the Budget, which is why we came forward with a significant package of support to help businesses adjust to their new values. For example, yesterday, Waterstones came out to express its support for our changes to business rates, because the lower multipliers that we have put into the system will support its business. Businesses across the country are benefiting from those lower multipliers. As I have said, more than half are seeing their bills either flat or falling. We have also put in place significant transitional relief support, with caps this year, next year and the year after. That is because we were aware of the effect of the changes to valuation, although I was not aware of what would happen subsequently with the pubs and their views. I have engaged with them on the methodology, and because of that we are launching this review. We think it is right to look carefully at that methodology.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Last Friday, I met Laura at the Malt at Aston-on-Trent. She started as a pot washer, went to university, worked the whole way through and is now a tenanted landlady. She shared the amount of hours she works, and she will welcome the review of the business rates methodology, not least because she feels that she works all the hours God sends and she was due to have to pay a lot more. Will the Treasury look at a couple of key bits of feedback that she gave me? One is about prices for alcohol in supermarkets. She could have longer licensing hours, but she cannot compete with people staying at home drinking. The other was about a cardboard tax. She has to pay for packaging for brewery deliveries, but she also has to pay local councils to pick up the packaging, so she would welcome something where the breweries reuse existing crates.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her engagement on behalf of the businesses in her constituency. She raises some interesting issues on tax, regulation and licensing when it comes to pubs and hospitality. I do not want to pre-empt the work of the high street strategy, which will be a cross-Government effort with the Home Office, the Department for Business and Trade, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury working together, but we want to hear about these things from businesses on the ground. I look forward to engaging with Members of Parliament from all parties as we work on the strategy in the coming months.

Mr Speaker: I call Jennie’s dad, Steve Darling.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): This is a baby step in the right direction, but the hospitality, tourism and retail industry in Torbay continues to trade in a hostile environment. One leisure provider in Paignton shared with me that they have a £44,000 gas bill. Will the Minister share what the Government are doing to tackle these high energy prices that many suffer from?

Dan Tomlinson: That is a very good question, and it allows us to reflect on the fact that back in 2009, Nick Clegg, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, said that we did not need to invest in nuclear power, because it would not come online until the mid-2020s. We are in the mid-2020s now, and we would have benefited from long-term investments in clean and green power, driving down energy bills for consumers and for businesses across the country. We are now taking the long-term steps needed to invest in our energy security and bring bills down. That is incredibly important, and I hope that the steps we have taken on business rates and tax can be welcomed and that businesses in the hon. Member's constituency and across the country can engage through the various sector bodies with the high street strategy that I have announced.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I am sure that pubs and venues, such as the Alhambra in Morecambe, will welcome today's announcement. The Minister might be aware of my letter to the Chancellor on the wider hospitality sector. On the high street, we know that consumer demand has changed, so businesses must change, too. Will the Minister tell me how the strategy will work with businesses and their representatives, such as the Morecambe business improvement district or Sedbergh economic partnership, to pivot businesses to meet the new market reality?

Dan Tomlinson: We are keen to hear from businesses, large and small, about what more the Government can do to support high streets. We want to engage on lots of issues affecting high streets, including planning, licensing and crime, and the direct investment that we can make in our communities. There is a lot to do, because we had 14 years under the Conservatives where our high streets were in decay and shops were shutting. We had 7,000 pubs closing and businesses struggling across the country. We know that there is work to do, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and other Members on it.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): After all the briefing in the newspapers, we were all hopeful of something more significant, but we have a somewhat flaccid statement from the Minister. The statement not only totally ignores the fact that some pubs are having to deal with a threefold increase in business rates, but it does nothing to help high street retailers. Will the Minister be coming back to the House to make another U-turn to help our high street retailers?

Dan Tomlinson: No.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The support package for pubs is welcome news. The Whitegate Inn in Chadderton saw its value increase from £194,000 to £330,000, and the Halfway House in Royton went from £20,000 to £57,000. The Minister knows that the pressures being felt by pubs are felt by the whole of hospitality. For instance, the Egyptian Room food hall in Oldham will jump from £142,000 to £175,000. It is all part of the same ecosystem. The Government could and should have included that wider package in the announcement today, but I urge the Treasury, even at the second attempt, to get it right and have a wider support package for the whole of hospitality.

Dan Tomlinson: We have implemented a wider support package for businesses across the country as a result of the changes to valuations coming in from 1 April, which unwind the valuations that were last looked at during the pandemic. Some 56% of properties will see their bills fall or stay the same in April. The easy thing to do would have been to kick the revaluation into the long grass and bury our head in the sand, but we wanted to make sure that businesses, particularly those that have seen their valuations fall, got the benefit of having up-to-date values post pandemic. Then, because we were aware of the changes coming down the track, we stepped in with £4.3 billion of support. It means that our net revenue from business rates this year will be broadly the same as was forecast before the Budget.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): My constituency has a diverse and varied hospitality sector that supports lots of different communities, including those who do not go to pubs, such as parents of young children, people who do not drink, faith groups and—dare I say—people who do not want to watch the football. They have different needs. They want to go to cafés and to soft play centres. Why are the Government focusing this relief just on pubs? Can they not come up with a package that provides better business rates relief for those businesses that will still be struggling with the rates hike?

Dan Tomlinson: The hon. Member may not wish to watch the football, and that is fine—that is her decision—but she will be interested to know that we are consulting on whether we can extend the power over longer licensing hours to other events. She will have to let me know if there are other events that she would like to go and watch in a pub, and that can be part of the consultation.

I have already answered the specific question that the hon. Member raises in a way, but I am happy to repeat myself. It is the case that pubs are valued differently than other sectors on the high street. It is also the case that they have suffered in the past 14 years, with 7,000 pubs closing and significant pressures. More broadly, we have put in a package of support, as I have outlined already.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I know that many of the businesses in the Walthamstow beer mile that are also music venues, as well as our brilliant Rose and Crown pub and the Wood Street Bear, will welcome what the Minister has said today, and rightly so, because pubs are important. I must take issue, however, with his metric that pubs are somehow the only cornerstone of community life in this country. I join colleagues in asking for further support for the hospitality industry, in particular those small independent venues, such as cafés, community centres and soft play centres. I am sure he does not want to be the Minister responsible for sending toddlers into pubs because the other places that their parents might take them to during the day have closed down. That would not be in anybody's interest. May I make a plea for him to revisit his exclusion of these smaller, independent chains from the hospitality relief that he is talking about?

Dan Tomlinson: I would not want to be the Minister who caused that to happen. My hon. Friend has made a very good point, and, as the parent of a young child, I can say how much I value soft play, even though it is rather exhausting at times.

[Dan Tomlinson]

I have set out the specific reasons why we have taken this approach to pubs and live music venues, and I am glad that my hon. Friend welcomes that for the businesses in her constituency. More broadly, the Government did come forward with £4.3 billion of support, most of which is coming this year, and we will of course continue to engage with businesses and with parliamentarians on this important issue in the run-up to future Budgets.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am not sure whether the Minister has volunteered yet for “Strictly Come Dancing”. Today, from the Government of U-turns, we have seen a half turn or a reverse turn or a pivot, as it is known in ballroom dancing circles.

The Minister will recall that I invited him to join me on a pub crawl in Shropshire. So far he has not responded, and perhaps he should not respond, because for many pubs in Shropshire his statement was too little, too late, and they have already decided to close their doors. The independent pub chains have to make investment decisions, and they have put those off. As for the wider business review, may I appeal to the Minister—on behalf of the leisure sector, the retail sector and the hospitality sector—for the timetable to be brought forward from 2029 so that people can plan for their business futures?

Dan Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman has asked about timing. We have announced this decision today in time for new bills to be issued from 1 April that reflect the changes the Government have proposed, because we have listened and because we have carried out that engagement in recent weeks. I am not sure that I will take the hon. Gentleman up on his offer of a pub crawl just yet, but I hope he will be able to welcome the support we have provided for the pubs that he raised with me in questions earlier this year.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his positive engagement and his willingness to listen. It has made a big difference. His announcement will be a big relief to pubs throughout my constituency, and it shows that the Government are on their side. However, he has rightly recognised the need for more fundamental reform, so I welcome the announcement of the pub and hotel valuation methodology reviews and the high street strategy. Does he agree that this is an opportunity to think further about how the business rates system, and indeed the tax system as a whole, could be used to actively incentivise entrepreneurs to start and grow businesses and create jobs in the places where our communities need them most?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his persistent and powerful engagement on these matters. He is an expert on all things high street and business rates, as I have come to know. Let me point him to the transforming business rates work that the Government have been publishing and advancing. One possibility that we are considering carefully and talking to businesses about is changing the business rates system from a slab system to a slice system. At present, if a business goes over an individual threshold, the new tax rate will then apply to the whole value of its property. Reform is always tricky, but we want to investigate whether changing to a slice system, whereby the tax rate would not involve those

big stepped increases, would support investment by businesses on high streets in Rossendale and Darwen and across the country.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): William Robinson is the managing director of Robinsons Brewery, on my patch. His is the sixth generation running a brewer, a bottler and more than 250 pubs, inns and hotels across the north-west and north Wales, as well as an important bottling plant in Bredbury. William has written to tell me that the present system is destroying confidence, businesses and future investment, and therefore jobs. Does the Minister accept that repeated changes such as moving from the removal of reliefs to this package, including frozen bills and a temporary 15% discount, have created huge uncertainty and anxiety for pubs as they are making important investment and staffing decisions?

Dan Tomlinson: There is a big picture that we need to move to with business rates: making sure that, permanently, we have differential treatment for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses and those with higher value, particularly the large online warehouses that are causing the economic rebalancing that we do not really want to see and that is harming our high streets. The Government set out the reforms in the Budget in respect of the 5p reduction in the multiplier. As I have explained to Members, that is a transfer of nearly £1 billion in tax away from the high street—less tax—towards the larger online giants. I want to continue to engage on all tax matters that affect the high street in the run-up to the next Budget, and decisions will, of course, be made in the usual way.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the changes that the Minister is introducing for pubs and music venues. Can he assure me that the changes for music venues will apply to Sheffield arena, which currently, under the proposal, is being treated like an Amazon warehouse? Will he also look at an issue I wrote to him about? Handsworth Junior Sporting Club, a small local voluntary sports club in my constituency, is faced with a 60% increase in business rates. Surely that cannot be right. It needs to be looked at again.

Dan Tomlinson: As I have said, some live music venues are valued in a similar way to pubs, and will therefore be included in the relief. We think it fairest to provide the same level of relief to all music venues. The detail will be set out for the business in his constituency and others to see in the guidance, which I hope, if it has not already been published, will be published at some point today.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It does not say “English Business Rates” up there on the annunciator, so I assume the Minister can confirm that the budget—the departmental expenditure limit—for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will increase with the new money, which will mean Barnett consequential for the devolved nations. What will the quantum of that be, and when will it be delivered?

Dan Tomlinson: The Barnett consequential of this decision will be set out in the usual way and through the usual process.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I give my personal thanks to the Members on both sides of the House who have been advocating very strongly with him, including my hon. Friends the Members for Redditch (Chris Bloore), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley). I also thank the businesses and, in particular, the pubs in my constituency: the Anchor at Walberswick, the Froize Inn, Deben Inns, and many, many more. I welcome today's announcement, but we can do more and go further, including in the strategy, to look at lowering VAT for hospitality and lowering the alcohol duty, which could perhaps be offset by a higher alcohol duty in supermarkets.

Dan Tomlinson: This year, we are three years on from the changes in alcohol duty that the last Government implemented. I am not sure whether they adopted the same policy position, but we made it clear that it would be reviewed after three years. As part of that usual process, we will be reviewing the reforms that were made in 2023. If my hon. Friend or other Members want to write to me about changes that they think should be made, I will, of course, be happy to receive that correspondence.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Labour's response to high street struggles is a strategy later this year to look at

"what more the Government can do to support our high streets."

Well, I will save them the trouble. They should adopt the Conservatives' plan, and scrap business rates on those high streets.

Dan Tomlinson: I am not sure what the question was, but the Government have set out a plan that is fair and reasonable and does not engage with the fantasy economics that Opposition Members keep peddling. They still have Liz Truss in their party, and it shows, because instead of having a sensible business rates policy that is affordable and works for the long term, they have made-up spending cuts and pretend that they could afford to abolish a tax altogether. We know that that will not work. We know that they will not deliver it, not least because they had 14 years to make changes of that magnitude and never even bothered.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on music, in Independent Venue Week, I thank the Minister for extending the support to music venues. Will it include multi-use venues such as the City Varieties music hall in my constituency, where I attended the Holocaust memorial event on Sunday, and the Howard Assembly Room? Has the Minister considered the impact on music studios, which are also a core part of our creative industries?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the announcements made today. Because I do not know those specific independent venues, it would not be right for me to comment here, but he is welcome to check the guidance and to encourage the venues to check it online. We have made it clear that our policy intent is for pubs and music venues to be covered by these changes.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Many business representatives who met me after the Budget, including Shaun who runs Lanes hotel, will welcome the decision to review the way in which hotels are valued, but their biggest concern is about staying afloat today. A review will not make a difference to the bills that business owners such as Shaun are facing right now. What help will the Government offer rural hotels that are fighting to stay afloat, and does the Minister recognise the uncertainty that all this flip-flopping is creating for the hospitality sector?

Dan Tomlinson: We have set out a package of support for hotels and all other businesses. It is worth around £2 billion this year and £4 billion over the next three years. If there are hotels in the hon. Gentleman's constituency that are facing significant increases in their rateable values this year, the increases in their bills will potentially be many multiples lower, because bill increases are capped at either £800 for small businesses or at 15% or 30% for the largest. It is really important that we distinguish—I am not saying that he is not doing so, because I am not sure of the detail—between the change in rateable values and the change in bills. That is important, and it sometimes gets lost in this discussion.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I welcome the engagement from the Minister and today's fantastic announcement, and invite him to come and have a pint at the Dolphin in my constituency, where I used to pull pints. Just down the road is William Cowley, a business that has been in my constituency since 1870. It produces the vellum on which much of the history of this nation has been written, including royal weddings, births and deaths; royal patents; freedoms of the city; and many Acts of Parliament. It is worried about its viability going forward, particularly after the revaluation of business rates. Will the Minister agree to meet me to have a discussion about how we can better support heritage businesses going forward?

Dan Tomlinson: One of my favourite things to do is to meet my hon. Friend to discuss a whole range of matters, so I will happily discuss this issue with him too. We have been in correspondence on this business already, so I hope that he passed on the messages from me about the need to check that there is a difference between the increase in the RV—the rateable value—and the increase in business rates bills. I hope to be in one of the fastest-growing cities in the country before long.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): This U-turn delivers some much-needed temporary relief for a lot of pubs, but it does not deliver the permanently lower bills that the Prime Minister promised. It also does nothing at all for the other hospitality firms in our constituencies—the cafés, restaurants, clubs and guest houses that are facing crippling rate rises because of this Government's choices. Mr Speaker, is it not a sign of the incompetence of this Government that they cannot even get their U-turns right?

Dan Tomlinson: I do not think that was a question for me. It was a question for you, Mr Speaker.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I note that Reform Members have already made it to the pub ahead of the statement, perhaps to celebrate the latest defection from

[Alex McIntyre]

the Conservative party, but I thank the Minister for today's statement. Since I got elected last year, I have been running a campaign to open up our empty shops in Gloucester and show that we are open for business. May I ask him to expedite the high street strategy to make sure that we are capitalising on the fantastic opportunities in my city to turbocharge regional growth in my area and make sure that everyone can be proud of their high street?

Dan Tomlinson: I really look forward to working with my hon. Friend on important matters such as the high street strategy, and I hope that he has been in conversation with his local authority and businesses about some of the other measures that the Government are introducing and the issues that are important to him. High street rental auctions have real potential to be powerful in forcing shops that are being left vacant back into use. The introduction of the community right to buy should also be an effective change, and I hope that we will be able to see it implemented in his constituency and across the country.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Can the Minister understand, from the point of view of a small independent retailer, that the way that this announcement has been done—with the package coming forward late in the day—has led to a perception of unfairness? I was contacted by one owner, who pointed out that her bills have gone up by over £500 a month. She compares herself with Harrods and Selfridges, whose bills have gone down. Although she is pleased that local pubs and hospitality have got some help, her business sits alongside them and is part of the same community. What does the Minister have to say to that independent retailer, who is part of the backbone of our economy? When is the help coming for her business?

Dan Tomlinson: I do not know the details of that individual business owner and by how much her rateable value has increased, but we have implemented the permanently lower multipliers. They are now 33% lower than the tax rate that is paid by the online giants. That is a big change to the system that this Government have delivered, and which previous Governments ducked time and again. We have implemented our transitional relief caps this year, capping increases at £800 or at 15% or 30% for the largest businesses. We will continue to engage with businesses on what more we can do on a whole range of issues.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Of course this package of support for pubs and music venues is most welcome, and I know it will be welcomed in Hartlepool, but I have been contacted by numerous businesses, including the Marine hotel in Seaton Carew, whose business rates will basically double this year. Hartlepool is a town of entrepreneurs and innovators, but they cannot afford that. Will the Minister look again at the wider support package that we could put in place for hospitality?

Dan Tomlinson: I would be happy to have a further conversation with my hon. Friend about this issue. It is really important that no hotel will see its business rates

bill go up by 100% this year. It may be that the Marine hotel has seen a really significant increase in its rateable value, and we will review the methodology because of the large increases. We are aware of those, and we want to work on this issue with the hotel industry. It sounds like the business is probably one of the larger ones, so its increase will be capped at 30%. If it is a smaller business, the increase may be capped at 15%. That is the difference that this Government are making. If it is a business receiving RHL relief, it would have had that relief removed overnight under the previous Government, with a 300% increase in rateable values for businesses in 2025.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): If the Minister were to visit my constituency and come with me to the George Inn in Barton-upon-Humber, we would go inside and he would immediately recognise it as a typical English pub, yet it is also a hotel—the last hotel in the town. Could the Minister reassure the proprietor at the George? Will he receive early relief, or will he have to wait for yet another review?

Dan Tomlinson: The definition of “pubs” that is used for the changes that have been announced today is the same one that was used when the previous Government implemented a relief. I believe that that was in 2017, so it is a long-standing definition. I encourage the hon. Member to find that on the gov.uk website and send it to the relevant business. I do not know the precise details of the pub that he mentions, but we are sticking with the long-standing definition.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): We in Peterborough are fond of a pint, so I thank the Minister and his team for their engagement today and in the months leading up to this decision. We are also proud of our independent beer festival, and we are home to Oakham Ales. Can the Minister reassure us that as he looks at the strategy for the high street and the rules on business rates, he will have due regard to the needs of the community sector—both the pubs that are going into community ownership, and the small businesses and others that provide communities on our high streets?

Dan Tomlinson: That is a really important point. There are many independent pubs up and down the country, as well as bigger chain pubs, and it is right that the support that the Government are bringing forward will support both. Around 75%—definitely above 70%—of independents and chains will receive support this year, ensuring that their bills are either flat or falling. We want to make sure that we are protecting both the independents and the chains.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the statement. It is a pity that it does not include hotels and restaurants, because the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland is under massive pressure due to taxes and the regulations that have been imposed. The Minister has confirmed that this will be new money and therefore there will be a Barnett consequential. Can he indicate how much that will be? More importantly, can he ensure that the Sinn Féin Finance Minister spends the money for the purpose that was intended, rather than spending it for other purposes, which he has done in the past?

Dan Tomlinson: It is not for me to tell the devolved Administrations how to spend their money, but if the right hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will be happy to write back to him with the details of the consequentials following the decision set out today.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hospitality and tourism, I thank the Minister for his constant engagement with me since the Budget, because I have been able to raise concerns directly with him from the industry, UKHospitality and others. This statement will be welcome for many pubs in Blackpool, including our small music venues, such as the Bootleg. You may want to visit it sometime, Mr Speaker, and I hope you get well soon. We know that the hospitality sector has been struggling. It is on life support after a decade of neglect from the previous Government, and it needs more support. Will the Minister continue to engage with me, the APPG and UKHospitality on what the high street strategy can do, so that we get it right this time?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is a powerful and strong advocate both for the businesses in his constituency and for the hospitality sector more broadly. I thank him for our conversations; I think we spoke before Christmas as well as in recent weeks. I will of course continue to engage with him and the hospitality sector on tax issues, as is typical for a Tax Minister in the run-up to a Budget, but I also want to talk more about the broader support the Government can provide, working across Departments, as part of the high street strategy we have announced today.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): This is another U-turn that does not go far enough, because as a result of the choices made by Labour, energy bills are up, taxes are up and confidence is down. That is corrosive, and it is having a particularly corrosive effect on cafés, restaurants, hotels and small retail outlets. Will the Minister announce broader support for those businesses to alleviate the pressure of business rates or, better still, scrap them once and for all?

Dan Tomlinson: Over and over again, Conservative Members profess to be paragons of fiscal virtue, yet stand up in this place and say they want to cut taxation, which in effect means more and more borrowing. We have in the past seen the problems caused by Conservative Governments who let borrowing run out of control, cause interest rates to surge for families in our constituencies, send our economy to the dogs and harm living standards. We will not stand for that—we will not make the mistakes they made—and we will come forward with proportionate changes that support businesses, but that make sure we can continue to keep our public finances on a sustainable path.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York is a difficult place in which to trade, and with two thirds of businesses being independents, many will not get the relief the Minister has announced today. I sent through a paper with a spreadsheet of every business in the business improvement district showing that this just is not meeting their needs of those businesses, which will close. Will the Minister look at that detail, and ensure that resilience and support are built in, because York has a very strong retail reputation, but it is about to be challenged unless more help comes its way?

Dan Tomlinson: I am always happy to look at and respond to the correspondence I receive from hon. Members. I am aware of the issue my hon. Friend raises, which she has been consistently raising in this House. We came forward at the Budget with a significant package of support, and many small and independent businesses are small enough not to pay business rates because we have the small business rates relief in place, and we are extending that relief to support businesses that could extend to a second premises.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I declare an interest in that my husband works for an independent wine merchant.

Today's news will be very welcome for the many pubs in North Shropshire that have been pushed to the brink over recent years by national insurance contributions increases, high energy bills and now business rates. However, this will not help shops or hotels such as the lovely Pen-y-Dyffryn in my constituency, the rateable value of which has nearly quadrupled. Will the Minister outline the timeline for his review of hotels in particular, and what other help can be given to retail and hospitality businesses?

Dan Tomlinson: We want to work with the hotel sector on the review I have announced today. We will make sure it reports in time to be implemented by the Valuation Office Agency by the date of the next revaluation. For hotels at the very far end of the distribution of changes in rateable value—with an increase that large, I believe the one the hon. Member mentioned is—that is precisely why we have implemented the support we have. If it is worth less than £100,000, its increase will be capped at 15% this year; if it is worth more, its increase will be capped at 30%. We are aware that that is still an increase, but it is significantly less than it would have been if we had not stepped in to provide that support.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is understandable that covid-era business rates support needs to come to an end, and the 15% cap on increases for most hospitality businesses is a really important protection. I particularly welcome the Government's acknowledgment of the central role that pubs—such as the Paddock in Chaddesden, the White Swan in Littleover and so many more across Derby—play in our communities. Will the Government continue to listen to and work with pubs, so that we can ensure they have certainty for the long term?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, we will continue to work with pubs, because we do value them. I want to be clear, however, that we value all of the businesses on the high street. We value our hospitality businesses, our retail businesses and those that work in leisure and soft play, which I believe was mentioned earlier. All the different businesses that provide life and vibrancy on our high streets are important. I have set out the particular challenges of the rateable value methodology for pubs and the big challenges they have faced over the last 14 years, with 7,000 closing, but we want to make sure we continue to do all we can to support high streets in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Dozens of small businesses across Ceredigion and north Pembrokeshire will have listened to the Minister's statement with interest.

[Ben Lake]

Could he please reassure me that the consequential funding that he has confirmed will go to Welsh Government will be determined and communicated in time—by 1 April—to allow the Welsh Government to allocate additional support to those small businesses?

Dan Tomlinson: I am sure that the consequentials and their implications will be set out as soon as is practically possible.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): As I think you know, Mr Speaker, Exeter and Devon have some of the finest pubs, independent breweries and live music venues in the country. I thank Exeter Brewery and the Exeter Phoenix arts venue for their representations to me on these issues. I am pleased that, on top of the support in the Budget, pubs will get an additional 15% off, and that will apply to music venues as well, which is very welcome. Does the Minister agree with me that the £4.3 billion of support in the Budget, and the support today, stand in stark contrast to the record of 7,000 pubs closing under the previous Government?

Dan Tomlinson: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. What happened in the past is in stark contrast to the reform of our business rates system under our Government. We have set out long-term differences in the multipliers—also known as the tax rates—faced by high-street businesses and those faced by the online giants and the largest businesses. Typical businesses on his high street will have a significantly lower tax rate than that faced by the largest online warehouses. I understand that bills may still increase because of the winding down of pandemic relief and the increase in rateable values, but that underlying reform of the system is there, and it is there for good.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Tom Duxberry has run Marney's village inn, a brilliant and much-loved local in Weston Green, for 17 years. Its rateable value is set to rise from £20,000 to £50,000—a 175% increase—and he is facing rent rises; inflation on beer, wine products and energy; and customers with less money in their pocket. Did the Government not see his plight right from the get-go, and what more help can they give him with all those pressures?

Dan Tomlinson: Because of the interventions announced today, the total business rates bill for pubs will fall over the coming years. As the hon. Member mentions, we are giving individual pubs a 15% reduction on their new bills, and then a real-terms freeze for the next two years. That is a significant intervention because of the significant challenges that pubs have faced—7,000 pubs have closed—and the issues with their RV methodology.

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this really significant additional support for pubs and music venues, on top of the £4.3 billion given to the wider sector at the Budget. I thank the Minister for all the conversations that he has had with me over the last few weeks, and I also thank Dan and Ness from the Greyhound, who have engaged so positively and constructively with me. It is fair to say that the business rates rebound inherited from the previous Government led to a mixed

picture across Ipswich, but the Greyhound was particularly unfortunate. Could the Minister lay out his thinking behind the review of this process?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy on behalf of the pubs and businesses in his constituency. Concerns have been raised about the methodology. We have looked into that in recent weeks, and we think it is right to review it. That review will take place in the coming months. It will definitely report in time for the new revaluation, so that we can have a long-term, sustainable methodology for pubs, making sure that they are valued in the right way for the long term, from 2029 onwards.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Minister's statement will certainly be welcomed by many pub owners who have written to me in recent weeks, anxious about rising costs, but what about the rest of the high street? Small businesses are the heartbeat of Blackburn and the engine of our country. Already battered by online shopping and rising costs, they are being squeezed from every direction. Why are the Government making it harder for Blackburn's independent shops to survive, instead of delivering the permanent cuts that our town centres need to flourish?

Dan Tomlinson: Around one in three businesses will continue to benefit from small business rates relief, and so will pay nothing at all. As for independent shops that are above the threshold and in the business rates system, many just above the threshold will be on the taper, and others will benefit from the support that was set out at the Budget.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I welcome support for pubs in Britain's beer capital of Burton and Uttoxeter. I thank the Minister for his continued engagement with me on this issue; I know that we will continue to speak about measures that could be included in the future, such as draught relief. The Minister will remember that I stressed the importance of hospitality more widely, and of breathing life into our high streets, so I welcome the high-street strategy announcement. How can businesses feed directly into it, so that we hear from those affected?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is a proud and strong champion of the businesses in his constituency—the brewers, pubs and all those in the hospitality industry. I am sure that businesses in his patch would do well to feed in via him, as he is such a good representative.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): There are many fine pubs in the South Cotswolds, such as the Old George Inn in South Cerney and the Rattlebone Inn in Sherston. For many of our small rural communities, these are the only freely available spaces where people—faith leaders and football fans alike—can meet, yet many pubs are really struggling. Although I welcome today's statement, £1,650 per pub is better than a poke in the eye, but not by much. Would the Minister be kind enough to meet me to discuss how his Department could further support the pubs of the South Cotswolds? Given today's run-ins with the Chair, I suggest the Trouble House near Tetbury as a suitable venue.

Dan Tomlinson: I hope that I will be out of trouble before too long. We will double the hospitality support fund, providing £10 million of funding over the next three years. That fund aims to help more than 1,000 pubs diversify their business model, improve efficiency and productivity in the sector, and support people who are furthest from the labour market in moving into jobs in hospitality.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the 15% off business rates for pubs in Sunderland. As we are a music city—live music is core to our identity and regeneration—I particularly welcome the steps that the Minister has announced for live music venues, and his engagement with me and the Music Venue Trust. Could he say a little bit about the methodology for music venues? I know that he will look at the pub methodology, but would he consider discussing the future methodology for music venues? We could perhaps do that at a gig at Independent, or over a pint at the Ship Isis afterwards.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his representations on behalf of businesses in his constituency. The Government are clear that we will look at the pub and hotel methodologies specifically. I would be happy to have a conversation with him about issues for other sectors, but the Government will focus on pubs and hotels. However, I would be happy to meet, to see if I can make it up to his constituency.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Unfortunately, the Sinn Féin Finance Minister in Northern Ireland has not got the memo on the need to support our hospitality sector, and is pressing on with a rates revaluation that will see a hotel in my constituency experience a 267% rate rise. Will the Minister commit to sharing this Government's hard learning about rates, and will he go further and reduce the VAT rate for hospitality as well?

Dan Tomlinson: The hon. Member is right that each devolved Government have full control over the structure and level of business rates in their part of the country. They set a business rates policy, retain all the revenues generated, and determine how they are spent.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): When we had an urgent question on business rates last week, I raised the issue of grassroots music venues, so I am pleased that the Minister confirmed today that there will be 15% off business rates for pubs and grassroots music venues. As he seeks to build on the permanently lower multipliers and the excess of £4 billion of support in the Budget with his high street strategy, can I encourage him to keep music and cultural venues front and centre of his thinking? The UK music industry generates more than £8 billion for the UK economy, and these venues are a platform for future talent.

Dan Tomlinson: I will continue to keep those important cultural and social assets in mind as we work on our policy for supporting businesses across the country.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Minister talks about the definition of a pub. In the village of Hurstpierpoint in my constituency, Morley's Bistro has a very similar product offering to food-led pubs on the

same high street. They are competing for the same customers, and they are, ideally, all employing young people and giving them their first job. How does the Minister justify this?

Dan Tomlinson: We are, in the usual way, using long-standing definitions set out in business rates guidance to define pubs, and similar venues to which the relief will apply.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I thank Gary at the Marcia Inn in Bishopthorpe and Adam at the Wenlock Arms in Wheldrake for meeting me to discuss support for pubs. The Tories created a ticking time bomb on business rates, then walked away, like someone who spilled a pint and left us to mop it up. Does the Minister agree that this Government are determined to back legendary landlords in Britain, like Gary and Adam?

Dan Tomlinson: Very much so. We want to support legendary landlords. I have my own in my constituency, and I look forward to having a pint with them this weekend to discuss the changes that the Government have made.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): When it comes to business rates, the Government have delivered a masterclass in giving with one hand and taking with the other, leaving pubs and hospitality businesses worse off, but businesses cannot be fooled. They are on top of their numbers, even if the Government are not. Will the Government consider again the Liberal Democrat proposal for an emergency 5% cut in VAT for hospitality, and can he give an answer that does not resort to political point scoring?

Dan Tomlinson: We will not be considering the Liberal Democrats' policy.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Yesterday, I visited the Beach Hut, a fantastic independent indoor play venue in my home village of Norton Canes. The owner, Joanne, told me how passionate she and her staff are, but they face particularly acute pressures; they have a relatively large footprint, and therefore higher business rates, but have to keep fees low for families. Indoor play faces a perfect storm of increasing costs, but it offers so much to children and their parents. As the Minister will be working on the high street strategy, will he meet me, people from Cannock Chase venues, and the Association of Indoor Play to discuss what support could be provided to the sector?

Dan Tomlinson: I would be happy to discuss that matter with my hon. Friend. Indoor play is a really valuable and growing part of our economy, but there are challenges. With more free childcare, it may be that fewer people are going in during the day, and I know that many indoor play centres have seen increases in their rateable values. We set out our proposals on business rates at the Budget to support these businesses with significant caps this year, next year and the year after.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): When I visited The Play Shed in Yate last year, the reduction in retail, hospitality and leisure relief was already costing it £12,000, even before the more recent changes. This package is welcome for pubs and music venues, but

[Claire Young]

what will the Government do to help other leisure businesses in my constituency that are struggling with business rates?

Dan Tomlinson: We have changed the tax rates, the multipliers, within the system so that a typical high street business may now pay 38p in the pound and an online retail giant may pay 51p in the pound on their rateable values. That is a significant underlying reform to the tax system that is here for good.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Business rates are complicated, and this new methodology particularly so. Businesses were always going to be in touch with MPs, and in our democracy we were going to talk it through with the Government to get to a better place. Today's announcement shows that our democracy works and that representation works. I thank the hospitality sector business owners in Bournemouth East who have constructively engaged with me to get to that better place. We also, in this House, need to put party politics aside and recognise that business owners put their hearts and souls, and their blood, sweat and tears, into building something better. We all need to commit to doing something better on their behalf. Will the Minister continue to engage with me, on behalf of all hospitality, so that we can get the very best deal for them, and not just now but for the future?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement, persistence and advocacy on behalf of the businesses in his constituency. I know that he has had many conversations with businesses in his constituency, and he has been able to feed them directly to me as the Minister with responsibility for tax. I am sure that we will continue to have such conversations in the months and years to come.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The change in business rates for pubs will be welcomed by the Winchester Arms in Trull in my constituency, but a family hotel contacted me yesterday and the combined impact of Government changes in the Budget will, they expect, as they look to the year ahead, lead to a £250,000 loss next year. Will the Minister meet me, Somerset MPs and hoteliers to discuss how hotels can be helped through the reforms he is proposing?

Dan Tomlinson: Because of the concerns around the methodology to value hotels, today we have announced that we will review that methodology so that, in time for the next revaluation, hotels can have a methodology that more appropriately works for their sector. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that hotels have seen some of the largest increases in their rateable values. Therefore, they will be some of the biggest beneficiaries from the caps we have put into the system this year.

Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles

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

3.31 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the marketing, sale, and supply of electrically assisted pedal cycles that fall outside the class of electrically assisted pedal cycles prescribed under the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles Regulations 1983 and of equipment capable of converting a pedal cycle into a such a vehicle; and for connected purposes.

The Bill is without doubt a mouthful, and it may seem technical and dry, but at its core it is about safety, clarity and responsibility. It is about protecting pedestrians, other road users, lawful cyclists, constituents and our communities from vehicles that look like bikes but behave like motorbikes. It is about stopping the sale of illegal e-bikes and the kits that turn ordinary, everyday pedal bikes into illegal monster bikes.

E-bikes, when they conform to the law, are a force for good. They mean cleaner journeys, better public health and less congestion. By law, e-bike motors should have a maximum continuous power output of 250 W and should cut out when the bike reaches 15.5 mph. Going faster than that is perfectly permissible without a motor. Indeed, I am told that for some people it is entirely possible—a fact that I am sure I will see at first hand when the Tour de France travels through my constituency next summer. But those speeds, as those athletes will demonstrate, will be reached without motorised assistance.

The sad reality, as Members know, is that right now, as I speak, there are illegal e-bikes on the streets of our constituencies that are reaching dangerously high speeds. Those e-bikes and the conversion kits used to create them are being sold with batteries capable of reaching speeds far beyond 15.5 mph. A bike seized and tested earlier this month in my constituency of Carlisle found that the bike was capable of 37 mph. Another e-bike seized in my constituency was found to have a battery capable of achieving 56 mph. Nationally, police have seized e-bikes capable of 70 mph.

These are not minor issues. These are illegal vehicles that can, and do, kill. Last year, in Australia, a pedestrian was killed after he was struck by an illegally modified e-bike. Last October, a 60-year-old woman was killed in New York by an e-bike capable of travelling at 30 mph. Last summer, in Greater Manchester, a 70-year-old woman was left in a coma and with life-changing injuries after being hit by an e-bike advertised with a top speed of 47 mph, and in 2024 an 86-year-old man from Lancashire was hit and killed by an illegal e-bike. We cannot continue to let this happen.

These, frankly, are illegal, unregistered, untaxed monster bikes without MOTs. These bikes have become a menace not just on the streets of Carlisle, but in communities across the UK. Their speed and lack of traceability makes them the perfect accomplice in robbery, phone theft and drug dealing. Our local neighbourhood police teams have done a good job of seizing and crushing these illegal machines, but they are fighting a losing battle. Cumbria's police, fire and crime commissioner, David Allen, who is in the Public Gallery today, believes that the time has come to stop the problem at the source by banning the sale of these illegal e-bikes and the conversion kits that create them. I agree, which is why I am introducing the Bill.

Online marketplaces and overseas suppliers sell high-powered e-bikes and conversion kits with minimal checks, scant safety information and no clear liability. Too often, buyers assume that a product is legal because the website does not say otherwise. We already accept that some dangerous items simply must not be sold to the public. We ban the retail sale of flick knives because they are capable of killing and causing serious injury; we restrict the sale of F4 fireworks to those who are trained to use them safely; and we ban the use, import and supply of asbestos-containing materials, because they can kill. Those bans are about removing from the market products that are known to harm and kill. Monster e-bikes harm and kill.

The Bill is targeted and proportionate. It would continue to allow the sale and enjoyment of legal e-bikes, but it would shut down the sale and marketing of illegal monster bikes and the kits used to create them. It would give regulators and the police powers to seize and destroy non-compliant bikes and conversion kits at the point of sale, and it would create clear offences and penalties for retailers of illegal products. Cutting off the sale and marketing of illegal e-bikes would remove dangerous products before they reach our streets.

The Bill recognises that enforcement must be paired with support. It would give trading standards bodies, the police and other regulators targeted powers to act against sellers and online marketplaces. It would require clear consumer information so that buyers are not misled into thinking that high-powered machines are road legal. It would also help riders who rely on e-bikes for work to continue to access safe, legal e-bikes.

The Bill is a practical, evidence-led measure that is intended to reduce the harm we see in our communities, protect the vulnerable and make our streets safer. As I have set out, it draws on the same logic that led Parliament to ban the sale of other dangerous items. It must be the case that when a product is capable of killing or causing injury, and its sale cannot be reasonably regulated, it simply should not be sold. Let us be clear: lawful, safe e-bikes are part of our future. What the Bill would do it introduce measured, necessary steps to make our streets safer, to protect our constituents, and to stop the sale of monster e-bikes. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ms Julie Minns, Luke Akehurst, Liam Byrne, Anna Dixon, Tim Farron, Fabian Hamilton, Tom Hayes, Alex McIntyre, Jim Shannon and Bradley Thomas present the Bill.

Ms Julie Minns accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 February, and to be printed (Bill 372).

MEDICAL TRAINING (PRIORITISATION) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings

on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme

order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report

the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

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

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

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

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

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

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

Miscellaneous

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

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

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

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

(17) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill

Second Reading

3.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I begin by thanking the Leader of the House, the Chief Whip, their counterparts in the other place, colleagues in my Department and in the NHS, the Bill team and parliamentary counsel, who have moved mountains to prepare this Bill in double-quick time. I once again place on the record my sincere thanks to my counterparts in the Governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—as well as the respective Secretaries of State for those nations—for the spirit in which, regardless of party, they have helped us to bring the Bill forward. Last but by no means least, I am enormously grateful to Jackie Baillie, Labour's deputy leader in Holyrood, for her wise counsel.

The NHS is on the road to recovery, not least because of the herculean efforts and dedication of NHS leaders and frontline staff who, even in the depths of winter, are delivering outstanding episodes of care, hour after hour and day after day. Among the encouraging signs of year-on-year improvement are waiting lists falling at their fastest rate in three years—down more than 300,000 under Labour—and quicker ambulance response times, shorter waits in A&E and speedier cancer diagnoses for more people. December was the busiest month in NHS history for 999 calls, but despite that, and regardless of industrial action and winter pressures, ambulances arrived at heart attack and stroke patients nearly 15 minutes faster compared with last year.

The progress we are seeing is a reminder that nothing positive for the people who use the NHS ever happens without the people who work in our NHS. Our investment and modernisation are starting to restore confidence and renew belief among frontline staff; with that, hope, optimism and ambition are returning too. That is why, outside of the pandemic, staff retention is at its highest in a decade and vacancies are at their lowest since records began in 2017. There is lots done, but, as we know, there is so much more to do.

I will always be honest about the state of our national health service—what is going well and where we need to improve. There is no sugar coating the fact that staff morale is still too low, and the way that some of our NHS workforce is still treated and the conditions in which too many of them still work are nothing short of a national disgrace. Not only is it a stain on our NHS, but it shames us as a country when those who care for us in our hour of need suffer bullying, harassment and racist abuse; have nowhere to rest, go to the toilet or get changed; cannot get a hot meal on a night shift; have limited flexible working options; must book holiday a year in advance; need to log in seven times just to use a PC; spend time form-filling rather than looking after patients; and face basic errors with pay and contracts. Before Christmas, I had a doctor in my constituency advice surgery in tears as she described the way she had been treated by a previous employer. This is no way to treat the people who kept us going when everything else stopped, so we are taking action.

Trusts are now implementing the 10-point plan for resident doctors and my Department, together with NHS England, is developing new staff standards to create better working practices and better conditions.

We have awarded above-inflation pay rises to everyone working in the NHS for this year and last year, which is beginning to recover the pay erosions seen under the last Government. We have begun 2026 with constructive talks with the British Medical Association's resident doctors committee, as we seek to broker industrial peace. I have also told NHS leaders that they need to step up when it comes to the conditions that their staff face. They cannot expect the Secretary of State to micromanage availability of hot food in their canteen, for example.

However, there are workforce problems that only Government can solve. We have known for years that the treatment of resident doctors is often totally unacceptable and that the very real fears about their futures are wholly justified. Every time I have met a resident doctor, either formally or informally, they have told me without fail how their careers are blocked because there are far too many applicants for training places. Not only do I think that they have a legitimate grievance, but I agree with them.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Secretary of State is essentially talking about postgraduate training. I wonder what thought he has given to new clause 2 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). I have spoken to students who worked really hard all the way through medical school to get the best exam results and perform highly but then ended up in an allocation system that pays no attention whatsoever to that. Merit has been entirely removed from the system. I think it was wrong for us to make that change. Does he have any sympathy for returning to a merit-based system?

Wes Streeting: I certainly do have sympathy with that argument. We have begun to move the system in the right direction in terms of giving applicants greater preference in placements, but it is not lost on me that the system of rotations, placements and jobs means doctors are moved around the country and families are uprooted. The frictional cost of relocating from one place to another is a challenge that resident doctors in particular face. I do not think that an amendment to the Bill is the right vehicle in which to address that issue, but I am sympathetic to the arguments that the hon. Member makes, and I am sure he will make them again during this afternoon's proceedings. We will take his arguments seriously and look to work together with the BMA and others to act to improve the experience of training, rotations and jobs.

UK graduates used to compete among themselves for foundation and specialty roles. Now they are competing against the world, because of the visa and immigration changes made by the Conservative Government post Brexit. The situation is compounded by the previous Administration's total lack of workforce planning, which saw more students going to medical school without the number of specialty training places being increased. That is why we see the training bottlenecks that resident doctors face today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Wes Streeting: I will give way to the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern).

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): A constituent of mine is studying medicine at Queen Mary University of London but at a campus in Malta. Students at the Malta campus complete the same General Medical Council-approved curriculum, assessments and licensed exams as London-based students, and graduates hold a UK primary qualification. He was given a formal guarantee that he would be at no disadvantage if he chose to study at the Malta campus. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that graduates like my constituent will be prioritised on the NHS foundation medical training programme?

Wes Streeting: Students studying in Malta will not be prioritised in the Bill, but they will still be able to make applications. Queen Mary University's Malta website is clear that Queen Mary does not administer the UK foundation programme and cannot control whether or on what basis applicants are accepted into the programme, and no one is guaranteed a post on qualification.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting: I will make some progress because, with respect, I have not yet set out the measures that we are to debate today. Let me take the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin, then I will set out the Government's rationale and take further interventions.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I wonder if the Secretary of State shares my residents' utter disbelief that the last Government created a system where thousands of UK medical graduates, educated at the cost of billions to the UK taxpayer, were suddenly forced to compete with overseas students, pushing many abroad for their careers and losing a big talent pool that should be powering our NHS and getting it back on its feet.

Wes Streeting: That is right. I have to say, many of my counterparts around the world cannot fathom how we ended up in this situation in the first place. They certainly do not do as we have been doing, investing so much in their home-grown talent only to then see that talent compete on equal terms with anyone from anywhere else in the world.

Let me set out why we need this Bill. There are workforce problems that only Government can solve. We know that the treatment of resident doctors has been totally unacceptable for years and we see the training bottlenecks that resident doctors face today. In 2019, there were around 12,000 applicants for 9,000 specialty training places. This year, that has soared to nearly 40,000 applicants for 10,000 places, with nearly twice as many overseas-trained applicants as UK-trained ones. As a result, we now have the ridiculous state of affairs where UK medical graduates, whose training British taxpayers fund to the tune of £4 billion a year and who want to carve out a career in their NHS, are either being lost abroad or to the private sector. If we do not deal with that, the scale of the issue and the resentment it causes will just get worse. More taxpayers' money will

be wasted, more British medics will turn their backs on the NHS, and patients and our NHS will ultimately suffer.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Secretary of State knows that the SNP believes that this is a pragmatic Bill that will have a net-positive outcome for the health service in Scotland. We welcome the Bill and are glad to support it. However, there are specialty fields, such as general practice, which have a high number of international graduates. Because of Government policy, there are significant challenges in supporting the retention of some individuals. For example, the new requirement for settled status is 10 years with some exceptions, whereas training programmes are often only three years long. I am sure that the Secretary of State does not want the UK to be a hostile environment for our vital overseas medical staff. Will he therefore make representations to the Home Office so that it is aware of the anomaly?

Wes Streeting: I will say two things to the hon. Gentleman. This Bill does not in any way detract from the fundamental point that the NHS has always been an overseas recruiter and we have always been fortunate to draw on global talent from around the world who come and give through their service, their taxes and their wider contribution to the national health service and our country. We will continue to welcome that and people will continue to be free to apply. In future, they will apply on terms that are fairer to our own, home-grown talent.

There is nothing in what the Home Secretary proposes that will stop people who come through our universities and have the skills that we need to contribute to our health and care system applying for jobs and settling and making the UK their home. The Bill supports the Home Secretary to reduce an over-reliance on overseas talent and labour, which contributes to levels of net migration that even bleeding-heart liberals like me can see are too high. That is the issue that the Home Secretary seeks to deal with.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right that we need to deal with this pressing problem and I support the aims of the Bill. However, as he can imagine, as the only current Member of this House with Maltese heritage, I have had representations from all quarters, both in the UK and in Malta, about the impact on Malta of this. Our two countries have a special health relationship, including the affiliation of the UK foundation programme with the Maltese equivalent. I understand that now may not be the time to have Malta in the priority group, but I note that there is a power in clause 4(6) that allows the Secretary of State to amend that in future. Is that something that my right hon. Friend will think about reviewing in future?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is right about the measures in the Bill. He is also right about the importance of our relationship with Malta, which is long-standing and deep, and this Government place enormous value on that. We will, of course, keep the workings of the measures in the Bill under review. He is also right to say that the Bill provides flexibility to the Secretary of State to adjust, as our needs may demand.

Dr Murrison: The Bill is basically a good one, and we all share the intent to encourage home-grown talent to remain in our national health service, so could the Health Secretary explain why he appears to have set his face against British students who for various reasons train at, for example, St George's in Cyprus or St George's in Grenada and who then want to come back and practise in our national health service? They want to come back and practise at home. Amendment 9 would deal with that conundrum. Why will he not support it?

Wes Streeting: We set UK medical school places based on future health system needs. We cannot control how many places the overseas campus universities create, whether they are UK-based universities or not. Prioritising those graduates in the way that the right hon. Gentleman suggests would undermine sustainable workforce planning. It would also undermine social mobility and fair access. Those campuses are commercial ventures; they receive no public funding and students are generally self-funded. The nature of prioritisation is that we set priorities, and these are the priorities that this Government are setting out. We must break our over-reliance on international recruitment.

As I have said, I am proud of the fact that the NHS is an international employer, and it is no coincidence that the Empire Windrush landed on these shores in 1948, the very year our NHS was founded. We are lucky that we have people from around the world who come and work in our health and care service. Since Brexit, however, under the last Government, we have begun to see something much more corrosive, with the NHS poaching staff from countries on the World Health Organisation's red list because their own shortages of medical practitioners are so severe. The continued plundering of doctors from countries that desperately need them while we have an army of talented and willing recruits who cannot get jobs is morally unacceptable. If some Opposition Members want to defend that record and dismiss the morality argument, I would point out that that position is naive on economic grounds. Competition for medical staff has never been fiercer. The World Health Organisation estimates a shortfall of 11 million health workers by 2030. Shoring up our own workforce will limit our exposure to such global pressures without depriving other countries of their own home-grown talent.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent speech and the strong points that he is delivering. I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) about Malta. As a member of the Health and Social Care Committee, I have also been approached by Queen Mary University. It seems to me that we should be approaching this with a sense of fairness, and if students have entered into a GMC-recognised course with the expectation of having priority access for foundation status, we should accept that those who are currently in training still enjoy that, even if we change the rules for people who enter those courses in the future. Is that something that my right hon. Friend will consider?

Wes Streeting: As I have said, the position we have set out is founded on fairness. The basis on which people have applied to these universities has made it clear that the universities cannot guarantee places and that overseas

applicants studying at UK universities' overseas campuses can still apply. There is nothing to prevent those people from applying, but when it comes to prioritisation, we are prioritising UK-trained medical graduates from UK-based universities who have undertaken their training here in the UK. I think that is the right priority to draw.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con) *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I will take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman. I will come to my right hon. Friend in a moment.

Gregory Stafford: The Secretary of State mentioned the need for more medical staff across the world and, of course, in this country as well. At the general election, he pledged to double the number of medical school places by 2030. Is that still a commitment, and how far has he got with it?

Wes Streeting: With respect, I think the hon. Gentleman has got his chronology slightly wrong. As shadow Health Secretary, I proposed that we should double the number of undergraduate medical school places. That policy was poached by the then Conservative Government, who made modest progress with it. We then came into government, looked at their long-term workforce plan and concluded that it was not a particularly long-term workforce plan, and we are revising it as we speak. The number of medical school places will be determined by future need. We will publish our long-term workforce plan in the not-too-distant future.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD) *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I will give way to the hon. Lady and then to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds).

Alison Bennett: The Secretary of State rightly notes that there is international competition for healthcare talent. On Friday, I met Dr Osoba, a GP who trains future GPs. She told me how disheartening it is to train future GPs whose intention is to leave the UK. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that British-trained medics stay working in the NHS?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member puts her finger right on the issue at the heart of the Bill. That is exactly the challenge we want it to address. The Bill is not a panacea—it does not solve all the problems—but reducing competition for specialty places from around four to one to less than two to one, as the Bill will do, will make it far more likely that people who have undertaken their training here in the UK will stay here and contribute to our national health service. Of course, there is much more to do on career structure, pay and conditions, but we will go as fast as we can and as far as the country can afford. We recognise that we need to keep the great people we have invested in, because doing so is in their interest and in our national interest.

Anneliese Dodds: My question relates to exactly that issue. The Secretary of State will be aware, because I have written to his Department about it a number of times, that many disabled medics face a particular challenge. They may have had to take time out of their training

[Anneliese Dodds]

because of a medical condition. They are told that they can obtain a certificate of readiness to enter specialty training and go into a training specialism, but the computer says no and NHS England is not sorting this out. Will he please get a personal grip on this and fix it for my constituents?

Wes Streeting: I am certainly aware of my right hon. Friend's concerns. I can give her that assurance and will report back to her on progress.

Without action to prioritise UK medics, we will also make it tougher than it already is for those from working-class backgrounds like mine to become doctors—or, for that matter, to even consider a career in medicine. The odds are already stacked against them: they are less likely to know doctors, their teachers may be less familiar with how to help students into medical school, they will have fewer opportunities to do work experience, and fewer people in their lives will tell them that they should aim high and reach for the stars. The result is that only 5% of medical school entrants are from lower-income working-class backgrounds. Someone's background should not be a barrier to becoming a doctor, so our job—especially as a Labour Government committed to social justice—is not just to ensure that a few kids like me beat the odds, but to change the odds for every child in this country so that they can go as far as their talents will take them.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is vital that we address this issue to ensure that UK-trained doctors are prioritised for vacancies over international applicants—the Secretary of State is making important points about that. We need those places to be opened up for UK medics immediately, so will he explain why the Bill will not come into force immediately after Royal Assent but instead includes provision for it to come into force

“on such day or days as the Secretary of State may by regulations appoint”?

Wes Streeting: It is important that the Bill is workable. A number of factors may well interrupt our ability to move at the pace at which I want to open up those places. One of those factors is the ongoing risk of industrial action. We know that the BMA is balloting for further industrial action at the moment. We respect the process that it is undertaking, and we are not closing the door to discussions while it does so. However, we are clear that that is a further disruption risk. I hope that we will be in a position to open up a new application round very shortly for current applicants, but that will depend on our ability to expedite the passage of the Bill through both Houses, and to ensure that the system is ready to implement it. That is why bringing forward the Bill on this timescale has been particularly important.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the Health Secretary; he is being generous with his time. Is he saying that he intends to use this as some sort of lever or bargaining chip in his discussion with the BMA?

Wes Streeting: I am clear that this is about whether the system will be ready to implement the measures in the Bill. I must say that I view the Conservatives' amendment on this issue with a degree of cynicism. Not so long ago, they were accusing me of being too kind to

resident doctors when it came to making changes to pay or conditions without something in return. They seem to have completely changed their position. I am sure that that is not remotely cynical and is for entirely noble reasons, but I will wait for the shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), to make his case. Let's just say that I am not entirely convinced.

The Bill implements the commitment in our 10-year plan for health to put home-grown talent at the front of the queue for medical training posts. Starting this year, it prioritises graduates from UK medical schools and other priority groups over applicants from overseas during the current application round and in all subsequent years. For the UK foundation programme, the Bill requires that places are allocated to UK medical graduates and those in a priority group before they are allocated to other eligible applicants.

For specialty training, the Bill effectively reduces the competition for places from around four to one, where it is today, to less than two to one. That is a really important point for resident doctors to hear, not least because in the debate we had on the Government's previous offer to the BMA, that point was lost amid some of the broader and, frankly, more contested arguments between the Government and the BMA around pay. It is not just the provision of additional training posts that reduces the competition ratio; it is also the measures in this Bill. I hope that that message is heard clearly by resident doctors as they think about their own futures immediately or in the coming years. For posts starting this year, there must be prioritisation at the offer stage, and for training posts starting from 2027, prioritisation will apply at both the shortlisting and offer stages.

In the 10-year plan, we committed to prioritising international applicants with significant NHS experience for specialty places in recognition of the contribution they have made to our nation's health. This year, we will use immigration status as a proxy for determining those who are eligible, so that we can introduce prioritisation as soon as possible. From next year, under the terms of the Bill, we will set out in regulations how we are defining significant NHS experience.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting: I give way to my hon. Friend with significant NHS experience.

Dr Opher: I commend the speed with which my right hon. Friend has brought this legislation to Parliament. I have been a GP trainer for 25 years. Fifty per cent of GP trainees are international medical graduates, and there has been some disquiet from them. Will he reassure our international medical graduates that they are welcome and treasured in the health service?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the contribution that international medical graduates make, and I have no doubt that that will continue to be the case for many years to come. I hope it is clear to those going through medical school or aspiring to a career in medicine that, in terms of the future of healthcare in this country, general practice is where it's at. We are looking to shift the centre of gravity in the NHS out of hospital and into the community, with care closer to

people's homes and, indeed, in people's homes, with GPs as leaders of a neighbourhood health service. I hope that gives encouragement to GPs serving today about the future of their profession, about which they care enormously. I also hope that that message resonates with people who are thinking about a career in medicine, when they think about what kind of career that might be.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): I recently spoke to a doctor in my constituency who was concerned about resident doctors going abroad to get a training place in their chosen specialty. We in Reform welcome this Bill. Can the Secretary of State make a commitment that we will prioritise our own UK-trained resident doctors ahead of those trained abroad, and will he assure me that the Bill will help UK-trained resident doctors to secure a training post in their chosen specialty?

Wes Streeting: I can give the hon. Member that assurance—that is exactly what the Bill does. Madam Deputy Speaker, I cannot, however, resist the enormous temptation to say that while I welcome the support of the hon. Member and her party, I hope that her party's position will not change now that it has adopted so many of the formerly Conservative culprits who landed us with this system in the first place. Whether it is the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman), or the former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), I am afraid that Reform looks rather more like the Conservative party that the country rejected at the last election, which I am sure will not be lost on people when they go to the ballot box in May—[*Interruption.*] As my hon. Friend the Minister for Care says from a sedentary position, Reform UK are increasingly the teal Tories—it is certainly the most successful recycling project currently taking place in the House of Commons. Anyway, that was totally self-indulgent, and very churlish given that the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) is supporting the Bill, so I will slap myself on the wrist and get back to the serious matters at hand.

As we set out these changes, it is important to note that they will have no impact on doctors working in the armed forces, who will continue to be a priority, and neither does the Bill exclude international talent, as people will still be able to apply for roles and continue to bring new and vital skills to our NHS. The principle here is home-grown talent. It is not about where students are born; it is about where they are trained. What the Bill does is return us to the fair terms on which those home-grown medics competed before Brexit.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's approach to the Bill, and how he has worked across all devolved Administrations. May I seek his assurance that medical students who reside in Northern Ireland, who identify as Irish and who study in an Irish institution in the Republic of Ireland will not be excluded from coming back to work in the national health service in Northern Ireland, where we very much need all the talent we can get?

Wes Streeting: I absolutely give the hon. Member that assurance—the Bill covers medical graduates from the UK and Ireland, for very obvious reasons. I welcome the broad support that the Bill appears to have across the House, because for the changes to benefit applicants in

the current round—for posts starting this August—it must achieve Royal Assent by 5 March. Any delay will risk vacancies in August and disrupt planning in NHS trusts, which rely on their new trainees to deliver frontline care. Doctors also need sufficient time to find somewhere to live, sort childcare and arrange other aspects of their lives before their posts start. I am grateful that Parliament has agreed to expedite the Bill's progress, and confident that we will be able to work at pace with our majority in this House, and with cross-party support in the other place.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I sense that the Secretary of State is about to reach the end of his remarks. We are keen to start the debate, but it would be helpful to get clarity on one thing before we begin. When will we see the workforce plan? It has been delayed a couple of times. We wrote to the Department in November asking for an explanation as to why it has been delayed and when we can expect it. Can the Secretary of State give us some clarity, because that is the context in which the narrow technical measure that we are discussing needs to happen?

Wes Streeting: That is a fair question from the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. We are taking longer than I would have liked with the workforce plan. I hope it reassures the hon. Member and the House that we have taken more time because that is what the royal colleges, trade unions, and clinical and NHS leaders asked us to do. Their strong urging was to get it right, rather than rush according to a political timetable, which I thought was a fair challenge. It will be published this spring.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I welcome this legislation. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the fact that the Government have listened to the concerns of resident doctors about training places, and have acted at pace to bring forward the legislation, shows that we as a Government are committed to fixing the problems left behind by the Conservative Government? Does he agree that the BMA should consider that when thinking about going forward with any potential further action?

Wes Streeting: I agree with my hon. Friend. For context, I say to members of the BMA and resident doctors that to bring forward legislation in this way and at this pace is not easy. We have a packed legislative programme. The clock is ticking on getting everything through that we want to get through in the time that we have available, and I am grateful to the business managers in both Houses for facilitating the Bill. Cross-party support is going to be important, particularly in the other place, where we have lots of expertise to draw on, including from Cross-Bench peers.

We have introduced the legislation because fundamentally we agree with the case that the BMA and resident doctors have been making. In our discussions with BMA representatives, immediately prior to the last round of industrial action and since, it has been very clear that when it comes to jobs, we are not that far apart. We recognise the problems and we are working together to address the solution. On pay, there remains a gap between the expectations of the BMA and what the Government can afford. All I ask of resident doctors and their BMA

[*Wes Streeting*]

representatives is some understanding and a bit of give and take about the range of pressures on the Government and the national health service, many of which require funding, which is why there are choices and trade-offs.

I hope that the BMA representatives know and have noticed that, regardless of the fact that we remain in dispute on these issues and have had a number of rounds of industrial action, I have not slammed the door in their faces and stopped talking—we have continued with good-natured and constructive talks—and I have not thrown my toys out of the pram either, and said “Right, we will not proceed with this Bill.” We have continued to work to enact solutions that we think are good for resident doctors, and therefore good for patients and good for the NHS. I hope that this will be the spirit in which we can work together.

The goal is to be in a place, particularly with the BMA and resident doctors although this applies to other groups in the workforce too, where we can work together and make progress outside disputes, so that we can gather around tables as partners, rather than as opponents. That will take some gear shifting from where we have been to where we want to be, but I know that both the Government and the BMA have entered the new year in that spirit, so we will continue to make progress.

Having stressed the urgency of the legislation, I want to address the commencement clause included in the Bill, which has already been raised. First and foremost, it is there as a failsafe. We are running to an extremely tight deadline. I do not want to be in a position where a law is enacted and we are unable to implement it in a timely and orderly fashion. Secondly, there is a material consideration about whether it is even possible to proceed if strikes are ongoing, because of the pressure that they put on resources and the disruption that is caused operationally, particularly among the people I require to help me deliver the measures in the Bill. Of course, I am keeping my options open. We are in a good place with the BMA, and we have entered the latest round of talks in good spirit, but we do not yet have an agreement on their disputes and we are waiting for the outcome of their ballot, so I am not going to do anything now that unnecessarily makes it harder to end the strikes.

The Opposition amendment to remove the commencement clause is designed to make industrial action more likely, not less likely. It tries to bind my hands and make this job even more difficult. It looks like political gameplaying, at a time when we are trying to save the NHS, and it looks like party interest before national interest. I hope that the Conservatives will consider whether their amendment is really necessary.

British taxpayers spend £4 billion training medics every year. We treat them poorly, place obstacles in their way and make them fearful for their futures. We are forcing young people, who should be the future of our NHS, to work abroad, in the private sector or to quit the profession entirely. It is time that we protect our investment and our home-grown talent. This Bill will ensure a sustainable workforce, cut our reliance on foreign labour, halve competition for places and give home-grown talent a path to become the next generation of NHS doctors. I commend this Bill to the House.

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

4.19 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): Let me start by saying at the outset that—

Alex McIntyre: You are not defecting?

Stuart Andrew: No, I am most definitely not defecting.

In the spirit of being constructive, I will start by saying that the Opposition support the principle behind the Bill. Doctors trained in Britain and funded by the taxpayer should have a fair, clear and consistent route to progress in our NHS. Britain trains some of the best doctors in the world, yet too many are leaving—not because they want to, but because they cannot access the training places they need. That wastes talent, damages morale, and ultimately affects patient care. However, support in principle is not a blank cheque; the Bill must work in practice, not just look good in a headline. We should also be honest about why we are here. Much of what is in the Bill has been promised by the Government since their election in plans, reviews and ministerial statements, and the fact that it is only being brought forward now suggests that this is catching up, not leading.

The first test is delivery. We cannot solve a shortage by changing the queue. Unless the Government deliver the 4,000 new specialist training places that they have promised, including the 1,000 places that are needed early, the Bill will not fix the bottlenecks; it will simply shift frustration from one group of doctors to another. That is why we are proposing constructive amendments to the Bill that we believe are workable and fair.

The next test is clarity. The real impact of this Bill will be determined by the rules that sit beneath it—who qualifies, how experience is assessed, and how decisions can be challenged. We welcome the focus on foundation training; prioritising UK and Irish graduates for foundation training is sensible, as it strengthens the pipeline and improves workforce planning. However, it will only work if there are enough placements and the system is transparent. That is why amendment 8 would clarify that a UK foundation programme must mean a programme in which the majority of training takes place in the United Kingdom. That is a necessary safeguard against loopholes.

Amendment 9 would ensure that from 2027, British citizens on UK foundation programmes are prioritised in a meaningful way. Prioritisation must apply not only at the final offer stage, but at interview, which is where selection decisions are often made. The amendment addresses many of the points that Labour Members have been raising, so I encourage them to support amendment 9 when we divide on it.

We are also concerned about doctors serving overseas with the armed forces. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State talk about them, since they certainly should not be penalised because part of their training takes place abroad on service. As such, amendment 10 would expand the definition of a UK medical graduate to include those undertaking placements as part of an armed forces posting outside of the British Isles. I hope the Secretary of State will consider accepting that amendment

to give reassurance to our armed forces, which I know is something he cares about. These are practical changes that would improve fairness and operability, and we hope the Government will adopt them.

We also support new clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), which would make clear that once priority groups are established, training places should be allocated on merit. That allocation should be based on academic achievement and clinical performance, rather than a lottery or a computer-generated ranking divorced from real performance. Again, I hope the Government will seriously consider the new clause. When the Minister for Secondary Care sums up, will she put on record that merit will remain central to selection?

Another issue that cannot be ignored is the impact on medical schools, especially those that rely on international students. New clause 3 would require an annual report to Parliament on the number of international students at UK medical schools and the financial consequences flowing from the Bill's provisions. International students pay higher fees and help sustain our universities. If those numbers fall, what funding model would replace them? When she sums up, will the Minister for Secondary Care outline what assessment has been made of the impact on medical school finances? How many international places do the Government expect to fund in future, and on what basis?

The Bill cannot stand in isolation. Workforce planning depends on more than allocating training posts; it requires enough trainers and clinical supervisors, viable rotas that support learning and facilities that make training possible. The revised NHS workforce plan must set out how those needs will be met, and how the extra training places will be staffed and supported. With NHS England set to be abolished in April 2027, we need to hear from the Government who will lead workforce planning and accountability thereafter.

Our approach is straightforward. We will support measures that are fair and practical, that strengthen patient care and that respect staff. We will press the Government where we feel that proposals are rushed, underfunded or left vague. Backing doctors means giving them a route to progress and ensuring that the system is properly planned and properly resourced. I repeat that, in principle, we support the Bill. We want doctors trained in Britain to build their careers in the national health service.

That brings me to enactment. As we have heard, the Government propose that the Bill should take effect when the Secretary of State decides, rather than on the date of Royal Assent. When he said that he wanted to introduce this Bill, and that it would be urgent, I said that we encourage that and support it. However, if this Bill is truly urgent, and if Ministers want it to affect this recruitment round, why would they not commence it immediately? The Secretary of State should not be playing politics with people's jobs. It is not right for doctors, including those not involved in industrial action, to be treated as bargaining chips, and it is not right for Parliament to be treated in this way to give him the tools that he needs because he did the first set of negotiations so badly. Will the Government support amendment 1, so that the Bill takes effect on Royal Assent? Will they commit to enacting the Bill as quickly as possible?

When does the Secretary of State intend to commence the Bill? If the Minister for Secondary Care cannot give the House a date today, what makes the Bill so urgent that it needs to be pushed through Parliament in a single day? Will the Government proceed with this legislation, even if no agreement is reached with the BMA? If industrial action is paused, will the Government still honour their commitment to prioritise UK medical graduates?

Many doctors took industrial action because they felt that their career progression was blocked. This Bill could play a part in rebuilding that trust, but that will only happen if Ministers deliver, publish the detail and follow through. They must be straight with the House. If this Bill is urgent, it should commence on Royal Assent. If implementation takes time, the Government should publish a timetable and the steps required to deliver it. To do anything else, frankly, would be discourteous to Parliament.

Dr Murrison: I think the Secretary of State has perhaps misunderstood how traumatic the process is for the young medical graduates going through this performance. Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that the sooner this legislation comes into force, the better it is for those young people, some of whom are finding the current situation incredibly difficult? They do not know what the successor scheme will look like, and the delay is adding to that unhappiness.

Stuart Andrew: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I said right at the outset that we would be constructive, but we have heard from many who are anxious about their future and do not know what will happen. The sooner that we can give them that certainty, the better. That was the premise on which we offered to support the Bill. I am grateful to him for making that point.

I am conscious that others want to speak, so I will end by saying this. Prioritisation without capacity will not fix the workforce crisis. Promises without delivery and headlines without planning will not retain the doctors whom our NHS needs. The Government must fund the extra places, set out the operational detail, and begin this reform without delay, because that was the premise that the Secretary of State identified. When he came to Parliament just a few weeks ago, he said that we needed to get on with this urgently, and that he would encourage business managers to provide the time. Well, if that is the case, let us get on with the job.

4.30 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Bill. I have long argued that a strong state must be rooted in work, contribution and fairness, and that principle stands behind the Bill. For too long, medical training pathways have drifted away from that principle. Taxpayers invest heavily in medical education, clinical placements and postgraduate training, but we have not been honest about who ultimately benefits from the investment. At a time when the NHS is under immense pressure, that is not sustainable.

The Secretary of State set out the scale of what we are dealing with. The taxpayer invests more than £4 billion every year in medical education, with more than £1 billion invested in undergraduate clinical placements, and more

[Preet Kaur Gill]

than £3.3 billion invested in postgraduate foundation and specialty training. That is public money, spent so that British patients have the doctors they need. However, since the lifting of visa restrictions in 2020, we have seen a fundamental shift in the way that medical training places are allocated. In the 2025 recruitment cycle, more than 25,000 overseas-trained doctors applied for training posts, and more than 15,000 UK graduates were competing for the same—nearly 13,000—round 1 and round 2 positions. As we heard from the Secretary of State, there are more than 47,000 applicants in 2026. That is a dramatic surge.

The Bill does one straightforward thing. It prioritises UK medical graduates for training posts, both foundation and specialty, where the NHS has already invested heavily. In my constituency, we see this clearly. University Hospitals Birmingham NHS foundation trust is one of the largest NHS trusts in the country. Just under 30% of my constituents work in the health sector. That figure is double the national average. We are home to the University of Birmingham medical school, one of the best in the country. The scale of public investment in training, supervision and infrastructure is enormous, and rightly so. However, the Bill recognises the basic truth that when the taxpayer pays, the public should see the return. Prioritising those who are most likely to work and stay in the NHS is not exclusionary; it is common sense. It is how we rebuild a health service that is resilient, staffed and fair.

Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with the Chair of the Select Committee that we need to keep Brits working in our national health service. Does she agree that we need to add to the priority list British nationals who, for one reason or another, are training in medical schools outside the United Kingdom—in Prague, in Malta, in Cyprus and in the Caribbean? The reasons why they are training in those places are many and varied, but they are British, and their intent is to practise in the national health service. However, they are being deprioritised by this measure.

Preet Kaur Gill: I am not the Chair of the Select Committee, and I think that the Secretary of State set out his position. This is really important. This is about UK taxpayers' money being invested in training doctors, and we must ensure that UK trainees are able to secure training places once they graduate. That is the issue that we are discussing.

Let me be clear: this is not a criticism of international staff. The NHS would not and could not function without the dedication, skill and compassion of people from around the world, and we should say that plainly and with gratitude. Every day, they hold our system together. However, a mature, confident country can value that contribution while also saying that we cannot replace long-term workforce planning with a permanent reliance on overseas recruitment. That is not fair on British trainees, not fair on source countries, and not fair on the NHS. As we heard from the Secretary of State, the World Health Organisation has estimated that by 2030, there will be an 11 million shortfall in health workers, as every country competes for the same limited workforce. This Government understand that putting British workers first is not something for which we will apologise. It is what the public expect.

The Prime Minister has been clear: a serious Labour Government must align migration, skills and training policy with the national interest. We cannot simply be passive; we must shape our domestic workforce to ensure that the NHS can continue to function. The same principle should apply wherever we are overly dependent on skilled migration because domestic training was neglected for 14 years under the Conservatives. Investing in people in the UK, and expecting that investment to strengthen Britain, is not ideological; it is responsible government.

The powers conferred to the Secretary of State in this Bill are important. The Royal College of Radiologists' 2024 census found that 83% of cancer centre heads of service in the west midlands were concerned about patient safety as a result of workforce shortfalls. In 2024, only 19% of clinical oncology training places in the west midlands were filled. Will the Secretary of State outline how he intends to use the powers in this Bill and work with the integrated care boards to ensure that access to training matches regional workforce needs and health demands?

Above all, this Bill is about respect—respect for the taxpayer, respect for the NHS workforce, and respect for a health service that must be planned for the long term, not patched up year on year. This is exactly the kind of reform that the public expect from a Labour Government who are serious about work, contribution and the future of our NHS.

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

4.36 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I am pleased to welcome this Bill, broadly. It seeks to prioritise graduates from UK and Irish medical schools for foundation and specialty training places. On this point, the Liberal Democrats support the Government, but we have some concerns about how that will be delivered, and about the real-world consequences for our NHS, patients and the doctors who keep our health service going.

Taxpayers invest around £4 billion every year in training young doctors, yet far too many are left competing for too few posts. In 2025, around 12,000 UK-trained doctors competed with 21,000 international doctors for just 9,500 specialty training positions. Many highly skilled young doctors, who were ready to serve in the NHS, were left without a pathway into specialist practice. That is clearly unfair and unsustainable. It is hardly surprising that so many doctors decide to leave the country altogether and seek opportunities elsewhere, where their training and wellbeing are valued. This is a tragedy for them and a tragedy for patients, so prioritisation is right, fair and long overdue.

However, reorganising a queue does not shorten it or make it move any faster. The reality is clear: the NHS has a deep workforce shortage, with crises in some specialties, and this Bill alone cannot solve it. A detailed long-term workforce plan, which ensures that training provides the skill mix that the NHS needs for the future, is required as soon as possible. I look forward to the Minister confirming when that will be delivered.

Shortly before Christmas, the Government committed to 4,000 additional specialty training places in their negotiations with the British Medical Association, including 1,000 that were brought forward, but following the collapse of those negotiations, it remains unclear whether those places will materialise. Patients cannot wait for certainty, and neither can exhausted staff. Will the Minister confirm those places, and go further by addressing other issues that have prevented doctors from working in the NHS, such as restrictive rotas, workplace violence and inflexible working? Dealing with such issues might prevent doctors who have secured specialty training places from moving abroad once their training is completed, ensuring that taxpayers' money is not wasted, and that doctors with local, relevant experience remain in the NHS.

I turn to the details of the Bill. We have concerns about clause 7(1), which allows Ministers to change eligibility for prioritisation through the negative procedure. That will enable sweeping changes, without proper parliamentary scrutiny, to who can access training places. Given the scale and sensitivity of the NHS workforce pressures, such decisions must not be made behind closed doors, or at the whim of a future Health Secretary with less desirable motives than the current one. That is why the Liberal Democrats have tabled amendments that would require Parliament to approve any future changes through the positive procedure.

We are also troubled by the Government's decision to apply the new rules part of the way through the 2026 specialty recruitment cycle. The Bill allows for prioritisation at the offer stage for medical specialty training places in 2026. I would like the Minister to clarify in her closing remarks whether this means that international doctors already working in our NHS—who have paid for exams, secured visas and maybe uprooted their life and their family—will suddenly be pushed to the back of the queue, mid-cycle. These doctors keep our hospitals running today. They entered the system in good faith, and it seems unfair to change the rules midway through the process.

I would also be grateful if, in the Minister's closing remarks, she outlined the expected impact on NHS service provision if people who are deprioritised during the application process decide to leave en masse. Will she give my constituents in North Shropshire reassurance that patient safety and patient outcomes will not be impacted? The Liberal Democrats would prefer implementation to begin in 2027, at the interview stage; that would protect both fairness and patient safety.

Would the Minister elaborate on the impact of the Bill on universities that offer medical degrees elsewhere in the world? I think we have all been contacted by Queen Mary, University of London; the implications for the university may be serious if graduates, who have always been considered UK graduates, undertaking NHS training, and a UK medical qualification registered by the General Medical Council, suddenly have their expectations changed.

As I have mentioned, retention is just as critical as recruitment, but unfortunately it is outside the scope of this limited Bill. In the year to September 2023, 10.7% of NHS staff—about 154,000 people—left their role. Burnout is rife, morale is low and too many staff are working in buildings that are crumbling around them. We have been contacted by GP trainers who are worried that the

doctors they are training plan to leave for Australia or Canada as soon as they qualify. The promised workforce plan must address this problem.

International comparisons lay bare the scale of the problem. England has just 3.2 doctors per 1,000 people, which is well below the OECD and EU average of 3.9. We would need 40,000 more doctors to meet that benchmark. Prioritising UK graduates is sensible, but it will not on its own deliver the workforce that patients urgently need. That is why the Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment requiring a specialty by specialty workforce assessment. Shortages are acute in general practice, radiology, cancer care, mental health and more, and transparency is essential if training places are to be directed at where the need is greatest.

It is neither right nor remotely sustainable that, at a time when patients struggle to see a GP, qualified GPs are unemployed, yet that is happening now, with vacancy freezes and financial pressure creating an NHS in which shortages sit alongside unemployment. The Government's decision to raise national insurance has only exacerbated the problem, forcing some practices into lay-offs or closure. In my North Shropshire constituency, several GP practices have told me that they cannot take on additional doctors because they are constrained by the outdated physical space in which they operate. The Liberal Democrats would fund 8,000 more GPs, ensuring that every patient could see a GP within seven days, or 24 hours if the need was urgent, because we cannot fix the NHS without fixing the front door.

NHS staff are the backbone of our health service, and they deserve better working conditions and a fair career path. We will continue fighting for an independent pay review body, for safe and modern buildings, for flexible working from day one, and for practical support, such as reduced parking charges, so that staff are not penalised for simply turning up to care for us. We will always stand up for our NHS and the people who make it work. While we support this Bill, we will push to ensure that its implementation strengthens our health service as much as possible.

4.43 pm

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill. This Bill goes to the very heart of the future of our national health service—the doctors on whom our health service depends. It is about fairness, protecting taxpayers' money, and building a home-grown NHS workforce that is sustainable in the long term. It is about making sure that those who have trained here have the opportunity to become the next generation of doctors working in our health service.

Every year, it is becoming harder for graduates of UK medical schools to find a place on a foundation or specialty training programme. Since 2019, competition for postgraduate training places has increased by a staggering amount. In 2019, there were about 12,000 applicants for 9,000 places, but in 2025 the situation became even more stark. There are now more than 30,000 applicants, and over 12,000 UK-trained doctors and nearly 21,000 overseas doctors compete for fewer than 10,000 places. That is an enormous and unsustainable change. For some specialties, the competition is much fiercer. Aspiring neurosurgeons, for example,

[Jack Abbott]

had to compete against 26 others to secure a place, and there were 737 applicants for just 10 cardiothoracic surgery training places.

Those are not abstract statistics, and behind every number is a person who has spent years training, often at great personal and financial cost, only to find their opportunities for career progression drying up. Some take time out, some seek experience abroad and some leave medicine altogether. Many do not have a choice. They are forced by a system that has become so congested that getting a training post in something that they are passionate about and trained in is completely unattainable. Every time a doctor leaves the NHS, there is no guarantee that they will come back.

The Secretary of State is incredibly committed to increasing medical school places, and we desperately need more doctors, but we have to be honest with ourselves: we cannot expand medical school places without addressing the growing crisis of competition for training places. It is within that context that the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill must be understood. There has been a direct correlation between the lifting of visa restrictions in 2020 under the Conservatives and the dramatic rise in competition for foundation and specialty training posts. Maybe that was one of the Conservatives' Brexit bonuses that they so eloquently talked about. This needs to be addressed, because otherwise we risk training doctors for a system that cannot support them. We are recruiting doctors from abroad at a time when there is already a substantial pool of eligible applicants who have trained in the UK or are already working in the NHS. That cannot be right.

General practice is particularly reliant on international doctors, with half of first-year trainees having qualified outside the UK in 2024. Let me be clear, because this point matters enormously: international medical graduates have always played, and will continue to play, a vital role in our NHS. Many of our hospitals and services simply could not function without them. The Bill does not diminish that contribution, and neither does it seek to close the door to international talent, but it does ask fair and reasonable questions. When we are spending almost £4 billion every year to train doctors in the UK, is it right that those doctors are increasingly unable to access the very training posts that they need to progress? Is it right that huge amounts of taxpayers' money is spent training doctors, only for that investment to be lost when doctors are forced out of the system or choose to go overseas or into the private sector? If we are honest with ourselves, how progressive is it that we poach doctors from countries that desperately need them, while we have our own brilliant and willing recruits who cannot get jobs here?

If we are serious about building an NHS that is stable, resilient and fit for the future, we must also be serious about retention and recruitment, so we must ensure that those we train can stay, specialise and build careers here at home. What is the alternative? We train thousands of talented, hard-working young people at significant public expense, only for them to hit a wall, feel undervalued and leave either the NHS or medicine altogether. Every doctor we train in the UK who chooses to leave is an enormous loss for our health service and our country. It is such a waste of talent and money.

We cannot afford to lose our next generation of doctors—the future of the NHS depends on it—yet that is where we are headed unless we do something now. It is urgent.

Prioritisation is not about exclusion; it is about safeguarding public investment and guaranteeing the long-term sustainability of our NHS workforce. It is about ensuring that the NHS remains an attractive place for young doctors to build a career, and that doctors in this country feel valued, which the previous Conservative Government failed miserably on. The Bill sends an important signal to young people in this country considering a career in medicine that we want them to build a long and fruitful career right here in the UK, in our NHS. It says to those currently picking their A-level options or deciding whether a medical degree is right for them that their hard work will be rewarded and we want them to succeed.

The Bill is not a silver bullet. It will not solve every workforce challenge facing our NHS overnight, but it is a sensible and necessary reform that will go a significant way towards dealing with a deeply concerning and growing problem. If we care about the future of our NHS, we must care about the doctors in it and the doctors who will sustain it in the years to come. For the sake of the future health and viability of our NHS, I therefore urge all Members to support the Bill.

4.49 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I will start with what is now a traditional declaration: I am a non-practising doctor and my wife is a doctor. I thank the Secretary of State for his comments, and for thinking through the content and merits of my new clause 2, on allocation based on merit. I hope that, as the Bill proceeds through this place and the other place, he continues to focus on that, because it is a very important point. For my Second Reading speech, I am not going to focus on the details of new clause 2—I will hold that back for Committee. Instead, I want to make some general comments.

In a sense, the Bill treats the symptoms of what has been happening in the medical workforce. I do not think it is a cure for the fundamental disease or the problems we have had over the years, which are in part down to a creeping de-professionalisation of the medical profession. I also think they are down to the way we have approached doctors' appointments to placements, and how we assess their skills and CVs, and how that then leads to different appointments and places. Doctors are thrown from pillar to post, subject to the whims of a computer or a training programme. It has been shown time and again that one of the most important things in people's eyes, or at least what gives most work satisfaction, is autonomy.

Unfortunately, we have sleepwalked into a situation, in pursuit of a weird type of fairness in the allocation of jobs, that works towards equality of outcome as opposed to equality of opportunity. Doctors have found themselves unable to compete or have control over their lives. Where they are allocated to their foundation school or their specialty training has a real, material impact. Crucially, within allocations, the geographical regions are huge. That means uprooting: moving your family and your social network. In the training scheme there

really is no power that a doctor can exert in terms of choice or preference. My understanding—I am a creature of the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the Medical Training Application Service, when I was coming through and applying for posts—is that we just used to let doctors competitively apply for different posts and put together a sort of portfolio CV. That has all changed.

There is now the allocation to training programme schemes and national contracts, which is something I have been campaigning about for quite some time. Do not get me wrong: I think the way the BMA has behaved is absolutely appalling. I categorically and unreservedly condemn the approach that it has taken, and not just under this Government but under previous Governments over various disputes concerning junior doctors. But the fact that doctors have found themselves in a situation where they need to have a militant trade union is a consequence of the training schemes, programmes and national contracts not treating doctors as professionals when it comes to applying for jobs.

It also means that the training providers, the trusts and the integrated care systems, cannot provide options that doctors might want to compete for. They cannot say, “Well, we’re a really good research unit, so we’re going to have an offering that pursues a certain type of doctor who wants to go down the academic pathway.” We do not have trusts or regions that can say, “Actually, this is an area where there is quite a lot of social and economic deprivation, so we want doctors who are interested in certain specialties.”

For all sorts of different reasons, there are parts of the country that are oversubscribed and parts that are undersubscribed. We cannot use what we use in every other walk of life, which is changing remuneration to encourage people to go to other places. We cannot say, “You know what? Let’s look at flexible working arrangements.” As part of my medical school rotations, I was in Barnstaple. I can only imagine that if the trust for Barnstaple had recruitment challenges—I do not know if it does or does not—then it could look at whether people are into surfing or ensuring they could get involved in other activities outside of medicine. Dare I say, as a former doctor, that medicine is important but there are more important things than people’s careers, in particular their work-life balance. We have a system that does not enable that to happen. The behaviour of the BMA is, in a sense, a consequence of dismantling the normal human experience in the approach to the selection and allocation of jobs.

That has real consequences locally. Ashford and St Peter’s, my local trust, struggles to recruit because of the proximity to London, which has London weighting. Since we are on the border of London, to look at it purely financially—if that is the main priority—it makes more sense to pop into London and work than it does being employed in my area. Runnymede and Weybridge, by the way, has house prices and a cost of living that are equal to a big chunk of London, but there is no approach to regionalisation.

I am really glad that the Secretary of State is in his place to hear my contribution. I will say to him something that I have said to many previous Secretaries of State. When he is in those difficult negotiations with the BMA and hears from doctors about the workforce experience challenges that they have, would it not be better if we trusted doctors—and, for that matter, anyone who is

subject to a national contract—to make decisions for their own lives, and that we devolve decision around pay and terms and conditions to some form of regional unit? For medicine, the obvious solution would be the integrated care systems, but there could be different solutions and ways of approaching it.

I think ICS devolution would make the most sense, but there are other opportunities to do it. That way, it moves from the Government essentially getting stuck in the middle of doctors, who are making difficult decisions about their careers and having to balance and judge different T&Cs of work, and the employers, which are different NHS trusts, being unable to use the normal mechanism that any other employer would use to recruit and incentivise people. If we do not do that, unfortunately the consequence is a Bill like the one we are debating: ever-increasing state intervention to try, in the absence of a market system, to impose a command economy.

The Secretary will have seen the issues dealing with local doctor prices. The fact that we have struggled with high locum payments for so long is because we do not allow the doctor employment market to resolve itself for adjustments in contracts. The system would save a huge amount of money overall if, rather than having a huge amount of money going to locums and a national contract system for doctors, we let the market sort it out. I will support the Bill, but I see it more as palliation than the definitive treatment that we need to solve the workforce problems for the NHS going forward.

4.58 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the Government bringing forward this legislation, and not just in response to the significant concerns that doctors currently have about access to training places, but as an important part of a reset, with a longer-term approach, to ensure that we have an NHS workforce that is fit for the future.

I am going to go off script and respond to some comments that the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), made. He rightly pointed out that the Bill is about prioritisation, not immediate capacity. However, in week one or two of NHS manager school, one of the core techniques that is taught is about capacity and demand modelling. A fundamental assumption about the capacity of our workforce going forward is retention—how long they will work over the course of their careers. The GMC is absolutely clear that an international medical graduate will, on average, work for a shorter period of time in the UK than a UK medical graduate—they are more likely to leave.

I suggest that it is entirely sensible that the Government are bringing in the legislation now, in advance of their NHS workforce planning, because the Bill fixes a core assumption of that plan. To give an example, I have managed cancer waiting lists and, knowing that I have a list of patients I am responsible for, feared that the lower gastrointestinal oncologist who is getting on will announce their retirement without a clear succession plan, as lower GI oncologists are in short supply. This Bill is not just the right thing to do but provides the absolute clarity around medical capacity that will allow the Government to do the proper demand work that is necessary to build the NHS of the future.

[Lewis Atkinson]

Turning to the immediate situation, I have heard the views clearly expressed by medical graduates in Sunderland and across the country about the bottlenecks they face when trying to secure foundation and specialty training places. Many are left in prolonged periods of uncertainty, unable to progress despite years of study.

When we talk about trainees, we risk giving the impression that the contribution made by these talented young people will all be in the future, but of course, in reality, people in training positions provide a huge contribution of direct service to the NHS today, forming the core of the medical workforce in hospitals up and down the country. When I was an NHS operational manager, I had to get to know the new rotation of core, foundation and specialty training doctors every time as they rotated around. Meeting those inspiring and motivated young people was not just a lovely thing to do but a hugely important one, as the day-to-day care of the patients in the specialties I was responsible for was largely provided by the people on those training courses.

That experience also highlighted to me how, over a decade under the previous Government, there was a total failure to put in place a proper care framework for those foundation and specialty doctors, which left UK-trained doctors competing in increasingly crowded pools. We have heard some of the numbers already from the Secretary of State: in 2025, there were more than 30,000 doctors competing for just 9,500 training posts. That is not a system that shows proper regard for the commitment of medical graduates or for their wellbeing, let alone a system that is designed to meet the future needs of the country or the NHS. We invest hundreds of thousands of pounds training each medical student, but too often we fail to retain them. That represents a loss not only of talent, but of public investment.

However, I think it is important, as others have done, to put on the record our recognition of the enormous benefit brought by medical professionals who have chosen to come to the United Kingdom and dedicate their careers to the NHS. I know that will continue even after this legislation is passed. As I always say, healthcare is a team sport, and in my experience, when a team is working together under significant operational pressure, the commitment of everyone in going the extra mile, no matter which country they trained in and what nationality they are, is always exemplary. That is the case throughout the NHS that I know.

The contribution of international medical and wider clinical staff to our NHS is invaluable, and it must never be diminished or forgotten. I know that will continue. It is important, therefore, that the discussion of the Bill is not interpreted as a slight on their contribution or commitment.

In aggregate, as I have said, the GMC has been clear that while international graduates are essential to the functioning of our health services, they are statistically more likely to leave the UK workforce within six years of joining compared with those who train here. That reality makes clear the risk of overreliance on a system that is unpredictable and, ultimately, unsustainable. This Bill is about balance, not exclusion; it is about ensuring that the significant public investment we are making in training doctors in this country translates into a stable and sustainable workforce for the years ahead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As others will know, I have raised this matter a number of times in the Chamber. In Wales, for example, the health service pays students' fees and trains them, and students then have an obligation to stay with the Welsh health service for a period of time. One of my constituents, whom I know well, did just that. She went there, received training and stayed there. What happened, of course, is that she met someone in Wales who she fell in love with, and now she wants to stay there, so we will lose her in Northern Ireland. The point I want to make is this: if paying the fees retains the staff in Wales, should we not also do that in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England? We could do so in this Bill.

Lewis Atkinson: There is some merit in the hon. Gentleman's proposal, not just for medical training but across the clinical workforce. As Members have acknowledged, we pay significant sums of public money training clinical staff, but the graduates incur significant student debt. If a UK-trained undergraduate student decides to work abroad, the UK taxpayer will have invested a significant amount in their training, and that is then lost. It strikes me that there is an opportunity for the Government to think about the sort of incentive that the hon. Gentleman describes as part of wider workforce planning.

That is pertinent to my next point about the importance of the medical workforce reflecting our wider society, particularly the working class communities of the north-east of England. I want to ensure that a young person doing well at a state school in Sunderland has as much encouragement and access as anyone else in the country to study medicine and, crucially, progress through the ranks to the highest grades. We have heard some talk of international medical schools, but I can absolutely assure Members that there are not state school-educated kids in Sunderland thinking that they will pay privately to study in Grenada or anywhere else.

As the Secretary of State rightly pointed out, there have been welcome improvements on diversity in the NHS, but we often fail to consider socioeconomic background in that. The first line of the NHS constitution states:

"The NHS belongs to the people."

But sometimes it can feel like it is staffed by a pretty unrepresentative slice of the people, particularly in medical roles.

In that spirit, I recognise the excellent work of the University of Sunderland medical school, which has placed widening access at the heart of its mission. Building on a 100-year history of wider clinical training, the school opened in 2019, shortly before the covid-19 pandemic—a period that starkly exposed our over-reliance on overseas recruitment and underlined the importance of growing our own workforce. By 2022, 47% of the University of Sunderland's intake were local students, and it now ranks sixth in the UK for student satisfaction.

However, it is no good universities like Sunderland in my constituency doing excellent work on widening participation at recruitment stage if when we get to foundation training and specialty training those students are disadvantaged in competition. In my view, the Bill will help to ensure that talent nurtured by institutions like the University of Sunderland is retained and prioritised for the benefit of our NHS.

I highlight that medical schools such as Sunderland are increasingly placing a huge emphasis on training their medical students in a multidisciplinary environment alongside the trainee nurses and trainee pharmacists of the day, so that they are prepared to work in the multidisciplinary environment that our NHS rightly demands. I am not sure that all international undergraduate courses are always so advanced, so it is right to prioritise this UK-based training approach for the multidisciplinary ethos of the NHS in the future.

Other Members have mentioned the wide variation in specialist training fill rates, and GP recruitment has been mentioned as part of that. It is also worth saying that the national statistics about specialty training mask significant regional variations. The GP specialty training fill rate has been as low as 62% in the north-east of England, and as we have heard, over 73% of applicants for GP specialty training in 2023 were international. That has a disproportionate effect in regions like mine. My constituents want to have the confidence that there will be a stable GP workforce as part of our community for the long term. I cannot tell them in all candour that the status quo delivers that, so we must make changes of the type that the Bill sets out.

I hope that by introducing effective, regulated training pathways, the Bill will improve retention and strengthen workforce planning in our communities, including in areas such as women's health, where training provision has not kept pace with rising demand. When I look at the shape of the NHS elective waiting list, it is no coincidence that some of the trickiest waiting time problems are in specialties such as gynae, where we have had recruitment and training challenges in recent years.

To close my remarks, I re-emphasise the link between capacity and demand, which I hope the Minister will touch on in advance of the workforce plan. Will she also say a little about the medical training review and the phase 1 report for NHS England and how the Government will work with that?

5.9 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): The NHS has a deeply unusual set-up when it comes to its workforce. The Government set the rules for who can qualify as a medical professional, decide how many medical training places to offer and control the flow of medical graduates into the NHS. They decide how much to charge medical students and under what conditions and since the NHS is by far the country's primary employer of medical professionals, the Government also have effective control over the pay and conditions of those who qualify, and are responsible for deciding where medical trainees go and when. As a result, the health service workforce is not subject to the same labour market conditions as other organisations. The Government control both the supply of and the demand for its own workforce.

It is welcome to see this legislation before us, which rightly gives priority to British-trained doctors for NHS training posts, particularly at the early stages of their career. Those who decide to practise medicine in this country should have reasonable confidence that, if they wish to do so, they can build a career here. The Bill goes some way towards addressing the current situation in which British-trained doctors are being squeezed out of the system in favour of overseas recruits, despite the Government's control of both the supply of new British graduates and the number of training places.

In 2025, 15,723 British-trained doctors were set to compete for 12,833 NHS training posts. This is already a competitive environment. However, the NHS's focus on overseas recruitment meant that those British-trained doctors were also forced to compete with another 25,257 overseas trainees. It is clearly absurd that the British Government should restrict the number of training places offered, while also increasing demand for those places through a policy of overseas recruitment, having spent hundreds of thousands of pounds to train each medical student in this country.

That is particularly true when we know that doctors trained overseas are two-and-a-half times more likely to be referred to the GMC by their employer than doctors trained here. Many overseas recruits are hard-working and well-meaning, and many are excellent at the work that they do. Yet we must be honest about the fact that relying on overseas recruits instead of training more medical professionals in this country is not always a like-for-like swap.

Both medical trainees and patients would benefit from a system that trains more doctors here and ensures that those British-trained doctors are given a reasonable chance at moving quickly into an NHS training post. The system should also reward ability and allocate training posts based on merit. The current system of random allocation not only fails to reward our most talented medical graduates but creates profound uncertainty for those at the start of their careers.

Last summer, one of my constituents qualified as a doctor. He graduated with one of the very highest marks in the year—he was in the top three—from one of the most competitive medical schools in the country. He is clearly an outstanding student and will make an incredible doctor. In any sane system, he would have been placed immediately and been able to choose his location and specialism to keep him incentivised and happy within the NHS and to make the most of his obviously considerable talents. Instead, because of the mismanagement of places and the lottery system, he was not placed at all in the first round of allocations. He was not placed in the second, the third or even the fourth round. With fewer than four weeks to go, he still had no placement and no sense of where he would spend the next few years of his life, including whether he might be able to live close to his partner, who was also a doctor and graduating with him.

That is an insane way to treat our most brilliant graduates. I hope the Government will change their mind and amid their other good changes accept the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), to which I have added my name, to ensure that training places are, in future, allocated on the basis of merit. If the Bill aims to provide certainty to British-trained doctors that they will be able to build a career in this country, which is a noble aim, it should also recognise that the current system of randomly allocating training places is one of the biggest causes of uncertainty in our system. It would be far better for doctors and patients to have a system that instead prized excellence, providing a clear basis on which medical trainees could be allocated and creating a system that rewarded the most talented graduate doctors. It is right that the health service prioritises British-trained doctors. It is also right that, across every area of the public sector, we reward talent, effort and merit.

5.14 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I would like to place on record my interest as the mother of an NHS nurse.

It is a privilege to speak in today's debate and to do so on behalf of my Carlisle constituency, which I am proud to say has recently taken a transformative step with regard to medical training, with the opening of the Pears Cumbria School of Medicine. This new graduate school of medicine is being jointly pioneered by Imperial College London and the University of Cumbria, and I put on record my thanks to Professor Martin Lupton, Professor Mary Morrell and Professor Brian Webster-Henderson, whose vision the medical school is, and to Sir Trevor Pears and the Pears Foundation, whose generosity has made their vision a reality.

As with the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill before us today, the Pears Cumbria School of Medicine purposefully prioritises home-grown talent. The school also seeks applications from students from non-traditional backgrounds, encouraging applications from groups that are less well represented in medicine. As part of the school's commitment to widening access, the four-year graduate programme has no GCSE or A-level requirements. The reason for this approach is simple: it provides the best chance, year in, year out and generation after generation, for Carlisle and Cumbria to produce our own doctors. These doctors will often come from the surrounding communities and, in part because of where they are trained, will be deeply committed to the local area and its people.

In geographically remote areas such as ours, the ability to train and retain our own doctors is critical. It matters enormously. Cumbria faces some of the most entrenched health inequalities in the country. We have struggled for years with recruitment and retention across both primary and secondary care, and our hospital trust relies heavily on locums. We know all too well that the traditional model of medical education, centred on large metropolitan teaching hospitals, simply does not produce or attract the workforce that rural areas such as mine need.

That brings me back to the Bill before us today. The Government are right to prioritise UK graduates for foundation and specialty training places. The Bill represents a significant and welcome step towards restoring confidence in the training pipeline, addressing the growing mismatch between the number of medical graduates and the number of available posts, and ensuring that those who have invested years of training in our NHS are not left without a route on which to progress. It is a sensible, fair-minded reform that will bring much-needed stability to a system that has been under real strain.

For Carlisle and Cumbria, however, the issue is not only who gets priority but where the training posts are located. At present, although foundation training can be delivered locally, it can be delivered only where accredited F1 and F2 posts exist. In Cumbria, the number of those posts is limited. The North Cumbria integrated care trust is able to provide places for some foundation trainees, and others will find F1 and F2 posts in primary and community care settings, but further accredited places will be required at foundation level. I ask the Minister to explain, in her response, not just how the new powers will prioritise UK medical graduates and members of the priority group, but how the powers

might be used to widen the availability of accredited F1 and F2 posts in areas such as Cumbria, where there is a shortage of doctors.

Even if we successfully retain Pears medical school doctors in Cumbria for their foundation programme training, the risk of losing them when they come to their specialty training programme is even greater, because doctors will overwhelmingly choose to settle near to where they complete their training, particularly their specialist training, and Cumbria will never be able to provide every specialty training pathway within the county to retain our home-grown talent. We simply do not have the population size or the case mix to deliver all specialisms in our trusts. However, that does not mean that we cannot design a system that keeps trainees connected to Cumbria throughout their training. I therefore urge the Minister to consider how the regulation-making powers granted by the Bill can address that issue.

Pears medical school believes that a new approach to specialist training is the way forward. I recently wrote to the Secretary of State seeking a meeting between him and representatives of the medical school to explore that approach, and I very much hope that he will soon accept that meeting. I also ask Ministers to consider seriously how specialty training can be structured so that trainees who complete F2 in Cumbria are supported to remain based in the region, even if their specialist rotations take them elsewhere for short periods. That could mean funded return-to-base arrangements, rotational models anchored in Cumbria, or formal partnerships between specialist centres in UK cities and community providers in Cumbria. In other words, we need a training pathway that allows people to specialise with Cumbria, not away from it, because if we allow the system to pull trainees out of Carlisle at the very moment they are beginning to put down roots, we will simply recreate and repeat the cycle that has left rural areas like mine short of doctors for too long.

The Pears Cumbria School of Medicine is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the medical workforce in Cumbria, but it will fully succeed only if training programmes are aligned with its purpose. In welcoming the Bill, I urge Ministers to ensure that its implementation meets the requirements and needs of remote communities. Prioritisation is important, but place matters too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

5.21 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I broadly welcome this common-sense Bill. I am left rather flummoxed that we got to this point, but here we are. It is self-evident that if we pay to train doctors, they should be prioritised and encouraged in all manner of ways to stay in the UK. I understand why we must expedite the measures: talks with the BMA are ongoing and we want to avert strike action. I sincerely hope that the BMA and all resident doctors hear this debate and see that Parliament is listening to them, and that, together, we can avert industrial action, which does nothing to help the recovery of the NHS—fingers crossed that this works.

I will talk about the fears that I have heard about in my postbag. We are here in part because of the lack of a big joined-up workforce plan. We have been talking about

such a plan for many years, but the previous one was clearly flawed, no matter which way one looked at it. It is in that context that we are bringing forward this very specific and quite technical point.

However, for resident doctors—formerly known as junior doctors—and for medical students, this is not technical at all; it affects their lives. Marco, an Oxford medical student, wrote to me last year to say that he was “particularly concerned about the prospect of unemployment from being unable to secure a training position.”

He pointed out that countries such as Canada, the US and Australia already have structured approaches, while England has fallen behind.

Yasmin, another constituent, said:

“I studied for six years and graduated with over £70,000 of debt. I completed my foundation programme in a crumbling district general hospital, where I was routinely overworked and trying to care for patients in corridors under conditions that felt increasingly unsafe. I worked extremely hard to provide the best possible care despite these circumstances. Yet now, after two exhausting years, I find myself unemployed.”

Yasmin told me that many of her colleagues had been forced to take non-medical jobs—in administration, hospitality and other sectors—simply to survive. Some will never return to medical practice at all.

If our brightest and most committed young doctors are worried about unemployment, or are leaving the profession altogether, the system is clearly fundamentally broken and needs reform, so the Bill is a necessary step. Notwithstanding the good reasons to support the Bill, we must be mindful that it may well have unintended consequences if it is not implemented fairly. I am particularly concerned about the impact on overseas doctors who have already made significant life decisions based on the current rules.

Lamia, one of the many medical graduates in my postbag this week, said:

“Over the past two years, I have organised my professional life around the UK’s published requirements, completing examinations, securing GMC registration, and investing significant personal and family savings, even incurring debt. I also declined a stable job opportunity abroad to focus on the MSRA based on the rules at that time.”

She feels that to suddenly change things retrospectively is an injustice. The Government must clarify what “significant experience” means, because this will have an effect on people’s life choices. Perhaps the Minister could indicate that today—are the Government looking at one year, two, five or 10?

There is also the issue of British universities’ overseas campuses, which we have heard about from a number of Members. Graduates of institutions such as Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia, Queen Mary University of London in Malta and St George’s in Cyprus are excluded from the Bill. The vice-chancellor of Newcastle University, Professor Chris Day, wrote to me to say:

“these graduates complete the same medical degree, receive the same accreditation, and the majority then go on to train and work in the UK.”

As these students studied in English to UK standards, they transition into the NHS as quickly and effectively as home-based counterparts. He makes the point that they are incredibly effective very quickly within the NHS.

The Secretary of State explained why these students are being excluded: the Government cannot determine how many overseas campus places these universities

will provide. However, to flatter my friend on the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman)—he is not here, but I know he will appreciate the flattery—he is absolutely right that the Minister could include a tightly drafted exemption for those who have already started those courses. I heard what the Secretary of State said about the fact that the terms and conditions on the website never guarantee a post, but we all know how this works. If we buy a product, understanding that for years and years it has worked a certain way, it cannot suddenly change halfway through. It would only take a year or two for this to wash through the system, so that we do not exclude those who have made the commitment and spent huge amounts of money in good faith, thinking that it would help. There could be some movement here, for a relatively small number of people. I hope the Government are listening to those voices. I am not sure it is a necessary battle, and it could be sorted in future regulations.

The other concern I have, which I have raised with the Minister and with the Secretary of State when he made a statement on the strikes before Christmas, is the signal that the Bill is sending to our overseas doctors. The more that we can all say this, the better: they are absolutely critical to our NHS. The chief executive of the GMC, Charlie Massey, gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee last week, and he was clear: doctors who qualified overseas make up around 42% of the medical workforce. Of course, we are not talking about that number, but if even a small proportion now might not want to work in our system, it will leave gaps that we simply cannot fill. Any conversation about prioritising UK graduates should explicitly recognise the immense contribution they make.

I want some concrete answers on this issue. We can keep talking about it, but will any measures be put in place? How will we show our appreciation? We must bear it in mind that these are highly mobile individuals to have come here in the first place. I understand the mantra that this is prioritisation, not exclusion, but if they find themselves excluded from some of the more popular specialisms, they may decide that they would rather leave the country and pursue that specialism elsewhere than stay in this country. We need them. There are potential unintended consequences in the short term. Has any modelling been done of how this might feed through the system? If the impact is negligible, what does that mean in concrete terms? Our Committee’s concern is that losing even a small number could have adverse consequences down the line.

My final point is on the workforce plan. I am confident that the Committee’s letter to the Minister is on her desk, and I hope it will be expedited soon. It would be better to flesh out some of the detail. The Secretary of State set out what the delay is and said the plan will be published in spring. I know that these things change, but we need to know exactly what is happening behind the scenes, so that we can get an understanding of the issues that are now being incorporated that were not there before. I agree we have to get this right. It was not right first time, and we have already had so many workforce plans that I understand why there is scepticism among the Royal Colleges and elsewhere that this one will work. Let us get it right—absolutely—but in the interim, by making such changes without the bigger picture, I fear we will end up doing more damage. England has

[Layla Moran]

3.2 doctors per 1,000 people, but the OECD average is 3.9, and it is 4.5 in countries like Germany. The BMA estimates that we need another 40,000 additional doctors, so the 4,000 places announced by the Secretary of State do not even begin to get there.

The other issue, of course, is the leaky bucket: retention. Every time I meet anyone in the sector they say, “How do you solve the workforce issue?” I understand why the Government focus on training—it is an issue they can dial up when they can—but the thing that really matters is retention. Having a conversation about training places and inputs is essentially turning on the drip of a tap when we have a big hole at the bottom of the bucket. For GPs, we had a session on the shift to community, and if we are going to deliver that, boy do we need home-grown doctors as part of it—I totally get that. According to a survey by the Royal College of General Practitioners, one-third of GPs might leave in the next five years, with stress being the leading factor, and with 44% citing unmanageable stress, and 73% saying that patient safety as a result of the high work load was causing them moral injury. That is mimicked across all the different specialisms, and it is something we need to address. I appreciate that it is not an issue for this Bill, but it has a material effect on whether these measures will solve the problems that the Government say they will.

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill and urge the Government to think again about overseas campuses, even in a short, time-limited, tight way. Let us also say again how much we value our international doctors, and how much we want them to stay. I am looking forward to hearing more from the Minister than just the warm words that I am sure she will provide. What else could we do to ensure that doctors believe that the NHS is a place where their career can thrive, not just make it slightly more bearable than it was before? We all want the NHS to succeed; I am sure they do too and that they want to stay and be part of it.

5.31 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): People are the backbone of our NHS, and I am incredibly grateful to the healthcare staff who work in it, particularly in Thurrock, and who care tirelessly every day, often in difficult conditions, for my constituents. As a lifelong Thurrock resident, I have experienced their excellent care as a patient, and now as an MP I see at first hand when visiting services in our area that they perform all the time to a high level despite the immense pressure they are under.

This Bill is about supporting our excellent NHS workforce, prioritising home-grown talent to ensure there is a pipeline for the next generation of fantastic doctors and nurses. It is right that it is introduced as emergency legislation, because the former Government left the NHS in a critical condition. The Tories’ botched policies on immigration saw students and junior doctors who study in the UK competing against the world for foundation and specialty roles. Visa and immigration changes meant that thousands more international workers applied for coveted training positions in the NHS. In 2019, there were 12,000 applicants for 9,000 specialty training places. That figure has now soared to nearly 40,000 applicants for 10,000 places, with twice as many overseas-trained applicants as UK-trained ones.

Those bottlenecks mean that we are losing home-grown talent. We are losing people who grew up in our communities, studied at our schools and universities, and know our NHS back to front from personal experience, because they move to jobs abroad or in the private sector. The Bill begins to correct those mistakes. It implements the commitment in our 10-year plan for health to put home-grown talent at the front of the queue for medical training posts, ensuring that UK graduates are prioritised for foundation and specialty training places. It is a signal of this Government’s intent to improve terms, conditions, and opportunities for doctors. It is a downpayment on the tangible progress offered in the deal that the BMA unfortunately rejected in December, and it marks a critical step in supporting long-term sustainable workforce planning for the NHS, ending our—let’s face it—unethical addiction to hiring from abroad. There is also an economic case. Each year, we spend £4 billion on training medical students and doctors, only to not offer those graduates a training place to continue their careers in NHS. By ensuring that we retain that talent, we will ensure that patients in the UK benefit from the investment, which is better for local doctors and the taxpayer.

Retention of staff is particularly vital in Thurrock, where we have a critical shortage of GPs and an acute hospital trust ranked among the bottom in the country. It has always been difficult to recruit doctors to our area, not least because if staff get a job 10 miles down the road—even one mile down the road, in some cases—they can earn significantly more because they will benefit from London weighting. Last year, I held a roundtable with local GPs to ask them why they chose to work in our area and how I could encourage more young doctors to make it their base.

Many young people growing up in Thurrock say that they would like to return home after medical training. They are ambitious to improve our NHS and they want to serve their community. They want to live and work in the area where they grew up. Ensuring that those graduates are prioritised to local places and have local career training, advancing their ongoing professional development, is key to unlocking a sustainable long-term workforce for our area. I urge the Secretary of State to use the opportunity afforded by both this Bill and the upcoming workforce plan to ensure that the right professionals are in the right places geographically, in order to fill historical gaps in provision.

I also urge the Secretary of State to use the workforce plan to ensure that training, recruitment and retention in all professional areas is considered and planned for, particularly in those vital professions that are often overlooked. Allied health professionals, such as speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, spring to mind and must feature in the plan, particularly those working in paediatric care, where waits for diagnosis are often felt acutely. I add a personal plea for the unique and important role played by learning disability nurses, who are already under strain. The charity Mencap, among others, warns that the role could collapse in three years’ time without urgent Government action. Those nurses are crucial in ensuring that some of the most vulnerable people in our society receive safe, effective healthcare, and in avoiding preventable deaths.

I welcome that the Secretary of State has brought this Bill forward, and the efficiency and speed shown in turning the legislation around at pace. I urge him to use

the same efficiency and speed to bring forward the workforce plan, in order to set the right direction of travel to recruit, train and retain home-grown talent. I encourage him to bring forward the workforce plan as soon as possible, to ensure that those gaps in vital provision are addressed and to support our communities through our fantastic NHS well into the future.

5.37 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): At the heart of the Bill is a simple test: does the Bill improve care for patients? Every delay in training, every cancelled clinic and every rota gap caused by workforce instability ultimately lands on the patient. It means longer waits, greater travel distances and, in too many cases, care that comes too late.

I was recently contacted by my Farnham and Bordon constituent, Dr R, as I will call her, who is a UK-trained medical graduate. Like thousands of others, she completed her studies in good faith, expecting a clear and credible pathway into the NHS. Instead, she now finds herself in a system where non-training posts are disappearing, competition ratios for training places are rising sharply and the holding pattern roles that once allowed junior doctors to remain clinically active while reapplying have all but vanished.

This is not a niche concern affecting a handful of individuals; it is a systemic failure that directly impacts patients. When trained doctors are unable to progress, fewer reach consultant and GP level in the years ahead. Services become overstretched, continuity of care is lost and waiting lists grow even longer. That is why I support the intention behind the Bill. Prioritising UK medical graduates, ensuring that the UK foundation programme is genuinely delivered in the United Kingdom and restoring confidence in the medical training pipeline are all necessary steps if we are serious about rebuilding NHS capacity for the benefit of patients.

I have supported amendments to this Bill because they strengthen those aims. They ensure that UK medical graduates are properly recognised as such, that training programmes are UK-based in substance rather than just name, and that allocation of training places is grounded firmly in merit, clinical knowledge, aptitude and performance. Patients, quite rightly, expect their doctors to be selected on ability and doctors expect fairness, and those principles should command support across this House. I also welcome new clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), which addresses growing concern among doctors and patients about the erosion of merit-based progression. When merit is undermined, morale suffers; when morale suffers, retention suffers, performance suffers, and ultimately patient safety suffers.

As such, the context of this Bill matters. Resident doctors have received cumulative pay rises approaching 30% over recent years—among the highest in the public sector. Despite this, industrial action has continued. It is increasingly clear that the BMA is determined to extract every possible concession from the Government, using sustained disruption as leverage. While I do not align myself with some of the Secretary of State's more inflammatory language, I do share the realisation he has belatedly reached: that repeated above-inflation pay settlements have not brought this dispute to an end, and that further concessions risk rewarding brinkmanship rather than restoring stability for patients.

However, in pressing its case so aggressively, the BMA has inadvertently shone a spotlight on a genuine and serious problem in the system: a broken training and progression pathway that leaves UK doctors without secure routes into the NHS. That problem is real, it affects patients, and it must be addressed regardless of the outcome of pay negotiations. That is precisely why this Bill matters and why it must not be treated as a bargaining chip, yet that is exactly the risk created by the way in which the Bill is drafted. It will come into force only when the Secretary of State gives permission. In theory, that may appear sensible; in practice, it allows a patient-benefiting reform to be delayed, diluted, or deployed as leverage in negotiations.

Before Christmas, Ministers openly discussed this legislation in the context of talks with the BMA. The implication was clear: progress on training reform was conditional. Now, months later, with industrial action ongoing, it appears that the same dynamic may be emerging again. That approach undermines confidence among doctors and, far more importantly, undermines care for patients. If a measure will improve the NHS for patients and doctors alike, it should be implemented because it is right, not because it is tactically useful. That leads me to a number of questions for the Minister to answer when she responds, which are all grounded in patient outcomes.

Patients need capacity and certainty. They need more doctors progressing through training, not further delays and ambiguity. If the Government genuinely believe that prioritising UK graduates will strengthen the workforce, why is the commencement of this Bill discretionary at all? What assurance can the Minister give patients that these reforms will not be delayed indefinitely while negotiations continue? Patients have already endured significant disruption from industrial action—hundreds of thousands of appointments and operations have been cancelled or rescheduled. Without further pay concessions, can the Minister explain how this Bill will reduce the risk of future disruption, or is she effectively accepting that patients may face continued instability?

There is also the question of scale. The BMA itself has said that the Bill does not go far enough to close the gap between applicants and available training posts. What assessment has been made of how many UK graduates will still be unable to access foundation or specialty training even after this legislation is passed, and what will that mean for patient access to care in the coming years? Patients in many parts of the country already struggle to access GPs, psychiatrists and emergency medicine specialists. How will the Secretary of State and the Minister ensure that these reforms do not inadvertently worsen shortages in hard-to-recruit specialties or underserved areas?

Finally, there is the question of credibility. If this Bill is genuinely good for patients, good for workforce stability and good for the NHS, why should its implementation depend on a ministerial decision at some undefined point in time? Why not give doctors and patients certainty by bringing it into force immediately on Royal Assent? This House has a responsibility to put patients first, not leave patient care hostage to industrial negotiations. That is why I strongly support amendment 1, which would ensure that the Bill comes into force at the moment of Royal Assent. It removes unnecessary delays, ambiguity, and the risk that these reforms will be postponed

[Gregory Stafford]

indefinitely while workforce and pay disputes continue. UK medical graduates, hospitals and training bodies need certainty that the rules will apply from day one, so that allocations, protections for those trained on military postings, and fairness measures can begin to operate without delay. The amendment would ensure that reforms designed to strengthen transparency, meritocracy and the workforce will take effect when they are needed most. That clarity is particularly important given the absence of a published NHS workforce plan.

We need certainty for doctors that delivers stability for services, which in turn delivers better patient care and better outcomes. That is the standard by which this Bill should be judged, and it is the standard it must meet.

5.44 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill. We all know that our NHS faces workforce shortages in many specialties. In my constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale, the workforce problem, combined with other factors, means that my constituents are not seeing the improvement in waiting times that other parts of the country have seen. The progress that has been made nationally is astounding, and we Government Members should be proud of that, but there are pockets where that progress has not been made, and that is unacceptable. I would welcome more conversations with Ministers about how we can tackle that, and I will continue to raise the matter with the local NHS.

Alongside the workforce shortages, we have the bizarre situation that doctors who need training places are struggling to get them, particularly those who are UK graduates. Competition for foundation and specialty training places has grown, partly because of a 2020 change to visas that lifted restrictions on overseas applicants applying for those training places. I would like to believe that that was done in good faith to try to increase the NHS workforce and to plug specialty gaps, but because of how it was done, UK graduates ended up competing, not with perhaps one other person, but with six other people for a training place. That is clearly unhelpful, particularly when we have already invested so much in their education.

Doctors have taken on a lot of debt to go through their initial training. Faced with this level of competition, and unable to continue their training in the UK, many medical graduates are being pushed to seek employment abroad or, even worse, to leave medicine altogether. Pressure is uneven across the system; some specialties are heavily oversubscribed, while some are left with unfilled posts. For example, there is a 15% staffing shortfall in oncology. For many years, I was the deputy chair of the Lancashire health scrutiny committee, so I saw Tory incompetence in the health service in real time. That particular example adds to the litany of their failures in health. Over 14 years, they made us poorer, sicker and less able to get early help.

This Bill addresses the failure to provide training places for doctors, in order to ensure that UK graduates can continue to train in the UK. It introduces a system of prioritisation for UK medical graduates, and will deliver this Labour Government's commitment to a more sustainable medical workforce. It protects public

investment, reduces excessive competition and ensures that our home-grown talent can become the next generation of NHS doctors. No disrespect to the fantastic medics who come from abroad to work here—they do such a fantastic job, and our NHS would not have survived without that immigrant workforce—but prioritising UK-trained graduates would bring us into line with international norms. Favouring domestically trained clinicians helps countries to ensure that they have a stable workforce. To be honest, we should not be nicking other countries' doctors, particularly doctors from countries with underdeveloped health systems. I do not believe that is in line with our values.

UK taxpayers invest around £4 billion every year in training doctors, so the aim of any sustainable workforce policy should be to see all UK graduates in training posts. A fifth-year medical student who wrote to me aptly described this Bill as essential to safeguarding what he calls

“fair access to training opportunities amongst UK graduates”, and to ensure that the NHS workforce pipeline survives in the long term.

I am glad to see the Government addressing this issue with the urgency it deserves. Doctors, of course, are only one part of the health service. Many professions work together to care for patients, but doctors are a vital part of the NHS, and we need to ensure that UK medical graduates can progress their careers. This goes alongside all the other work that the Labour Government are doing to make us healthier as a nation, whether on controlling tobacco and vapes, helping people to afford healthy food, or enabling earlier access to primary care. I urge colleagues across the House to support this Bill.

5.49 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): As I said earlier, I will be supporting the Bill. I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for their engagement with the devolved institutions on the Bill's intentions, and on expediting its progress. Its implications for Northern Ireland, and for the medical workforce spanning the islands, are crucial.

As has been discussed, the Bill introduces a UK-wide duty on providers of medical training to prioritise applicants who have graduated from medical schools in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. While health is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, I entirely recognise that this legislation is essential to preserving a joined-up and UK-wide approach to medical training and recruitment. For too long, we have seen increasing pressures on training pathways, with locally trained graduates facing uncertainties and bottlenecks when moving from undergraduate education into foundation and specialty training. I hope very much that the Bill will ensure that those who trained in UK and Republic of Ireland systems have a clear and reliable route into employment in those same systems.

I welcome clause 4, which refers to the terms “UK medical graduate” and “the priority group”, but am concerned about the drafting of amendment 9, which was tabled by members of His Majesty's official Opposition. If Northern Ireland were excluded from these arrangements in any way, by default, it would face an invidious choice between accepting increased competition for limited training places and withdrawing from national

recruitment altogether. The latter would place a significant administrative and financial burden on local bodies, particularly the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, and could risk undermining long-established recruitment structures.

I welcome the fact that the Bill does not impose additional costs on health services in Northern Ireland, given that the system is under unprecedented financial strain. Instead, it simply changes the order in which applications are considered for existing programmes, and by doing so, it helps to protect the investment made in medical education. However, I seek an assurance from the Minister in connection with a graduate-entry medical school that was created at Magee College back in 2021. The first cohort of graduates came through in June 2025—69 second-degree doctors and surgeons. I hope that nothing in the Bill will hinder their progression into the workforce. I am sure that the Minister has engaged with the Northern Ireland Health Minister on ensuring that there are no impediments to that progression.

Ultimately, the Bill supports locally trained doctors and maintains the integrity of national recruitment systems. I therefore fully support it, along with its extension to Northern Ireland through the legislative consent motion process. I genuinely wish the Minister well, and commend her on the constructive approach taken to recognising Northern Ireland's devolved competences while ensuring alignment across the entirety of the United Kingdom. However, I will support the Opposition amendment regarding the timing. In my view, this legislation is not just the right thing to do. It is the timely thing to do in order to tackle the issue of workforce recruitment, and it should not be used in any negotiations with the British Medical Association to resolve another issue out there. I seek an assurance from the Secretary of State, as other speakers have done, that the Bill will be introduced in the right manner, because it is the right thing to do.

5.53 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I welcome the Government's plan to change the law. It was obvious to me and to others that such a change would be needed, and it was one of the matters about which the newly elected doctors spoke to Ministers last year.

Imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you have graduated from a medical school, excited at last to be called a doctor, and looking forward to finally getting to work after years of intense study, uncountable examinations and fierce competition. When this happened to me at Sheffield medical school, our early pre-registration posts were organised by the university. We were simply distributed around the local hospitals. We were in familiar locations, with our classmates and consultants who knew us. We began, rather hesitantly, to work as doctors, but suddenly we had responsibility for life and death.

However, something changed. Now young doctors are simply sent by chance, with little notice, to a region of the country they have never visited. They are far from their friends. Ironically, they are now called resident doctors, but that is the very last thing they are; the residences have long since disappeared. The shift system replaced the on-call rotas, and the doctors' mess disappeared, so hot food was no longer available. Now, if they are lucky, they have an office chair in which to

rest, and a sandwich dispenser in a cold corridor. They have no friends nearby, nowhere to live, and nothing to eat at night. It is not really the best start, and these are the young doctors on whom your life may depend. We really must do something to look after the health workers who look after us—all health workers. That does not just mean paying them properly, although we obviously must do so. Today we are speaking about our doctors, for young doctors face a very uncertain future.

After Brexit, many of our European doctors just left. The deficit was filled, as so often in the past, by doctors from the rest of the world. Especially in hospitals that are remote from medical schools—such as my hospital, the West Suffolk hospital in Bury St Edmunds, and the hospital where I worked for so many years, the James Paget hospital in Great Yarmouth—we have always depended on brilliant doctors from many nations, many of whom have become my long-term colleagues and some of my best friends. Immigration rules were altered after Brexit, effectively enabling applicants from across the world to apply for a very limited number of posts. As we have heard, although competition is healthy, it is certainly not healthy for the ratio of applicants to posts to go from about 2:1 to more than 4:1. As we have also heard, this is absolutely the cause of the bottlenecks. UK graduates simply cannot progress and are obliged to repeat years, often as unstructured and unrecognised clinical fellows. They leave the country or give up medicine altogether. The Government have rightly recognised that this must change.

Medical training is a continuum, and the end result is a general practitioner or a hospital specialist—by the way, I much prefer “specialist” to “consultant”. Doctors have five or six years of undergraduate training, and eight to 10 years of postgraduate training, and it makes no sense to graduate so many students and then fail to accommodate them in postgraduate training. The measure to prioritise the graduates of UK medical schools is simply common sense and I support it, alongside, I understand, almost all Members of the House.

Finally, let me issue a word of warning. The number of new medical schools—I understand that there are many new medical schools, including the one in Cumbria, which I did not know about—means that we have more graduates than ever. That is good, because we have insufficient doctors, but the health system must create additional training posts, more substantive posts for general practitioners and hospital specialists, and incentives to create these posts, especially in general practice, so that our new neighbourhood health centres, which I like to call “Bevan health centres”, can be fully staffed and open late at night, and so that we see an NHS renewed. That is our aim, and we will achieve it.

5.57 pm

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): As always, it is an honour and a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), who is a retired ear, nose and throat surgeon. It has been a pleasure to listen to my colleagues in the House debating this Bill. In common with Members from across the House, I absolutely welcome the Bill, and I am glad to see it come forward. I have heard from many of my junior medic colleagues about the issues that my hon. Friend set out so eloquently, and we need to care for our UK graduate workforce.

[*Dr Beccy Cooper*]

In recent years, NHS workforce planning has not been done well. There has been an increase in the number of medical students training, which we welcome, but there has not been a commensurate increase in the number of jobs available at the end of that training, which makes no sense. Training is expensive, and UK graduates should be able to access employment at the end of their training. As many Members from across the House have said, there must be recognition that healthcare professionals are part of a global workforce. There will continue to be a natural flow of my medical colleagues heading to other parts of the world to deploy their skills, and there will continue to be a global workforce in our national health service. We should not underestimate the mutual learning that results from this arrangement.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global health and security. We are undertaking an inquiry with our Global Health Partnerships colleagues on the net benefits to the UK from international recruitment, and at the future reciprocal benefits for both the UK and countries of heritage. The benefits will go both ways; we should not underestimate that. A balance needs to be found, and I think this legislation more than achieves that. We are prioritising UK graduates, increasing the number of placements available, and continuing to recognise international skilled personnel who already have experience of the UK health service, whom we value and do not want to lose. This will of course need close monitoring, alongside implementation of the NHS workforce plan. All that has been said, but I just wanted to reinforce it.

What has not been mentioned in the Chamber this afternoon, and I would like to bring it to the Minister's attention, is the public health workforce. As a declaration of interest, I am still a public health consultant or specialist on the General Medical Council register. The public health workforce is exempt from the prioritisation in this Bill, because we are very fortunate that public health benefits not only from medical graduates such as myself, but from a non-medical workforce. There are benefits from this mix, and the global nature of public health is reflected in having an international mix, but public health training is hugely oversubscribed in the United Kingdom. So will the Minister give further consideration to this exemption to ensure that UK graduates do not continue to face the issues, which have been so eloquently outlined, currently faced by their medical colleagues?

6 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I will keep this short, because many of my points have already been made. I think that there are two main problems. The first is about priority for our medical graduates. To be honest, I was a little bit surprised when, about a year ago, I found out that they are not prioritised. That clearly is not reciprocated around the world, and we need to change it. The other problem is our training numbers. If we are training medical students up to graduation, we must ensure that the number training fit into our postgraduate training, because otherwise it is crazy, which is the situation we find ourselves in.

I have been a GP trainer for about 25 years, and many of the doctors I have trained as GPs have gone off to Australia. My favourite went to New Zealand and is

staying there, although I keep trying to entice her back by saying how great it is that the NHS is improving. GP training is unique. It involves 18 months in general practice in a one-on-one apprenticeship-type system, and I think the system in the UK is one of the best in the world. It teaches continuity of care for patients, and it also teaches the skills that are bringing back the family doctor. This is about the doctor being the gatekeeper to the NHS, and also protecting the patient against the NHS and from over-investigation.

In fact, I always think an MP is bit like a GP, because a GP has to know a little about absolutely everything, which is the same for an MP. I would like to give a shout-out to my Stroud GP trainers group, who visited Parliament last year, and also to the 8,000 GP trainers in this country, who do a fantastic job, often going above and beyond their responsibilities.

I would like to mention international medical graduates—I have had a number of them. At the moment, 50% of those training in the UK are international medical graduates—I understand that in Teesside the figure is 100%—and we are depending on these people to provide some of our general practice. I have had fantastic trainees from India, Spain, Germany and Algeria, who have all become fantastic NHS GPs. As I have said, we must ensure that they are welcome and treasured in the NHS, because they constitute a large body of GPs in our system. Although we need to prioritise UK graduates, we must not put off international graduates from coming and helping us to deliver a new NHS.

I would like to make another point about medical training. Postgraduate medical training goes through a process, and it is important that we recalibrate this so that the number of training spots exactly matches the number of our medical graduates. That is particularly true for anaesthetists. There are bottlenecks in anaesthetics training, and if we could relieve those bottlenecks, we would get more anaesthetists training and could start to bring down our waiting list. However, that will involve a decent workforce plan, which I understand we are developing, and proper planning for the future, so we can get our waiting lists down and deliver a better NHS for everyone.

To conclude, after years of failure and the neglect of our home-grown talent, this Government are taking action so that our doctors can train, stay and serve the communities that need them most. I urge Members to support the Bill.

6.4 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): This Bill matters enormously in my constituency. The NHS is one of the largest local employers. Our hospitals, community services and care settings are the backbone of our local economy. We also have outstanding institutions—Bournemouth University, Bournemouth and Poole College and the Health Sciences University—ready and willing to provide a strong local pipeline of medical and health professionals. I have met professors at the school of midwifery at BU worried about whether its graduates will get a first placement, specialist nurses unable to progress their careers, and early-career psychiatrists forced to look for work far from home. That is not through a lack of demand for these services in the local area. If we train doctors here, fund their education through British taxpayers and ask them to commit their lives and careers to the NHS, we owe them a fair chance to build those careers within it.

The shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), has said that we should not play politics with people's jobs. I agree, but we must recognise that the situation we are in now is a direct result of the Conservatives' ill thought-through visa changes in the wake of the mess left by their post-Brexit settlement for the UK. The fact that we now have more than double the number of overseas-trained applicants than UK-trained applicants for a limited position is a consequence of that. Under the Conservatives, we became too reliant on pulling the immigration lever to solve our workforce shortages. Their policies meant that UK graduates are being squeezed out, with too many lost to the private sector or overseas not because of a lack of talent or commitment, but because the system did not work for them. I was proud to campaign on a commitment to train more local young people and to encourage companies to hire locally before looking overseas, and the same should be true for the NHS, so I am pleased that the Bill is doing that.

This is not about blaming or disrespecting migrant workers. International doctors and those from our immigrant communities who work in all elements of our NHS are valued and respected. Immigration has enriched my town. The people who have come to the UK to care for our elderly, nurse our sick and heal our injured are important parts of the vibrant and diverse community that we have in Bournemouth, and I thank them for their service.

We should also be proud that the NHS is a world-renowned employer and a real part of our soft power influence. Countries around the world aspire to the type of universal healthcare offering that we have in the UK, and our specialists train health professionals around the world. For many doctors around the globe, time spent working in the NHS is a badge of honour, but poaching doctors from countries that desperately need them while UK-trained doctors cannot progress is morally wrong. It undermines global health equity and erodes trust here at home. It is right that we prioritise skilling our own people; other countries recognise that reality. The United States, Canada and Australia prioritise domestic graduates for training opportunities.

The Bill is consequential for me, as a Labour MP for a constituency that has never voted Labour before. Bournemouth and Poole are often seen as affluent areas, but they contain real inequalities and serious barriers to social mobility. In places such as West Howe and Alderney, parents tell me that they feel forgotten. They worry that their children do the right things, work hard and get the right grades, but are constantly told that they cannot compete or are locked out. If we want young people from council estates to believe that they belong in medicine, we must back that belief with opportunity. We cannot claim to be the party of social mobility and dignity in work if we do not put the ladders in place.

The Conservative record is clear: expanding medical places without expanding training posts, liberalising visas without the workforce planning and leaving UK graduates to carry the cost. The Bill is a necessary correction. It is fair, responsible and morally right for our NHS, communities and the next generation. To any students or recent graduates considering Australia, I say this: if we get this right, we have beaches that are just as impressive in Bournemouth, even if I cannot always guarantee the weather.

6.8 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): At its heart, this Bill is about fairness—fairness for the doctors who train in this country, and fairness for the patients who rely on the care provided by our fantastic NHS workforce. Before Brexit, graduates from our British medical schools predominantly competed among themselves for foundation and specialty training posts, but since Boris Johnson's disastrous visa and immigration changes made under the previous Conservative Government, that picture has changed completely. Doctors trained here are facing huge barriers to progressing their career and caring for patients up and down the country, and many are turning to jobs abroad or within the private sector. That is not because they lack the ability or the commitment, but because of how the system was left to drift by the previous Government until it has got to this point of being set up against our graduates.

We hear a lot about the doctors who train here but then end up going abroad, but we hear a lot less about the concerns of the doctors who remain here in the UK. They are passionate about our NHS and want to dedicate their careers to it. They want to build their lives here, but all too often they find that they simply cannot secure a training post. This is not a new problem; it is a reality that has been behind the flight of doctors overseas for many years. But only now do we have a Government who are committed to tackling it. I commend the Health Secretary not only for bringing forward the Bill, but for committing to bring in changes as swiftly as possible.

Our NHS and our constituents are missing out on our home-grown talent because of the previous Government's changes to immigration, which led to the so-called Boriswave. As we have heard, international medical graduates contribute hugely and are welcome, but visa changes have had a destabilising effect on British-trained doctors who now face double the competition for every single post. We are training more doctors now than ever before, but we have failed until now to match that ambition with a system that supports them. As we have heard, we spend around £4 billion a year training doctors in the UK, a huge investment of public money, and it is only right that taxpayers see that investment translating into doctors building their careers in our NHS.

The prioritisation to which the Secretary of State referred is about sustainability and keeping things fair for our UK-trained graduates, not about shutting out international talent. The NHS is rightly proud to be a major international employer and people from around the world will continue to bring vital skills to our health service. Of course, anyone who can apply now will still be able to apply. But many countries from which we are recruiting also desperately need their own doctors. We should be proud that people want to come and work here, but it is morally unacceptable to pinch doctors from other countries that need them, meanwhile leaving our brilliant and willing resident doctors unable to get training places.

The Bill builds on action that the Government have already taken to boost the NHS workforce. When the Government came into office, we heard concerns from GPs and patients alike about a dire need for more GP surgery capacity, while many qualified GPs were out of work. Labour removed the red tape around the additional roles reimbursement scheme and more than 1,000 additional GPs have since joined our primary care workforce.

[Josh Newbury]

When the Government heard from nurses who were just about to qualify and struggling to find work, despite a clear and chronic need for more nurses, they brought in the graduate guarantee. Now the Government are acting again.

Following the Secretary of State's constructive approach to negotiations with the BMA, he offered a package of support, including quadrupling the number of specialist training posts being created in the coming three years and funding resident doctors' Royal College exam and membership fees. Despite a rejection of that deal, he is making good on his commitment to put British graduates back on a level playing field, giving them a fair shot at taking the next step in their careers, with competition ratios that are reasonable and workable.

The Bill will ensure that the NHS retains the talent it has developed through excellent medical schools such as Keele University in Staffordshire, rather than losing that talent to overseas recruitment or forcing doctors out of the profession altogether. The BMA has welcomed extending prioritisation to the foundation programme, which the Government expect will significantly reduce the number of placeholder offers faced by final-year medical students. I hope that as their members vote on whether to take further strike action, they will see that the Government do not make pie-crust promises. We are taking the steps we said we would take to fix the issues that they have raised.

I know that the Bill will not fix every workforce challenge overnight, but it is certainly a big step in the right direction. It will reduce competition for training places and, most importantly, send a clear message to resident doctors who trained in this country: if you want to progress your career here, the Government will back you. For those reasons, I am proud to support the Bill.

6.13 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for the Bill, which delivers on the promises made previously in this place in response to the proposed industrial action a couple of months ago. It is welcome to see the pace with which the Government have moved in progressing these important changes. It shows their commitment to backing doctors and medical professionals in this country.

There is a lot to welcome in the Bill's provisions. Members have talked at length and with a lot of personal and professional expertise about the challenges of the medical training system. As a member of the Health Committee—alongside the Chair, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), and others who have spoken—we often hear about the need for a proper workforce plan to address the NHS's long-term issues with training and development, which frankly have failed staff and patients.

It is important to reflect on, as others have, the important and vital contribution that doctors and nurses from around the world have made. That is the case in my constituency at Hillingdon hospital, and in GP and community-based health services. My mum recently had a stroke and, fortunately, recovered from it at University College London hospital in central London.

As ever, it was doctors, nurses, speech therapists and allied healthcare professionals from almost every country around the world who helped and supported her to recover. I am sure that they will continue to serve our national health service with dedication and commitment, and I am sure that the whole of this House is thankful for their service.

As we have heard, however, it is absurd that thousands of British doctors trained by our NHS at great expense, funded by the British taxpayer, are currently unable to find jobs in the NHS after graduation. In a time of crisis for the NHS, we do not have a penny to spare, and every pound needs to go even further. It is a great waste of talent and capacity, and it is not fair to young doctors in the system, who are being beaten to entry-level NHS positions by doctors from overseas with decades of experience.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I wonder if the hon. Member has given any thought to residents such as George and Dennis in my constituency, who are both British citizens, brought up here, but went to work abroad either because they are dual citizens and wanted to be able to learn in two languages, or because of the covid delays. They will not be included in these measures. Does the hon. Member think they should be included within the second tier of graduates from places like Iceland and Liechtenstein? Does he have any views on whether we should be excluding British citizens?

Danny Beales: I am about to turn to a specific issue about British citizens, so I hope I will pick up on the hon. Member's points. More generally, there is nothing progressive about a system that promotes a brain drain from some of the most deprived and underdeveloped communities in the world, with significant health needs. To have doctors and nurses come from those systems on an industrial scale, and to take away the resources spent in those systems on education and training for our benefit in a western, developed country, is not progressive. It is important to welcome the provisions in the Bill that address those challenges.

As the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) raised, I will press the Secretary of State—and the Minister for Secondary Care, who is now in place—on the specific language of the Bill, which seeks to prioritise graduates from medical schools in the United Kingdom, rather than UK citizens who are medical graduates.

Like other Members, I have been contacted by a number of my constituents who will be affected by these provisions. That includes Alisha, a British citizen who was schooled and grew up here; her family live in Ickenham in my constituency, and she is a first-year medical student at Queen Mary University of London's campus in Malta, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) mentioned earlier. When she enrolled last year, she was given a guarantee by the university that she would face no disadvantage compared with students on the London campus.

We have heard that there can never be any guarantees; that there is not a legal contract that this Government make with individuals; and that this House is sovereign, and can make different decisions. But I think there are issues of fairness around the retrospective applications of decisions that we make that can affect people's lives,

particularly at crucial points, such as when studying or getting a job—decisions that have major impacts on someone's future life chances.

Alisha studies a British curriculum and she will be awarded the same degree qualification as her peers on the London campus. However, if the Bill's current wording is interpreted strictly geographically instead of institutionally, it would mean that she is categorised as an international medical graduate, despite being a British citizen, studying a British medical degree at a British university.

I ask the Secretary of State to take away this point and, with officials, to look at this specific issue in greater detail and at modelling and sharing the number of UK citizens projected to be affected this academic year by those changes. If, as has been suggested by Queen Mary University, this is a matter of 40 or 50 individuals, I ask the Secretary of State to look at whether further changes could be made to ameliorate the impact on UK citizens, at least in a transitional way, that would not bind us in future academic years. I also ask that officials have discussions with Maltese counterparts about our important and ongoing strategic relationship in health and other key areas.

To conclude, there is much to welcome in this Bill. I know that medical colleges and societies strongly support many of the provisions. I hope that they will be the start of a broader process of a comprehensive workforce plan that will address the many challenges in workforce planning, training and development and the numbers of bottlenecks that exist throughout the workforce system so that we have a training and development system for medical professionals in this country that delivers both positive results for patients and better and fairer outcomes for those applying to study, learn and train.

6.21 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): As the final contributor from the Back Benches, I shall try to strike a slightly different tone from the rest of the debate.

Over the past few days, I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are likely to be affected by today's emergency Bill. One of those is Dr Khan, a resident doctor at Poole general hospital's emergency department. He trained overseas and has been working in the NHS for almost three years. He also has a young family living in my constituency. As an international medical graduate working in the NHS, he is concerned that the proposed emergency legislation on UK medical graduate prioritisation will have a negative impact on people like him. Although I support a sustainable domestic medical workforce, implementing these changes mid-cycle in 2026, after applications have closed and commitments have been made, is, I believe, a breach of procedural fairness.

My constituent has raised further concerns that I would also like to share. The technical proposal to use immigration status such as indefinite leave to remain or citizenship as a proxy for NHS experience is both blunt and unnecessary. The Oriel application system already specifically collects data on whether an applicant has more than six months of NHS experience, and this existing evidence-based metric should be used to prioritise those already contributing to our health service rather than relying on immigration status.

Many of Dr Khan's colleagues have relocated to this country and planned their lives based on the rules in force when the applications opened in late 2025. To change the rules now, while we are in the middle of the interview window, will cause immense personal distress and undermine our long-standing commitment to fairness.

There is also a genuine risk to the workforce. Our NHS relies heavily on our international staff, and today's Bill risks damaging the UK's reputation as a fair employer. It could lead to an exodus of skilled professionals that the NHS, in my view, cannot afford to lose.

When the Minister responds, will she consider providing clear transitional protections for the 2026 cohort who are already here? Will she further consider that any new criteria should be implemented prospectively for 2027 and that any measure of NHS experience should utilise the data already collected, rather than blunt immigration-based proxies?

A few days ago, I submitted a written question on the impact that the proposed changes to rules around indefinite leave to remain for health workers would have on the viability of the NHS 10-year workforce plan. The response from the Department was that no such assessment had been made. I fear that we are now making the same mistake again. Those who are already here and making a contribution need to be acknowledged for their service. I would welcome any assurances that the Minister could give to Dr Khan and all those like him who are already a valued part of our NHS.

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

6.24 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Opposition, but first I should declare my interest as a consultant paediatrician and member of the British Medical Association.

Medicine is a vocation, but it is also an art and a science, and training takes a long time. After, in general, five years as a medical student, new resident doctors need to train further in a specialism such as orthopaedics, ophthalmology or, in my case, paediatrics. Postgraduate training varies in length and structure among the specialties, but in broad principle it is divided into a foundation programme and more specialist training. The foundation programme is two years long and teaches a variety of skills. Specialist training is more specific, and there are well over 60 different specialties that people can choose from. It is those two phrases—the foundation programme and specialist training—that the Bill refers to.

We are in a situation where there has been a huge surge in the number of applications per training post. One reason for that is the substantial increase in the number of medical school places. That was caused by action by the previous Conservative Government to improve the number of doctors in the long term. The previous Government opened five medical schools—at Sunderland, Anglia Ruskin, Kent and Medway, Edge Hill and, very close to my constituency, Lincoln. The first students at those universities graduated in 2023, 2024 and 2025, which increased the number of students looking for posts.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

At the time there was also a widespread expansion of existing medical school places—and, of course, there was the pandemic. During the pandemic, students who had applied for medical school and accepted offers found themselves unable to take their exams, and teacher-assessed grades meant that there was a huge increase in the number of successful applicants who got the grades they needed. There were more compared with the number that was statistically expected. The Government lifted the cap, and there was a huge number of medical students in that period. Many of them qualified last summer. That is why there is a huge increase in the number of local graduates.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), the Secretary of State talked about his pledge to double medical school places, but there does not appear to have been an increase in the number of medical school places this year, and a statement from the Department for Health and Social Care at the weekend suggests that it is not a Government commitment. When the Secretary of State was asked whether he stands by his pledge, he seemed to say no, so I would appreciate it if the Minister clarified that issue.

In 2024 at a visit to the Royal Derby hospital, the Secretary of State said that that site would be part of delivering the doubling of the number of medical school places that Labour is committed to in order to ensure that the NHS has the staff it needs to treat patients on time. He then encouraged people to vote for that in the 4 July general election. Will he clarify whether he stands by his pledge, and if so, when does he expect to start delivering on it?

UK factors are not the main cause for the rise in numbers. The BMA has published figures from freedom of information requests that show that the number of UK graduates applying for training programmes went up from 9,273 in 2023 to 12,305 in 2025, which is an increase of about a third. Over the same period, the number of international medical graduates applying for specialist training went from 10,402 in 2023 to 20,803 in 2025, which is a doubling of applications.

The surge in numbers has left British graduates facing unemployment. Some may pursue careers overseas and not return. The valuable contributions from international medical graduates are appreciated, but many complete training and return to their home nation, which could leave us with a potential shortage in the long term of consultants and GPs.

The Government are right to step in to prioritise local talent. As such, we support the principles behind the Bill. However, there are some issues that we have questions about. First, the foundation programme applications are in progress. An application window closed on 8 October, and pre-allocation outcomes were due in mid-December. Foundation school applications due on 26 February are also to be delayed. The foundation programme website states that allocations can only occur once the Bill receives Royal Assent. That delay in itself, and the uncertainty associated with it, is difficult enough for young doctors and their families. Yet the Secretary of State creates an extra layer of uncertainty by adding clause 8 and the right to withhold activation of the Bill to a day of his choosing. Why is he doing that?

What are the foundation programme and the people who run it to do? Should they wait, based on, “Will he, won’t he?” and, “When will he allocate it, when will he not?” Should they allocate places anyway, on the basis, as has been said already, that people need to know where they will live and sort out their arrangements? Or will they have to reallocate if the Secretary of State activates it, after it was allocated on the basis that he had not done that yet? That is not the way to treat professional, hard-working people.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon said in his speech, this is not just about doctors; it is about patient safety now and in the future. The Conservatives have submitted an amendment that would activate the Bill on Royal Assent. I urge the Secretary of State to do what is right for the country and for patient safety and support it.

Secondly, Labour has forgotten the British people—those we represent and should prioritise. I will say more as we consider the specific amendment, but under Labour’s Bill, foreign nationals completing a primary medical degree in Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and the UK are in a priority group. Yet a British citizen who trained in the USA, Canada, France or even the Malta campus of a UK medical school are not.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) talked about the likelihood of international medical graduates leaving the UK after training, but surely that is an argument to ensure that British trainees are prioritised wherever they have trained—if the degree is suitable. The Conservative amendment ensures that British people are always front and centre, and we urge the other Opposition parties to back it. The issue of British citizens was raised earlier too. I want to clarify for the avoidance of all doubt that when we say “British citizens” we mean those from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

There are other clarifications, which I will be grateful if the Minister can address when winding up. On military doctors, what position is in place to ensure that military resident doctors are able to access the posts that they need? What impact will the Bill have on them, particularly if, as the world is more dangerous now, they spend more time overseas in future than at present?

As Conservatives, we believe in meritocracy and, as such, I support new clause 2 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). We all want excellent doctors and—I will say more about this in Committee—a random allocation does not encourage excellence. It produces stress and uncertainty, it does not encourage excellence, so I support the amendment.

We agree with the principle of the Bill, but we encourage the Government to accept amendments that encourage excellence, to think through the detail, to put politics aside and do what is right for the country, to prioritise British citizens and to activate the Bill immediately on Royal Assent.

6.32 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to close on behalf of the Government. I welcome the support of the Opposition spokespeople and the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon.

Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I put on record my thanks to them for meeting me in advance of the Bill and for airing their concerns.

From the many contributions this afternoon, there is clearly a broad base of sympathy and support right across the House for the measures in the Bill to support our NHS staff, who have been at the sharp end of every ill-conceived policy of the past 14 years—not least since the previous Government lifted the visa restrictions in 2020, as outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale). The last Government's failure to do any proper workforce planning has also led to patients struggling to find a GP appointment while GPs struggle to get a job, bottlenecks for resident doctors and an over-reliance on overseas workers and a refusal to foster our own home-grown talent.

Although I welcome the support, I find it slightly ironic that some of the Opposition speeches were around the need for clear and consistent routes and for clarity. That is exactly what we intend to provide to fix the mess. We will bring forward wider issues in the workforce plan, which, as the boss said earlier, will be in the spring. That is as a result of the concerns around training from the Royal Colleges and other stakeholders and making sure that we do that properly. We will bring that forward in due course.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD) *rose*—

Karin Smyth: I am going to make some progress. Time is of the essence, I am afraid, but we can pick up more in Committee.

When I was a manager in the NHS, I worked alongside many overseas doctors, and I want to make it clear from this Dispatch Box this afternoon that they are, of course, welcome here. The NHS is and always will be one of the most diverse employers in the world. This Bill is about bringing future generations into the health service and giving them the secure future that we all know they need. It is about sustainable workforce planning so that patients are no longer at the mercy of the market. Crucially, it is also about fairness. How is it fair that every year the taxpayer picks up a £4 billion bill to train medics who cannot then get jobs? Those taxpayers deserve a return on their investment. How is it fair that medics in this country put themselves forward to train, make sacrifices, get into debt and work long hours only to find themselves trapped in bottlenecks?

I am going to try to address a number of colleagues' points. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson), for his experience and for outlining the capacity and demand issues that people like him have to face as managers, and also for his important point about our workforce needing to reflect our society. He talked about the great work being done in Sunderland, and I was pleased to meet the leaders there, including Dr Wilkes, to see the work they are doing so that we can take that elsewhere. That is exactly what we want to do.

I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns)—the mum of a nurse, as she told us—for putting on the record the work of the Pears Cumbria School of Medicine and the intention of growing doctors who are steeped in Cumbria. She also mentioned health inequalities, and I would be pleased to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those issues further. My hon.

Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) was right to highlight the soaring numbers of people we are losing and to recognise that it was all going back to front.

Why do we need emergency legislation? We need Royal Assent by 5 March at the latest to ensure that the change happens this year. We do not want medics to face another year of bottlenecks. Specialty training offers will be made from March, and any delay will risk vacancies in August. This emergency legislation gives the NHS the certainty and stability it needs to carry on bringing down waiting lists and to keep us on the road to recovery. The people applying for those posts need enough time to make decisions about their lives, including deciding where they will move, finding accommodation and sorting childcare, and they deserve enough time to get on with that.

A number of colleagues have raised the definition of prioritisation for training posts. Let us be clear that, for specialty training posts starting this year, we will prioritise UK medical graduates and others, using their immigration status as a proxy for having significant experience of working in the health service. Colleagues might wonder whether there has been some pulling of strings to include Irish doctors in that prioritisation, but I can assure them that that is not the case. Ireland is included because of our special and long-standing relationship with Ireland and very similar epidemiology. I thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) for the important points he raised about Magee College and working with the devolved institutions. I can assure him that officials have worked closely with officials in Northern Ireland on this. If there are any other issues, he should please raise them, but we have worked closely on that point.

From next year, 2027, immigration status will no longer automatically determine priority. I accept some of the points from my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan). He perhaps suggested that the proposal was crude, but it is a proxy for this year. Next year we will bring forward regulations to prioritise whether someone has significant experience as a doctor in the health service or by reference to their immigration status. This point was raised by the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, and many others. We will continue to work with all partners and the devolved Governments to agree those criteria in time for the autumn application round.

On international staff, my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), the Chair of the Select Committee and others raised the issue of foreign doctors. Let us be clear that international staff play an important role in our NHS and they always will. The NHS might be the most diverse public body in the world, and we would not have it any other way, but we are recruiting doctors from abroad—sometimes even from countries that are short of medical staff—when there is already a pool of applicants at home.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) said, we are not about nicking other people's workforces. Home-grown doctors are more likely to work in the NHS for longer, and be better equipped to deliver healthcare tailored to the UK's population, because having been trained in the UK's epidemiology, they better understand it. It is not fair for British taxpayers

[Karin Smyth]

to spend over £4 billion training medics every year, as my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) and for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) said. Nor is it fair for doctors who struggled to get into specialty training places. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston said, a responsible Government get a grip on this.

I will refer to the amendments when we move into Committee of the whole House. We are seeing the green shoots of recovery as we repair the NHS following the damage done over the past 14 years. We are turning another page on that decline. However, the decision in 2020 to lift visa restrictions has done untold damage to the system and to staff morale, and contributed to a national mood of cynicism and pessimism, especially among the young, so we need to act. Those points were articulated well by the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), and expertly, as always, by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley).

Let me end my remarks by talking about the many young people who will be affected by the changes that we are setting out. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) said, these are not abstract statistics but personal costs. When I speak to those in my family, my constituency and even my parliamentary office who have breached the first barrier of getting to a medical school from a state school, I am disheartened to hear how many of them feel that their careers would be better served by moving abroad. In the 1970s, James Callaghan said that if he were a young man, he would emigrate. I do not want young people to take that path; I would rather say to them, “By all means, travel, see the world and enjoy that time, but there are great opportunities for you all in this country, and we want you to rebuild the NHS with us.” My niece is currently in Australia, and we sometimes call this the “bring Talia home Bill”.

The NHS must play its part in training our young people and keeping top talent in the UK. If colleagues agree that that is worth doing, and if they want to keep our people here, they should join us in voting for the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins): I remind Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as “Deputy Speaker”. Please use our names. Madam Chair, Chair or Madam Chairman are also acceptable.

Clause 1

UK FOUNDATION PROGRAMME

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider:

Amendment 6, in clause 2, page 1, line 16, at end insert—

“(e) persons within subsection (3),”.

This is a paving amendment for amendment 7.

Amendment 7, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(3) A person is within this subsection if they—

- (a) were actively employed as a doctor in the NHS or Health and Social Care Northern Ireland on 13 January 2026; and
- (b) had submitted a valid application for a UK specialty training programme for a start date in 2026 before the day on which this section comes into force.
- (4) For the purposes of subsection (3), “actively employed” includes, but is not limited to, persons on fixed-term Trust Grade, Clinical Fellow or Staff, Associate Specialist and Specialty Doctor contracts.”

This amendment would require applications to specialty medical training in 2026 from those already employed in the NHS to be prioritised.

Clause 2 stand part.

Clause 3 stand part.

Amendment 10, in clause 4, page 3, line 2, at end insert—

“unless that time was spent outside the British Islands as part of a posting with the UK armed forces.”

This amendment would include within the definition of a UK medical graduate anyone who spent all or part of their training on a military posting outside the British Islands.

Amendment 9, page 3, line 3, after “are” insert

“a British citizen or are”.

This amendment would require British citizens to be prioritised for places on UK Foundation programmes and for interviews and places on speciality training programmes from 2027 onwards.

Clause 4 stand part.

Amendment 8, in clause 5, page 3, line 30, at end insert

“,provided that the majority of training for the programme takes place in the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would require a UK Foundation Programme to be a programme for which the majority of training takes place inside the United Kingdom.

Clause 5 stand part.

Clause 6 stand part.

Amendment 2, in clause 7, page 5, line 1, leave out paragraph (a).

This amendment, taken together with amendment 4, would provide that regulations made under Clause 3 are subject to the affirmative procedure.

Amendment 3, page 5, line 24, leave out “section 3 or”.

This amendment is consequential on amendments 2 and 4, which provide that regulations made under Clause 3 are subject to the affirmative procedure.

Amendment 4, page 5, line 40, after “under” insert—
“section 3 (regulations describing persons who may be prioritised for specialty training programmes from 2027 onwards)”.

This amendment, taken together with amendment 2, would provide that regulations made under Clause 3 are subject to the affirmative procedure.

Amendment 5, page 6, line 19, at end insert—

“(6) Before laying before Parliament a draft statutory instrument containing regulations under section 3 the Secretary of State must obtain the consent of—

- (a) the Welsh Ministers, if the draft regulations contain provision which would be within the legislative competence of Senedd Cymru if it were contained in an Act of the Senedd;
- (b) the Scottish Ministers, if the draft regulations contain provision which would be within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament if it were contained in an Act of the Scottish Parliament;
- (c) the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, if the draft regulations contain provision which—
 - (i) would be within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly if it were contained in an Act of that Assembly, and
 - (ii) would not, if it were contained in a Bill for an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly, result in the Bill requiring the consent of the Secretary of State.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to obtain the consent of the relevant devolved government before laying draft regulations under section 3. It is consequential on amendments 2 and 4.

Clause 7 stand part.

Amendment 1, in clause 8, page 6, line 23, leave out from “on” to the end of line 24 and insert

“the day on which it is passed”.

This amendment would bring the Act into force on the day on which it receives Royal Assent.

Clause 8 stand part.

New clause 1—*Report on impact*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament an annual report on the impact of the provisions of this Act.

(2) A report under this section must include—

- (a) an assessment of the impact of the provisions of this Act on the number of applications for places on—
 - (i) UK Foundation Programmes, and
 - (ii) UK specialty training programmes, and
- (b) if the assessment under paragraph (a) concludes that there has been a decrease in the total number of applications attributable to the provisions of this Act, an analysis of the potential impact of that decrease on the number of fully qualified doctors working in the NHS and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland, including specific analysis of the impact on the number of general practitioners and on each medical specialism.

(3) The first report under this section must be laid before 31 December 2029.”

New clause 2—*Allocation of individual places on merit*—

“(1) This section applies to the allocation of individual candidates to specific places on a UK Foundation Programme or a UK specialty training programme, whether that allocation takes place in the course of deciding offers of places or otherwise.

(2) A person who has a function of allocating places on a UK Foundation Programme or a UK specialty training programme must ensure that, once the prioritisation requirements set out in sections 1 to 3 of this Act have been applied, those allocations are based on an assessment of the applicants’ merits.

(3) For the purposes of the assessment of the applicants’ merits, a person may take into account—

- (a) the candidates’ educational achievements,
- (b) the candidates’ clinical performance,
- (c) structured assessments of relevant skills and knowledge,
- (d) the candidates’ research, leadership, management, quality improvement, and teaching skills, and
- (e) the candidates’ knowledge relating to the place being allocated.”

This new clause would require the allocation of candidates to specific training places to be decided on an assessment of the candidates’ merits, after the prioritisation requirements in clauses 1 to 3 of the Bill have been met.

New clause 3—*International students*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must report annually to Parliament on the impact of the provisions of this Act on the numbers of international students at UK medical schools.

(2) This report must include an assessment of the financial impact on medical schools.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament annually on the impact of the measures in this Act on the numbers of international students studying at UK medical schools.

6.42 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): In the interests of time, I will address the amendments at the end of proceedings, when I have heard from them—I think we have the gist of most of those issues. I restate our firm commitment to the Bill and all clauses.

Let me turn to clause 4 and clarify how we are defining “UK medical graduate” and “the priority group” for the purposes of the Bill. “UK medical graduate” in this context excludes those who have spent all or the majority of their time training for their medical qualification outside the British isles. This means that if a person has obtained a primary UK qualification but has studied mainly overseas, they will not be eligible for prioritisation as a UK medical graduate unless they fall into another group that is to be prioritised under the Bill. While internationally educated graduates from overseas remain an important part of the workforce and can continue to be recruited under the Bill, we are committed to growing home-grown talent, who are more likely to work in the NHS for longer, and to be better equipped to deliver healthcare tailored to the UK’s population.

Clause 8 sets out the territorial extent of the Bill and deals with commencement. The Bill extends to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and we have worked closely with the devolved Governments to ensure that it meets all needs and provides consistency. We are grateful to them for their support in bringing these measures forward so quickly. The Bill will engage the legislative consent motion process, and the devolved Governments have committed to commence this process in their Parliaments.

[Karin Smyth]

To ensure that the systems, planning and operational capacity required for successful implementation are in place, the Bill will be commenced

“on such day or days as the Secretary of State may by regulations appoint.”

As the Secretary of State outlined on Second Reading, this is an important fail-safe to ensure that we are not in a position in which a law is enacted that we cannot implement effectively at the time. I am happy to expand on that after we have discussed the amendments, but the key issue is the ability of the NHS and training providers to deliver the measure. That is why we have a fail-safe; we first need to be very clear that the NHS is in a position to deliver. Members have talked about the strikes. Those would be one consideration, and there are many others. We are asking the NHS and training providers to do something very difficult very quickly, and in order to ensure that they have the capacity and capability to do it safely, we are reserving the right to commence the Bill at a later date, rather than at the end of this Session. I will come back to the amendments when I close the debate.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I will speak to the amendments tabled by the Opposition. First, amendment 9 would require that from 2027, priority is given to British citizens on UK foundation programmes, and that they are prioritised for interviews and places on specialty training programmes. Clause 4 defines a UK medical graduate as a

“a person who holds a primary United Kingdom qualification within the meaning of the Medical Act 1983 (see section 4(3) of that Act)”.

However, it does not include

“a person who spent all or a majority of their time training for that qualification outside the British Islands.”

The Secretary of State has stated his intention to prioritise UK medical graduates, but he has failed to protect all British citizens in doing so. Our amendment would ensure that British citizens who study on an eligible medical course overseas were still prioritised in the Bill. There are many scenarios in which we may need to ensure that we protect British citizens. Consider, for example, a spouse, partner or child of a serving member of the UK armed forces who completes relevant training overseas while their relative is posted in Cyprus; a student at Queen Mary University of London who has completed the bachelor of medicine and bachelor of surgery course at its Malta campus but received a UK medical degree; a young British citizen who has studied in the US or France, owing to a family relocation; or, given that the largest bottleneck is not in training places but in getting a place in medical school at all in some cases, a British student who has gone to study overseas because of their fervent desire to become a doctor.

Those are all entirely possible and plausible scenarios in which British citizens have completed their relevant training, and wish to bring their skills back and to relocate in their homeland for the rest of their career, but may not be covered by the Government’s prioritisation

model. The Government’s prioritisation model is based on where the degree was taken, rather than also considering who did it. The Secretary of State must ensure that we do not overlook our own citizens if we are to fairly address the competitive landscape for training posts. The Opposition therefore urge the Government to accept amendment 9.

Amendment 10 is a probing amendment to explore the effects of the Bill on military personnel. As a Member of Parliament representing an area with a large armed forces community, I know that medical trainees are an integral part of our serving community. The world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place, and junior trainees may be sent abroad earlier in their career than is currently the case. It is clearly wrong to penalise people who are doing brave work caring for our armed forces. They ought to be provided with optimal opportunities, and the Secretary of State has a duty to ensure that they are not overlooked. I would be grateful if the Minister covered that in her response.

New clause 3 would require the Government to make an annual report to Parliament about the Bill’s impact on the number of international students at UK medical schools, and the financial impact on UK medical schools. We talked about the bottleneck, and the balance between UK and international students training at UK medical schools; clearly, becoming a UK graduate will now come with a significant premium. What impact will that have on British children getting to make their choices and become doctors if they want to? What incentives does it provide to universities to increase the number of international students, and what effect will that have overall on UK medical schools?

New clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), is about places for UK foundation and speciality training programmes, and the importance of allocation on merit, because we all want the very best doctors. When I became a doctor—believe it or not, it was 25 years ago this year, Madam Deputy Speaker—I applied for a job as a junior house officer, as it was called then. I applied for the jobs I wanted, I was interviewed by the consultants who would have been supervising my training, and then I was offered the jobs.

The experience of students today is very different. They are allowed to put in a preference and say which deanery or foundation area they would like to work in, but that is all. After that, the application goes into a computer system, which gives them a single rank that is not based not on anything they have done at university, or on whether they got good results or worked hard, or anything like that. The computer system will do a first pass, and if the first choice is available, it will give the student their first choice. If it is not available because by the time it gets to that student those places have gone, the computer system will miss the student and go on to the next one. When it has completed its full pass of the list, it will start again, and when it comes to that student next time, it will give them the highest preference that is still available.

Once the student has been allocated a foundation deanery, the process starts again within the locality, and I mean “locality” in the loosest possible sense. Take those applying for the Trent rotation; they could be posted in Lincoln, Boston, Nottingham, Derby or Burton. The doctor has no control over where they will go, and very

little ability to express a preference. My hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) spoke about a student in her locality who had not been able to get a place, despite being at the top—third, I think—of their university class. It is clearly not fair to give people no opportunity to control their future. By the way, there is no right of appeal, so having been given their place, the choice for the student is: that place or no place.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) spoke about ordinary children from the north-east. Having once been an ordinary child from the north-east, I agree that it is important that people have opportunity, but it is equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome, that matters. I worry that the system creates equality of outcome. We therefore support new clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge.

Amendment 1 would require the Bill to take effect on the date of Royal Assent, as opposed to a date at the discretion of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. The Bill is deemed necessary emergency Government legislation to prioritise medical graduates in the United Kingdom for places on medical training programmes. When he announced the Bill in an attempt to avert industrial action by resident doctors in December, the Secretary of State told the House that he had been working intensively with his team to

“to see how quickly we could introduce legislation”—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 430.]

However, the Bill does not commit to a date when these measures will be enacted. Instead, the power lies in the hands of the Secretary of State, giving him a clear bargaining chip for future negotiations. It is clear that the Government intend to pass this legislation urgently, as they have said. However, without a commencement date, there are clear concerns that the Bill is just a negotiating tactic to prevent industrial action by resident doctors, and can be scrapped at a later date. There remains the prospect of further industrial action, despite the legislation being introduced. The Secretary of State should not be asking Parliament to pass a Bill that he has no intention of enacting if the British Medical Association plays ball and holds off on strikes. Either the Secretary of State thinks that this is emergency legislation that we need to get on with and enact, or he does not.

It is vital that the legislation is enacted straight away, because students are due to be given their training programme places now, and they need to decide where they are going to live. They cannot put their life on hold, and measures to prioritise UK doctors cannot be held off, until the Secretary of State has finished dangling a carrot in front of the British Medical Association. The Opposition are clear: while we are supportive of the principles of the Bill, it must be used for offers made this year.

Amendment 8 would clarify that under clause 5, a UK foundation programme is a programme where the majority of training takes place inside the United Kingdom. A foundation programme is defined as

“an acceptable programme for provisionally registered doctors”

in section 10A of the Medical Act 1983. It is vital to clarify that a UK foundation programme is a programme where a majority of training takes place inside the United Kingdom. That is because the General Medical

Council can approve foundation programmes overseas. If it is not explicit that a foundation programme needs to be in the United Kingdom, a loophole is created whereby a foundation programme could be approved overseas, creating a back way into the system and circumventing the measures that the Government have tried to put in place. I encourage the Minister to look at that carefully as the Bill progresses.

In summary, we support the Bill, but we have concerns about some of the clauses, so we have tabled amendments that we hope the Government will look at carefully.

The First Deputy Chairman: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The amendments in my name raise concerns about the Bill's impact on fairness, transparency and the smooth functioning of the NHS, notwithstanding the Liberal Democrats' overall support for the Bill.

Clause 7(1) would allow Ministers to change who is eligible for prioritisation through the negative procedure, meaning that such changes could be made unilaterally, without meaningful scrutiny. In practice, that hands the Secretary of State the power to redraw the boundaries of opportunity, and to decide who gets prioritised for medical training places, without Parliament ever having a say. That is unacceptable for a decision that affects people's lives and careers, as well as the future capability of our health service. While I do not doubt the intentions of the Secretary of State and the Front Bench team, it opens the door to the risk of political whim or prejudice influencing who gets access to career-defining opportunities in the future. That is why the Liberal Democrats have tabled amendments 2 to 5 to reverse this, and to ensure that any changes must be subject to full parliamentary consent.

On the timing of the Bill's implementation, the Government intend to apply the new prioritisation rules midway through the 2026 specialty recruitment cycle. Let us reflect on what that means in practice. Doctors already working in the NHS have entered this cycle under one set of rules. They have paid for exams, secured visas, arranged travel, uprooted their families and committed themselves to the NHS. To change the rules halfway through the process would not only be potentially destabilising for services, but very unfair to those individuals, many of whom are plugging urgent staffing gaps right now.

We already face real workforce pressures, so the last thing our NHS needs is a wave of dedicated doctors forced out by uncertainty, or pushed to leave the country because the Government moved the goalposts after applications had already begun. For this reason, we believe that the Bill should come into force from 2027. We must protect frontline services and protect the integrity of the applications process. To address the problem directly, we have tabled amendments 6 and 7 to safeguard those already in the 2026 application cycle, ensuring that they are not deprioritised, because that is a simple matter of fairness.

We have also tabled amendments to improve the transparency and long-term impact of the Bill. Across the NHS, we face severe shortages, not just in general practice but in radiology, oncology, mental health services and many other specialities.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Last year, research by the Royal College of Radiologists found that 76% of English cancer centres had patient safety concerns due to workforce shortages. While we welcome the Government's recent commitment to ending the postcode lottery of cancer care, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to publish an assessment of the Bill's impact on doctor numbers, broken down by speciality, to ensure that cancer treatment is not delayed because of staff shortages?

Helen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for her point, which I agree with fully. That is why we have tabled new clause 1. It will require the Government to publish a report on the Bill's impact on the number of applicants to foundation and speciality training programmes and, crucially, to break that down by speciality. If applications fall as a result of these changes, the Government would be required to assess the impact on the total number of fully qualified doctors entering the NHS. This report would be produced annually after three years, allowing time for a full training cycle to complete. It is a sensible safeguard, one that ensures that we do not inadvertently exacerbate the very workforce shortages that we are trying to address. To return to the core principle that is at stake, we are not opposed to the Bill's objective. We support the principle of prioritising those who have trained in the UK, but that principle must be implemented fairly, transparently and with proper oversight.

7 pm

I will touch briefly on the amendments tabled by the official Opposition. Amendment 9

"would require British citizens to be prioritised for places on UK Foundation programmes and for interviews and places on speciality training programmes from 2027 onwards",

while amendment 8

"would require a UK Foundation Programme to be a programme for which the majority of training takes place inside the United Kingdom."

I am not convinced that these two amendments are consistent with each other. Surely the purpose of the Bill is to ensure that the £4 billion spent every year on training doctors in the NHS is an investment in the NHS, and that those who are prioritised for speciality training have experience of both the workings of the NHS and the epidemiology of the UK and their own locality. In that context, amendment 8 looks broadly sensible, but amendment 9 would prioritise British citizens regardless of their place of training or NHS experience, which seems potentially counterproductive to that aim. As such, we will not be supporting amendment 9.

In conclusion, amendments 2, 3, 4 and 5—which stand in my name—would strengthen parliamentary scrutiny by replacing the negative procedure with the affirmative procedure, ensuring that any future changes to eligibility receive proper examination. Amendment 5 would also ensure that devolved nations also give consent before any changes are laid before Parliament. Amendments 6 and 7 would ensure the fairness of the process in the current year, and new clause 1 seeks to ensure that the Bill meets its objectives of lessening the workforce crisis by speciality. These changes would not undermine the Bill, but strengthen it. They protect fairness, protect parliamentary sovereignty, and protect the NHS workforce from unpredictable and disruptive

changes. As such, although we support the Bill, we urge the Government to adopt these amendments, which would ensure that the legislation works for patients, staff and the long-term strength of our NHS.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): As always, Mrs Cummins, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I rise to speak to new clause 2, which stands in my name and is supported by many other Conservative Members. I declare again that I am now a non-practising doctor and my wife is a doctor.

I believe that ambition should be encouraged, and success should be dependent on the talent and hard work of the individual. However, in a vocation where we really want to encourage and support the brightest and the best, the signal being beamed out by the NHS and its various arms and quangos is unfortunately quite different. We have already seen this over the years in how the NHS treats competence and excellence among doctors—someone could be the best doctor in the world and be treated exactly the same as someone who is just about competent. No other operation would approach employment, and celebrating and supporting success, in that way.

I do not think, though, that I have ever seen as egregious and extreme an example of completely ignoring talent and merit as the preference informed allocation system. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), has laid out some of the details behind that system, but I encourage Members across the Committee to read about how preference informed allocation works—about the soulless, computerised, algorithmic method by which it allocates human beings a random number. That random number is then the sum total of those people's dreams, hopes and ambitions when it comes to placements as they take their first steps into their medical career. To me, PIA looks better suited to the dystopian sci-fi programmes that I enjoy watching—better suited to "Logan's Run" or "The Prisoner", in which people are allocated numbers. It is not the way that we should be treating people in this country, and it is outrageous that such a system has been brought into force. We in this House should stand up for merit, and I really hope the Minister will affirm from the Dispatch Box today that the Government will dismantle this awful scheme.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to Members for their contributions to the wider debate at this hour and for their considered amendments. I will respond briefly to their points and the amendments that have been tabled.

Amendment 6 and 7 would widen the scope of who is prioritised for specialty training starting in 2026 by prioritising applicants who worked as a doctor in the health service on 13 January. Although we welcome the intention to recognise the importance of internationally trained doctors, we cannot accept the amendments at this time. They would mean that the Bill was ineffective in delivering on its intention to tackle bottlenecks and ensure that we have a sustainable medical workforce that can meet the needs of the population.

I remind the Committee again that the Bill does not exclude anyone. In particular, there are likely to be opportunities in specialties such as general practice, core psychiatry and internal medicine, which historically attract fewer applicants from the groups we are prioritising

for 2026. International medical graduates also continue to have opportunities in locally employed doctor roles. That could lead to NHS experience that might count towards future prioritisation as we look to make regulations to set criteria for what is considered “significant” NHS experience from 2027.

Amendment 10 would ensure that members of the armed forces are not excluded from prioritisation due to having undertaken medical training while on posting outside the British islands. We cannot accept that amendment as we believe it is not necessary. That is because medical cadets do not spend time outside the British islands as part of their UK medical degree. While cadets undertake their elective with the military, which may be overseas, that is no different from other civilian medical students, many of whom undertake electives overseas. As such, we do not believe that medical cadets are disadvantaged by the Bill.

Amendment 9 would include all British citizens within the priority groups so that British citizens will be prioritised for the purposes of the foundation programme and specialty training from 2027 onwards. It has no effect for 2026 specialty training, as British citizens are already prioritised by virtue of their immigration status. We therefore cannot accept the amendment. To do so would risk a significant increase in the pool of prioritised doctors who would compete with UK-trained doctors. The amendment would incentivise the expansion of the market for overseas medical schools, including medical schools working with foreign Governments to grow the overseas campus sector. That could offset any increase in postgraduate training places and undermine workforce planning. While British citizens will be prioritised for specialty training places in 2026, this is a proxy that is necessary for practical reasons. From 2027 we want to prioritise applications with experience and training based in the NHS.

Again, prioritisation does not mean exclusion. International medical graduates who are not prioritised will still be able to apply and will be offered places if vacancies remain after prioritised applicants have received offers. However, it is important that we do not incentivise actions that will undermine the Bill. This Bill will reduce competition for places for UK-trained doctors so that home-grown talent can become the next generation of NHS doctors.

Amendment 8 would limit the definition of a UK foundation programme in clause 5 to include programmes only where the majority of training has occurred within the UK. Although I understand the desire to do that, the number of doctors on a foundation programme within the meaning of the Medical Act 1983, but where the majority of training occurs outside the UK, is very small. Indeed, we understand that there is only one such active training programme. There are fewer than 25 doctors on that programme this year, of which fewer than five applied to continue their training in the UK. As such, there is no material impact on the Bill, so we do not think amendment 8 is necessary. However, we will keep the situation under review.

Amendments 2, 3, 4 and 5 would change the procedure for making regulations to set additional priority groups for specialty training from 2027. The regulations would prioritise additional groups based on criteria indicating that a person is likely to have significant experience of working as a doctor in the health service or by reference

to their immigration status. To be clear on our intention, the Bill sets out the groups of people who are to be prioritised for specialty training from 2027 onwards. The delegated power is limited to adding to that list by reference to their having

“significant experience of working as a doctor in the National Health Service”,

or immigration status. Although I am sympathetic to the desire for more parliamentary scrutiny, as outlined by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), we believe that, due to the limited scope of the power, the negative procedure is justifiable. I therefore encourage her not to press those amendments to a Division.

Amendment 1 would change the commencement of the Bill—from being commenced by regulations to being commenced automatically on Royal Assent. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State outlined, the commencement clause is important, and I have addressed that point. It is a failsafe that, given the tight timeline for introducing the Bill, will ensure that we are not in a position where a law is enacted that we cannot implement effectively for whatever unforeseen reason.

As I have said, there is also the question of whether it is even possible to implement prioritisation if, for example, the strikes are ongoing, given the strain that they put on resources and the impact that could have on delivery of the Bill. Because our objective is not just to move quickly but to get this right, these considerations are key to the commencement of the Bill, which is why the Government believe that we need to be able to commence the Bill when it makes sense to do so. For those reasons, we cannot accept the amendment.

We do not think that new clauses 1 and 3 are necessary, because the data is already published, or, as we have said, we would be seeking to monitor the impact. New clause 2 would require the allocation of individual candidates to foundation and specialty training places on merit, once the requirements to prioritise certain applicants had been met. We consider the new clause to be unnecessary at this time because existing systems for recruitment to foundation and specialty training already assess the applicants on many of the merits outlined by it. The Bill does not alter that; it simply ensures that UK medical graduates and other eligible applicants are prioritised.

Dr Spencer: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I am coming to the hon. Gentleman's point. We will keep the current system under review—I think the Secretary of State was clear about that—but we think that any change is best made through established guidance rather than through legislation.

Many Members raised the issue of our relationship with Malta and Queen Mary, and the work that is done there. That relationship is clearly important. We have a great deal of work ongoing with Queen Mary, in the medical field as well as others. We are not excluding anyone. We are making sure that the prioritisation works in the best way possible, and we will of course keep all that under review. I thank hon. Members for their constructive debate on this important legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 and 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

“UK MEDICAL GRADUATE” AND
“THE PRIORITY GROUP”

Amendment proposed: 9, page 3, line 3, after “are” insert

“a British citizen or are”.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

This amendment would require British citizens to be prioritised for places on UK Foundation programmes and for interviews and places on speciality training programmes from 2027 onwards.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 91, Noes 378.

Division No. 418]

[7.12 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Mak, Alan
Andrew, rh Stuart	Malthouse, rh Kit
Argar, rh Edward	Mayhew, Jerome
Atkins, rh Victoria	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Bacon, Gareth	Moore, Robbie
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Morrissey, Joy (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Barclay, rh Steve	<i>cast by Mr Mohindra)</i>
Bedford, Mr Peter	Morton, rh Wendy
Blackman, Bob	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Bool, Sarah	Mundell, rh David
Bowie, Andrew	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Burghart, Alex	Norman, rh Jesse
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Cartlidge, James	O'Brien, Neil
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Patel, rh Priti
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Paul, Rebecca
Cocking, Lewis	Pochin, Sarah
Costa, Alberto	Pritchard, rh Mark
Coutinho, rh Claire	Rankin, Jack
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Reed, David
Cross, Harriet	Robertson, Joe
Davies, Gareth	Rosindell, Andrew
Davies, Mims	Shannon, Jim
Dewhurst, Charlie	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Smith, Greg
Evans, Dr Luke	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Fox, Sir Ashley	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Freeman, George	Spencer, Dr Ben
Fuller, Richard	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Gale, rh Sir Roger	<i>cast by Mr Mohindra)</i>
Garnier, Mark	Stafford, Gregory
Glen, rh John	Stephenson, Blake
Grant, Helen	Stuart, rh Graham
Griffith, Andrew	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Harris, Rebecca	Thomas, Bradley
Hayes, rh Sir John	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Hinds, rh Damian	Vickers, Martin
Hoare, Simon	Vickers, Matt
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Whately, Helen
Huddleston, Nigel	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Hudson, Dr Neil	Wild, James
Hussain, Mr Adnan	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Wilson, rh Sammy
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Wood, Mike
Jopp, Lincoln	
Lam, Katie	
Lamont, John	
Lockhart, Carla	
Lopez, Julia	

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Paul Holmes and
David Simmonds**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy</i>	Abbott, Jack
<i>vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-</i>	Abrahams, Debbie
<i>Addy)</i>	Ahmed, Dr Zubir

Akehurst, Luke	Cooper, Andrew
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Alexander, rh Heidi	Cooper, Daisy
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Ali, Rushanara	Costigan, Deirdre
Ali, Tahir	Cox, Pam
Amos, Gideon	Coyle, Neil
Anderson, Callum	Craft, Jen
Anderson, Fleur	Creagh, Mary
Aquarone, Steff	Creasy, Ms Stella
Arthur, Dr Scott	Crichton, Torcuil
Asato, Jess	Curtis, Chris
Asser, James	Daby, Janet
Athwal, Jas	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Atkinson, Catherine	Darling, Steve
Atkinson, Lewis	Darlington, Emily
Babarinde, Josh	Davey, rh Ed
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Davies, Ann
Bailey, Olivia	Davies, Jonathan
Baines, David	Davies, Paul
Baker, Alex	Davies-Jones, Alex
Ballinger, Alex	Dean, Bobby
Bance, Antonia	Dean, Josh
Barker, Paula	Dearden, Kate
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Denyer, Carla
Baxter, Johanna	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Beales, Danny	Dickson, Jim
Beavers, Lorraine	Dillon, Mr Lee
Begum, Apsana	Dixon, Anna
Bell, Torsten	Dixon, Samantha
Benn, rh Hilary	Dollimore, Helena
Bennett, Alison	Doogan, Dave
Berry, Siân	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Betts, Mr Clive	Eagle, Dame Angela
Billington, Ms Polly	Edwards, Lauren
Bishop, Matt	Ellis, Maya
Blackman, Kirsty	Elmore, Chris
Blake, Olivia	Entwistle, Kirith
Blake, Rachel	Eshalomi, Florence
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Esterson, Bill
Botterill, Jade	Evans, Chris
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Farron, Tim
Brewer, Alex	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Brickell, Phil	Ferguson, Mark
Buckley, Julia	Ferguson, Patricia
Burgon, Richard	Fleet, Natalie
Burke, Maureen	Flynn, rh Stephen
Burton-Sampson, David	Foody, Emma
Butler, Dawn	Fookes, Catherine
Byrne, Ian	Forster, Mr Will
Caliskan, Nesil	Foster, Mr Paul
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Foy, Mary Kelly
Campbell, Irene	Francis, Daniel
Campbell, Juliet	Franklin, Zöe
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Frith, Mr James
Cane, Charlotte	Furniss, Gill
Carling, Sam	Gardiner, Barry
Carns, Al	Gardner, Dr Allison
Chadwick, David	Gelder, Anna
Chamberlain, Wendy	Gemmell, Alan
Chambers, Dr Danny	George, Andrew
Champion, Sarah	German, Gill
Charalambous, Bambos	Gilbert, Tracy
Charters, Mr Luke	Gill, Preet Kaur
Clark, Feryal	Gittins, Becky (<i>Proxy vote cast</i>
Coghlan, Chris	<i>by Sir Nicholas Dakin)</i>
Collier, Jacob	Glendon, Mary
Collinge, Lizzi	Glover, Olly
Collins, Tom	Goldman, Marie
Collins, Victoria	Goldsborough, Ben
Coombes, Sarah	Grady, John

Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hurley, Patrick
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Logan, Seamus
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 MacNae, Andy
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex

McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew

Rayner, rh Angela
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Sir Mark

Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williams, David
 Wishart, Pete
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Stephen Morgan and
Imogen Walker

Question accordingly negated.

Clauses 4 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Amendment proposed: 2, in clause 7, page 5, line 1, leave out paragraph (a).—(Helen Morgan.)

This amendment, taken together with amendment 4, would provide that regulations made under Clause 3 are subject to the affirmative procedure.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 61, Noes 311.

Division No. 419]

[7.26 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Brewer, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Chadwick, David

Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann

Dean, Bobby
Denyer, Carla
Dillon, Mr Lee
Farron, Tim
Forster, Mr Will
George, Andrew
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Lake, Ben
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Mike
Medi, Llinos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum

Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Munt, Tessa
Olney, Sarah
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Taylor, Luke
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Ayes:
Zöe Franklin and
Claire Young

Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Hurley, Patrick
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kyrke-Smith, Laura

Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lockhart, Carla
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Miliband, rh Ed
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard

Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Edwards, Lauren
Ellis, Maya

Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin

Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Imogen Walker and
 Stephen Morgan

Evans, Dr Luke
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Freeman, George
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse

Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Shannon, Jim
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Paul Holmes and
 David Simmonds

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
 vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
 Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary

Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

Amendment proposed: 1, page 6, line 23, leave out from “on” to the end of line 24 and insert “the day on which it is passed”.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

This amendment would bring the Act into force on the day on which it receives Royal Assent.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 88, Noes 310.

Division No. 420]

[7.39 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain

Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel

Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh

Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Stephen Morgan and
 Imogen Walker

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

7.52 pm

Karin Smyth: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

I will not use this time to rehearse any of the arguments made today. We have had some good discussions. I want to thank the Leader of the House, the Chief Whip, parliamentary counsel and business managers, the public

servants in my Department and NHS England, who have worked so hard to bring this together, and the devolved Governments for their support. They really have worked well together to bring this important measure to this place.

I am also grateful to all colleagues for scrutinising the Bill so thoughtfully and thoroughly during today's proceedings and, as I said previously, for meeting me last week to go through some of the provisions. It shows that Parliament can put its shoulder to the wheel and get stuff done in the public interest. We act in the public interest because we were elected on a mandate to fix our broken NHS and make it fit for the future, and we will not succeed in that goal without our workforce, who are and will always be our greatest asset.

When I worked in the NHS during the Lansley reforms, I had a front-row seat to see their devastating impact on staff morale. I saw that patients bore the brunt of some of that collapsing morale. When our workforce does well, our NHS does well. That is why we are working to restore confidence and renew belief among frontline staff. The Bill is another step on that journey, and I urge colleagues to come with us and see it through.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

PETITIONS

Public Order Act 2023

7.54 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I am pleased to present this petition on behalf of Elisabeth Spain and the South Cambridgeshire Climate and Nature Group in my constituency. The petition states that peaceful environmental protesters are being criminalised through excessive charges, harsh sentencing and negative media treatment, and that the Public Order Act 2023 has introduced restrictive protest measures that deter people from exercising their right to peaceful protest, undermining the United Kingdom's long-standing commitment to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and non-violent civil disobedience.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of South Cambridgeshire,

Declares that peaceful environmental protestors are being treated as criminals, facing excessive charges, receiving prolonged sentences, and enduring unjust treatment in the media; further declares that the Public Order Act 2023 introduced anti-protest regulations that have proven intimidating to those who wish to continue to raise their voices peacefully; and further declares that

the UK's commitment to the fundamental rights of freedom of assembly, expression and non-violent civil disobedience should be reaffirmed.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to introduce a bill to repeal the Public Order Act 2023.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003156]

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete in Housing

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I present this petition on behalf of my constituents from Tillicoultry who have had nowhere to call home for two years now, and for those people from across the United Kingdom who have also had their life impacted by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in their homes. This builds on a similar petition circulated locally, which gathered over 200 signatures. That shows the strength of feeling in Tillicoultry and beyond. My constituents deserve answers and accountability. All they ask for is fairness.

The petition requests

"that the House of Commons urge the Government to hold a public inquiry into the handling of RAAC by national and local government, to introduce legislation to require the maintenance of a high-risk building register, to mandate reporting of building defects by surveyors and other professionals and to introduce sixty-year liability for developers for building defects; and to consider compensation measures such as a ban on levying interest on mortgages on homes condemned after the discovery of RAAC, and the restoration of first-time buyer status for affected homeowners."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that many families across the UK face homelessness, bankruptcy and trauma after being forced from homes made unsafe by RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete), particularly in former council homes purchased under the right to buy scheme.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to hold a public inquiry into the handling of RAAC by national and local government; to introduce legislation to require the maintenance of a high-risk building register, to mandate reporting of building defects by surveyors and other professionals and to introduce sixty-year liability for developers for building defects; and to consider compensation measures such as a ban on levying interest on mortgages on homes condemned after the discovery of RAAC, and the restoration of first-time buyer status for affected homeowners.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003158]

East Park Energy: North Bedfordshire

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Deirdre Costigan.)

7.56 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I start by thanking you and, through you, Mr Speaker for permitting me to speak on this important constituency matter. I also welcome the Minister. For the benefit of those who may be not familiar with the process, the Minister will probably be very limited in what he can say specifically about the topic I am raising today. The topic is a proposal by East Park Energy for a large-scale, ground-mounted solar plant and battery energy storage system spanning North Bedfordshire and also the constituency of Huntingdon. This proposal is currently under consideration as part of the nationally significant infrastructure project process.

East Park Energy spans 1,900 acres of land—to give some perspective, that is larger than Gatwick airport—on what is currently open countryside. It engulfs the rural parishes of Pertenhall and Swineshead, Bolnhurst, Keysoe, Little Staughton, Staploe and Dean and Shelton in my constituency, as well as the parishes of Hail Weston and Great Staughton in the constituency of Huntingdon. Some 74% of the land is classified as best and most versatile agricultural land, and East Park is one of six nationally significant infrastructure projects impacting North Bedfordshire.

I have called this debate to discuss with the Minister the impact that East Park Energy could have on North Bedfordshire's local residents and on its landscape and rural character, and to raise with him points specific to the proposal that, in my opinion, warrant serious consideration for its rejection. East Park Energy would permanently and fundamentally change the area's rural aspect and character and transform open countryside into industrial land. It is important that we stop referring to these installations by the rather cute term of "solar farm", because the truth is that they are industrialised complexes. This one is made up of 700,000 solar panels, each up to 3 metres high, along with fencing, lighting, CCTV, inverter stations, transformer units, battery storage infrastructure and cabling. That sounds a long way from what we understand a farm to be.

Proposed mitigations to plant trees in order to screen the development are usually insufficient. Even if planting to screen the panels is successful, it would take years for the trees to mature, and even at full maturity, large parts of the site would still be visible because of its topography. The site will be a huge, permanent, unmissable and miles-long change to the local environment of that part of England. It will not blend in with the existing environment; it will crush it.

It is important to say that we in Bedfordshire are not against solar farms in general. In fact, we have 44 solar farms that are already operational or proposed in both Bedford borough and Central Bedfordshire, which are the two local authorities that traverse my constituency. However, this specific proposal is different.

Given my interest in financial matters, I hope that I have the House's discretion to make a couple of general points about the finance of solar farms, of which I know the Minister will be aware. First, it is important to note that, with large solar plants, we are paying the cost of

capacity, not of output. Capital costs are excessive because of the inherent process inefficiencies in solar farms. That is fine as long as it does not end up on the public purse, but ultimately investors look for a return, so it does indirectly end up on us.

Secondly, we are paying for the cost of variability of output from solar plants—the hidden costs of changing the national network to cope with that new factor of energy production. Thirdly, it is important to note that we are paying the cost of buying the energy produced, even when it is not necessarily needed or used—paying essentially for wasted energy.

In addition to those points, which the Minister is aware of and which have already been factored in, the combination of solar-generated energy and energy price arbitrage via battery energy storage systems fundamentally changes the economic case for solar—certainly from a public benefit point of view. Returns to investors will already be supercharged by the addition of new capacity in the form of battery storage—a very significant additional investment. However, that additional investment makes financial sense only when the purpose is to arbitrage energy costs—producing energy at low price points to sell at high price points—but that is not really the intention of trying to get low-cost energy.

As a business person, I say that the overall structure of the contracts, which the Minister inherited from previous Administrations, directly encourages maximum financial leverage—taking on as much debt as possible in order to maximise returns to investors. We have seen in other areas of public infrastructure—particularly with Thames Water—the problems that arise when so much leverage can be put up. Essentially, the returns are privatised and the losses socialised. I would be interested in hearing the Minister's observations on that.

Will the Minister advise on whether the Government have put in place, or have plans to put in place, a limit on the debt ratios that large-scale solar plant operators can carry? I did a quick check but could not see that such a limit was in place at the moment. I would be interested in the Minister's thoughts on that. Tied to that point—again, from a financial point of view—is my own understanding about corporate and political risk. In the case of East Park solar, I am concerned about the corporate history and financial viability. I mean no disrespect to the business, but it has no prior experience in developing or operating such large-scale solar projects. There are substantial issues of project failure or poor management, and therefore the risk that the current developer sells the site on to somebody else with a whole new set of investors and objectives.

The Minister may not be able to speak about this, but at least one political party in this House has said that it might cancel such projects in the future, raising the risk of stranded assets. The Government should be considering that, not because they agree with it, but because if there is such a change in Government, it is the people of North Bedfordshire in this instance who will be left with those stranded assets—solar panels stretching for three miles one way and three miles the other way, with no economic return and no financial viability to remove them. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I do not believe there is a requirement for an escrow fund to be put in place for the removal of plants should a business go bust. Can he say what weight is placed on

the historical experience of applicants for large-scale plants in installing and operating such plants in the past? Does that factor at all?

I have reviewed a number of these debates, and in many of them the issue of best and most versatile land has come up. The Minister must accept that East Park Energy's proposal of 74% of the site being best and most versatile land is a pretty high proportion, well in excess of almost every single plant that has been adopted or accepted to date. It is a generational loss of arable land. I am afraid the proposal from East Park Energy lacks any serious demonstration of seeking lower-grade or brownfield land, and it appears to be at odds with national policy, which is to avoid using best and most versatile land.

I will quote the Minister back to him, because what he said was very sensible. In a debate on 15 May 2025, he said:

"I am not going to put a figure on it right now, but we have clearly said that it is important to find the right balance when it comes to best-use agricultural land."—[*Official Report*, 15 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 573.]

The Minister will not give a figure today, but 74%? Come on now! Can he advise whether the proportion of best and most versatile land at 74% and the scale of East Park Energy will be an issue of weight in the appraisal? I do not expect him to say whether it is right or wrong. However, Ministers have said in previous debates that it is important not to use best and most versatile agricultural land and that food security is important, and then they have gone on to say that solar will only take up 1% of land, which implies both that it matters to avoid using the best and most versatile land and that it does not matter. Which is it? With the proposed figure standing at 74%, this seems to be a central point.

I want to make two final points that are of particular significance, to make the Minister aware of the broader issues. We need to consider the cumulative impacts. I want to put on the record the context of North Bedfordshire and the surrounding area that the East Park Energy proposal will be coming into. The first thing he should be aware of is that, for the past decade or more, Bedfordshire's housing growth has been between two and three times the national average. If he looks at the 2011 and 2021 censuses, and at the number of households in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), he will see that the level of housing growth is between two and a half and three times the national average. As he will know, that is great for the country, but it puts a strain on the surrounding infrastructure.

Secondly, Bedfordshire has six nationally significant infrastructure projects on the blocks right now. That is a huge amount. Let me enumerate them for the Minister. The first is the Black Cat roundabout on the A428, which is in the direct area of East Park Energy. That is the country's largest ongoing road project, due for completion in spring 2027 or thereabouts. Secondly, East West Rail is the country's third largest railway project, proposing to drive a line between Bedford and Cambridge, cutting through my North Bedfordshire constituency. Thirdly, Universal Studios is the country's most significant inward investment. It started under the previous Government, supported by the then Opposition, and it has been brought home by this Government and

is supported by the Opposition today. It will mean 10 million visitors a year, with all the movement of people that that entails, and the ancillary development around it.

Further away, Luton airport is expanding to facilitate that, doubling in size from 18 million to 30 million passengers a year. Very specifically, there is a new settlement in Tempsford. As I have said, Tempsford is currently a village of 400 residents and seven sheep. The Government are highly likely this year to take forward the proposal from the new towns commission that Tempsford should be the site of at least 40,000 new homes, going from 400 residents to over 100,000 on land that encompasses, abuts, and perhaps embraces, land for East Park Energy. On that specific point, it seems that we can have one or the other, but we cannot have both.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. He is making a thoughtful and important speech. He has spoken eloquently about the cumulative development in both our constituencies, which is putting central Bedfordshire and Bedford borough under significant strain from a planning perspective. Does he agree that it is important for the Government to support our local authorities, so that we think holistically about these developments and ensure that our landscapes are protected, our local communities are listened to, and that we secure the agricultural land that we need for future food security? The reason we have so many farmers in Bedfordshire is because we have fantastic agricultural land. Would it not be a waste to build on all that land, and in the case of East Park Energy, to do so on the altar of net zero?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend makes two important points. First, during world war two, London would have starved without agricultural produce from Bedfordshire. More importantly, the Minister must recognise that we are supportive. We know that the Government have a growth strategy—we may have disagreements on national economic policies, but we want to do our bit. Indeed, the people of Bedfordshire are doing their bit, and a lot more. The Minister will appreciate that, with so many projects happening all at once, at some point those things are going to break, and my hon. Friend makes an important point about that.

In East Park Energy's documentation, it chose not to be comprehensive in the scope of its evaluations, and was insufficient in the depth of its analysis. For example, it completely omitted any reference to Luton airport expansion, the Universal theme park, and any potential new town at Tempsford. It dismissed the need for an assessment of Black Cat roundabout on the assumption that construction would be finished before East Park Energy starts, but there will be consequential effects, including further construction from the change at Black Cat roundabout. It dismissed the need for an assessment of East West Rail on an assumption, but it is highly likely that there will be an overlapping construction period should East West Rail go ahead. It lacked any assessment of medium or long-term effects such as permanent land use change and increased perception of the urbanisation of the area. It provided no consideration of the over-concentration of solar development in North Bedfordshire—my constituency is part of the 1% club,

[Richard Fuller]

which is constituencies where over 1% of the land area will be covered by solar panels—and it ignored the impact of overlapping construction periods that it would be adding to for two and a half years, or 30 months.

Just imagine all the traffic from building Universal Studios, getting in construction because we want shovels in the ground to start building at Tempsford if the Government decide to go ahead with that, and trying to build East West Rail. East Park Energy completely ignored that, so from the point of view of understanding the impact of what it is going into, the proposal that was presented fell significantly short.

Finally, before I yield to the Minister, I know that he is limited in what he can say about specific projects and that, given his role, the Secretary of State would not be able to comment at all. As I mentioned briefly to the Minister earlier, I am in a small minority of Conservative Members who agree with some of the Secretary of State's criticisms about past energy policy, even though I may not agree with all of his proposed remedies, so I hope that the Minister understands that my observations come from a positive place.

The role of a Secretary of State or his designated Minister in making a decision is a crucial step in an evaluation process, which the public must trust. They must assess each proposal individually on its merits, not just on overarching goals. There have been 12 solar panel development consent orders for evaluation since July 2024, each of which has been approved. Some of us may be old enough—not you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but certainly me—to remember the musical “Oklahoma!”, in which there is a song, “I Cain’t Say No”. That is a very old reference, but I am very old. I encourage the Secretary of State to avoid any caricature that he “cain’t say no”, because in the case of East Park Energy, my personal view is that there are considerable and specific reasons why he can say no.

8.16 pm

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) on securing the debate. Although I disagree with some of what he said, the tone of his remarks is welcome. I will respond to some of his points, but given the time I will not be able to respond to them all.

On a general point, I appreciate that many issues, and planning issues in particular, are contentious. As Members of Parliament, we all know that as such issues are raised regularly. Although we might take decisions as a Government that people will disagree with, I hope that I have always given the impression that I am always keen to hear the points that the hon. Gentleman raises, and that other hon. Members raise, and I want to continue those conversations.

Helpfully, the hon. Gentleman said at the outset that I will not be able to comment on the specific application that he references, and it is worth being clear about why that is: the application will come before my Department for a decision. As the Minister with a policy interest in this area, I personally do not see the papers for such decisions and I am not engaged in that process. My noble friend Lord Whitehead usually makes these decisions, or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy

Security and Net Zero. It is important that no Minister who has a role in decision making speaks about the specifics, and I know that the hon. Gentleman understands that. However, I can talk in more general terms about how we ensure that solar projects, which are really important, are rolled out sensibly and sensitively, which is at the heart of many of the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

To start, I will take us back slightly to the bigger picture about why solar power is so important in the first place, and why it is at the heart of the clean energy mission. We know that far too often energy bills are still being set by the cost of gas, and that deploying renewables faster than we have before is a way that we can reduce our dependence on volatile fossil fuels, protecting bill payers now and in the future. That deployment also provides an economic opportunity to create thousands of jobs in communities across the country. In addition, the Government cares deeply about tackling the most existential crisis that the planet faces. I will return to this point, but the effects of climate change, which we see all too often, cannot be put off until tomorrow. It is hugely important that we tackle them now, so this mission is critical.

Solar is at the heart of the mission—and critical to it—because it is one of the cheapest renewable energy sources that we can deploy, and it can be deployed at scale. The aim of our clean power mission is to achieve at least 45 GW to 47 GW of solar by 2030. We are at around 22 GW today, so if we are going to deliver that goal, we need to rapidly deploy a combination of ground-mounted solar and a roof-top revolution, which I will return to. At the same time, we have a commitment to doing that sensitively for the communities that host that infrastructure, and to ensuring that those communities gain a benefit from hosting it on behalf of the country.

I will pick just some of the hon. Gentleman's substantive arguments. The way in which we balance the need for this infrastructure across the country—the fact that it has to be somewhere—with the adverse impacts, as well as the potential benefits, that communities face from hosting the infrastructure, is exactly what our rigorous planning system is about. The views and interests of local communities are key to that. I know that the hon. Gentleman has engaged in the process in this specific case—he has already made representations, and will obviously encourage his constituents to do the same. That feedback is hugely important; people should feel that it has a serious role in the decision-making process, because it does, and therefore it is worth participating in that process. Making those submissions and turning up to those meetings really does matter.

Obviously, the planning process itself considers many of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised, including visual amenity, protected landscapes, land use, food production, safety, and traffic conditions during construction. The system for nationally significant projects requires that considerable community engagement be undertaken before a decision is made. The level and quality of engagement is considered during the decision-making process, and these projects are marked down if that is not taken seriously.

The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of cumulative impact, which is a really important one for us to wrestle with. I do not pretend that we have a single answer to this, but the idea that we should plan holistically—I think the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson)

made this point—to make sure communities do not face multiple projects, with all the cumulative impact that comes from that, is something we want to tackle. We are doing that in two ways.

Richard Fuller: The Minister is talking about cumulative impacts from projects. Just so that it can be on the record, the point I was trying to make is that one consideration is the cumulative impacts from solar farms; the other is that there are a lot of other types of infrastructure construction going on. Could the Minister be clear that cumulative impact includes consideration of both?

Michael Shanks: I will come to that point in just a moment. Part of the wider work we are seeking to do across Government is to plan where infrastructure is built holistically and strategically. For example, the land-use work that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is doing is about looking at the whole United Kingdom and making sure we have a plan in place for future land use, so that all of those things are taken into consideration.

The legal requirement for a cumulative effects assessment is set out in environmental regulations. The Government have published advice that summarises the process for undertaking that assessment in relation to NSIPs, and the hon. Gentleman's wider point about the cumulative impact of housing, Universal Studios or transport is also really important. Obviously, my Department has a particular interest in how we plan the energy system, but we are seeking to work much more broadly right across Government. The land use consultation that DEFRA launched closed in April 2025, and the outputs from that and the regional workshops that have been undertaken are now being analysed. That is the first time we have had a national, holistic plan to bring all these things together.

From an energy perspective, which is what I am responsible for, the second point is about the strategic spatial energy plan. For the first time in our history, we will strategically plan the energy system that we need and make conscious decisions about where we site energy infrastructure, so that we are not needlessly building the grid infrastructure that goes with it—so that we are building it next to where we need it the most, reducing the impact on communities and taking into account the cumulative impact of those projects. We should have been doing that a long time ago. I do not blame any particular Government for this, but we have rolled out a huge number of renewables projects across the country without doing any of that strategic planning. That has been a huge failure in the past, and as a result, we are now spending huge amounts of money on building the grid to connect that infrastructure. We have to do that. It is a shame that we did not plan it more strategically in the first place, but we start from where we start, unfortunately.

I am conscious of the time, so I will quickly refer to the point about land use and the use of farmland for solar projects. That point is raised regularly, and it is an important one to raise—food security is also our national security, and it is hugely important. Planning policy makes clear that, wherever possible, developers should utilise brownfield, industrial, contaminated or previously developed land. I understand the point that the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire made about this particular site; I cannot comment on that, but he helpfully quoted me to me. I still agree with me—which is not always the case—but I am not going to set a specific figure, for obvious reasons. There is very much a determination in the process that we should be using lower-quality land wherever possible, but that does not mean that we can always do so. We need to realise that for some projects, that is just not possible. However, if we zoom out just a little bit, even in our most ambitious deployment scenarios, only 0.4% of UK land would be devoted to solar in 2030.

There are a number of other points that I do not have time to address, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman with some responses on them. In the context of what we are seeking to do, I am not complacent about the impact that these projects have on communities—I genuinely understand it. I read all of my correspondence from people who write to me about these points, and he is right to raise these issues. We are seeking to build the infrastructure that the country needs in a way that takes into account the local impact. Communities may feel that has not been done, and for that I apologise, but we are seeking to build a strategic system that deals with many of these issues into the future, so that communities feel that energy is not done to them, but is part of their community and is something that they welcome. At the same time, that helps us to deliver our missions as a Government.

Solar power in this country remains hugely popular and, despite a number of issues, the planning process is rigorous. There is not an automatic yes coming out of the planning system; we look carefully at every single one of these applications. They get a huge amount of consideration, and it is important that communities feel that, and that they know that these applications are taken seriously. If they do not feel that, we have to do more as a Government to ensure that people have confidence in the system. As we deliver this clean power mission, solar will play an important role. We want to bring communities with us, and I commit to doing more to make sure that is the case.

Question put and agreed to.

8.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 27 January 2026

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

UK Bus Manufacturing

9.30 am

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered UK bus manufacturing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British buses, alongside the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister).

There were 694 more zero emission buses registered in Britain in 2025 compared with 2024, a 38% rise in the number on the road in one year. There were 167 fewer built in the United Kingdom in 2025 compared with 2024. When we need more zero emission buses, when operators and local authorities are buying more buses but there are fewer orders going to factories in Falkirk, Ballymena, Scarborough, Aldershot and across the country, we know there is a problem, and it did not start yesterday.

I applied for this debate, first and foremost, having been born and raised in a community that has seen immense benefit from the UK bus manufacturing industry. The goliath industrial site, which stretches across a large section of Glasgow Road in Camelon, has been the origin of Scottish-built buses for decades. A stone's throw away is the sleek, relatively new modern site at Larbert, which hosts the global headquarters of Alexander Dennis. I had a welcome visit to Alexander Dennis's "meet the fleet" exhibition last week for prospective bidders to Transport Scotland's ScotZEB3 scheme. I tentatively await the outcome of that exercise and welcome Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, writing to me earlier this month to confirm when the announcement of successful bids is to be made. I hope for an objective outcome that supports Scottish manufacturing.

Members of Parliament will recognise the inherent pride when they spot something built in their community when out and about elsewhere in the country. When the Mayor of Greater Manchester's fantastic Bee Network was launched, I was proud to note that there were more buses built by workers in Falkirk than from any other place in the world.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Mellor, a bus manufacturer in Rochdale, does a superb job of producing the buses that Greater Manchester needs. Andy Burnham was the first in more than 40 years to retake control of our bus network in Greater Manchester, showing that with a publicly controlled local bus network, we cannot only improve facilities for passengers but secure contracts for local workers and British-built buses. Does my hon. Friend agree that is the way forward, particularly when we are considering Chinese-built buses?

Euan Stainbank: Franchising is certainly an opportunity for our British bus manufacturing sector. I will speak later about procurement and the opportunities it presents for us to go even further, and potentially correct some of the examples that are not as great as the fantastic work done by the Mayor of Greater Manchester in that regard.

This debate is unlike the last one held in Westminster Hall prior to the election in 2024. This is not a debate about the virtues of the current push to decarbonise transport. It is an immutable fact that the shift in demand from both operators and public subsidy is towards cleaner and quieter transport. For the UK manufacturing sector, we need to recognise that the transition to zero emission buses and away from diesel is happening. A business selling horses and carts at the beginning of the 20th century could have continued to sell the carts and might have done well in the short term, but eventually, if it did not transition to automobiles, it would have gone out of business.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful speech on a topic about which I know he is particularly passionate. He will be aware that Alexander Dennis has a base in my constituency of Harlow. Would he agree that the move towards zero emission buses is a massive opportunity to increase the skills base of our communities? We should welcome the opportunity that young people have in our constituencies to work on these revolutionary new vehicles.

Euan Stainbank: My hon. Friend goes to the heart of the issue we are debating today. This is an opportunity for our country to enable our manufacturers to compete within the market.

What British industry needs is not to see its renowned prowess for making diesel buses become a sentimental memory in communities such as Falkirk, but policy certainty and support to scale up and properly compete in the zero emissions market as we move towards the implementation of the ZEB mandate. International competitors have been able to scale up to meet the global market through state subsidy and clear procurement ambition. It is up to us to gather the political will to do the same, which I am sure we will hear articulated today.

Through both the mandate and voluntary targets for new registrations, operators are moving to prepare for new additions to their fleet to be fully zero emission by 2030, at the earliest. As that date approaches and diesel buses concurrently become a diminishing part of manufacturers' order books, we must acknowledge that there is a short window before every new bus in the UK market will be zero emission. The year 2027, proposed by some during the passage of the Bus Services Act 2025 as the date for the ZEB mandate to come into operation, would, without thought, drastically narrow that window, and I was glad to see those amendments defeated.

However, the message we are hearing from our manufacturers is clear. If we now fail to get this right, we will not be talking about a British-led transition and we will not be talking just about a 35%, and rising, Chinese market share. We will be talking about transitioning to reliance on other places in the world to build the vehicles we need on our roads. We will be facing the reality of the long-term consequences of the price and security of supply being increasingly elsewhere and not here. We will have lost control.

[*Euan Stainbank*]

That is why this debate is urgent. The Government, in my view, have the political temperament to deliver a new generation of British-built buses, and they have the proven ability to be bold on industrial policy, but too many missed chances by previous Governments and increasingly imminent deadlines for our industry mean that we need to be bolder. Sadly, taxpayer-funded schemes have contributed, rather than aiding a solution, to the problem of diminishing market share for UK manufacturers.

The initial ZEBRA—zero emission bus regional areas—scheme, touted proudly by Prime Minister Johnson's Government, committed to 4,000 British-built buses by the end of the last Parliament. The scheme delivered just 2,270 buses, of which about 46% were built abroad. There was a material and harmful chasm between political rhetoric and delivery for UK manufacturers.

Scottish manufacturing fared worse recently in phase 2 of the Scottish Government's zero emission bus challenge fund, the outcome of which was sending two thirds of ScotZEB2 orders to Yutong in China, while less than 20% went to Scottish manufacturers. That created an existential threat to 400 jobs and the Scottish bus manufacturing sector last year, with the First Minister being informed by the company in August 2024 that the outcome of the scheme appeared to show little regard for Scottish manufacturing, with unprecedented action being required in September to prevent the two factories from closing for good.

In addition, 130 jobs were lost in 2024, in part because of the aggravated issue of conditions being placed on Scottish Government funding, compelling adherence to advanced Fair Work First standards for employee remuneration, welfare and safety, while no such requirement was made of foreign manufacturers. I am all in favour of fair work standards being applied. The problem here is that they were not weighted in the procurement exercises, despite their being required only of British manufacturers. That created an unlevel playing field, tilted in the wrong direction.

We have heard testimonials to the origin of London's public transport system in the labour of Scottish, English and Northern Irish workers, who now contend with, and are contradicted by, the rapidly increasing portions of Transport for London infrastructure coming from elsewhere in the world.

It does not have to be this way. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) alluded to, the Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region combined authorities, when franchising their bus networks, bought nationally. They chose to weight properly when buying buses, with procurement teams looking at what could be achieved when social value is appropriately weighted.

These successes and failures are largely down to how the schemes are set up. It seems entirely right to me that, because many are funded wholly with our constituents' tax money, we should maximise the muscle of the state to make sure that as much of it as possible ends up benefiting our constituents, within the limits of our World Trade Organisation obligations.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In the Doncaster East part of my constituency, franchising kicks in next year. At the moment, routes

are about profits, not the people who use them. With this being about buying British buses, I think we have an amazing opportunity also to think about accessibility on our buses and to make sure we are also thinking about people who have disabilities or need extra help when we build our British buses.

Euan Stainbank: For Members of Parliament, accessibility on our public transport network is always a key factor. At the "meet the fleet" exhibition, I was glad to see some of the new models coming out from Alexander Dennis—hopefully to be built at the Larbert and Camelon sites—which will provide greater accessibility for customers. It is important for all bus manufacturers to make that feature a key selling point when they are going out to the country.

Other countries have been able to do this and follow WTO or even EU free trade obligations. The German Government have recently started enforcing a 50% rule for contract value in procurement from the EU or countries with a free trade agreement, putting a cap on market growth of foreign competitors and, in practice, protecting jobs in the German automotive industry. The US's Build America, Buy America scheme, introduced by the Biden Administration, mandates 70% local content for all rolling stock, and final assembly in the USA. Canada, while engaged in several free trade agreements, has introduced a Buy Canadian procurement policy framework that prioritises domestic industries.

If other countries can do it, so can we. When I have put to the Government the case for greater policy support for UK manufacturers, the very welcome forum of the UK Bus Manufacturing Expert Panel and the 10-year bus pipeline are often cited as the answer. The panel and the imminent 10-year pipeline will offer welcome certainty about the volume and source of upcoming demand, but we need alignment of policy to support our industry or we are in danger of providing just as much certainty to foreign competitors as to our own manufacturers.

The Government's recent consultation on procurement reform is very welcome. I hope it did not escape the notice of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench and in the Cabinet Office that substantial submissions were made by Alexander Dennis, Wrightbus and supply chain businesses that rely on the primary UK manufacturing sector. The UK manufacturing sector is clear on a way forward that supports it without significant structural legislative change. We need a stronger emphasis on social value, and I believe Ministers must now consider a 30% social value weighting and clearer local economic benefit expectations.

Social value criteria should be directly linked to key performance indicators that provide evidence of growing industry; job creation and retention; skills and metrics, including economic impact; taxes paid in the UK; supply chain spend; and UK gross value added to UK plc. Simply setting social value at 10% would continue to risk it being immaterial to scheme outcomes, as we saw in Scotland, and would be an inadequate tool to deal with rapidly diminishing British market share.

Will the Minister confirm in his summing-up what further action is being considered to encourage contracting authorities to maximise their portion of the 10-year bus pipeline through domestic content when it is published? In addition, what conversations has he sought with

Cabinet Office colleagues on procurement reform to amplify the views of the manufacturing sector and supply chain businesses when the time comes to legislate?

The necessity to retain and grow our domestic capacity is increasingly essential when serious concerns are being raised across Europe about the security of some Chinese-built buses. Following concerns raised by myself and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim, there is currently a National Cyber Security Centre and Department for Transport investigation into the risk of remote deactivation in some Chinese-built buses. I understand, through subsequent reports in the media, that the possibility of remote deactivation exists for 700-plus buses currently active on British roads.

Although the risk may appear abstract to some, this issue raises important long-term security, autonomy and dependability concerns for my constituents, operators and passengers. Our manufacturers currently comply with security regulations 155 and 156, verified by the Vehicle Certification Agency, which ensures that vehicle manufacturers implement comprehensive cyber-security measures throughout a vehicle's life cycle and ensures that software updates happen safely and securely. Approval certificates, however, can be sought from other countries' approval authorities through mutual recognition arrangements for non-UK verification.

I raised written questions prior to the interim reports of the investigation being reported in the media. I will repeat them here, considering the new information. Have the Government considered requiring UK VCA verification for any non-domestic manufacturers in the UK following those concerns? Following that, will the Government accept that national industrial security could and should be factored into any subsequent taxpayer-funded procurement exercises? If there is any degree of fallibility in security that cannot be adequately mitigated, the Procurement Act 2023 surely provides the powers for contracting authorities to disregard bids from non-treaty state suppliers.

Is that a power the Government would consider encouraging or mandating contracting authorities to use, if they are not satisfied with the security of buses coming from abroad? Although that would certainly be significant action, buses are the most used form of public transport in the country and are essential national infrastructure. We know that there are sufficiently credible risks to warrant Chinese-built buses being investigated. Without prejudicing the outcome of the investigation, which I understand is still on track, will the Minister provide us with as much of an update as possible on when we should expect the investigation to be concluded? This concern reinforces the need to move urgently to tilt the market away from increased reliance on Chinese manufacturers and towards self-sufficiency.

With 400 jobs and the very existence of a century-old bus manufacturing sector put in jeopardy in my community in Falkirk last year, the state of the UK bus manufacturing sector is a real and present issue, not only for my community but for our national industrial security and how we effectively execute a just transition, as we move towards the zero emission bus mandate for 2030 at the earliest. The transition towards clean transport has been, and will be, backed by billions in additional funding from this Government, who have shown the ability to be bold on industrial policy. We have a valued, well-paid and skilled workforce. At the same time, we

have an existential challenge from foreign competitors. Too much taxpayers' money goes abroad, and too many self-imposed targets were missed by previous Governments.

If we do not adopt creative policies from elsewhere to support our British industry, we risk losing those jobs permanently to Chinese manufacturing, and if that is done, it cannot be undone. If UK bus manufacturing fails, for as long as this country is subsidising buses we will be sending taxpayers' money abroad, so we cannot afford the cost of doing nothing.

Deindustrialisation is not an inevitable process—a reaction to the UK sector losing market share. We have policy levers. We can increase social value weighting expectations nationally and locally to 30%; we can give clear guidance to contracting authorities on how the muscle in the Procurement Act can best be strategically deployed; we can clearly state the risks that kill switches could present; and we can back British buses.

My constituents and I hope to see buses being built in Falkirk for a long time to come. I want the same for communities in Ballymena, Scarborough, Aldershot and beyond. I believe this Government can make that hope a concrete reality, but to do that we need to make the right choices. We need to make bolder choices, and we need to make them now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): I will call the Front Benchers at 10.28 am. There are about half a dozen Members seeking to catch my eye, so they will have five or six minutes each. Colleagues should reflect on keeping their remarks brief—a copybook example of which will be provided by Graham Leadbitter.

9.46 am

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the co-chairs of the APPG, the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), on securing the debate.

I like to think I have a bit of an affinity with buses. For my entire time at high school—three years at Oban high school and three years at Biggar high school—every school day started and ended on a bus, as it does for many living in rural communities. At the age of 15, I volunteered at Biggar's Albion works as part of a Duke of Edinburgh's award, and helped to restore an Albion lorry. Albion was, of course, one of Scotland's first vehicle manufacturers, and that included the manufacture of many buses. I do not know whether anybody here is old enough to remember that.

Although Albion is sadly no more, Alexander Dennis has been manufacturing buses in Scotland for more than 100 years and provides significant skilled employment. In Scotland, we recognise the importance of bus travel. The SNP has put in place a number of measures to boost bus use, including an extensive bus pass system, which includes free bus travel for under-23s. It has had positive social impacts and gives young and old people access to vital services and to education, employment and social opportunities. Increased bus use means steady demand for new buses to replace or expand existing fleets, and higher demand means greater opportunity for manufacturers.

[Graham Leadbitter]

In my former role as council leader in Moray, I had the pleasure of being a signatory of the Moray growth deal, which included the m.connect scheme—a combination of massively expanded on-demand bus services and expanded scheduled services over a large geography. It is well supported and well liked by the public and, again, more services mean more buses.

However, there are serious challenges for bus manufacturers—notably from cheap foreign imports, especially from China—and that raises questions about the current procurement rules. The UK-wide Subsidy Control Act 2022 has prevented the Scottish Government from directly procuring from a single supplier, which puts avoidable strain on domestic bus manufacture.

Protecting skilled manufacturing in Scotland is critical to building our transition to a green industrial economy. That is why the Scottish Government committed £4 million to retain more than 400 manufacturing jobs at Alexander Dennis through a furlough scheme to protect crucial skilled workers until work can recommence. It was because of that collaboration and determination, and a shared belief in the value and the future of domestic manufacturing, that the Scottish Government and Alexander Dennis were able to negotiate that deal. But the obvious preference for the company, the Government and, most importantly, those workers is to have a steady stream of orders and no requirement for such a scheme.

There are several key things the UK can do to support bus manufacturing. The Subsidy Control Act needs reworking. As the hon. Member for Falkirk said, social value weighting needs to be ramped up. As a councillor, I argued very strongly for that for a wide range of contracts, and I continue to do so today. It is perfectly reasonable to place weighting on local supply chain content, quality assurance, apprenticeships and much more.

We also need to significantly tighten up certification of buses to ensure consistently high standards, especially on issues such as cyber-security. There have been multiple investigations in various countries into so-called kill switches in imported vehicles and other technologies, so that is clearly of critical importance.

There is a particular irony in trying to grow an electrically powered bus fleet in the UK by shipping buses in large numbers halfway around the world using heavy fuel-powered cargo ships. The green credentials of such procurement arrangements are highly questionable. The whole carbon impact of manufacture and delivery needs to be considered. Work also needs to be done by the Government and power distribution companies to ensure that grid connections for new charging installations are carried out in a timely way. Bus operators will not procure modern EV buses if they have nowhere to plug them in.

In conclusion, there are several actions the Government can take to support bus manufacturing and manufacturing more generally. That would also give public authorities and Governments across these islands more tools in the box to support procurement that drives growth and skilled jobs in our manufacturing sector, and ensures a future for these well-known, well-liked companies.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): I call the co-sponsor of the debate, Jim Allister.

9.51 am

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dr Murrison. I declare an interest as the co-chair of the APPG for British buses.

As the representative for North Antrim, I have the privilege of having Wrightbus as the key manufacturing company in my constituency. It is remarkable that, having started in a domestic garage just after the second world war, Wrightbus is now one of the world leaders in technology, skills and innovation. Ballymena in my constituency will forever be grateful to Sir William Wright for his innovative foresight, which led to where we are today.

It was not always an easy road. Just a few years ago, after substantial problems, Wrightbus rose like a phoenix from the ashes under new ownership, generating 2,300 jobs and producing many, many hundreds of buses, with the ambition to produce more than 3,000. I recently visited the site again, and saw the most modern of the company's buses, which thankfully take care of all the accessibility needs one could think of. I was encouraged by the enthusiasm of the new chief executive, who certainly has ambitious plans for the site.

It is important that we as a nation grab hold of the opportunity here. The industrial strategy talks about advanced manufacturing as a strategic growth sector. If we mean that—I certainly believe that the sector has that potential—we must twin it with the approach we take on procurement. There is no point saying that advanced manufacturing is a strategic growth sector if our procurement policy is letting it down.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given that we have a growth policy that aims to support UK bus manufacturing, does the hon. and learned Member agree that it seems totally counterproductive that we subsidise overseas bus manufacturers to bring buses into the United Kingdom? We have such magnificent manufacturing bases in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.

Jim Allister: Indeed, and the Chancellor is on record as saying that

“where things are made, and who makes them, matters.”—[*Official Report*, 11 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 979.]

That is correct, and the Government need to get that message embedded in their soul.

I want to speak directly to the mayor of this great city—our capital city. In recent times, 479 Chinese buses have been put on our streets, with another 160 to follow—that is China, with the kill switches. I ask the mayor and TfL: where is the national pride in our capital city if we arrive and discover that the bus we are likely to get on was made in China rather than the United Kingdom? Other mayors seem to have had the vision and the desire to promote British-made products. That desire needs to catch flame here in the capital city, and I trust that it will.

Our procurement must be assertive and bold. There are the social value tools to make our procurement effective in assisting the production of home-made buses. We should be unashamed to do as other countries do when it comes to productivity. I hope that one outcome of this debate will be that those in a position to order buses reflect on where they order them from, and that

we will see an interest in and accentuation of orders from within our United Kingdom. We have the means. We have the product. Let us build on it and make it even greater.

Finally, I want to raise a particular problem with production and exports in Northern Ireland. Sadly, under the Brexit arrangement, we are still under EU state aid rules. We see that in clauses 13 to 15 of the Finance (No. 2) Bill, which increase the level available for enterprise management incentives, enterprise investment schemes and venture capital trusts in Great Britain, but hold it down for companies in Northern Ireland. Why? Because of EU state aid rules. We also see it in the Industry and Exports (Financial Assistance) Bill, which again caps us under the EU state aid limits. How can we have a level playing field for UK production if, quite outrageously, one part of the United Kingdom is subject to a cap under EU state aid rules, which would not be there at all, of course, if we were properly part of the United Kingdom and had properly achieved Brexit? For Wrightbus, the workers in my constituency and the commonality of this United Kingdom, we must have that level playing field. That will then unleash opportunities for this great industry. It is time for the Government to liberate the bus building industry so that it can grow, including in Northern Ireland.

9.58 am

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Good morning, Dr Murrison; I am delighted to serve under your chairship. I bring attention to my membership of Unite, and I record my appreciation for the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and for my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), for securing this vital debate.

My hon. Friend and I both have Alexander Dennis sites in our constituencies, and we have campaigned together, representing the interests of the AD workers from Larbert in my constituency and Falkirk in his. Of course, being MPs from central Scotland, we are sadly no strangers to big industrial issues. Scotland's only oil refinery operated in Grangemouth for a century until last year, when it was closed by its owners—a combination of a multinational company owned by a billionaire and a company controlled by the Chinese Government.

Eight miles along the M9 from Grangemouth is Larbert, which is my Alexander Dennis site. It is a huge local employer, and it is feeling the adverse effects of Chinese influence.

It is a well-known fact that Chinese buses and batteries currently have a substantial share of the market. Alexander Dennis workers and trade unionists have laid out the realities and issues that British bus manufacturers are facing. As is the case in many different industries, China is now able to overpower more established economies, and the position of European nations in a global trade context has dramatically changed.

Let us be clear: as a Government, we are not without power. Things can be done to help British business. The Government must be willing to intervene, impact and change the circumstances for British industry. It can be done. It was done, in December last year, when the Labour Government stepped in and saved the British chemical industry at Grangemouth. Our intervention

saved 500 skilled and well-paid jobs on site, reversed the town's industrial decline and boosted the local and national economy. That is the good that Government intervention does for British industry, British workers and British working-class communities.

I say to the Minister that, sadly, Labour Governments do not come around all that often, so it is up to us to be assertive and to create, at the very least, a level playing field. In fact, why not make it more advantageous for British companies to do business? Where things are made matters, and "Buy British" and Britain being "Britain's best customer" have to be more than political slogans.

Things must be changed to make it easier for our companies to be competitive, and we know that the SNP will not do it. It is easy for them to duck responsibility and point the finger at Conservative Governments of the past who treated working-class Scots and Scottish industry with utter contempt. But we have had 20 years of SNP Government with zero industrial strategy. Equally bad has been their public procurement policy. If it is not buses ordered from China, it is ferries built in Turkey or Poland; it is NHS Scotland contracts going to France; it is Scottish Government cyber-security services being outsourced to the United States. Over £7.7 billion of Scottish Government expenditure—public money—has gone to foreign companies. Stronger for Scotland? The treatment of Scottish workers, including the bus industry, which we are talking about today, is a national scandal.

In finishing, I say to the Minister: go back to the Department and be bold, be transformative and put our workers, our communities and our businesses at the heart of everything that we do.

10.2 am

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): Good morning, Dr Murrison. As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and my good friend the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on securing this important debate. Today we gather to discuss British bus manufacturing. We are here to highlight not only skills, the economy and transportation but, I believe, the integral role of all those dimensions to the security of our entire nation.

This industry is woven into every facet of our national life. It is part of the fabric of our island story, and I believe we must defend it. This is not just about vehicles; rather, it is about our British heritage, our skills and the future of our country. There are more than 4,150 highly skilled individuals directly employed, and more than 13,000 indirectly employed, in the supply chain of bus manufacturing throughout the United Kingdom. Bus manufacturing is a powerhouse of skilled jobs that trains and employs local people across 90 local authorities. Those jobs are not only skilled but more highly paid than comparable occupations, with salaries 20% higher than in other parts of the supply chain.

Sadly, we do not manufacture buses in my constituency of Romford, but local people are employed in all parts of the supply chain, and many more depend upon it.

Every day, local people in Romford, which is part of Greater London, rely on buses supplied by great companies like Ulster's Wrightbus keeping our communities connected. In my borough of Havering to the east side of London

[Andrew Rosindell]

in Essex—where my constituency is located—almost a quarter of journeys are made by bus, and across the whole of the Greater London region, buses enable more than two thirds of journeys.

Buses are an essential lifeline for so many of our constituents. I use buses all the time; I jump on the 103, or possibly the 499, from my home down to Romford station on the way to Westminster. We have two very good buses in my community. They are provided by Transport for London, which comes under the Mayor of London. I entirely endorse the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim when he talks about the absolute failure of pride that the Mayor of London shows in our part of the country. British buses could be purchased and procured for use in Greater London, and yet Mayor Khan is going to China: shame on him. That is one reason why people in my borough would love to have the opportunity to not be under Greater London and be fully part of Essex as we have historically always been.

While our buses are essential for both the economy and transportation, that is only part of the picture. We ought not to forget that many British buses are made in Northern Ireland. That is a stark reminder of the severe damage being inflicted by the Windsor framework—a shameful betrayal of the people of Northern Ireland that is creating barriers between British people and businesses, and creating two internal markets in one United Kingdom. That is a national disgrace and must be brought to an end. We are one United Kingdom and all British people should be treated the same. The rules should apply throughout all parts of our great nation; we should not be separating Northern Ireland from Scotland, Wales and England. I look forward to the next Government—and I hope it will be a Reform UK Government—reversing the Windsor framework and implementing Brexit as the people voted for.

It is also a reminder of the continuing avenues for growth and job creation across the Union. Wrightbus is a prime example; the Ballymena company produces dozens of buses every year, employing hundreds of local people and supplying a quarter of buses across Greater London. That means roughly a quarter of bus journeys taken by my constituents are made possible by the entrepreneurial spirit and work ethic of the good people of Ulster. That is an incredible testament to the importance of the Union and showcases Britain at her very best.

By backing British bus manufacturing, we are not only calling on the Government to protect transport networks, the economy or even the Union, but also asking that they live up to their central responsibility to defend our national security. Under the zero emission bus regional areas scheme, which ended in 2024, 40% of buses were procured from abroad, increasing foreign influence in this native industry and divesting from the domestic skills base. Worse still, publications such as *The Times*, *The Guardian* and others have reported extensively on kill switches present in foreign-made buses, inserted by international competitors or adversaries of the United Kingdom, such as the People's Republic of China. The very real risk of foreign disruption has been permitted for too long by successive—I am afraid to say—Conservative and Labour Governments and

must be brought to an end. Keeping our bus manufacturing in British hands is no longer a patriotic preference or an economic luxury, but a national necessity. I call on the Government to keep our bus network in British hands, protect our people and create jobs across the kingdom that showcase British excellence. Let us ensure that we have the skills, investment and political will to back British industry making British buses: British made for generations to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): I appeal to colleagues to be brief in their remarks so that we can get everybody in.

10.9 am

Kenneth Stevenson (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for securing this important and timely debate. I also say “happy birthday” to my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk—I know that he says he is 25, but I am not so sure about that. Bus manufacturing is a significant sector in both Members’ constituencies, through Alexander Dennis and Wrightbus. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim for their dedicated efforts to support a highly skilled sector that employs more than 4,000 people across the United Kingdom and a further 13,000 in the supply chain.

The United Kingdom has a proud industrial heritage. It was known for its ability to build and build well, and companies such as our bus manufacturers keep that reputation alive. Engineering has been critical to our country’s success, and small steps, such as including engineering in the name of the current Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, would show this Parliament’s collective determination to highlight the role that engineering has to play in our future. That is a pet peeve of mine and something that the Tories and failed Reform have no idea about—in the past and in the future.

The United Kingdom can have a booming, home-grown economy at its centre once again. As an engineer and former lecturer, I am passionate about the future of UK manufacturing and innovation, but I am well aware of the need to harness potential through timely investment and the right strategies. A modern industrial strategy is required, but it must not be in name only. Any strategy must have the creation of a skills-based economy at its heart. It must be cognisant of the impacts of deindustrialisation in constituencies such as mine in Airdrie and Shotts, and it must commit to utilising skills that exist here in the UK to get Britain building and to ensure that major employers such as Alexander Dennis have a role to play long into the future.

This Government are committed to securing the future of industry and supporting bus manufacturers in their move to electric, but we must collectively go further.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Ensignbus, which operates in my constituency, is not a bus manufacturer per se, but it repurposes buses and is looking to get into the repowering of buses that have finished their natural life, usually in London, which will aid the switch to zero emissions. Will my hon. Friend join me in encouraging and supporting

it in that endeavour, and in urging the Minister to look into what we can do as a Government to support enterprises such as this?

Kenneth Stevenson: Yes, of course I would. There is a major move towards making sure that cars in the future, such as Beetles etc, move to electric power. There is a move towards that in America, and we should make that move in the UK towards taking cars and buses that can be improved and moving them to batteries or even hydrogen—to non-fossil fuels.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government's procurement is so deeply flawed that contracts are handed to Chinese bus manufacturers when the skills exist in our central belt. Investing in British bus manufacturing by supporting companies such as Alexander Dennis will not only get state-of-the-art buses on the road, but bolster national security, given the serious and widely held concerns surrounding where Chinese manufactured buses are controlled from and whether an action taken in China could bring electric buses here to a halt.

Too many fossil fuel-powered buses—more than 36,000—remain on our roads. Bus manufacturers here in the United Kingdom are prepared to meet the demand to replace them. Manufacturers are calling for certainty and security, and they are asking for Government buy-in. To think that a company such as Alexander Dennis was at risk of going under, and that the jobs of people in my constituency were threatened, when such potential exists to invest in and grow the sector is deeply worrying. Words must quickly turn into action in every part of the United Kingdom to get this industry back on its feet and contributing to our economy in the way we know that it can. That is why net zero emission bus funds, whether in Scotland or across the United Kingdom, must be accessible to British businesses. The potential to grow our economy through investing in British bus manufacturing is clear to see, and I hope to hear from the Minister how we will embrace that potential, deliver for UK industry, and protect and create jobs for years to come.

10.15 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, as always, Dr Murrison, and I say a special thank you to the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for highlighting this topic and securing the debate. There is a potential for UK-wide investment, which will pay UK-wide dividends. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place, and I wish him well in his role. I know that he will give very confident and positive answers to our questions.

The constituency of the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim encompasses Ballymena and is strongly linked to buses. He will be aware that I have supported and cheered on Wrightbus for many years and will continue to do so because, as he rightly said, bus manufacturing is a UK-wide project, which Strangford plays her part in. While primary assembly is done in Ballymena, the Northern Irish manufacturing sector is highly integrated. It is common for precision engineering firms in the Strangford constituency to act as tier 2 or tier 3 suppliers, providing specific components such as metal fabrications or electronic systems to larger manufacturers. As Members in this Chamber know, we

need the small cogs as well as the big ones for the engine to power up, so there is a role for us all to play across many of our constituencies in relation to that.

The fact is that the reputation for Northern Ireland crafted vehicles is top class; it is no exaggeration to say that we are world leaders in the field. The hon. Member for Falkirk said that his bus companies are leaders in the field, and they are. It is a collective goal that we are trying to achieve. That we are world leaders is undoubtedly down to the investment and support of local bus makers such as Wrightbus. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim set the scene in relation to Wrightbus. He set out how it has advanced to where it is today, and told us of the key role that it plays. Its submission to the Business and Trade Committee made it abundantly clear how supporting the manufacturing sector can help others in the United Kingdom.

I find it so interesting that the global bus market is worth around \$21 billion and that some 3 million buses are used for public transport. To meet global net zero goals, all buses—or at least the vast majority of them—will need to switch to zero emission alternatives by 2050. There is a great desire for the new, green-friendly electric buses. If a bus is going to last for 15 years, that commitment needs to be made now, so maybe the Minister can give us some idea of what is going to happen in relation to that.

As Members may know, the average lifespan of a bus is 15 years, which means that bus operators and local authorities are now making investments in the decarbonisation of their fleets. According to those projections, global sales of zero emission buses are due to rise from 112,000 in 2022 to 670,000 in 2027. That is massive—it would be a growth of six times in a period of five years. As a result, there is a major export opportunity for the UK bus manufacturers to sell zero emission buses in a growing global market.

To do that, Wrightbus needs Government support, not simply financially but promotionally. The Government must ensure that firms throughout Europe can order with confidence from this very niche but very successful firm. I believe that more can and must be done by the Government to provide that security, and that begins with investment in the facility. I am confident that every investment of time and money will pay dividends throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I thank hon. Members for the motion and give my wholehearted support once again, knowing that a rising tide lifts all ships. Northern Ireland has historically carried out high-level manufacturing in the air, in the sea and on land, and each of those industries has potential for so much more. I hope that, from today, we begin to realise that potential.

10.19 am

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) for leading on such a critical issue for his constituents. As of the third quarter of 2023, the UK manufactured only around 17% of UK buses, employing around 4,400 people while also supporting supply chains. That is undoubtedly an economic benefit, but it is also less harmful for our precious planet.

[Alison Taylor]

Transporting large goods from as far away as China obviously has a detrimental environmental impact. Britain should be at the heart of manufacturing electric buses for our own use, driving forward the green transition to halt climate change. In my constituency, which covers part of Glasgow, improving air quality has undoubted health benefits. Driving change does not happen by accident; it needs a strategy, a plan, hard work and investment.

The demand for electric buses will only continue to grow. I hope we can ensure that domestic demand is primarily met here. Alexander Dennis has faced significant issues over the last few years, and I hope they are temporary and resolvable. The future of bus manufacturing in the UK should be strong and positive, build on the existing manufacturing base and be supported by a strong domestic pipeline of orders.

There is no shortage of existing sites for the expansion of bus manufacturing in Scotland. Bus manufacturing companies seeking new sites need look no further than the advanced manufacturing district for Scotland at Glasgow airport in my own constituency, which has an ample supply of land, access to the White Cart river for water, good motorway connections and a developer and a local authority poised to construct low-carbon buildings at a reasonable cost.

Communities like mine in Paisley and Renfrewshire North need more and better buses, including slicker, smaller buses that can wind through our housing estates. The reliability and availability of buses and their routes comes up frequently on the doors of my constituency, particularly in Gallowhill, Ferguslie Park, Erskine, Renfrew, Penilee and Cardonald, where they are a lifeline to doctor's appointments, work and seeing families and friends. My constituents need to know that more buses will be coming very soon.

10.22 am

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on securing this important debate. My contribution will be short; it will focus on the Government's approach to securing the manufacturing jobs we have already in the UK, and how we can expand that number further.

My hon. Friend will be very happy that my Edinburgh constituents ride on buses manufactured in his constituency every day, so much so that since 2018 Lothian Buses has purchased 180 buses from Alexander Dennis. In 2018, Lothian Buses and Alexander Dennis unveiled a brand new 100-seater double-decker bus. Even stepping on these buses today, they feel state of the art, with increased driver safety and passenger convenience. In 2021, Lothian Buses started testing four Enviro400EV double-decker buses, which were the result of an electric vehicle partnership between Alexander Dennis and BYD UK. This kind of partnership demonstrates the work and innovation already under way in manufacturing to decarbonise the transport that we use across our cities every day.

Lothian Buses is the largest municipal bus company in the United Kingdom. It will come as no surprise to many of us that a municipal bus company, working

with the same procurement policies and constraints as other bus companies, has supported local manufacturing. Ownership matters, and Lothian Buses demonstrates that municipal ownership leads to positive economic benefits for the people such companies serve. I am keen to hear from the Minister whether the Government have further plans to support or encourage municipal ownership to ensure that the decisions on services, standards and operations are always made for the benefit of passengers.

10.24 am

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for bringing this important industry to the attention of the House.

The latest figures tell us that just 17% of buses used in the UK are manufactured here, which of course means that 83% come from abroad. Those figures are very much the wrong way round. What can we do to reverse them?

A number of trends have come together to make what was always a challenging market much more difficult. In particular, we have seen the shift to low emission vehicles on environmental and pollution grounds. That has created a major inflection point in the market. It is an opportunity for companies if they can get ahead of the curve—a chance for them to displace established players—but potentially a major setback if other companies get there first. In this sector, the competitive advantage clearly lies with Chinese manufacturers.

Research published in 2024 by the professional services firm KPMG on the economic impact of local bus services found that the sector invests over £180 million each year in UK buses. KPMG also estimates that around 53,000 people are indirectly employed through the industry's supply chain, including those working for manufacturers, fuel suppliers, maintenance, parts companies and technology providers. That amounts to a major contribution, both to the economy and of course to employment.

However, the only solution to a long-term strategic problem lies in a long-term strategy. Under the previous Government, there was no industrial strategy worthy of the name. One arm of Government did not seem to know, or care, what another was doing. The need for environmentally friendly forms of public transport was clear a long time ago, but the move towards such transport and the subsidies to support it seems to have been carried out in isolation from policy relating to UK manufacturing. The Liberal Democrats welcome the present Government's move to a more strategic approach, and I hope the Minister will tell us more about those plans today.

As Liberal Democrats, our approach would be, first, to establish a comprehensive industrial strategy in partnership with business, civil society, including trade unions and academia. Secondly, we would ensure that the principles of tackling the climate emergency, boosting living standards, spreading prosperity everywhere in the UK and growing the economy are at the heart of that strategy. Thirdly, we would seek to provide a strategic framework for effectively addressing the needs of

economically disadvantaged remote or rural areas by collaborating with local, regional and devolved authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Fourthly, we need to work towards four key business priorities: a positive business climate; leveraging technology to supercharge the green economy; empowering small businesses to create prosperity in local communities; and boosting trade. Finally, we need to enable businesses to achieve these priorities by enabling the workforce of tomorrow with a training and apprenticeship programme, investing in key infrastructure, scaling digital innovation and technology adoption, and creating financial markets that work for all businesses.

Although the solution has to be long-term, there is the short-term challenge of keeping the bus industry that we already have afloat in the meantime. The businesses at Wrightbus and Alexander Dennis play a key role in their local economies, as we have heard from the local Members. I hope that the Minister will give us an idea of how we can bridge the gap between what has worked until now and how we need to operate in the future. We have a fantastic workforce and an amazing history in automotive manufacturing. Let us make sure that the industry continues to prosper in the future.

10.28 am

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. The debate comes at an apposite time. I was particularly glad to have heard from the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), who both made excellent speeches. Whether someone is in Ballymena, Aldershot, Falkirk, Scarborough or indeed anywhere that bus manufacturing is based in Britain, we want to see a thriving and successful UK bus manufacturing sector, because it is critical to local communities. I was glad to have visited Alexander Dennis when I was the buses Minister.

However, at the very top level across the country, we are seeing real damage being caused by the Government's complete mismanagement of the economy, with rising national insurance, increases in business rates and self-created economic uncertainty. Those problems have been doubled down on when it comes to our bus manufacturing sector, but it is important to set out the fundamental issues affecting businesses right across the country.

As hon. Members have mentioned, the UK bus manufacturing sector directly employs about 4,200 people, with about 13,000 more in the supply chain. It is vital that we retain and grow that workforce. My fear is that the bus sector, and what is happening to it, is the canary in the mineshaft for manufacturing generally, and particularly vehicle manufacturing, in the UK. As the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) noted, in the past year, just 17% of buses with new registrations were made in the UK. There has been a significant and rapid reduction over the past couple of years.

Buses are the most popular form of public transport, so we know that we will continue to need new buses in the UK well into the future, but many companies in the sector are facing huge challenges from increased overseas competition alongside technological change, so we must take the opportunity to ensure that we have companies

that are able to compete in an increasingly challenging marketplace. It is not always a competitive marketplace—that point was made clearly by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim and the hon. Member for Falkirk—but it is a challenging one for many bus manufacturers.

We also need to ensure that UK companies continue to innovate, so that they are at the forefront of technological change. We must examine the hard work of many companies, but especially Wrightbus and Alexander Dennis, the two companies mentioned by the proposers of today's debate. Those companies have been through challenging times, but they have taken enormous steps to become technological leaders in the sector. Wrightbus in particular has announced enormous growth over the past few years. In 2019, it had fewer than 50 employees and went into administration, with 1,200 jobs being lost. It now provides more than 2,000 jobs in County Antrim, which shows the opportunities for UK manufacturing when there is growth.

At the same time, I recognise the issues noted by the hon. Member for Falkirk, which AD and Wrightbus both referred to in their respective financial announcements. The UK bus industry is facing huge financial challenges. It is vital that we understand the challenges those companies face and ensure that the business environment for them and other companies in the sector is as friendly, financially viable, pro-British business and pro-British worker as it can feasibly be. That means creating a sector that has the opportunity to grow, with technology that can rival that of any company around the world.

During my time as buses Minister, there was exceptionally strong growth in the bus sector, with a 44.6% increase in new registrations. That was driven most strongly by British-built double-decker buses, registrations of which increased by 173.6% during that time. We also became the largest market in Europe for electric and hydrogen-powered buses, under a scheme that was Government supported but local-authority led. None the less, councils have sometimes chosen foreign manufacturers over UK ones. Councils in Leicester, Nottingham, West Yorkshire, the north-east of England and Newport, and now, as the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) mentioned, the Mayor of London have chosen to buy foreign-made buses. That issue was raised today by Members on all sides, and it is one that I battled with when I was Minister. We want to ensure that existing companies in the UK can prosper. Creating the conditions for that is vital.

We must consider not only the work of UK companies but the challenges they face in the international context. Bus manufacturing is a global industry with manufacturers around the world, which is why the Minister is probably facing some of the issues that I faced when I was Minister. Clearly, one of those is social value, which we must do much more about. It is interesting that the hon. Member for Falkirk mentioned the figure of 10%, and I am sure that he is right. We must reflect on that, especially in the international context, and consider how to increase it. That is in the context of something that has only emerged in the past few years: increasing and broader concerns about cyber-security, technology and kill switches. When we put those two things side by side—social value and the security of our bus network, which provides the most popular form of public transport—we see that we have to ensure that we end up

[Mr Richard Holden]

in the right place. I ask the Government to commit to reviewing their policies so that matters such as the regulation of equipment, the evaluation of security risk, and trade policy do not enhance the prospects of manufacturers from other countries to the detriment of British manufacturers, especially when taxpayers' money is being used.

Chinese manufacturers are becoming a dominant force in multiple forms of transport. In 2025, BYD overtook Tesla to become the largest seller of electric vehicles, and Chinese electric bus manufacturing has been significant for some time. The International Energy Agency noted that in 2024, just under 50,000 of the 72,000 electric buses sold globally were sold in China, and that Chinese manufacturers have increasingly looked at exports to exploit the available overcapacity in domestic manufacturing. In 2024, more than 15,000 electric buses were exported from China—a 25% increase on 2023 alone.

Yutong, a Chinese company that is the largest bus manufacturer in the world, grew to take an 8.4% UK market share by the third quarter of 2025. It is clear that, while Chinese providers are present, we must ensure that all relevant trade practices are fair and that the technology being used does not create security risks. I am aware of the worrying reports before Christmas that, following an investigation in Norway, the Department for Transport was working with the National Cyber Security Centre to assess whether Yutong's remote access to vehicle control systems, for software updates and diagnostics, was a security concern. I would be grateful if the Minister provided details on whether that issue has been looked into and, if so, what the results were.

We need to confront such difficult questions as we do not want to be in the position of enabling bus manufacturers from abroad to take advantage of our policies while making our own manufacturers uncompetitive. There is a risk of the situation worsening, given the Government's enthusiasm for raising taxes on domestic businesses and particularly on domestic employment.

Will the Minister also consider other Government schemes that send money for manufacturing abroad? I am thinking particularly of the electric car grant: 90% of the vehicles covered by that scheme, and 100% of motorcycles, are built in other countries. This is British taxpayers' money going abroad to subsidise manufacturing in other countries. We are talking about billions of pounds, so it is really important that we look at the issue. Earlier, it was good to hear Labour Back Benchers make strong points about British taxpayers' money being sent abroad. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) quoted the Chancellor of the Exchequer saying that

"where things are made, and who makes them, matters."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 979.]

The Government as a whole need to consider that; they would certainly have Opposition support if they wanted to address the matter more forcefully.

Overall, we know that the British public want comfortable buses that serve the public well. I am not going to dwell on the 50% bus fare increase, from £2 to £3, under this Government, as this debate is about UK bus manufacturing, but that manufacturing is driven by consistent growth

and by what the people want: comfortable, clean buses, with people feeling safe on public transport that has a reliable and affordable model. I am confident that British manufacturers on both sides of the Irish sea can rise to the challenge of delivering what people want in our bus sectors.

As technology improves, we want to ensure that our manufacturers are not just protected as the best in the world but encouraged to compete right across the board, offering the jobs critical to local economies up and down the country. To do so, we must support businesses and their workers and ensure that our regulations and taxes do not place a burden that drags businesses down. I believe that that is the best way to ensure that British bus manufacturing remains competitive in the modern world. I really hope that the Minister reflects on some of the issues raised today, particularly the security concerns that have emerged forcefully over the last year, so that he sees what more can be done to support British bus manufacturing.

10.39 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for securing this debate, and Members on both sides of the House for their passionate contributions. I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk a wheely good birthday—[*Interruption.*] I was particularly proud of that. Look on the bright side: he is one year closer to his bus pass.

It is clear from this debate that the UK bus manufacturing sector matters to our communities, our workers, our supply chains and our shared ambitions for cleaner, more inclusive transport across the country. I want to say at the outset that the Government share hon. Members' commitment to ensuring that the UK remains a world leader in bus design and manufacturing.

We have heard today about the proud heritage and continued innovation of two major UK manufacturers: Wrightbus in Ballymena, which I was very pleased to visit, and Alexander Dennis in Falkirk, Larbert and Scarborough. Their names are woven into the fabric of our industrial story. They produce buses that serve communities the length and breadth of the UK and increasingly showcase British engineering abroad. I pay tribute to the workforce across the UK—the engineers, apprentices, designers and technicians—whose skills sustain the sector. It is precisely because we recognise the importance of that workforce that the Government are taking decisive, practical action to support the long-term health of the industry.

Last March, we established the UK Bus Manufacturing Expert Panel because we are clear that we need a new kind of partnership—one that brings together manufacturers, operators, local leaders and central Government. Over the past year, it has worked tirelessly, focusing on three central objectives: supporting the growth of UK bus manufacturing, developing a clear pipeline of future orders to give manufacturers confidence to invest, and prioritising passenger-centric bus design to ensure that the future bus is fit for the people who rely on it.

As that work draws to a close, I can already see the tangible difference it has made. For years, manufacturers have told us that the biggest barrier to growth is lack of visibility of future demand. There are too many peaks and troughs and too much uncertainty to justify investment in new production lines, skills and research and development. The bus order pipeline is well advanced in development, aggregating likely industry demand for the next decade. I understand Members' desire for it to focus on UK bus manufacturing. I intend to publish the pipeline shortly. It will offer for the first time a national forward look at the buses that we expect local authorities and operators to need. That degree of certainty can be transformational, giving our domestic manufacturers the confidence to hire, innovate and compete globally.

Members have also raised the essential role of zero emission buses in supporting UK manufacturing. Let me be clear: we are committed to the transition to a zero emission bus fleet. Zero emission buses bring real, lasting benefits: cleaner air, quieter journeys, lower running costs and more reliable services for passengers. Through ZEBRA 1 and ZEBRA 2, the Department has supported the roll-out of 2,500 zero emission buses and the infrastructure that they need. That real investment is already translating into orders, the majority of which have been won by UK manufacturers.

In April 2025, we provided a further £38 million to fund an additional 319 zero emission buses, again providing real opportunities for UK manufacturers. Alongside that, we have announced £15.6 billion over five years to improve local transport across some of the biggest city regions, and given local leaders the ability to allocate funding to upgrade and decarbonise their fleets. That is a long-term commitment to cleaner bus travel and, crucially, the domestic jobs and skills that go with it.

We introduced the Bus Services Act to deliver on our commitment to better buses up and down the country. Encouraging bus operators to upgrade, modernise and decarbonise their bus fleets is a huge part of that work. The Act will introduce a requirement that new diesel buses cannot be used on local bus routes in England, which will come into force not before 2030. We will confirm the precise date in due course, but of course we will consult manufacturers and other stakeholders. Right now, that measure is sending an unambiguous signal to the entire sector that the future is zero emission. It gives manufacturers time to plan the shift, it gives operators breathing room to prepare, and it supports the longer-term case for investment in the UK.

Understandably, Members want to see UK taxpayers' money supporting UK jobs, and I note their ask for a target for UK-built buses purchased using taxpayer funding in this Parliament. Although I cannot mandate the purchase of British-built buses due to the Subsidy Control Act and our international trade commitments, we can do more to help UK-based suppliers compete.

When I launched the expert panel last March, social value was a key theme that emerged—how we could get best support for jobs, skills and local economic growth. UK manufacturers reported that bus procurements typically had just a 5% weighting for social value criteria and that the procurement design did not sufficiently secure social and economic value in the way we would expect. I took two actions in response to their concerns.

First, in an extraordinary meeting of the expert panel in July, I secured broad agreement from mayoral authorities that they would make social value criteria at least

10% of weighting—so far. I am pleased to say that that is now happening. Secondly, I challenged the expert panel to focus on meaningful social value, ensuring that procurement is designed in a way that best delivers real social and economic value that supports the Government's missions.

A report is due to be delivered in February at the next expert panel meeting, which I will chair, detailing best practice and recommendations. I will strongly encourage mayoral authorities to apply that best practice consistently. Although I cannot legally require authorities to buy British, we absolutely can and are helping them take into account the full value that British manufacturers offer. I assure Members that we are working with Cabinet Office colleagues to ensure that the views of the UK bus manufacturing sector are represented as they consider changes to public procurement. We want that work to help deliver the Government's industrial strategy and foster a resilient economy that supports British businesses and creates good jobs in communities across the country.

I also want to address the concerns raised today about the potential remote deactivation of Chinese-made electric buses. As the Prime Minister said in his Guildhall speech in December 2025, we will never compromise the UK's national security. We will take tough steps to keep the UK secure while also pursuing secure economic opportunities when they are in the UK's interest.

The use of terms such as “kill switches” is alarmist. It is a fact of life that modern vehicles, regardless of where they are from, are increasingly using software to support safer driving, improve diagnostics and provide a host of other services. Updating that software remotely is effective and efficient, as well as a key mechanism for rectifying security vulnerabilities. But we are not complacent. The UK has already implemented two new UN cyber-security regulations, requiring manufacturers to strengthen cyber protections, rigorously oversee software updates, and maintain real-time incident monitoring. We will continue to lead internationally on cyber standards, ensuring that wherever buses, British-built or otherwise, are running on the roads, passenger safety, data security and operational integrity remain paramount. Parliamentarians will understand that some of our response is sensitive and that it would not be wise for us to broadcast details. Rest assured that we will act to manage any risks.

I turn to other hon. Members' comments. We talked about repowering, which I absolutely support. I was privileged to officially open the Wrightbus bus repowering plant, NewPower, in Ballymena. I see the potential of that as a stepping stone to decarbonising our fleets.

A few hon. Members raised the issue of bus procurement in London. My understanding is that more than 50% of ZEBs that entered service in London in 2025 were manufactured or assembled in the UK. To be very clear, TfL does not purchase buses—the operators purchase buses, and TfL sets the specification for them. However, TfL has absolutely committed, as did other mayors at the UK Bus Manufacturing Expert Panel, to explore the social value commitments that I mentioned. Other items will include price, reliability, the quality of build, delivery times and, crucially, after-sales service.

Today's debate has shown what Parliament does at its best: coming together across parties to stand up for British industry, British workers and British ingenuity. Let me close with this message: this Government are absolutely committed to ensuring the long-term success

[Simon Lightwood]

of the UK bus manufacturing sector. We know how important the sector is to communities, from Falkirk to Ballymena and far beyond, and the pride that British manufacturers feel when they see their buses on our roads. With the right support, the UK can remain at the forefront of bus manufacturing for decades to come. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today. Above all, I thank the thousands of skilled workers who keep this industry moving. I look forward to continuing this work together in the months ahead.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Given that it is his birthday, the hon. Member sponsoring this debate has quite a long time to wind up. He does not have to take the full 10 minutes.

10.50 am

Euan Stainbank: Thank you, Dr Murrison. I may take the full time; I may not. I thank all hon. Members from all four corners of the United Kingdom for coming to support our British bus manufacturing sector, which shows how important this industry is to many of us here today, especially those from Scotland. It was very apt, considering where the political focus has been, that two Scots kicked off today's debate.

The hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) used his experience as a worker at Albion, and then as a council leader, to demonstrate the value of bus services to our community. His point on the Subsidy Control Act was fairly made, as the Minister said. I appreciate his tacit admission, which I have not heard in many corners of Scotland, that social value is a way to correct these problems. I will be looking very attentively at the ScotZEB3 scheme to see how that is addressed compared with the ScotZEB2 scheme, which, from our constituents' perspective, was substantially inadequate.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) has an extensive history as a champion for Wrightbus. It was good to hear support for both Alexander Dennis and Wrightbus in relative parity throughout the debate from two corners of our great United Kingdom. I share his frustration about the conduct of some franchisees. However, I was rather glad to hear in the Minister's response that social value is being doubled to 10%.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) brought his characteristic fire and worker-led perspective to the debate. He championed our community over the summer through some of the darkest times it has experienced up to the very welcome resolution in September, with the delivery of furlough. He has been a strong champion for the workers' perspective.

The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) powerfully made the point about the value of jobs. He reminded us that for every four jobs directly within the bus manufacturing sector, 13 are created further out in the supply chain. I welcome that perspective. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Kenneth Stevenson), who always brings to bear his wealth of experience in engineering, rightly raised the point that contracts and skills are incredibly valuable. I know that there are workers from Alexander Dennis and supply chain businesses in his constituency, and I hope for growth further down the line for him.

I welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). There is a strong presence from our friends in Northern Ireland today, which reflects the importance of Wrightbus to his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) made a strong environmental case for buying British.

As a regular attendee at Murrayfield on match day, I am very well-acquainted with Lothian Buses. I recognise the orders they have made from Alexander Dennis, but, as for all franchisees, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) will be unsurprised to hear me say that when they come to buying new parts for their fleet, they should look closer to home.

In conclusion, I still wish to raise the point about social value and recognise the urgency of where we are at. A lot of comments were made about the market share, but the point I made at the top of the debate is that we are buying electric and zero emission buses to a greater extent—which is quite right; they are cleaner, quieter transport—but less of those orders are going to every corner of the United Kingdom and less of them are being built in this country, despite a rising demand. It is important to recognise our constituents' unhappiness with that. One of the most common complaints that I receive from constituents in Falkirk is that despite the effort, labour and history of bus manufacturing within our community, it is not British-built or Scottish-built buses that are picking them up and taking them from our communities into the centre of Falkirk. That is an important matter to address for our industry.

Today's debate has been a call for ideas, and I will reiterate a few that I put forward. I restate my ask for a 30% social value metric, on the basis that it would be a material intervention both from national and local funding to procurement. I am aware that the Minister has managed to secure substantial progress, which I recognise and welcome, but I will not stop asking.

On the Procurement Act, I recognise the concerns and comments made about remote deactivation by the Minister. I recognise there is a limit to what will be publicised on that, but I will look diligently at the outcome. There is a sense of frustration that what we have at this stage is interim rather than confirmed. Although remote deactivation has utility, there are clearly grounds for investigation, which could perhaps be shared within proportionate boundaries. We have the muscle in the Procurement Act, which was introduced by the Labour party to address non-treaty state suppliers. If a credible risk of remote deactivation is established, I would like to see an official Government response.

I look forward to the publication of the 10-year bus pipeline. Both that and the UK Bus Manufacturing Expert Panel are signs of tangible progress from the Government, in recognising and listening to the perspectives of the UK manufacturing sector. It is important to have a sustained pipeline and a clear road map that can be met by British industry. I am aware that Alexander Dennis and Wrightbus are prepared to meet the demand of the British sector.

Sadly in the last few years, too many of our constituents have seen market share going in the wrong direction, especially in the ZEB market, because of medium-term and long-term decisions taken by the previous Government. They did not stand up for the sector, creating a problem

that we have inherited. I think that is a good round of the doors in the 10 minutes I had, and I have nothing further to add. I thank all hon. Members.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK bus manufacturing.

10.57 am

Sitting suspended.

Rural Broadband: Installation

11 am

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the time taken to install gigabit capable broadband on rural communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. Broadband is now an essential part of daily life. Families, businesses and communities all rely on a good connection. The fact that most of us managed without it for most of our lives is irrelevant; times change, and we change with them. I recall family friends talking, when I was a child, about electricity coming to their village in the 1940s. We would not now think it tolerable for any village not to have a reliable supply of electricity, because the provision of electricity is a basic service—a utility that underpins almost everything in daily life. In many ways, that is what broadband is becoming.

I represent a beautiful Somerset constituency that is part rural and part urban. I can see the different issues that persist in different areas, and the gap in service between those who live in the town and those who live in the countryside. Last year, I conducted a survey of the rural areas in my constituency and asked residents to rate the quality of their broadband service. I asked them to give scores out of 10 across customer service, internet speed, reliability and value for money.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. Under a previous Government, the DUP had funding from the confidence and supply arrangement, and we were able to boost the broadband in Northern Ireland exceptionally. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, by their very nature, delays perpetuate the digital divide, causing rural areas to be perceived as lagging behind their urban counterparts in economic growth, productivity and access to essential services, and that in fact this could, and must, be easily remedied by investment and a good delivery strategy?

Sir Ashley Fox: The hon. Member anticipates much of my speech, and I thank him for that intervention.

Unsurprisingly, in my survey those in larger villages reported the best service, and those in the most remote rural areas reported the worst.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Member is making a really important speech, and I commend him for the survey he conducted. In Cumbria, many communities and homes that are within the scope of Project Gigabit are still going to be excluded from it because they are deemed too difficult to reach. The majority of those places will be upland farms, where the people are on less than minimum wage. Does the hon. Member agree that the people who produce our food and tend our beautiful landscapes have as much right to be connected to the internet as the rest of us?

Sir Ashley Fox: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who anticipates a section of my speech on farmers. I am going to make a little progress, if I may.

Those in the most remote rural areas of my constituency reported the worst service. For example, residents of Broomfield rated their service at 2.6 out of 10; in Lyng, it was 2.2 out of 10; and in Durleigh, it was an average of just 1.5 out of 10. When I am out on the doorstep,

[*Sir Ashley Fox*]

access to reliable broadband is one of the most noticeable gaps between the experience of those in towns and of those in small villages.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important speech that reflects what we see in my constituency, where more than 15,000 premises are still without acceptable broadband speeds. I wrote to the Minister responsible before Christmas, and when they finally responded to my letter, there was no answer for the nearly 10,000 premises from Willington to Delamere Park and beyond that are unlikely to be covered by a new framework contract. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must consider either reopening the voucher scheme or providing an answer on how those homes and businesses will get the broadband speeds they need for today's digital world?

Sir Ashley Fox: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. I agree with her and hope the Minister will respond.

We cannot expect businesses to survive, let alone grow, if they are cut off from the digital world that the rest of the country takes for granted. For farmers and small business owners, the issue is especially unfair. They are required to interact with Government agencies, with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and with banks almost entirely online, yet many are forced to do so with unreliable connections, painfully slow upload and download speeds, and constant disruptions.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): On that point, farmers have been encouraged to diversify their businesses, and Stubbhayne farm in Southleigh has lost countless bookings because people who wanted to stay there found they could not use the internet in the farm's bed-and-breakfast accommodation. That problem has now been resolved, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that such issues really affect businesses in rural areas?

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. He is right that time that should be spent running a business is often wasted waiting for files to load, forms to submit or video calls to reconnect.

My constituent Sue Felstead runs a restaurant at Greenway farm in Wembdon. She had ongoing problems with the farm's internet service, which had a hugely negative impact on her business. She relied on broadband for the card machine, the music system and other devices, but had a download speed of only 2 megabits per second. That meant that customers who were waiting to pay by card could not pay their bill because the internet would crash, and that music would be cut off midway through a song. The issue got so bad that BT told Sue she would be better off using Starlink. That is an extraordinary thing for BT to tell her, and I hope the Minister will comment on that. In the end, it cost her £1,500 to have Starlink installed.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): In rural areas, there is often a double whammy. As a vet, I know from driving around in the night trying to find calvings or horses at 2 in the morning that there is also no mobile signal in places with very poor broadband. It is a problem not just in very remote rural areas: in my

constituency we have issues in Sutton Scotney, South Wonston and New Alresford—a thriving market town that is in the bottom 10% for connectivity. This is not acceptable for businesses. It is not just inconvenient; it is holding businesses back.

Sir Ashley Fox: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Problems with internet connectivity and mobile connectivity often affect the same areas. This debate is specifically about broadband, but I would be happy if the Minister chose to touch on mobile signals as well.

The lack of reliable broadband is not just inconvenient; it is actively damaging to business.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): One of my constituents runs a company that develops semiconductor technology, but the listed building he is in was recently removed from an Openreach fibre-to-the-premises plan. Does the hon. Member agree that Openreach must be more transparent in decisions not to provide services, and that such delays to gigabit fibre provision risk making rural Somerset a less attractive place to set up cutting-edge businesses?

Sir Ashley Fox: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He and I have perhaps similar constituencies, in that we have one large dominant town and a hinterland of many small villages and hamlets. Those in the town often have a very good service, while those in the small villages do not.

A lack of reliable broadband limits productivity, increases stress and makes it harder for rural businesses to compete on an equal footing.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this really important debate. My broadband survey in Monmouthshire shows that communities such as Trellech, Llangwm and Mamhilad have really big issues with broadband. Will the hon. Member address the issues for people personally, not just for business? A man from my constituency got in touch with me whose wife was disabled. She sadly passed away in May, but he told me that because a lot of the management of her condition was supposed to be online, and online systems were used to get her health sorted out, that made life very difficult for him. I could give countless other examples. Will the Minister address the fact that we must prioritise rural broadband in Wales?

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point.

The lack of reliable broadband discourages innovation and investment, and pushes people towards cities and towns—not because they want to leave their beautiful, rural life, but because they feel they have no real choice.

The hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) anticipated my next point: it is not only businesses that suffer. Families struggle to access online education, healthcare services and remote work opportunities. Young people are placed at a disadvantage simply because of where they live.

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): My semi-rural constituency is less than an hour from London, so people would think the broadband would be tip-top, but it is far from it. In some areas, speeds are less than 1 megabit per second. As we have discussed, this prevents

businesses from holding online meetings and so on, but it also means that, for example, students cannot go home in the holidays to stay with their parents because they simply cannot complete their studies. Does the hon. Member agree that high-speed broadband is critical to this country's infrastructure and that the Government have a duty not to leave rural communities behind?

Sir Ashley Fox: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point, and I agree with her. That is why I started my speech with a reference to electricity being rolled out to the last few villages in the 1940s. We would think that was extraordinary nowadays. The Government certainly have a duty to roll out broadband to the whole country.

The previous Government had a good record on rolling out gigabit broadband throughout the UK. In 2018, full-fibre coverage stood at 6% of UK households; today, the proportion is 78%, which is a remarkable transformation. But the Minister will be aware that we need that to go up to 100%, and I hope he will outline how this Government will complete the journey.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is being so generous with his time. In North Shropshire we were really excited because we were included in Project Gigabit, which was going to roll out fibre broadband for 12,000 properties—mostly easier to reach ones, but it would have been a significant improvement none the less. Freedom Fibre, which had that contract, has handed it back, having connected only around 3,000 properties, and we now have to wait for Openreach to get around to it, despite the fact that, in the meantime, everybody has to pay BT for pretty poor broadband, come what may. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Project Gigabit roll-out has been a shambles in some areas, and that the Government need to prioritise those areas that were promised an improvement but have been let down yet again, to make sure that they get their connections sooner rather than later?

Sir Ashley Fox: I think the word “shambles” is harsh; I would say that “patchy” is a more accurate description. Going from 6% in 2018 to 78% today is an achievement, and the hon. Lady should give some credit for that. The Conservative Government made a deliberate and strategic choice about the future of digital infrastructure. We chose a pro-competition, pro-investment regulatory framework that was designed not to crowd out private capital but to attract it, and that choice has delivered real results across the length and breadth of Britain.

Aphra Brandreth: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous with his time. He is making an important point about the previous Government's achievements and strategies in this policy area. Since then, communities in Cheshire and Warrington have not seen a single new publicly delivered broadband connection in more than two years. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government must move faster on this important issue?

Sir Ashley Fox: Yes, I agree. We are waiting for the Government to respond to a consultation. I will now make some progress so that the Minister has time to respond.

The objective of the previous Government was simple but ambitious. It was to reduce reliance on a single incumbent network and instead create the conditions for alternative network providers to emerge, scale and

thrive. The results—that transformation from 6% to 78%—speak for themselves, but we cannot be complacent because, if we are serious about closing the digital divide and ensuring that gigabit connectivity reaches all rural communities, we must continue the momentum. That will depend on a stable, competitive regulatory regime that gives investors the confidence to commit capital for the long term. It will also require action to remove the remaining barriers to roll-out, including planning obstacles that can cause unnecessary delays, particularly in rural areas.

In Somerset, we have had particular issues with the roll-out. Airband was contracted to roll out fibre-optic broadband to more than 55,000 homes in Devon and Somerset. In the end, it descopeed thousands of properties, committing to deliver only 27,000 homes, which is fewer than half of its initial target. More than 3,000 properties in my constituency were descopeed. While Openreach has now taken up the contract for the majority of those properties, my constituents are still being left with unacceptable delays.

Many villages are still looking at waits until 2030 for the roll-out of broadband, and I worry that some might have to wait even longer. Openreach has shared with me its concerns that there is a shortfall in funding from the last spending review, meaning that there is a risk that the Government do not meet their 99% gigabit-coverage target by 2032, which is already an unacceptably long time for my constituents in remote rural areas to wait to be connected. It would be intolerable if it were to be delayed further.

Will the Minister clarify in his response whether he believes he has sufficient funding to meet the 99% target? When will the Government bring forward their statement of strategic priorities for Ofcom, which is a critical step to shape the next phase of the UK's digital infrastructure journey? The Minister will know that the consultation on this ended in September; we await his Department's response. This Government are quick to issue a consultation, but they seem rather slower to act.

My constituents in remote rural areas feel let down by this Government. They have had to deal with the family farm tax and the uncertainty that has created. They have had to deal with the sustainable farming incentive being withdrawn without any notice whatsoever by an utterly incompetent Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. As such, this issue of rural broadband is very important if my residents are to have confidence that they can live, enjoy life and run thriving businesses in the remote rural areas in Somerset. I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. First and foremost, I thank the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) for securing today's debate on the impact of the time taken to install gigabit-capable broadband in rural communities, and for once again drawing to the attention of the House the importance of delivering fast and reliable digital connectivity to them.

I also thank all other hon. Members across the House who have persistently championed the cause of improving

[*Kanishka Narayan*]

rural broadband, and not least for their gift of anticipation when it comes to the speech of the hon. Member for Bridgwater.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): May I intervene, seeing that we have been so generous on interventions?

Kanishka Narayan: I am happy to give way briefly.

Mr MacDonald: We have heard about the 78% and the 99%. In north-east Skye we have 3% gigabit availability, and in south Skye we have 4.5%. We are dealing with enormous levels of depopulation among our young, with the number of children under the age of 15 at school halving in the last 15 years. A large part of that is because the place is an internet desert. Can the Minister reflect on that?

Kanishka Narayan: I thank the hon. Member for making that point, and I am very happy to engage with him both individually and with my colleague, the Minister for Digital Economy, on the particular experience of his constituents.

The contributions we have heard today from across the House again highlight just how essential connectivity has become to daily life. We have heard about its centrality to work, education and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) said, to healthcare, online banking, farming, running a business or simply staying connected with friends and family.

The Government recognise that delays in broadband delivery can be particularly frustrating for rural residents, who often have fewer alternatives than urban residents, and for whom a slow or unreliable internet connection can have a deep impact on their quality of life and economic opportunities. Our mission is to ensure that 99% of premises can access a gigabit-capable connection by 2032. According to the latest figures from the independent website thinkbroadband.com, over 89% of UK premises already have access to a gigabit-capable connection.

Through Project Gigabit, we are targeting precisely the communities that have been highlighted in today's debate. Commercial roll-out would not otherwise take place for these communities, and public investment is therefore essential. As at the end of September 2025, over 1.3 million premises in rural and hard-to-reach communities across the UK had been upgraded to gigabit-capable broadband through Government-funded programmes. In addition, over 1 million premises are now included in signed Project Gigabit contracts worth £2.4 billion in total.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): There is a persistent issue in the Stainton and Thornton area of my constituency, which residents have raised with me. Would the Minister commit to meet me to discuss this issue?

Kanishka Narayan: I know my hon. Friend is a deeply committed champion for his constituency, so I would be very happy to meet him—both on my own and with my colleague, the Minister for Digital Economy—to look at the issues in his constituency.

We are making good progress on delivering these contracts. We have already celebrated the completion of the first three Project Gigabit contracts in Northumberland, Teesdale and north Dorset, which marks an important milestone in our programme. These early completions show that the programme is working, and rural communities are beginning to see the benefits of this investment.

The majority of premises receiving Government funding for broadband upgrades continue to be rural. Between April 2024 and March 2025, 89% of the premises benefiting from our interventions in this sector were in rural areas, including proud farming communities. We remain absolutely committed to ensuring that these communities receive the gigabit-capable connectivity they need and deeply deserve.

I also recognise, with honesty, that there have been delays to subsidised roll-out across Devon and Somerset in particular, as a result of premises being descope from contracts under the earlier superfast broadband programme, including in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bridgwater.

When suppliers encounter financial, operational or technical challenges, I know that rural communities feel the impact the most, and as a proud representative of rural communities in south Wales, I feel it, too. I want to reassure hon. Members that we are closely engaging with Connecting Devon and Somerset, and with suppliers, to establish a clear path forward.

Following the announcement in 2025, descope premises, particularly in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bridgwater, were made available for suppliers to bring forward proposals under the gigabit broadband voucher scheme. Several suppliers expressed interest, and I am pleased to say that approximately 3,000 premises are now included in approved voucher projects. Around 8,500 descope premises remain without confirmed commercial or subsidised plans. However, these premises are now being considered for inclusion in the Project Gigabit contract with Openreach. We expect to finalise the amended scope of that contract in the spring. The hon. Member feels that work is urgent, and I do, too.

Approximately 3,100 premises in the hon. Gentleman's Bridgwater constituency are currently included in the Project Gigabit contract delivered by Openreach, and my hope is that this intervention will deliver gigabit-capable connections to homes and businesses across the constituency, such as those in Nether Stowey, North Petherton and Westonzoyland.

Although 3,400 premises in Bridgwater were descope from the previous superfast broadband contracts, almost half of those premises have since been connected through a supplier's commercial roll-out, without the need for public subsidy. The remainder are included within the scope of the current contract change discussions we are undertaking with Openreach.

A healthy, competitive broadband market is fundamental to achieving our national gigabit ambition. Commercial delivery has been and will remain the backbone of the UK's digital transformation. The majority of gigabit-capable connections have been delivered entirely through private investment. The Government's role is to create the right environment for such investment to continue at pace. That is why we continue to work in close partnership with both industry and Ofcom to support the roll-out of fibre networks across the UK, including in the most rural and hard-to-reach areas.

Our approach is designed to complement commercial build, not to replace it, ensuring that public funding is targeted only where the market cannot deliver on its own. In July last year, we published a consultation on our draft statement of strategic priorities to Ofcom, setting out the Government's view on the importance of promoting competition and maintaining a stable regulatory environment that gives investors confidence. A predictable and proportionate regulatory framework is essential for suppliers to continue investing billions in our fibre networks. Ensuring that regulation is not lifted prematurely is central to protecting our consumers, which is why competition must be properly established before we can relax regulatory safeguards. That is the approach needed to deliver long-term benefits.

I know there has been a question about where the Government are in this process. Our draft statement set out our position on infrastructure sharing, which has become one of the sector's most important enablers of competition. In particular, Ofcom's physical infrastructure access product has allowed over 100 alternative networks to roll out fibre using Openreach's ducts and poles, lowering barriers to entry and helping to accelerate competition. We have asked Ofcom to provide greater transparency on how PIA pricing is calculated and set, because transparency is the underpinning driver of confidence for investors.

We are reviewing responses to the consultation on our draft statement of strategic priorities, and we will set out the Government's conclusions in due course. I of course note the hon. Member's comments, and we are all hoping for pace as well as rigour in the response to the consultation.

Sir Ashley Fox: I referred to Openreach's comments to me. It said that it did not believe there is sufficient funding in the spending review for the Government to meet their target of 99% by 2032. Does the Minister believe he has sufficient funding to meet that target?

Kanishka Narayan: Openreach has not made that representation to me. The Government are squarely focused on reaching the 99% target, and we are doing all we can to make sure that all providers are in a place to do so. I am happy to engage with Openreach if it wants to make a representation to me.

To ensure that the commercial market can continue to deliver as fast as possible, the Government remain committed to removing deployment barriers. Whether that is done by reforming wayleave processes, improving access to land and multi-dwelling units, enhancing the

co-ordination of street works or accelerating planning decisions, every barrier we remove helps the industry to build networks faster and more efficiently.

Even with the scale of commercial investment and the ambition of Project Gigabit, the expectation is that some remote premises will remain too expensive to reach with gigabit-capable fibre in the immediate term. We are therefore continuing to consider what more we can do to enable high-quality alternatives for those in the "very hard to reach" category. The satellite market is developing at pace. We expect to see more competition in that market imminently, with rapidly improving terminal equipment, higher speeds and falling costs for end users. We continue to monitor and support the development of that market, recognising its role in connecting the most remote communities.

I am conscious of the points made on mobile connectivity, not least those made by the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers). With increasing 5G coverage from mobile network operators, fixed wireless access is becoming an increasingly viable connectivity option. Ofcom estimates that fixed wireless access delivered over mobile networks is already available to 96% of UK premises, with wireless internet service providers offering fixed wireless access to around 8% of premises.

I thank the hon. Member for Bridgwater for securing this important debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed. In response to the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), I want to flag that, since Building Digital UK and Freedom Fibre mutually agreed to terminate the Project Gigabit contract for Cheshire, we have launched a new procurement for Cheshire. We expect it to be in place by the spring, and we will be sure to let her know of its progress.

Let me be clear that, although challenges remain, the Government are acting. We are committed to working at pace with suppliers, local authorities, communities and devolved Governments to ensure that progress continues. Rural communities must not and will not be left behind as we work towards our goal of 99% gigabit coverage. Given that the hon. Member for Bridgwater brought up wider support for rural communities, I put on record that this Government are squarely on the side of rural communities across the UK, which were abandoned by the previous Government on trade negotiations and farming funding and were not given appropriate representation.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Women's Safety: Walking, Wheeling, Cycling and Running

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered women's safety while walking, wheeling, cycling and running.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. Violence against women and girls happens in every corner of life: in our homes, in our workplaces, on the internet and in public. Whether we are commuting or exercising, women and girls across the country risk harm just being out and about. The threat of harm hangs over women's decisions and moulds them. Those cycling home from work may weigh up whether to take the direct route home or the safer route—the one that is lit and busier, but not too busy.

In preparing for this debate, I was contacted by a woman who led a female running group in Hampshire for more than 11 years. She said:

"During that time, there was not a single week when women in my group, or I personally, did not experience some form of unwanted attention while running...This ranged from so-called 'micro' incidents, like sarcastic clapping, comments about our bodies, unsolicited advice shouted from passing vehicles, through to more serious incidents, including being filmed while warming up, having objects thrown at us, and one time being physically assaulted...Unfortunately, these experiences were not isolated or rare—they were routine."

Women's fear and experiences of harassment are often minimised—I saw that in the responses to my announcement of this very debate on social media—but when women have to do an unspoken risk assessment of their route every time they want to walk to the shops or take a run, it is a chronic weight around the neck of society. It is a fear that men do not have to live with day in, day out. As one of my Lowestoft constituents put it:

"Would a man, when running in the dusk or dark, every time they saw a member of the opposite sex heading towards them feel a slight fear and feel a sense of relief when they have passed that individual?...Would a man tell their partner or friend in advance of their route and the time they would be back? Would a man cautiously look behind them every few metres to see if they were being followed?"

The threat of harassment and assault is enough to force women to lead smaller, less free lives, withdrawing to the safety of being behind the front door.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate, the timeliness of which should be obvious to us all. She alluded to notifying people of this debate via social media. Does she agree that, particularly among younger males, part of the problem is the internet and the manifestations of unhealthy lifestyles online? We need to tackle that so that young males understand and appreciate that they should aspire to proper relationships between males and females.

Jess Asato: I thoroughly agree. Women are often filmed while running, and girls are put off exercise by the way that men create this material, which can go viral. We have seen recently that men have been using smart glasses to film women in public spaces going about their

everyday lives. Those women have then been harassed, with everything that goes with that, simply for being in a public space.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): To build on the point made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), Girlguiding has found that two thirds of girls say they are put off exercising and going out because they fear some of the things we are describing. Given that we are debating potentially removing social media from young people, does my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) agree that it is even more important to ensure that other activities that we want young people to take part in are equally available to girls and that they do not feel scared? Otherwise, they will face even more inequality and stigma.

Jess Asato: I absolutely agree. I firmly support the idea of a social media ban for under-16s, partly because of the huge impact it has on girls and their body image, which obviously affects the way they think about taking part in sporting activities, often in public. We also know that many of those girls are catcalled and whistled at as they come home from school, not just by boys their own age, but often by grown men. That has a chilling effect on their decision to engage in sport and other activities.

Last year, I was glad to invite Dr Caroline Miles, who researches the abuse of women runners, to meet the Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), to discuss the issue in front of us today. Alongside her colleague Professor Rose Broad, their research found that 82% of the women they surveyed had safety concerns while running, and 68% had experienced abuse while out running, but only 5% had reported it to the police. Of those who experienced abuse, 91% received it verbally, 29% were followed and 10% were sexually flashed—that is illegal. Indeed, very recently, a man exposed himself to a woman on the seafront in Lowestoft when she was out on her daily walking route, which has had a profound impact on her sense of outdoor safety.

The university researchers also looked at the 81 offences recorded by Greater Manchester police and Merseyside police in 2021 and 2022, and they found that more than 40% were sexual offences. They identified three areas where they think the Government could go further: improved space design, police training and challenging societal attitudes.

I am glad to see that the Government's violence against women and girls strategy, launched just before Christmas, says:

"Well-lit streets, accessible transport, and thoughtful urban design can deter violence and reduce opportunities for harm".

We now need to see national design guidance reflect the concern about violence against women and girls. The strategy states that tackling VAWG

"must be embedded in the training of every officer as a fundamental requirement."

Yesterday's policing White Paper sets out that the College of Policing, with the new national centre for VAWG and public protection, is currently developing a "programme for frontline officers that focuses on the core skills needed to respond across crime types like domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and harassment."

I hope that includes harassment outdoors. The training should learn from the best practice that already exists across a number of forces, such as the Jog On campaign,

as part of which undercover female officers posed as joggers to catch perpetrators. It is vital that we encourage women who are harassed while out running, cycling or walking to report it, and that we ensure that, in reporting it, they feel that they will be taken seriously.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful case. On the issue of reporting, I raised a written question with the Department for Transport last summer on what it is doing to improve reporting mechanisms for women cyclists who had been harassed or intimidated. At that stage, there was a suggestion that it might be covered by the VAWG strategy. There is an admirable focus on women's safety on public transport, but does she agree that we need to do more to make sure that reporting mechanisms are amenable to women and girls who suffer abuse and intimidation?

Jess Asato: I absolutely agree, and it is one of the reasons why I took those University of Manchester researchers to meet the Safeguarding Minister. I hope that, given the VAWG strategy is a living, breathing document across a 10-year period, we can make sure this is in future versions of the strategy. It is incredibly important.

The long-term programme of awareness, training and behaviour change at the heart of the strategy aims to drive a societal response that empowers victims and deters perpetrators. In the medium and long term, that will drive the change we wish to see.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent speech on this important subject. As well as reporting, I am sure she agrees that it is important to gather intel from women about where they do and do not feel safe. Will she, as a fellow East Anglia MP, welcome Norwich Cycling Campaign's women's safety audit? It has just been launched to hear from local women about their experiences, whether it be of harassment or of safe cycling routes. I encourage my constituents to take part. Does my hon. Friend recognise the value of such community-led initiatives?

Jess Asato: As a fellow East Anglia MP, I praise Norwich Cycling Campaign for its women's safety audit. I am sure it is a model that many local areas should follow.

In the medium and long term, of course, we want to see real change. A poll conducted by the Cycle to Work Alliance in 2024 found that safety concerns deter 45% of potential cyclists from commuting by bike. Although this is obviously broader than harassment, there is certainly a gendered element to it given that women are three times more likely than men to fear cycling to work.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Will she join me in congratulating Newbury Road Club, Newbury Velo and West Berkshire Spokes, which organised a glow ride in October last year as part of Cycling UK's "My ride. Our right" campaign? If we had segregated cycle lanes, it would help to improve all cyclists' safety on the roads, including women.

Jess Asato: I would obviously love to congratulate Newbury Road Club and the other organisations that are highlighting Cycling UK's "My ride. Our right" campaign, and that have been very active in this discussion about women's cycling safety. I will come on to segregated cycle lanes.

In these dark winter months, safety concerns can often be at their greatest. Research by Sport England's "This Girl Can" campaign found that 72% of women worry about their personal safety when it is dark and change their behaviour as a result. That has knock-on impacts. As one of my constituents wrote to me,

"if women feel unsafe or intimidated in these spaces, we lose more than just an exercise route—we lose a vital lifeline for our health."

Indeed, to protect themselves, women are forced into more expensive, less healthy options to get around, such as driving, and the many benefits of active travel, including long-term public health savings, are lost. A study by Finnish researchers found that active travel reduces absences from work, and Transport for London found that people who walk to their high streets spend 40% more in local shops. That is also replicated for those who cycle to our local high streets.

Cycling requires the physical environment to reflect the needs of women and girls to be safe. Cycling UK found that 45% of women say that direct, traffic-free paths to town centres would encourage them to cycle more, and 39% say that physically separated cycle lanes would make the biggest difference. Polling from Cycling UK in 2018 also found that 50% of respondents in London saw a lack of separate cycle lanes as a barrier to cycling. Thanks to large-scale investment in a network of cycling and walking infrastructure in our capital, the same survey in 2025 saw that concern halved. That model ought to be replicated throughout the country.

I therefore look forward to the Government's cycling and walking investment strategy later this year, and I hope to see that investment in infrastructure explicitly reflect the real barriers that women and girls face, particularly given that the gender gap in cycling has widened since 2018. Nine in 10 female cyclists have experienced abuse while on the road, and 63% said it occurred at least once a month. As a result of these experiences, over 20% of those women said they had given up cycling temporarily or permanently. I hope to see a target and a plan in the strategy to reduce the gender gap in active travel.

There is a wealth of organisations in this space, and I am sure the Minister and her Department will be encouraged to continue to consult meaningfully with these organisations in preparing and implementing the strategy. Like all of us, I want to see my girls, my children, grow up with the freedom to enjoy the outdoors, live healthy lives and travel safely wherever they want.

Our constituents rightly demand that freedom, and we must answer their call. We must be able to live in a society where women do not need to walk down the street clasp their keys in their hands or pretending to be on the phone to someone to protect themselves. Girlguiding's latest girls' attitudes survey found that 68% of girls aged 11 to 21 have changed their everyday behaviour in the last year to avoid sexual harassment. Of that 68%, 12% say they have changed where they exercise and 11% say they have changed the type of exercise they do. I will not stop fighting for a society in which that 68% becomes 0%.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. At the moment, I advise that there should be an informal time limit of five minutes.

2.45 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine.

I am a cyclist. I love cycling; I have always cycled, ever since I cycled to school as a six-year-old. I have cycled throughout my life, including as a university student, and I still cycle today. I see cycling as a means of transport. For me, it is not a sporting activity; it is very much my choice of transport.

However, recently in Bath I was about to cross a road, turning to the right, and I stopped, and the driver next to me pulled down his window and commented on my skirt. Me? I mean—I am a 65-year-old woman, and he was commenting on my skirt. I was so shocked that I wanted to get away, and then I nearly went into a car—I made that mistake because I was so shocked. Cycling is not a very safe mode of transport anyway, but being harassed makes it even less safe.

Women want to cycle, yet today only one in four cycling trips are made by women. That is not because women do not want to cycle. Almost 60% of women limit how much they cycle because of safety concerns. As we have heard today, one in five women have stopped cycling altogether after feeling intimidated by drivers, just as I felt intimidated by that driver in Bath. This is clearly more than just a personal issue; it is a public policy issue.

We must build the infrastructure that makes women feel safe, visible and supported on the road. Too often, women are forced to choose between two unsafe options: dark, isolated roads, or busy roads without protection. If we had built well-lit, segregated and visible routes, especially for evening and night-time travel, far more women would feel sufficiently safe and confident to cycle.

Cycling UK's "My ride. Our right." campaign calls for women's safety to be embedded in all transport and safety strategies, including the upcoming cycling and walking investment strategy, and I echo that call today. The new cycling and walking strategy must include measurable targets that improve women's safety, including clear goals to increase the proportion of cycling trips made by women. The draft strategy already recognises that investment in well-lit, safe and high-quality walking and cycling routes increases people's feelings of personal safety. Of course, that includes the personal safety of men and boys, and of all children, but it is particularly important for women.

Such improvements support the Government's work to tackle violence against women and girls. Cycling UK urges the Government and Active Travel England to update design guidance LTN 1/20, strengthening standards for lighting and night-time safety, and introducing gender-responsive safety audits for all new active travel schemes. I very much hope to see those measures in the final cycling and walking investment strategy.

Right now, the UK lags behind many of our European neighbours, and I would say that includes the number of children who are allowed to cycle at an early age

to school. There are a lot of things that we can do to encourage young people at school to take up cycling; I myself became a lifelong cyclist because I started early. However, in Britain fewer than one in five people walk, wheel or cycle on an average day, compared with more than one in four people across Europe. Now is the time to change that.

2.48 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this important and timely debate.

Put simply, women are not safe running, walking, cycling or even just existing. We are not safe in our own homes; we are not safe in pubs, bars, restaurants, at school or at work; and crucially, for the purposes of this debate, we are not even safe at the gym.

Girls are at risk, too. How many of us here today have stories that start with our wearing school uniform? When I was at school, men in cars slowed down beside me, men in white vans asked me where I was going, and grown men followed me and asked to wear my glasses; I am not wearing them today.

As the daughter of a prison officer, I was educated early, not in confidence but in caution. My dad would say, "Don't take your phone out when you are walking home. Don't listen to music on a walk home. Stay alert. Cross the road if a man's behind you. Walk with your keys between your fingers." All of that does not just disappear when we grow up.

Only last week, when I was going for a run in Bolton, I shared my location with my family over WhatsApp, just in case. "Just in case"—those words tell us everything. I wear a running vest with a phone pocket. I clip my SOS fob to my clothes. I plan my route as if I was carrying out a risk assessment, and that is the point. Men do not make contingency plans to exercise, but we absolutely have to.

When it comes to exercise, women are constrained by the hours that we can safely be outdoors. Even in daylight, safer does not mean safe, and after dark many women feel pushed indoors. Here is the bitter irony: a lot of us can only exercise when it is dark, because we are primary caregivers. We do the school runs, and we care for our elderly or disabled relatives, or our children with additional needs. Society relies and depends on that care, and then acts surprised when women's lives are more restricted and when we are forced to pay for safety. For many women, a gym membership is the price of feeling secure enough to exercise at all. Women-only spaces in gyms are growing, and that is progress, but where is the acknowledgment that many women are paying simply to do what others can do for free—exercise without fear?

Let us be clear: this is not a confidence gap; it is a safety gap that is rooted in our environment and systems. In winter, nearly three quarters of women change their outdoor exercise routines for safety, and over four in five say they feel unsafe in parks at night. I know that most of us avoid parks altogether.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): In the southside of Glasgow, we are lucky to have some wonderful parks and green spaces, but I often hear from women in my

constituency who do not feel safe going through them. The Light the Way campaign, led by Radio Clyde, is campaigning for better lighting in parks, including in Queen's Park in the southside. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to that campaign, and in encouraging councils to make park lighting a priority so that women can feel safe in their own spaces?

Kirith Entwistle: My hon. Friend makes the important point, which I will come on to, that well-lit spaces would make a world of difference for so many women and girls.

The safety gap that I mentioned earlier is also written into our transport patterns. In Greater Manchester, women make less than a third of all cycling trips. When women are asked why that is, they talk about traffic danger, harassment and intimidation. One Bolton resident told me that routes can feel pleasant by day but unusable after dark, and that one incident can be enough to stop women from cycling altogether.

Women's participation in outdoor exercise is already lower than men's, but the safety gap widens again for women from ethnic minority backgrounds, who face higher levels of harassment on the streets. Black, Asian and minority ethnic women are nearly 20% less likely than white women to exercise outdoors regularly, and half as likely to cycle to work. If we bear in mind both the ethnicity and gender pay gaps, we are also less likely to be able to afford a gym membership.

In Bolton, I am proud of the grassroots work that is making a difference, including Horwich Ride Social's women-only rides, Krimmz girls youth club's glow rides and the United We Run campaign, which gives thousands of Bolton women access to the Her Spirit fitness app. These initiatives, while brilliant, are also a warning sign. Women should not need safety in numbers. It is time that we address women's safety properly, as we should have done for decades. That starts by building routes that we can actually use—the well-lit, connected routes that were mentioned earlier—and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft said, treating harassment as public safety, making it easier to report and making it clear that it will be taken seriously.

Finally, we must put women's safety into transport planning from day one, and ensure that progress is measured so that we can check whether the gender gap in cycling and walking is closing.

2.53 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this important debate.

I am passionate about women's safety, especially in semi-rural areas such as Frome and East Somerset. This is not an abstract policy discussion. As has been discussed, it is about the constant calculations that women make every day: "Do I take the longer, better-lit route? Do I run before dawn, or wait until daylight? Do I walk home, or pay for a taxi that I cannot really afford?" These decisions are so ingrained that many women barely register them any more. But this should not be accepted—it is not normal. No one should have to limit their freedom of movement because they feel unsafe.

Last year, I met a constituent called Holly who had been the victim of repeated incidents of flashing when she was out walking in her village in Somerset. As a result of talking to Holly, I launched a survey in my constituency to hear directly from women about safety in rural areas. With nights getting darker, I wanted to understand how safe women feel when getting to work, socialising or simply going about their daily lives. The responses were sobering. Women spoke about being followed on dark country lanes with no street lighting, waiting for buses on isolated roads with no shelter or CCTV, giving up running and cycling altogether because it simply did not feel safe, and above all, the constant vigilance required just to get home.

Rural areas face particular challenges. Public transport is limited and street lighting is sparse or non-existent. Communities are spread out and mobile signal is often unreliable. The scale of the problem is clear: UN Women UK found that 71% of women have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces, yet most never report it because they believe nothing will be done. The Government are right to call violence against women and girls a national emergency. I know that members of the Government are committed to this issue, but there is currently a glaring gap between Government Departments on planning policy.

Just days before publishing the new strategy on violence against women and girls, the Government also published a revised national planning policy framework, with no reference to women, girls or gendered safety. That omission matters. The places we build determine whether women feel safe walking home, waiting for a bus or going for a run. Planning policy is one of the most powerful tools we have to prevent harm before it occurs. A place cannot credibly be described as "healthy" if half the population feel unable to use it safely after dark.

We know what works: good lighting, clear sightlines, active streets, safe transport routes, and design that considers how women experience public space. Without explicit national policy, women's safety becomes a postcode lottery. I put it to the Minister that if we truly believe in a whole-society approach to ending violence against women and girls, women's safety must be designed into our streets, paths, transport networks and public spaces, not just bolted on as an afterthought.

Will the Minister talk to colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Home Office about the importance of this joined-up thinking? Women are not asking for the impossible; they are asking for the freedom to move through their communities safely. Let us commit to making that a reality.

2.56 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for considering such an important topic.

I am an avid runner, having taken part in the Great South Run and a 4.5 km MyWay to raise awareness of male suicide. I am pleased that I will also be running with On the Tools 7K and hope to be one of the women MPs running the London marathon this year. It is a brilliant form of exercise for mental health and wellbeing because it gets people outside and clears the mind, but clearing the mind is difficult when worried about safety.

[Amanda Martin]

Women and girls should feel safe when exercising in public, yet for so many that is not the reality. When I leave the house, I say jokingly to my kids, “If I’m not back in 45 minutes, send the police.” But that is not a joke. Studies have found that 70% of women have experienced an intimidating incident when running. A rise in social media and online abuse and videoing is making that worse.

Constituents have contacted me out of concern for the safety of women and young girls who run and jog in Portsmouth. They talked of their 15-year-old daughter, who loves going on runs. Despite doing what she felt were all the right things, such as going out only in daylight hours, she had been catcalled and verbally harassed on multiple occasions. The parents were not only distressed for their daughter but worried about her reaction. She was taken aback at first but then insisted on shaking it off, believing that reporting it would just be a waste of police time. Like her parents, I feel that she should not have to put up with that.

She is not alone. Others have reported aggressive behaviour, bunching around them as they are running, stepping out in front of them, throwing things and saying, “Why don’t you just smile at me, you grumpy cow?” We do not want our girls to experience that brazen misogynistic behaviour any longer. It is upsetting but not surprising that women and girls have to deal with such harassment, with the added mental load of worrying about their safety, from such a young age. If we socialise our young girls simply to brush off such abuse, we are harming society as a whole. As we know, low-level harassment of women can be a gateway to more serious crimes. We need to take this persistent and common harassment more seriously. We do not want women and girls to feel that they are unable to participate on the grounds of their gender.

Although I welcome the Government’s strategy to build a safe society for women and girls, using a whole-society approach, and the VAWG strategy’s prioritising of prevention by getting to root causes, such as the normalisation of women and girls’ feeling unsafe while walking, wheeling, cycling and running, it is vital to tackle this by working across Government Departments. We must join up the Home Office, the Department for Transport, MHCLG, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and many others, so that our young women and girls feel safe when they are outside exercising.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is again a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for setting the scene so well and giving us a chance to speak on the matter.

The situation in Northern Ireland for women’s safety is incredibly worrying, and of course it is equally concerning for the rest of the United Kingdom, as the hon. Lady and others have said. The stats speak for themselves back home, and I want to be here to represent others and have that conversation.

The hon. Member for Lowestoft mentioned smart glasses. I confess that until last Wednesday, when I was watching TV, I did not even know there was such

a thing. They can contain a concealed camera, almost requiring a close-up inspection. I am not sure what can be done in relation to that, but if there is a problem, as there clearly is—there were many examples in that TV programme—maybe the Minister can give us an indication of what can be done.

There has been an increasingly negative perception of safety in public places, especially among women. One we always associate as most notable is the tragic and heart-rending murder of Sarah Everard, who was walking home in London when she was kidnapped, raped and murdered by a policeman—of all things in this world. The horror that lady must have felt is inconceivable, when she expected protection but got the very opposite.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency has revealed that in Northern Ireland significantly more men report feeling safe than women—68% of men compared with only 27% of women—which is a devastatingly low figure. Shared public spaces are also widely used for the likes of running, walking and cycling. A separate survey by Queen’s University Belfast found that only 43% felt safe walking alone on a public street or on public transport. Official crime statistics show that sexual offences in Northern Ireland have risen significantly over the past decade and remain a serious concern tied to women’s safety in public places.

I want—we all want—to live in a society where individuals, and women in particular, do not fear being out in public. There are some fantastic helplines, such as Strut Safe, where a volunteer stays on the phone with a caller and chats until they get home. That is something that can really help. It is sad and unfortunate that such services must exist, but we are grateful that they are there and are taking extra steps to protect the public while they are in public. Many universities have those kinds of services. I know the Minister does not have responsibility for education, but perhaps she can tell us whether she has had discussions with an Education Minister to ensure that girls are safe in school and young women are at universities.

Policing and community safety partnerships back home, and others, have noted an increasing number of women looking to obtain a personal alarm for their own safety. I know the Police Service of Northern Ireland do that, so if ladies want an alarm, they can get one. It makes a high-pitched noise that would sometimes distract the person involved, which can be helpful. They can carry it out in public with them should they feel unsafe. That demand reflects the argument that women are simply afraid and that more must be done to ensure that fear is not there.

I have noticed that in my constituency, and maybe it is the same in others, that with the sports club we have, whether karate, judo or boxing, many young girls and women are taking up those sports simply so they can protect themselves. Let us remember, and I will try to be very careful with my words, that when a man approaches with intentions that are wrong, we know where he is vulnerable—kick him hard in a certain place and his fervour will leave him right away. Young girls and women are getting their protection in the karate, judo and boxing clubs in Newtownards so they can protect themselves, which has to be good news for the clubs in my constituency.

There is clear evidence of too many women in Northern Ireland and further afield feeling unsafe walking, running or cycling in public spaces. We must invest in better

infrastructure, lighting and policing, alongside better community awareness and safety initiatives. I look to the Minister, as I always do. I know her intention to help us all in our request to make public spaces across the nation feel safe, accessible and welcoming for all women, whether in a group or alone.

3.4 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for giving us the opportunity to speak in such an important debate for our constituents, but many of us in the room will also be speaking from personal experience and for those people who are close to us.

Walking, wheeling, cycling and running are sold to us as sports that are easily accessible, particularly walking and running because there are no monthly fees and many will have the equipment accessible at home—pop your shoes on and off you go—but for women it is nowhere near as accessible as it should be. We hear the phrase, “Everyone has the same 24 hours” a lot, particularly on social media, trying to shame people for not going for a run, going to the gym or choosing to bike to work instead of taking the bus. I know many women who actively choose not to exercise at night because they feel unsafe; suddenly, those 24 hours are limited to when it is light outside. If someone works in an office or during the winter, the hours available to them to go for a run or a cycle can feel even more restricted.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): In my constituency we have one of the best cycling networks in the UK. However, the lighting is absolutely shocking in some places, because over the years Hertfordshire county council has changed it to LED lighting. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a whole-Government approach to this at all levels, and that we should encourage local councils to think about that when they are designing their lighting systems?

Amanda Hack: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. Some 58% of women say that their cycle journeys are limited because of safety concerns and the infrastructure provided. As somebody who has run fairly regularly for a number of years, being hassled has sadly been a daytime as well as a night-time experience.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): As the hon. Member rightly alluded to, catcalling, being followed or being shouted at by passing cars is a frequent experience for many women who go out running. In my constituency, there are many poorly lit paths and parks, which limits where women feel safe to go out for a run. Does the hon. Lady agree that women should not have to choose between doing the exercise they love and their safety?

Amanda Hack: Absolutely. That is why this debate is so important. We should not be restricting access to exercise because we do not feel safe.

It is frustrating that I have been catcalled both running on my own and with buddies. What was saddest for me was during covid. My 10-year-old daughter had just got on to her big bike and was faster than me while I was running behind her, and we had comments from a car. Thankfully, she did not really understand what had

been said, so I will not repeat it here, but I can guarantee that they knew exactly what I thought of their disgusting behaviour. It changed my approach to life, however, and we did not do that again. We both went cycling together instead.

This is what we have to do all the time. We are constantly compromising on what we can and cannot do, and when we can and cannot do it. Whether it was a poll on a Facebook group for Leicester and Leicestershire runners, or my running trainer trying to learn more about his female clients, the comments were inundated with women sharing their experiences. We have to start changing the way that we feel. It is no surprise that 20% of women never walk at night, and that 48% of women in the UK feel unsafe while out running according to SportsShoes. That is shameful, and we have to change it.

It has been really good to see the Government take such a strong stance on violence against women and girls, but this problem is embedded in our infrastructure. As a councillor, I saw part of a bus route being cut. I then demonstrated to the bus company what they wanted us to do: to walk along an unlit path on dangerous roads, to get from where the bus would stop to the place of business where people needed to go to work. These things are baked in, and we have to change them for everybody.

Footpaths and cycleways must be built with women's safety in mind, not with cost-cutting measures putting in fewer lampposts and less lighting, or weaving cycle lanes well away from well-lit main roads because it is cheaper. Those compromises should not be taken. Too often, cost savings prohibit women. Safer streets for us to get to work and exercise on would have huge benefits. If someone cannot drive, and public transport where they live is not very reliable—as it is in North West Leicestershire—cycling can help open up more doors to work, education, and seeing family and friends.

Helping us to feel safe while running, walking and wheeling would mean that women are far more likely to exercise, helping to ease some of the strain on our NHS and other services by keeping women fit and active.

3.9 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for introducing the debate in such a compassionate way. As a wannabe runner—I cannot claim to be a runner—on behalf of myself and also my son and daughter, who are both keen runners, I want to thank all the people who have been talking about running.

In Edinburgh the gold standard for active travel routes were our canal path and converted railway tracks. Across the city, converted railway tracks offer routes away from busy roads and are used for thousands of journeys every year. In my constituency, a national cycle route runs alongside the Water of Leith—the route that used to be the Balerno branch line—and provides a space for active travellers to enjoy a quiet and beautiful route away from traffic. I use the route regularly and feel incredibly lucky to be able to enjoy it as I travel through my constituency. It is one of the things that defines my constituency.

[Dr Scott Arthur]

I said the routes were the gold standard. That is because in 2021, the brutal death of Sarah Everard so far away from Edinburgh heightened an ongoing conversation about women's safety in public spaces. In Edinburgh, the safety of our active travel routes came to the forefront. At this point I have to thank Councillor Mandy Watt, who showed amazing leadership and quite quickly allocated around £500,000 to light some of the routes through our parks. Routes along old railway lines and canal paths that offer enjoyable, smooth, green and quiet routes during the day change in the darkness. Even with lighting, without the passive surveillance found in busier public areas, I know that women often feel unable to use those routes, or feel unsafe when they do so. You, Ms Jardine, will know that from Roseburn path in your constituency.

During the winter when it is dark, often from around 3 pm to 9 am in Edinburgh, those routes become less accessible. This has a significant impact for those who rely on them to travel to work or for leisure. The last Edinburgh walking and cycling index showed a 7% difference in the perception of safety between men and women, with women feeling much less safe. In many cases this prevents women from integrating active travel into their daily lives—we have heard about that from other speakers. But it also pushes women who had previously walked or cycled to stop, and that is not good for them and not good for us or our economy. It is worth pointing out that all of us want to live in a town, city or village where more people walk, run or cycle. It is a tragedy that often these investments and changes can be so controversial, because it is something we all aspire to. It is about how we do it.

Too many women face harassment. One study in Edinburgh showed that around 20% of women cyclists stop after experiencing a single event of harassment. Unsafe routes decrease women's ability to travel easily around the city, and no doubt reduce the mental and physical benefits that come with active travel. Ensuring safe routes in busier areas through the creation of separate, well-maintained cycle lanes on roads, for example, are one way to ensure that those who feel unsafe using our canals and former railway tracks are still able to actively travel during the winter months and at night. I want to thank the InfraSisters in Edinburgh who have run a fantastic campaign over many years—I am sure you are aware of their work, Ms Jardine.

As walking and cycling routes reach the city centre, it is vital that we have the correct architecture and infrastructure to ensure women's safety in busier areas as they travel home or to work. In a public consultation in 2023, up to 80% of women who responded stated that they had experienced harassment, abuse or violence in public spaces in Edinburgh. Some people might think 80% is an exaggeration—I did when I first read that stat—but when we speak to women we find that it is absolutely not. I was ashamed to hear some of their experiences.

Wera Hobhouse: Is the hon. Member not absolutely shocked at how much this behaviour is normalised, and that we accept it as normal? When my male partner's sons do not realise what happens, we continue to normalise it. Is it not time that we stopped?

Dr Arthur: Absolutely. As a cyclist in Edinburgh, I have been verbally abused by drivers. On my social media pages, I am also often criticised for encouraging more people to walk and cycle. However, that is very different from abuse based on someone's gender, which really goes to the heart of who they are, rather than simply what they are doing. I thank the hon. Lady for making that point.

The feeling of safety among women in Edinburgh varied seasonally, and according to lighting and the presence of passive surveillance from other citizens. Variation was also found between different groups, with disabled women and BAME women more likely to experience some form of harassment. That is in Scotland's capital city; it is absolutely shameful.

There are seemingly small things that we can implement to improve the situation. Providing multiple points for road crossings, improving street lighting and increasing on-street passive surveillance can make a difference, and we now integrate those things into our urban design in Edinburgh.

The safety of women on public transport deserves a debate of its own, but ensuring that women can safely access public transport, either by walking and cycling, should also be actively considered. We must look at the routes between communities and key public transport hubs, ensuring that they are safe and, above all, well lit—bus stops, in particular. All those small changes can improve the safety of women as they walk around our city centres and outlying neighbourhoods.

I will quickly give two examples. Lighting was recently installed in Hailes Quarry Park in my constituency, which has made such a change to local travel. Colinton tunnel, which I am sure you are familiar with, Ms Jardine, and which is 120 metres long, also had lighting added. I thought nothing of it—it just used to be a dark tunnel—but many women came forward to say that having lighting in place had transformed the way they walked along that route. It was cheap, easy and transformational.

3.16 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) not only on securing the debate but on her fantastic opening speech, which really set the scene.

Violence against women and girls, including sexual harassment and assault, affects millions of women across the UK. It affects what we say, what we wear and what we do. It affects how we live our everyday lives and—as we have heard from many hon. Members in the debate—whether and where we walk, cycle and run. In what I think was a national survey, 20% of women said they would never go walking at night. Local research undertaken by the West Yorkshire combined authority and the University of Leeds produced similarly stark findings. In a survey of users of Myrtle Park in Bingley, in my constituency, they found that 48% of respondents would not feel safe at night.

According to the Office for National Statistics, over 15% of women and girls in Britain feel “very or fairly” unsafe in parks during the day. It is a scandal that women feel unsafe while walking, wheeling, cycling or running. As we have heard, it is also harmful to our health and wellbeing. Increasing active travel by 50% in

England would result in 1.8 million fewer GP visits and 4 million fewer sick days, so it is vital that we provide safe opportunities for women and girls to participate in active travel.

The Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, has led the way on this issue, by not only publishing her safety of women and girls strategy but going on to commission and produce specific guidance called “Safer Parks”. The guidance sets out in detail how to address the inequity of access to parks, promoting the need for them to be designed in a way that makes women and girls feel more secure. I have been briefed on the research, and interestingly the most obvious things—such as lighting the path through the park—do not always result in people feeling safer, because they are in the spotlight and fear that attackers are hiding in the shadows. It is really important that we do the research and get the design guidance right. We must also address the different barriers that exist for different groups, and generally increase the number of people using the parks—that is something that makes us feel safer. The guidance was trialled in Bradford last year, and will hopefully inform planning of how we improve safety in parks for women and girls across West Yorkshire and beyond.

Like the West Yorkshire combined authority, Bradford council is treating the issue with the seriousness it deserves. I recently met the council to discuss the safety concerns of women who visit Myrtle Park. I will continue to engage with the council, the Friends of Myrtle Park—a fantastic community group—and the local councillor, Susan Fricker, who has been a really strong advocate on this issue.

I have also been pleased with some of the initiatives by West Yorkshire police. The Jog On campaign is dedicated to tackling the harassment faced by female runners and joggers. It seeks to raise awareness of inappropriate behaviour, provide education—including through active bystander training—and take enforcement action against individuals who persist in targeting runners with unwanted behaviours such as catcalling, horn-pipping or sexualised comments. At my request, Jog On recently attended the parkruns in both Myrtle Park and Roberts Park in Saltaire, in my constituency, encouraging and advising women who enjoy parkrun, but who may want to go out and run at other times of the day and week.

Women and girls must feel confident to get out and about on their bikes. They must also feel safe in our parks and green spaces and along our canals and greenways—I am campaigning for the Wharfedale Greenway in my constituency, and I will highlight that it must be designed with the safety of women and girls in mind, following the excellent points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) about Edinburgh. I hope the Minister will encourage the sharing of these positive initiatives from West Yorkshire and Bradford and, with colleagues, ensure that local authorities have the funding and guidance they need in order to secure the safety of women and girls in all our public spaces.

3.21 pm

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as chair of the all-party parliamentary

group on running. It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing it and for her constant work on this issue.

Running should be available to everyone as a form of exercise, stress relief and mental regulation, but it simply is not; it is available only to people who feel safe to do it, and the reality is that too many women do not. Put plainly, 70% of women say they have experienced an intimidating incident while running. Two out of three women have faced harassment. Those are not isolated experiences; they show a pattern that forces women to adapt their behaviour. Women change their routes, avoid running in the dark or stop altogether. That is not freedom; it is women adjusting their lives because of the behaviour of men.

I am a member of a running club, and there are many running clubs in my constituency, which make women feel safer because there is safety in numbers. I pay tribute to those clubs—particularly the all-female ones, such as the St Pol Striders—for creating these spaces, but they should not be relied on, and women should not have to do things differently.

Men who make women feel unsafe have to face consequences, because serious offenders begin with acts of harassment. If we want to prevent worse crimes, we cannot ignore the early ones. We need to make reporting easier and the follow-up stronger. We need systems that take women seriously when they come forward. I represent a constituency with large rural areas, so simple solutions such as better lighting or planning just cannot be relied on. Fundamentally, it comes down to how seriously these complaints are taken.

I am reminded of two very similar incidents about five years apart of men exposing themselves to female walkers, which happened while I was a councillor. In one, the police did not take the act very seriously at all—I suspect that the policeman spent more time complaining to me about people posting about the crime on social media than he did following it up—and in the other they did. Things have changed in West Yorkshire, not out of the ether, but because of leadership. Alison Lowe, our deputy mayor for policing, has really changed how things are looked at, and that has made a huge difference.

Fundamental to good outcomes is an institutional recognition of the problem. We need our police to lead from the front, take victims seriously and be proactive in their information and support. Running should be for everyone; it should not depend on gender, postcode or the time of day. If we want more people to enjoy the benefits of running, we must make sure women feel safe enough to take part. That means consequences for harassment, proper lighting, easier reporting and support for the communities that bring people together.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Before I call the final Back-Bench speaker, I should say that I would like to call the first Front-Bench spokesperson at 28 minutes past 3.

3.24 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for her assiduous campaigning and for bringing this important issue to the Chamber.

[John Slinger]

This is a problem suffered by women but caused by men—not all men, of course—and men must be the main part of the solution. Women's spaces are being constricted. Women are forced to take exercise in more public places and to avoid footpaths and canal towpaths, and parents of daughters will have had those conversations with them. However, when they move into those more public places, which are better lit and supposedly safer, they face intimidation, catcalling and the like. That is a total outrage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) said. If it were happening to men, I can assure Members that it would be dealt with very rapidly.

Women are adapting their behaviour, but it is men's behaviour and attitudes that need adapting, confronting, changing and—yes—on occasion prosecuting. Many men and boys do not even know they are doing anything wrong, but they are intimidating women, and shrinking their status and freedom as citizens. We therefore need a multifaceted approach, and that of course is what the Government are taking through their VAWG strategy, encompassing education, public education, police and criminal justice system work, and more.

This is clearly not something that can be prosecuted out of existence, but part of the challenge is to defeat the defeatism, and more can and is being done. If we mention catcalling, people instinctively say, “That can't be dealt with; How could you prosecute it?” However, as we heard in relation to the Jog On campaign, it is possible for police to take action.

I want to touch briefly on the work of Warwickshire police in Rugby. They have a safer neighbourhood team that carries out VAWG walks; an enhanced policing initiative on Friday and Saturday nights that promotes Ask for Angela; and Project Vigilant, in which officers are trained to detect predatory behaviour. They have also set up a working group that looks at surveys from the parkrun and walking groups to get data so that they can work out whether they would like to carry out an operation similar to the Jog On operation carried out by Surrey police. They also do a lot of education in schools.

We need to ensure that there are no no-go areas for women and girls in our society, and to commit to work more to tackle the misogynistic, predatory behaviour of some men and boys. They need to be the people who feel worried and intimidated when they go into public spaces—or any other spaces—with the attitudes we have talked about and perpetuate them.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.28 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for securing this important debate. As hon. Members have set out, the abuse and violence experienced by women and girls in public spaces is horrifyingly prevalent and should be called out for what it is: a national emergency.

I want to pay tribute to hon. Members from across the House for some of the things they have said this afternoon, and particularly to the hon. Member for Lowestoft, who started the debate in such a wonderful

way and really set the tone. She highlighted things that we all know, as women, but that, shockingly, still need highlighting. She spoke about women having to choose either the most direct or the safest route home, and about the unspoken risk assessment we all do—those words rang true to me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) spoke about her personal experience of harassment while cycling, and about the importance of encouraging children to start cycling early. The hon. Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) spoke about the things we do “just in case”, and that really resonated with me. My hon. Friend the Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) talked about her constituent, Holly, and her call for women's safety to be designed in—that is really important, and I hope the Minister listens to that call. The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) said that women are “constantly compromising” in what they do, and that also rang very true to me. I also highlight the hon. Members of the other gender who spoke up so passionately and convincingly when they said that men's behaviour needs to change and that they would champion that. I thank them very much for speaking out about it.

A UN Women UK study found that 71% of women of all ages have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces in the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Frome and East Somerset said. That figure increases to a shocking 86% for women aged 18 to 24. Part 2 of the Angiolini inquiry confirmed, in black and white, what women already knew—that it is common for us to feel unsafe walking or running in our own streets, and that as women we often actively change our daily routines to avoid very real threats, as highlighted by Members across the House.

It also found that sexually motivated crimes against women in public are not prioritised to the same extent as other serious offences. Women have felt that to be true for far too long. A University of Manchester study found that more than two thirds of women runners experience some form of abuse while running, most commonly verbal, with just 5% of them reporting such incidents to the police. That is plainly unacceptable in Britain today.

Liberal Democrats have urged the Government to implement all 13 of the inquiry's recommendations without delay. The sense of insecurity among women worsens during the winter months as the lack of safe routes on dark evenings greatly restricts women travelling for work or leisure.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Richmond Park in my constituency is a very popular spot for runners and cyclists, but as my hon. Friend points out, it is so much darker during the winter months. Our dedicated police force, the Royal Parks constabulary, has recently been completely scrapped, leaving the park unpatrolled and even less safe. This means women are choosing not to run in the park at all, which reduces their options for safe running and cycling routes in the winter months. Does she agree that investing in neighbourhood policing, including the policing we used to have in the royal parks, is critical to women feeling safer?

Marie Goldman: My hon. Friend's intervention is very timely. My Chelmsford constituency is in Essex, and Essex police has just announced that it feels it will

have to scrap numbers from the force, which is very concerning indeed. She also highlights the importance of women feeling safe, particularly in parks. In Chelmsford, streetlights were left dark and unrepaired by Essex county council for years, leaving many women feeling unable to take the most direct and quickest route, which was through the park, from the station to their home, at the end of the day.

As a county councillor, I campaigned hard for the lights to be fixed. I am pleased that they were eventually fixed, but that was with the help of Liberal Democrat-run Chelmsford city council. It is hardly surprising that inadequate street lighting and a lack of safe paths to facilitate active travel are widely reported to be significant barriers to women walking in their communities.

A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research in the last two years found that chronic underfunding of active travel across England is undermining efforts to get people walking, wheeling and cycling, instead of driving, with just 2% of the total transport budget spent on infrastructure to support active travel. It sometimes seems that we are putting our money in the wrong places.

It is disappointing to note, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath did, that the UK lags behind its European counterparts, with fewer than one in five people walking, wheeling or cycling on an average day, compared with more than one in four across Europe. The report highlights that this failure has locked in more congestion and contributed to worsening air quality, making it harder to reduce emissions while also limiting growth. Members might wonder why I mention that, but we also know that higher levels of pollution intersect with racial and wealth inequalities, with the most racially diverse and the poorest parts of our towns and cities suffering the most.

There is even evidence that equal exposure to air pollution does not mean equal health outcomes for women and men. For example, some studies have shown that women experience more harmful effects from air pollution than men. More research is needed, but at the very least that demonstrates the necessity of inclusion when considering the importance of prioritising active travel.

The same goes for road safety more generally, and the Liberal Democrats have for some time been calling for an updated road safety strategy, so we welcomed its recent publication by the Government. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I also welcome the publication of the pavement parking consultation outcome, albeit five years on. Although it might seem strange on the surface, women are likely to be disproportionately affected by the inaccessibility caused by pavement parking.

Women are more likely than men to be disabled and have mobility or visual impairment issues. We are more likely to be accompanying children and wheeling prams, and we are more likely to be carers, as was pointed out earlier. I was therefore pleased, in the autumn, to table an amendment to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill that would have enabled local authorities to enforce pavement parking laws more easily. Pavement parking is not just a minor inconvenience; it puts people in harm's way, impacts their sense of dignity and limits their access to public space. It is easy for the casual observer to dismiss some of those small changes as trivial, but they make a genuine difference in improving women's sense of safety and inclusion.

In Chelmsford, Make Space for Girls has been doing great work to build inclusive infrastructure, which is so important for creating environments where women feel safe. The project enables girls and gender non-conforming children to design their own play spaces, and it is just as much about creating safe, comfortable physical environments as proving to these children that they can enact change in their own communities and hold power to shape their own futures. That is important, because although street lighting and safer paths play an essential role, those issues are ultimately symptomatic of the broader problem that faces our country. That is why initiatives such as Chelmsford city council's women's safety charter, through which local premises commit to a range of training to ensure that staff consider and prioritise women's safety as standard, are also necessary.

Finally, the fact remains that women who are victims of violence are incredibly likely to be known to the men who attack them. We must therefore focus our efforts on tackling the societal attitudes that lead people to look away from, excuse and sometimes justify violence against women and girls. We have a responsibility to change that. It cannot be that, in a decade's time, women are still fearful of walking our streets because of who may be lurking in the dark. We owe it to future generations of women to act. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and, I believe, Members from across the House will continue to press the Government to do so.

3.36 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) not just on securing this important debate, but on the powerful way in which she opened it. It can be described only as a sobering debate that requires the Government's full attention, and that must come not just from the Department for Transport but, as others said, from other Departments, too.

I thank the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) and for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) for sharing their personal experiences. It is completely unacceptable that anyone should have to face what they described on the streets of this country.

I equally agree with the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) that so-called low-level offences should be stamped down on incredibly forcibly. He is right—I have long argued along similar lines—that it is essential because so-called low-level crimes lead to more serious and potentially fatal crimes in the future. It is therefore absolutely essential that they are clamped down upon incredibly hard.

The method by which anyone, and particularly women, chooses to travel should not be dictated by how safe they feel. Everyone should feel safe walking, running, cycling, wheeling, driving or riding a horse—we had a good debate about horse riding last week, and it should have been added to the title of this debate, because it is incredibly important in rural communities such as mine.

It is clear that the challenges of securing women's safety are an obstacle to an array of activities that women might want to do, but feel unable to do so. It is incredibly concerning that, according to Cycling UK, 23% of women cite harassment or intimidation as a reason not to cycle.

[Greg Smith]

The data on running is even starker. Research published in 2023 found that almost three quarters of women in the United Kingdom change their outdoor activity routines during winter, with many doing so because they feel unsafe.

Separately, survey data from SportsShoes.com, which is not a website I was particularly familiar with until I began my research for this debate, found that 48% of women had felt unsafe while running, compared with 36% of men. Similarly, 70% of women had experienced an intimidating incident while running, including 22% saying that they had been followed and 21% reporting that they had been beeped at by someone in a car. Such behaviour on the streets of this country is deeply unacceptable.

Even though it is challenging to point to a single source, data from a variety of organisations highlight that a considerable number of women experience behaviour that is not acceptable—indeed, it is clearly despicable—in our society. The idea that someone who is merely trying to run or cycle should be followed or harassed is clearly wrong and must be stopped.

Therefore, to address both the safety of women while cycling, wheeling, walking or running, and concerns about harassment, we must make sure that we embed enforcement as the underlying principle of safety strategies. That must involve having sufficient numbers of police officers located in the areas where women feel most unsafe. That is a challenge, given that we are currently seeing a reduction in the number of police officers on our streets. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) gave a particularly stark example. The thought that a park such as Richmond Park, which is so suited for walking, running, cycling and all sorts of activities, is no longer to be policed should horrify all of us in this House, no matter what political party we belong to.

Improving the safety of women should also involve following up on incidents properly. For example, a small minority of drivers demonstrate truly unsafe behaviour and put women at risk. We have strong rules about what constitutes dangerous driving, and those rules must be enforced where people have broken the law. However, the rules for dangerous driving must apply equally to those who behave in an unacceptable way by verbally abusing people, beeping their horn or whatever it might be.

To do that, we need effective funding for our police forces, which is why my party has specifically said that we would provide £800 million to deploy 10,000 new police officers in hotspot areas where crime is most likely to occur. I appreciate that hotspot policing might be less impactful for groups such as cyclists, who travel much greater distances than other people, but in urban environments or in places such as Richmond Park, which we have already heard about, there are often particular locations and areas that dissuade people from running and walking. The more we can do to target those locations—where crime, particularly crime against women, is more likely—the more we can instil trust and a sense that such activities are safe.

Therefore, can the Minister say what cross-Government work has been conducted by her Department to prioritise the safety of women and girls when they are engaged in active travel and to feed into the Government's strategy on preventing violence against women and girls? Also,

can she make a commitment that her Department will engage with local police forces to ensure that they are monitoring areas where women feel most unsafe?

Also, I understand that the consultation for the third cycling and walking investment strategy says that

“Investment in well-lit, safe, high-quality walking, wheeling and cycling routes increases feelings of personal safety, as well as improving road safety”.

I think we can all agree with the sentiment and the principle that we want particular areas to have improved lighting, in order to improve safety. As with many aspects of road safety, targeted measures that focus on the most dangerous areas will rightly have support from Members across this House.

I am aware that issues such as improved lighting form part of the much broader calls for clear targets on what organisations such as Cycling UK describe as high-quality cycling infrastructure, which are made alongside calls for appropriate levels of spending. That is all important. And from our time together on the Transport Committee in the last Parliament, I know the Minister is a long-standing supporter of active travel in general and of cycling in particular.

There is always a difficult balance to be drawn between making our roads safe for cyclists and making them too difficult for other modes of transport to use, or even prohibiting other modes of transport. Nevertheless, I hope the Government can find the appropriate balance by making cycling safer for women without making it more difficult for those same women to use their cars for other journeys.

One request from Cycling UK and a range of other road safety organisations is to improve understanding of the 2022 changes to the highway code. These organisations have been clear about welcoming the changes as an important step in improving the safety of pedestrians, cyclists and other road users, but the knowledge gap remains in the public's awareness of these changes.

All in all, as I said at the start of my remarks, this needs a whole-Government approach. The safety of women cannot be put on the back-burner or into a footnote; it must take centre stage across multiple Government Departments. I look forward to hearing the Minister's commitments this afternoon on how she will be leading that in the Department for Transport and across the whole of Government.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) for raising this important issue and congratulate her on her appointment as violence against women and girls adviser to the Department of Health and Social Care. I look forward to working with her to help to drive forward the Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade.

I imagine that every woman here today will have recognised the issues under discussion. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle), the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine), my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) and for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse),

my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) and the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) all described vividly what those issues mean for women in our daily lives. The fear of male violence is so normalised that it is easy to forget that it is anything but normal. I am pleased that many men, including my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Rugby (John Slinger) and for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), and indeed the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), are also committed to ensuring that the situation changes.

As we have heard, women remain under-represented in cycling due to persistent safety concerns: 58% of women feel that their cycle journeys are limited by such concerns, and more than a third say that roads do not feel safe. Harassment, intimidation and poorly lit routes all contribute to a sense that cycling, particularly in the evening, is simply not a safe or viable option. Research conducted by Dr Caroline Miles and Professor Rose Broad at the University of Manchester found that, over a two-year period from 2021 to 2022, 68% of women survey respondents said they had experienced abuse while out running, but only 5% of those women had reported the abuse to the police.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) have both referred to the excellent research by the University of Manchester. One of the most shocking findings of that research, which I discussed with the researchers last year, was that 19% of women runners had been followed and 7% had been flashed at. Does the Minister agree that, while women are often taking measures to mitigate the threat, whether through smartphones, special safety apps, or even changing their routes, the real answer ultimately lies in more visible policing, more CCTV, better lighting—crucial for local communities—and in tackling at source, as the violence against women and girls strategy does, the misogyny in our schools and workplaces?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a number of very important points. The scale of violence against women and girls in our country is intolerable, and that is why this Government are treating it as a national emergency, but the most important change is a change in the behaviour of men, frankly.

The Government published our strategy to build a safer society for women and girls last month, and have set out a range of actions to prevent violence and abuse, pursue perpetrators and support victims. Giving women the confidence to report incidents is essential. The strategy includes an ambitious aim to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, which will require us to take a transformative approach to the way that we work across Government and with other partners. I can assure the shadow Minister that Ministers regularly come together from all Departments to discuss the action that we need to take.

Turning to active travel, in December we announced that we are allocating £626 million over the next four years for local authorities to deliver walking, wheeling and cycling schemes—enough for 500 miles of new walking and cycling routes. That is in addition to almost £300 million of funding that we announced in February 2025.

In November, we launched a consultation to develop the third cycling and walking investment strategy, which recognised the need to address the barriers to active travel, including for women and girls and proposed two new objectives to support the long-term vision for active travel: ensuring both that people are safe to travel actively and that people feel it is an easy choice. The consultation closed on 15 December; we are looking carefully at all the comments received and the final strategy will be published this spring.

Since its establishment in 2022, Active Travel England—ATE—has worked with local authorities to help them to make walking, wheeling and cycling a safe and attractive choice for everyday trips. That has included overseeing £435 million of investment to deliver more than 400 miles of routes and hundreds of safer crossings and junctions.

ATE has commenced a project focused on the need to design streets better for women and girls and to support local authorities in the delivery of that. The organisation is working with Living Streets and with Footways to pilot an approach to developing walking network plans. Through that project, women have highlighted issues with walking, including—these will be very familiar to hon. Members—poor lighting, isolated routes and limited visibility, which strongly shaped their willingness to walk and influenced route prioritisation. Those findings will inform an important part of the evidence base for planning walking networks that work for everyone. I welcome the examples of good practice highlighted by a number of hon. Members, including Members from West Yorkshire.

This year, through ATE, we have provided £2.5 million to Cycling UK to deliver the Big Bike Revival, which is now in its 10th year and has reached more than half a million people. The Big Bike Revival programme helps people across England to get back on their bikes and experience the many benefits of cycling. Since it began in 2015, more than half of participants have said they now feel safer cycling and 49% of participants have been women. Women who have taken part in the programme have described being made to feel comfortable, having their confidence and self-esteem boosted, and feeling empowered.

Last October, Cycling UK organised “My ride. Our Right”, and approximately 60 women-led glow rides took place across the country to increase the visibility of women’s cycling and demand better infrastructure. In my constituency, the cycling groups Women in Tandem and Pedals organised rides and are doing great work to give more women the confidence to ride a bike especially, or including, after dark. As Women in Tandem says, cycling should “feel liberating, not intimidating”—hear, hear!

We know that good street design can contribute to helping women to feel safe when walking, cycling and running, and enables safe access to public transport. We are currently working with MHCLG to update the manual for streets, which was first published in 2007. That will include advice on aspects of street design that can help to improve personal safety and perceptions of safety: how safe is it, and how safe does it feel?

Anna Sabine: I thank the Minister for giving way. It may be that she is coming on to this issue but, while everything she is saying on active travel is fantastic and

[Anna Sabine]

I recognise the point about the manual for streets, does she recognise that if the overarching framework, the national planning policy framework, does not pay regard to women's and girls' safety, it is much harder to enact those subsets such as active travel?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution. As I said, we are working with our colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure we have a coherent approach.

I welcome the support of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chelmsford, for our proposals to tackle pavement parking. Of course, the issue is not just safety on the street, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West highlighted, but having the opportunity to walk, wheel, cycle and run in our green spaces and parks, on canal towpaths and on greenways. Natural England's "Green Infrastructure Planning and Design Guide" offers detailed guidance on creating accessible green spaces and, for teenage girls specifically, emphasises the need to design spaces that are not only safe and inclusive but also comfortable and welcoming. Sport England is also running campaigns challenging prejudice to make clear that sport is for everyone. That has included the "This Girl Can" and "Let's Lift the Curfew" campaigns; the latter included 320 local events in October to amplify women's voices and overcome barriers that prevent women from being active outdoors.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft for raising this important issue. It has been wonderful to see the level of contribution and the interest that has been shown in the debate. I look forward to continuing to work with her, with other hon. Members here this afternoon, and with my colleagues across Government to take further action on this important issue and ensure that for our daughters the opportunity to go out and walk, run and cycle is different from how it perhaps has been for our generation. We can, must and will do better.

3.55 pm

Jess Asato: I thank all Members who contributed and the Minister for her remarks and ongoing work on this issue, which forms a key part of the Government's ambition to halve violence against women and girls. We all very much look forward to working with her to improve women's safety in this area. I finish with this quote from the Belonging Forum:

"When women feel unable to move freely in public spaces, this limits opportunities for connection, reinforces isolation and undermines a sense of belonging."

We must work to tackle that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered women's safety while walking, wheeling, cycling and running.

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Consumer Energy Bills: Government Support

4 pm

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I will call Luke Taylor to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will be no opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for consumer energy bills.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Ms Jardine. This morning, hon. Members may have caught the same package on the breakfast news as I did. It followed Ukrainians on the outskirts of Kyiv who had been without heating for more than two weeks. They have suffered in conditions unthinkable to those of us in modern Britain, with temperatures in some places dropping to minus 20° overnight. The pictures—of children with frozen faces wearing four or five coats, and grandmothers slipping on sheets of ice that had formed on the floors of their apartments—were heartbreaking.

I hope that hon. Members will indulge my making that aside at the start of my remarks; as I watched those scenes, I could not help but feel alarmed at the sense that Russia's targeting of Ukrainian energy infrastructure mirrors the shockwaves it has wilfully sent across Europe's traditional energy mix since it first crossed the Ukrainian border nearly four years ago. Those shockwaves were amplified in the UK when they collided with the unstable economic conditions wrought by Liz Truss's mini-Budget, whose impacts are still rumbling on today.

We are fortunate in this country not to suffer temperatures consistently way below 0°, and especially lucky not to have to contend with that while bombs rain down on our heads. But the reality of the dangers of cold is present everywhere, and our cost of energy crisis is forcing people to live without heating mere miles from where we stand today, in the world's sixth largest economy.

It is always innocent, ordinary people—from Kyiv to Kilburn and everywhere in between—who suffer because of huge energy price shocks: ordinary people such as the pensioners in my constituency of Sutton and Cheam, who are living in homes that are sealed shut against the winter, their windows "boarded up" with blankets and towels as they try desperately to keep inside what little heat they can afford.

In the Chamber last week, I mentioned an incident in which I knocked on the door of a resident who answered in a coat and scarf—not because she was going out, but because she did not have the heating on inside; it was around 3° or 4° outside. It happened again yesterday, when I was out canvassing in Worcester Park. I have heard from households that now avoid using their ovens, not out of choice but out of fear of what switching them on will do to their finances. Local hospitals prepare for influxes after cold snaps, because the cold weather thickens blood and causes clots and heart attacks in older people. Anyone who has experienced true cold—awful,

core-shaking cold—can only dare to imagine what it feels like for children and older people, whose temperature regulation is developing or fading.

The End Fuel Poverty Coalition estimated that 4,950 excess winter deaths in the UK were caused by living in cold homes during that first chaotic winter of 2022-23.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Over 6,000 households in my constituency are living in fuel poverty. The warm homes plan will deliver targeted support for those living in fuel-poor households and provide them with the means to upgrade their homes with insulation, solar panels and heat pumps. Does the hon. Member agree that we should prioritise measures that improve energy efficiency and sustainability to cut fuel bills for years to come?

Luke Taylor: Absolutely, and I will come on to the package that the Government outlined last week. It was very welcome, but we need to go further on immediate measures.

More than 12 million households are struggling with high energy bills today. It is not just the cold, but what creeps in with it: the damp and mould in children's lungs and the reliance, for some families, on heating that produces dangerous carbon monoxide, which presents a threat to life and limb. Let us be clear: in parts of Britain where fuel poverty is all too common, we are at risk of letting one generation slip away slowly, sitting lonely in their homes, shivering, while we raise another forever stunted by a cold childhood.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward; it affects everybody in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. About 39% to 40% of households in Northern Ireland are classed as being in fuel poverty, meaning that they spend more than 10% of their income on energy just to keep their homes warm. Those stats are significantly above historic measures, and many working families do not qualify for Government assistance. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Government must do more. Does he agree that very little action has been taken to ease pressure on working families, and that more must be done to adjust thresholds so that those families are eligible for support and assistance?

Luke Taylor: The hon. Member highlights the gap between families who are eligible for support and those who just cannot quite make ends meet. Clearly, there is a challenge in making any measure completely comprehensive and ensuring that those in need get the support they require.

When Beveridge wrote of his five great evils all those decades ago, he had in mind specifically the kind of poverty that we are talking about here—not just in material terms, but in access to living conditions that make a higher quality of life possible. In the decades since, we have clung to the findings of his report while slowly letting the meaning of those words decay, assuming that things such as freezing to death in one's own home were evils conquered by the “white heat” of revolution. We were wrong, and squalor, by means of poor housing, insulation and lack of warmth, is back in Britain. It is here, not just in the homes of the poorest and most vulnerable, but all too often in the suburban houses of middle-income families and in urban flats where young people raise kids.

That is to say nothing of parts of rural Britain, where very old, pre-modern insulation in housing is still the norm. For too many families and pensioners I meet, across neighbourhoods, ages and even incomes, this is the single most pressing issue in their lives. We do not need a new Beveridge report to tell us that—not that we are wanting for heartbreaking statistics. We can see it with our own eyes and hear it with our own ears, and we feel it in our bones when we knock on doors in our constituencies, time and again, day in, day out.

When an issue gets to the heart of people's quality of life in such a huge way, the state has a duty to cut through the roadblocks, take the lead and do something about it quickly. This Government, however, have taken too long to do so. The announcement last week of the warm homes plan is welcome; we Liberal Democrats have been pushing for it for years. Many organisations working in this space, such as the MCS Foundation, are relieved to see it finally outlined.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): As somebody who suffers enormously from the cold—as anyone can see from my hands, which are already white—I really appreciate my hon. Friend for bringing this point forward. The warm homes plan is incredibly welcome, but I am worried about the order in which it suggests interventions. The idea that we should be putting solar panels and heat pumps before insulation and air tightness worries me, having spent 25 years in the building industry.

I am also very concerned about the focus on specific technologies rather than on aims. The real solution must be to cut the cost of heating our homes. There are innovative solutions, such as the Luthmore electric boiler, developed by an innovative firm in my own constituency; a gas boiler can be taken out and the Luthmore boiler plugged straight in. However, we risk pandering to those who can afford to put these measures in, while the most vulnerable are left exactly where they are, in damp homes. I assume my hon. Friend agrees with me.

Luke Taylor: I wholeheartedly agree. As an engineer by background, I think we need to focus on the outcome and the goal, rather than prejudicing the tool. While air-source heat pumps are suitable in many cases, they rely on air tightness and insulation, which may well be a barrier to quick implementation.

The Liberal Democrats have been calling for a 10-year emergency home upgrade programme, starting with free insulation and heat pumps for those on low incomes.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): A constituent of mine was having energy retrofit work carried out by Consumer Energy Solutions under the energy company obligation 4 scheme, which seeks to lower heating costs. That firm has recently gone into administration, and the work will now not be finished. The ECO4 scheme has been extended, but the Government have not clearly committed to introducing better protections for customers. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government urgently need to ensure greater consumer protections against installers' incompetence and incompletions?

Luke Taylor: I agree 100%. Whenever we have novel technologies, there is a rush to fill the space; unfortunately, cowboys may well get there first. The Government have a huge role not only in encouraging quality installation but in protecting against that vacuum being filled by disreputable traders.

[Luke Taylor]

On the subject of the home upgrade programme, as with most Liberal Democrat policies we urge the Government to steal it. It would complement and, frankly, complete their own strategy. I invite the Minister to take this opportunity to outline specifically how the delivery of that strategy will work. As we Liberal Democrats have said, without a clear replacement for the ECO programme or future homes standard, we face losing skilled installers and risk long delays for the kind of ambitious programme of insulation that we need. That is not a theoretical loss: homes with lower efficiency standards are actively dangerous to people's health. We will hold the Government accountable for their legally binding targets, but I encourage them to remember that full disclosure of the practicalities of implementing the strategy would help all of us work harder to tackle fuel poverty.

In fact, the Government should be working more closely with new projects such as the Citigen network, which I recently visited in London, or with local councils such as my own in Sutton, to see how new alternative heat sources are already making a difference to people's lives. We can and must be more ambitious. We must surely now recognise that the scale of the crisis is so severe that tinkering with infrastructure investment, while useful for the future, does not solve the problem for families shivering and cutting back every single day.

To genuinely rescue people from the cold, we must tackle the real cost of energy now. That is why we need a social tariff to provide targeted energy discounts for vulnerable households, including those on low incomes and in receipt of personal independence payment. That is why the Liberal Democrats have been calling for the renewables obligation levy to be removed from people's energy bills and instead funded by a proper windfall tax until April 2027—after which the Government should develop a new way of funding RO contracts, implementing Liberal Democrat proposals to move them on to a contracts-for-difference model. That would decouple energy prices from the wholesale gas prices and ensure that ordinary people across the country can benefit from cheap renewable energy.

I am sorry not to see any Reform MPs here, although it is not a surprise; it was written down here in my notes. They deserve to be told once again that net zero does not mean higher energy costs. How we fund our energy transition is a political choice. They are choosing to remain wedded to the very system that has left us so vulnerable and Britons literally freezing to death in their own homes, rather than making sure that the fat cats pay their fair share towards keeping people in this country alive.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In addition to the absence of Reform MPs, the absence of Conservative MPs is also striking. It was during the Truss-Kwarteng mini-Budget that borrowing was pushed up by £60 billion because of the energy price guarantee that was a consequence of Government dependence on Russian gas. Does my hon. Friend agree that what we need in this country is energy independence, so that we have energy security and can be the custodians of our own destiny?

Luke Taylor: I could not agree more: energy security is national security. It sounds like a trite cliché, but it is so absolutely true when we look at the dangers around the world today.

The Minister has heard my arguments and the arguments made by other colleagues who intervened. The Minister will have seen, like the rest of us, the findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, published earlier today: that the number of people living in the most extreme form of poverty has reached its highest level since records began. In addition to my other asks this afternoon, I ask the Minister to simply look us in the eye and tell us why, when people are freezing, the Government are not moving faster?

4.14 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this very important debate.

I have seen at first hand how urgent the cost of living pressures are for many of my residents. Just last week, I hosted a cost-of-living coffee morning in my community, bringing together energy providers, water companies, banks and local support groups. It was a practical example of how joined-up, accessible support can make a real difference to residents in Portsmouth, particularly when people are helped to understand what they are entitled to and how they can access alternatives.

I want to say a huge thanks to all who attended, be they residents or stakeholders, including: Advice Portsmouth, Centrica, British Gas, HIVE Portsmouth, IncomeMax, Octopus Energy, Nationwide, Switched on Portsmouth, Portsmouth Water, the Energy Ombudsman, E.ON Next, Utilita Energy, Southern Water and NatWest. The drop-in highlighted so many issues, which is why I welcome the Government's excellent warm homes plan—a plan that will improve energy efficiency, reduce energy bills, cut carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty through a mix of grants, loans, local delivery and updating of standards.

The warm homes plan is vital because consumers have been let down by previous Governments, and by rogue tradies, so many times. We must think about trust. That is why I have been meeting with Checkatrade, the Department for Business and Trade and the sector, to ensure that our tradies' reputations are not let down by cowboy builders and shoddy outfits when we bring about the reality of our warm homes plan. Although I welcome the warm homes plan, warmly, I ask the Minister to outline how it will build trust and complement local, community-led initiatives to ensure that energy bill support and home efficiency measures meet the people of Portsmouth's needs.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine, I think for the first time. We could probably have done with a longer debate given how many people intervened at the start, but I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this debate and for giving us the opportunity to debate an important issue, which I know lots of Members across the House have an interest in.

I associate myself with the hon. Member's remarks about the situation in Ukraine. Last year, when I attended the G7 Energy and Environment Ministers meeting,

I met the then Ukrainian Energy Minister. I was struck by the sheer scale of what she was facing every day, such as sending energy workers into the field to repair broken transmission lines and substations—not just facing the risks that any worker faces in situations with high voltage cables, but also facing the risk of Russian drone attacks and bombs. I could not be clearer in condemning the actions of the Russian regime and what they are doing in targeting infrastructure at this time.

As I draw this debate to a close, I want to reaffirm that tackling the affordability crisis is this Government's No. 1 priority. The main reason that bills are so high, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam alluded to, is the wholesale cost of gas and our exposure to price shocks caused by our dependence on fossil fuel markets. We are working to bring down, for good, the cost of energy by taking back control of our energy system through our clean energy superpower mission. Thanks to our decisions, last year was a record year for wind and solar power, and we have embarked on the biggest nuclear building programme for half a century. Already in 2026, the Government's seventh contracts for difference auction secured an incredible 8.4 GW of new offshore wind capacity across Britain—enough to deliver energy for more than 12 million homes. That is what it means to deliver on lower bills, good jobs and energy security. I have to look at the Opposition Benches, which are empty this afternoon, and think about the work that those Members could have been doing in government over the past 14 years to take us to a position where we would have been less reliant on fossil fuels and not facing such fuel shocks. I suppose it is no surprise that they did not turn up to defend their record.

Notwithstanding the concerns voiced by hon. Members this afternoon, which I share, energy bills are starting to come down. In real terms, Ofgem's price cap was lower in 2025 than in 2024, but we know we need to go further. The Government's intervention at last year's Budget will help people deal with cost of living pressures, by taking an average £150 of costs off energy bills from April 2026. By closing the ECO scheme and providing Exchequer funding to reduce the cost of the renewables obligation for domestic energy suppliers, this Government are turning a corner by putting more money in people's pockets in 2026.

At this point, I want to address the point made by the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance), who raised the issue of an ECO project affecting one of his constituents. I ask him to send me the details of that case in writing, so that we can investigate it fully. In addition to the £150 off energy costs, we have expanded the warm home discount scheme this year, so that more households will benefit from its support. That means that up to 6 million households will receive a £150 rebate on their energy bills this winter. In Sutton and Cheam, over 2,800 households received the warm home discount last winter; we expect that to increase significantly this year. Under the expansion across London, for example, 950,000 households will benefit from the warm home discount this winter. That is money going on to people's energy bills and bank accounts, now. I recognise how important that support is to households across Britain over the winter months. That is why we have proposed continuing the warm home discount scheme for a further five years, up to winter 2030-31.

A number of hon. Members raised the warm homes plan, and I will address some of those issues in a moment. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said we needed an ambitious plan; that is precisely what the warm homes plan that we announced last week is. Reducing bills is not just about discounts, whether that is £150 off costs or the warm home discount; it is also about transforming an ageing building stock into comfortable, low-carbon homes that are cheaper to heat and fit for the future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan) highlighted, the warm homes plan is a vital step in the Government's mission to address the long-term issue of energy affordability in this country. It is the biggest ever public investment in home upgrades and will help millions of households benefit from solar panels, batteries, heat pumps and insulation.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) talked about the priority afforded to different measures. I reassure her that we are not suggesting that insulation is not important. I am sure she has read the warm homes plan and will have seen the pages that deal specifically with insulation. Insulation plays an especially important part in the local government schemes we are running. With the offer of consumer loans and the work we are doing with finance organisations, there will be an opportunity to finance the retrofit of homes.

The hon. Lady highlighted how technology is changing. She talked about the electric boiler, which I have seen myself. We have been looking at lots of different technologies that could deliver and have already made changes, for example, to the boiler upgrade scheme, which is now offering heat batteries and air-to-air heat pumps as well as traditional heat pumps. We are always on the lookout for new technologies.

Sarah Gibson: I was aware that the Minister had seen the boiler I mentioned. I welcome the warm homes plan immensely, but I have a slight worry about it. There is the old saying that doing the same thing again and expecting a different outcome is a sign of madness. My hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) highlighted that the previous scheme failed to do the right things at the right time, due to a lack of scrutiny and accountability. I have not seen anything in the warm homes plan that talks of an overview to ensure that a heat pump is installed only when it needs to be, since airtightness and insulation would be more appropriate first.

Martin McCluskey: To address those points: the warm homes agency, which is part of the plan, is there to provide advice and guidance to consumers from the start to the end of the retrofit journey. That is about increasing the level of advice and guidance available. I understand that retrofitting a home is challenging and that people need advice and guidance to do it effectively, as the hon. Lady noted.

As for oversight, there has been a problem in the past, as we saw with the number of issues around the ECO4 programme. The warm homes plan states clearly that we will consult on the protection available to consumers through the course of this year. As the Minister responsible, I never want to see an issue like ECO4 again. We need to make it as easy as possible. We should ensure that problems do not occur in the first instance, but when

[*Martin McCluskey*]

they do there must be proper adequate redress, so that there is confidence in the system. We cannot expect people to make these changes without confidence in the system.

The warm homes plan will roll out upgrades to up to 5 million homes by 2030, saving households hundreds of pounds on energy bills and helping lift up to 1 million families out of fuel poverty by 2030. We are providing £5 billion of targeted support for low-income households, which will receive free upgrades, including heat pumps, solar panels and batteries. That includes additional funding for the very successful warm homes local grant, and the warm homes social housing fund for local authorities and social landlords to upgrade homes for those on low incomes and in social housing. Those upgrades can provide a significant saving for a typical household of £550 a year on their bills. Alongside that, we have allocated £5 billion to a new warm homes fund, almost £2 billion of which will go to the provision of low or zero-interest loans. That will make it easier for more people to meet the up-front costs of upgrading their homes in order to benefit from lower bills.

About 30% of private rented sector tenants live in fuel poverty. We are introducing new minimum energy efficiency standards for the private rented sector and the social rented sector, which will save renters hundreds of pounds a year and ensure that they have decent, warm homes. I am confident that the landmark plan that we have announced will make people across Britain better off, secure our energy independence and do right by future generations by tackling the climate crisis.

One of the effects of the affordability crisis has been to increase consumer debt, which remains at a record level. Reducing debt not only helps those in debt but cuts the cost of managing debt for all consumers. I recognise the need to tackle that problem, and I have been working closely with Ofgem to do that. In November, Ofgem published an updated debt strategy that set out its near-term actions and priorities in supporting suppliers to reduce debt in the sector. It includes proposals for a debt relief scheme to tackle the debt that some consumers built up during the energy crisis; that could reduce aggregate debt.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) for arranging the coffee morning and the energy support event. I believe that many Members are doing similar things; they have received a lot of support from energy suppliers and other organisations. She said that she has had conversations with Checkatrade and with people in the building trade. I said a moment

ago that we are ensuring high levels of consumer protection to protect not just consumers but those in the building trade. Whenever I meet them, they ask for reliable regulation and standards that they can adhere to. The vast majority of builders, who are maintaining a high standard, do not want their reputation trashed by people who are not meeting those high standards.

The energy system is changing. We have more clean power and innovative tariffs, such as time of use tariffs, and the use of technologies such as heat pumps and electric vehicles has grown. That means that we need solutions fit for 2030 and beyond. Ofgem is currently conducting a cost allocation and recovery review to look at how costs on energy bills can be recovered in the future, and it is considering factors such as efficiency, fairness, meeting our net zero commitments, ensuring growth, and how we pay for our energy system. I am keen that that ensures that progressivity is at the heart of the way people pay for their energy.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam spoke about a social tariff, which I know a lot of hon. Members would welcome, but I am always thoughtful about how we make sure that is properly targeted. For that, we need reliable data. We have just launched a kick-starter project with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which is about accurately finding reliable household income data and properly targeting energy interventions—I would be happy to discuss that in more detail with the hon. Gentleman. It is vital to ensuring that energy costs and bills reflect the changing market.

We are bringing energy bills down for everyone with the actions that we will be taking in April, and we will continue to search for other ways to do so. We are lowering bills through the delivery of the Budget's bill reduction measures. We have expanded the warm home discount, and are delivering the record-breaking warm homes plan. We are working with Ofgem to future-proof how costs are managed, and are taking action to fund a cleaner, more secure energy system. We will achieve bill savings while taking back control with home-grown clean power. That is the route to cheaper energy in the long run. Every wind turbine that we turn on and every piece of new technology that we adopt helps us reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, including gas, and ensures that we get costs down in the long run. That is the only way to protect the British people and bring down bills for good. That is what the Government's clean energy mission is all about.

Question put and agreed to.

Digital Exploitation of Women and Girls

4.30 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling the digital exploitation of women and girls.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. Online abuse and digital exploitation are extremely prevalent in the modern-day world. The targeting of women and girls in online spaces is growing into a market where legislation is not keeping up with the speed of the digital world, so much so that the world's richest man considered it acceptable and a matter of free speech to have his personal artificial intelligence platform undress women without their consent. That is shameful.

There is a growing difference between in-person exploitation—including sex trafficking, grooming, domestic violence and coercive control—and digital abuse and exploitation of someone's image, where victims are often not known to perpetrators. In most cases they may not have any knowledge that they are even being exploited, and these crimes often happen in a highly organised manner.

In Lancashire, the police and crime commissioner conducted a survey of 4,800 people on violence against women and girls—otherwise known as VAWG—which asked about digital abuse. Half of the women surveyed, 51%, said they had experienced unwanted or inappropriate messages or images online. Only 12% of those women reported it to the police or any official body. Only a third of survey respondents felt confident that the police would act if they reported an incident, and just 8% trusted the wider criminal justice system to deliver any kind of justice.

Research by the domestic abuse organisation Refuge states that almost every survivor they have supported was subject to some form of technology-facilitated abuse. Some 95% of survivors of technology-facilitated abuse said it had impacted their mental health. I work closely with many organisations in Preston that tackle VAWG, many of which I am pleased to say are here today to observe the debate: the Foxton Centre, Lancashire Women, Hope Prevails Preston, Girls Who Walk Preston and Trust House Lancashire. We are also talking about stalking and abuse. Most of us would think about conventional stalking, where a perpetrator knows the individual or there is often a real-life link between them. The digital world has transformed the ways in which perpetrators utilise online tools to commit intimate partner abuse and coercive control.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is an incredibly difficult subject to address, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for doing it incredibly well. As a grandfather of three beautiful granddaughters and having seen how the online world has made so many women and girls vulnerable to despicable attacks, I certainly share his concerns, and I believe that we must do more to ensure that safety is paramount. Does he agree that not only do we need to make it digitally impossible to carry out exploitation, but we must ensure that our young people are taught the dangers of image sharing, which can lead to image replication online? The Department for Education, in co-ordination with parents, has a key role to play in that.

Sir Mark Hendrick: I totally agree. In fact, I have just been discussing with some of our visitors from Lancashire what needs to happen in schools so that young people are aware of digital exploitation and the damage and distress that it can cause. I hope the Minister, who is in her place, will look at ways in which the Government could facilitate legislation so that, in future, many of these digital crimes could be included in the statute books and not be regarded as things that the police can do nothing about.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that consent is vital, teaching about consent and seeking consent is imperative, and that the influencers and politicians who say that is too woke and is unnecessary are actually putting our children in danger?

Sir Mark Hendrick: I totally agree. Without getting too much into the politics of this, there is a very right-wing argument about what free speech means. When I first came to Parliament in the early 2000s, the then Prime Minister used to talk about rights and responsibilities. We all believe in rights, but they need to be balanced against responsibilities. The idea that somebody can print or send a person's image and not take responsibility for the consequences is ridiculous. A lot of the current free speech arguments do not give that balance. We need to make sure that the young people and older people who are carrying out these acts know fully what they are doing, are willing to take responsibility for it and that the legal system is equipped to deal with it.

As I said, research by Refuge showed that almost every survivor it supported was subjected to some form of technology-facilitated abuse. When we talk about stalking and abuse, most of us think of conventional stalking, but the digital world has transformed the ways in which perpetrators use online tools to commit intimate partner abuse and coercive control.

In relationships with coercive control as an element, technology is often used to stalk, track and watch a partner's location at all times. If this were carried out in person and a perpetrator physically followed an individual, that would cross the threshold for criminal prosecution. However, doing the same thing through a device in the digital world has become normalised and is not considered criminal.

This encourages perpetrators to use technology to facilitate abuse as it is more convenient and often evades prosecution. Tech devices, such as Ring doorbells, AirTags and cloning devices are used to track and further stalk victims. In-person stalking is facilitated by the introduction of such devices. Lancashire constabulary has acknowledged the increasing use of social media and messaging apps in coercive control cases. All police forces in the north-west report a year-on-year increase in digital elements in VAWG cases.

We are also seeing the rise of non-consensual intimate image sharing, often referred to as revenge porn. These images are often shared digitally on websites. The person in the image does not have ownership of that image, meaning that it is almost impossible for it to be taken down at the victim's request. The Revenge Porn Helpline recorded 22,275 reports in 2024, which is a 20.9% increase from the previous year, and 412,000 intimate images have been reported since 2015. We have also

[Sir Mark Hendrick]

seen an increase in online stalking, often through social media, catfishing and doxing, to share personal information such as addresses, workplaces, children's schools, benefits and immigration status and much more.

The issue of digital abuse is even more severe. Perpetrators are often unknown individuals or organisations, utilising online means such as dark web markets and unregulated servers. Strangers obtain images of women and monetise them. Some of the images are obtained or created to order, and there is increased use of AI to create deepfakes, undress victims and attach false bodies to victims' faces.

There is also a market for perpetrators to obtain lists of leaked passwords, which can then be used to hack into victims' personal accounts, where personal photographs are often kept. Widely used dark web servers are monetised to exchange explicit images of women and girls. That represents a significant shift from earlier patterns, where such images were more commonly shared in private by an intimate partner in their social circle.

In the majority of cases of digital abuse, the victims and perpetrators are not known to each other. The threat to share images also happens to under-age boys and girls, including threats to share falsified, AI-created images. That has led to suicide attempts, and, tragically, the completion of suicide in some cases.

One of the most concerning developments in digital exploitation is under-the-radar abuse, where victims have no idea or knowledge that their private images have been accessed, copied or distributed without their consent. We are aware that the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, even of children, has led to perpetrators planning to gang rape some victims in those images. Currently, there is no legal definition of technology-facilitated abuse, and I hope that the Minister will address that point in her remarks. It means that it is almost impossible to prosecute, leaving victims without the ability to seek justice before the court. That situation should not be allowed to happen.

Prosecutors have to rely on other legislation that is often outdated and does not take the growing digital world into account. That results in short sentences and no real justice for the victims. The difficulties of prosecution lead to a lack of understanding by both prosecutors and the police, as well as continued offences and reoffending, which pushes victims into stressful situations, contributing to mental health complexities. The volume of cases put to prosecution by the Crown Prosecution Service is remarkably low, and convictions are even lower. Although we are seeing an increase in the reporting of digital abuse, it often leads to victims feeling disappointed and isolated, as the criminal justice process fails to deliver meaningful outcomes.

The Computer Misuse Act 1990 is outdated, and the police are still having to apply the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 when considering seizing and examining devices. That is also outdated, as mobile phones and cloud-based storage did not exist in the way that they do today. Unfortunately, in some cases, victims need to collate their own evidence, as police forces do not have adequate training or an understanding of the severity of these issues. For example, a member of Girls Who Walk Preston, who is in the Public Gallery, has had a stalker for the last six years who the police have been unhelpful with, because she has not received death threats.

The stalker lives under a different police force and refuses to admit that their accounts belong to them. The victim has been forced to collate her own evidence, to prove that the accounts do in fact belong to the stalker. That should not be necessary. It is an outrage, and she should not have to endure it.

I supported a constituent who has been stalked at work, which again fell under a different police force. There is a clear gap in how different constabularies understand and can prosecute those cases. While the picture has been improving in that regard in Lancashire, it is not a country-wide push.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Is it not also imperative—I think the Government have done some work on this—that women being stalked know who their stalker is? Sometimes they do not know, and it means that they could be at a bus stop, and their stalker could be behind them without them knowing. I am glad that the Government have done some work on that. It is important that, as technologies change, we have the legislation to keep up with them.

Sir Mark Hendrick: I totally concur; my hon. Friend makes some very strong points.

The examples that I just mentioned highlight the need for consistent and mandatory guidance for all police forces to recognise digital abuse and online stalking, and not just take it for granted that there is nothing they can do about it. I call for national mandatory education for all police forces to recognise and deal with victims of digital abuse and exploitation; exploration of a legal definition of technology-facilitated abuse; and the provision of up-to-date legislation for the prosecution of offences, modernised in line with an ever-evolving digital world.

I welcome the commitment from the Minister to work with technology companies to stop online predators and the spread of explicit images stolen through hacking. I also welcome the Government's commitment to enact, through the Crime and Policing Bill, a new offence of taking or recording an intimate photograph or film without consent. I would be happy to support the Minister in any way to achieve this objective, working with my own local police force.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called to speak. I will call the Front Benchers at eight minutes past 5, so will Members please keep their speeches to about two and a half minutes each?

4.46 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) on securing this very important debate. In 2018, I introduced the upskirting Bill, the Voyeurism (Offences) Bill. At the time, an alarming number of men did not consider it harassment or an offence to upskirt a female. Too often, behaviours such as upskirting are dismissed as a laugh or as not that serious. I reject that entirely.

These are not victimless acts. We know that these kinds of violations often cause long-lasting psychological harm to the victims. We must also recognise the strong

link between online and offline abuse. After all, it was the offence of upskirting that first led to Dominique Pelicot's horrific crimes being brought to light in 2020. We know that if perpetrators get away with lower-level offences, they move on to more serious crime.

The law must move as fast as technology does, but it feels as if we are constantly on the back foot in reacting to novel uses of technology that harm women and girls, for example the recent rise of AI-generated indecent images and deepfakes. We must develop more proactive measures, because by the time we legislate against one form of technology-facilitated abuse, another seems to emerge.

It is for Ofcom to hold social media companies to account, but in my view it is currently failing to treat the digital exploitation of women and girls with the seriousness that it deserves. That is why we Liberal Democrats are calling for a dedicated online crime agency to effectively tackle illegal content and activity online. I hope that the Government will take that seriously.

Another example of technology developing faster than regulation is the rise of covert filming using smart glasses. Across social media, footage is being uploaded of women who have been filmed without their consent. Often, it has been taken outside nightclubs and gyms, when women are out walking or running—as we heard in the earlier debate—or on beaches, violating the privacy of women without their even being aware that they are being filmed.

The Government must send a clear message to the tech sector that women's safety is not optional. If they are serious about tackling the epidemic of violence against women and girls, we must create a safer online environment, backed up by strong legislation and enforcement.

4.48 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): It is a beyond fantastic pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing such an important and extremely timely debate. As we have seen over the past weeks, months and years, the exploitation of women and girls comes in many forms; the digital landscape does not automatically protect them from physical harm. We have seen recently how easily predators can sexually exploit women and girls through deepfakes on social media, and how these actions are actively promoted by platforms. That exploitation can also translate into the exploitation of physical insecurities, which can lead women and girls down a dangerous and unattainable path.

Unrealistic body standards in advertising are not a new phenomenon, but AI has deepened the problem. It is beyond the pale: it now enables girls to be exposed to imagery promoting body types that quite literally defy the laws of physics. Such content is not something that they stumble on; it is actively pushed at them through targeted advertising. Once a social media platform identifies a user as a girl or a young woman, the algorithm begins promoting harmful material directly into their feed.

A recent Government report found that 19% of girls aged between 14 and 16 had been exposed to harmful content promoting extreme thinness—nearly three times the figure reported by their male classmates. A leaked internal report from Meta went further, indicating that its eating disorder-related algorithm is more likely to

target users who have previously engaged with content about body dissatisfaction. That is a malicious example of how these companies, which by the way are fully aware of these risks, continue to exploit the insecurities of women and girls.

Some of the most distressing cases of deepfakes and technology-facilitated sexual abuse have resulted in women losing their job, their reputation and even access to their children. These incidents send an appalling message that perpetrators can wield overwhelming power over their victims. They confirm the very fears that many survivors live with every day.

If social media and AI companies are willing to stand by while their algorithms amplify content about dangerous eating disorders and give abusers free rein to harm women and their children, we must act. This is a significant fight, but one that I and many of my colleagues are absolutely committed to continuing. If we are not vigilant, we risk allowing our digital world to be shaped by the misogynistic impulses of figures like Elon Musk and the wider manosphere, rather than building an online world that safeguards and protects women and girls.

4.51 pm

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. The argument for urgent and robust regulation to protect girls online has been won, thanks in no small part to the grit and resilience of survivors who have spoken out, and of the Minister herself, who is a formidable force in this area.

I began campaigning on this issue in defence of 14-year-old girls. Being 14 is tough: your hormones are wild, your body is changing, you take risks and you are desperate to belong. It has not been that long—although it is longer than I care to state to the House—since I was 14, so I do remember it. Some people advocate for an imaginary time gone by, filled with innocence, skipping ropes and cross-stitch, but that world was not real for most girls. Most 14-year-old girls will take risks, will keep secrets, will have a crush or 10, and will say mean things they should not say. That is part of growing up.

What we have allowed to happen to our girls, through the explosion of unsupervised stranger contact and self-published content, is utterly appalling. It is not normal, and we must take action now. I will outline as quickly as possible why I think we must take action to ban any form of stranger contact for under-16s online and why self-published content and functionalities that publish unregulated and unvetted content need to be banned for under-16s, to stop the exploitation.

The first meeting I had when I was elected was with the headteachers of secondary schools in Darlington, about online safety. I wanted to hear what the real issue was in Darlington and how severe it was, because so many parents had raised it with me. The results from the first forum, in which a thousand pupils came forward, were worse than I had feared: 60% of girls had known someone who had been bullied or blackmailed online, 53% of girls had been contacted by somebody lying about their age, 49% had been asked for pictures or personal information, compared with 28% of boys, and over 70% had been contacted by a stranger. One 14-year-old girl told me that they had been added to groups of strangers and that extreme content was then shared. That was on an app where you are not supposed to have contact from strangers.

[Lola McEvoy]

The platforms say that adults should no longer be able to contact under-16s, but it is obvious that it is still happening. It is easy to pass through: recent analysis of the ban in Australia showed that a lot of children had drawn on moustaches and coloured in fake beards in order to pass the facial recognition age verification test. I urge the Minister to look into that and to offer her support for a more rigorous ban.

Obviously, strangers should not be able to contact under-16-year-old girls. The secondary point about enforcement is quite clear, but there is also a point that has not yet been made to the House, about self-publishing and online safety. Where we see self-published content, we see an organised criminal network of people grooming children through links and through more enticing content that might lead them into a darker space that is even less regulated. I urge the Minister to support work to address that.

Finally, we need to address the deep imbalance in who pays the price for online extortion with images of girls. Girls who make a single mistake are made to suffer a permanent price. That is obviously wrong. Their image could be circulated at any time. The threat of it is unbearable: it can be used anywhere and shared with any number of people throughout their life. That is brutal enough, but as one girl in the forum said to me, "It's so wrong. The girl's always blamed. She's totally responsible." Can the Minister outline how we can do more to support girls who are victims and survivors?

4.54 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing this debate. It could not be timelier, because today represents a significant day for the constituency and community that I represent.

Three years ago, Holly Newton lost her life at the hands of her ex-boyfriend in Hexham. She was a much-loved daughter, granddaughter and sister, a loving friend and a talented dancer. She was just 15 years old. Her ex-boyfriend had become increasingly obsessed, coercive and controlling in the lead-up to her murder, attempting to isolate her from friends and relentlessly bombarding her. Three years ago, he used Snapchat to track her movements before fatally stabbing her. The exploitation of technology was used as one of a range of tools to abuse Holly and ultimately to end her life.

Devastatingly for her family, this abhorrent act of violence against Holly and the abuse that preceded it are not recognised as domestic violence, as Holly was under the age of 16. Micala, Holly's mother, experienced a horrifyingly similar lack of support or acknowledgment of her own experience of domestic abuse as a teenager. Without recognition for domestic abuse victims under the age of 16, the system will continue to fail children across the country.

I support the family and the campaign for Holly's law, which would change the age of recognition and the development of relationship education for all young people. It is a critical flaw that we are not legally recognising victims when we know that they exist and that perpetrators in the realm of digital exploitation and abuse are themselves increasingly under the age of 16 or 18. I thank the Minister

for the time she took to meet us last week, when we discussed the next steps for the campaign and addressed potential routes to reform.

Technology is being weaponised against women and girls at a speed that far outpaces our systems to safeguard and support victims, prosecute perpetrators and intervene in cases before warning signs escalate into fatalities. I want to touch briefly on a case that my office has been working on with another constituent for well over a year. Not only has she suffered the most appalling digital violation, but she has been a victim of systemic flaws when it comes to this form of abuse. She discovered that her partner had spent several years taking non-consensual intimate photographic images of her and had posted them to websites and forums online. He was arrested, but while he was in custody he refused to share the PIN to access his device.

The investigating force did not have the technology required to effectively review the device, which was key to the perpetrator's activity. It had no way to prove where the non-consensual images came from or prove their existence with any electronic footprint on the suspect's devices. With only circumstantial evidence based on who had access to the images, and with the suspect denying the accusations against him, the police could not meet the evidential threshold required for the CPS to charge. After being released, he was free to go straight back into the community, holding the very device that could be used to further perpetrate abuse, which he did. He turned to AI nudification apps to continue to produce non-consensual imagery of the victim and cover his digital tracks in the process.

Investigation resources, appropriate technologies and the boundaries of the evidential threshold have all conspired against this innocent woman whose life has been devastated by digital and domestic abuse. I urge the Minister to look proactively at a cross-departmental approach to ensuring that our commitment to tackling digital exploitation is effective and addresses the systemic gaps.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but to get everyone in we will have to go down to two minutes each.

4.58 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing this important debate.

With increased access to the internet, the exploitation of vulnerable children, predominantly young girls, has become easier for predators. Over the past few years, we have seen the rise of deepfakes on social media: the National Police Chiefs' Council estimates that they have increased in prevalence by 1,780% between 2019 and 2024. Let me be clear: the toxic culture of misogynistic behaviour online is not banter. It is not free speech. It is abuse.

We know that the victims of online misogyny, abuse and exploitation are predominantly women and girls, so I welcome the Government's bold action in making it a criminal offence to create or request the creation of non-consensual intimate images. How we respond to

online abuse defines what kind of society we are and what kind of society we are prepared to be. We should be a society that stands up for dignity and equality for all women and girls.

The speed at which these images can be produced and shared is truly alarming. I worry that without social media platforms taking more responsibility to remove this content from their sites, we will never truly be rid of it. There needs to be more emphasis on stopping the predators who create the images and on ensuring that such images can be removed swiftly from sites to protect women and girls. That needs to be backed by legislation.

The answer should never be for girls and women to log off or stay quiet. Exploitation of women and girls online is not inevitable; it is a failure of choice and a failure of systems. If we have the power to design these systems, we have the responsibility to make them safe.

5 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing this hugely important debate.

At the start of the year, many of us were horrified by the ease and speed at which thousands of women and children had their bodily autonomy violated, simply for existing online, but we should not kid ourselves that this was a one-off or an isolated scandal. Digital abuse of women and girls is not an anomaly; it is systemic. Only a few weeks ago, it was reported that Meta's smart glasses are being used to secretly film women without their consent. This is not accidental misuse; it is foreseeable harm. Before these technologies are embedded in the fabric of everyday life, we have a duty to regulate and legislate so that women and girls do not become the tragic cost of a tech revolution that prizes innovation over safety. We must be proactive, not reactive, because the ways in which women and girls are degraded and denied bodily autonomy online are constantly evolving.

We must enforce safety by design, and it must mean more than administrative box-ticking. Tech firms must be able to demonstrate that they have seriously considered the harms their products may cause, and that they have meaningfully mitigated those risks. There is so much more I could say on this, particularly in the case of Grok and Meta's smart glasses. Even a moment's serious reflection would have made it glaringly obvious that these technologies could be exploited. This failure has already cost thousands of women and girls their sense of safety and dignity online. We must take a firm and sustained approach, and fully empower Ofcom, so that this moment of technological progress does not become a major step backward for women's safety.

5.2 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): The recent horrific stories about Grok and other AI-enabled abuse have highlighted a trend with which far too many women are very familiar. The online world, for all its benefits, has also brought new opportunities for them to experience exactly the same degrading abuse that they are all too familiar with in day-to-day life.

There are three really important lessons for us all to take from the Grok case. First, given the platform's consistent inability to act on its own before being pushed, we need to continue to be proactive in taking on tech

firms. Secondly, the fact that we were able to deliver such fantastic action so quickly teaches us that when tools can be delivered robustly and with confidence, change is possible. Thanks to the brave testimony of many women, many of whom knew that in speaking up they would be making themselves targets for abuse, we were able to drive robust action from Ofcom and get X to back down. Thirdly, if we are to continue to keep pace with developing risk factors, we need to find quicker ways to legislate. The Online Safety Act 2023, for all its strengths, took far too long. We have to get comfortable with more principles-based legislation or secondary legislation options to ensure finally that we can do far better to keep women and children safe online.

Across Government, we need to make sure that our own services cannot be used to enable people to perpetuate abuse. I have been working with one woman who, having escaped domestic abuse and relocated to my constituency, now finds herself unable to reject a simple planning application because, in doing so, the local authority requires her to be comfortable publishing her full name and address online. This important democratic right cannot be denied to women fleeing domestic abuse, of all people. I welcome the chance to talk further with the Minister, after this debate, about what wider work we can do across Government to put this right and to ensure that none of our services, online or offline, are enabling women to be anything other than safe in their homes and thriving in their lives.

5.4 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing this important debate. I speak today as the MP for Portsmouth North, but also as a former teacher, a mum of three young men and a victim of this crime.

In Portsmouth, our residents live much of their lives online for work, study, information, and socialising, but the reality for many users is worrying. In 2023-24, of the cyber-crimes reported in Portsmouth, 34% were online bullying or harassment, 30% malicious messaging, 10% stalking and 8% sexual offences. Disgustingly, that number includes 60 cases involving images of children. Most of the victims were women under the age of 45, and their perpetrators were known to them, yet only 13% reported these crimes, leaving too many to suffer in silence or to be told that their complaint did not meet the threshold.

The digital revolution has brought opportunity, but it has also brought new and relentless forms of abuse. UN Women warns that AI deepfakes, grooming and image-based abuse are escalating. The recent use of AI to generate non-consensual sexual images, as my hon. Friend the Member for Preston noted in opening this debate, shows how quickly technology can be weaponised, and how tech giants are complicit.

Let me be clear: this is not about blaming girls or young women, or boys and young men. It is about responsibility, consent and respect. It must be clear that technology does not remove consent, and anonymity does not remove accountability. Women and girls should never have to navigate fear, shame or harassment just to live their lives.

[Amanda Martin]

I welcome the strengthening of the law and the introduction of the long-awaited VAWG strategy. I am proud to be part of a Government who have presented it and will deliver it, but we all know that laws alone are not enough, because technology moves quickly. We need stronger enforcement, safeguarding at the source, and education for young people and their parents about respect and consent online as well as offline.

There must be joined-up Government working, taking young people, their parents and whole communities with us, so that we can change the landscape and the culture, ensure that young women and girls in Portsmouth and across the country are safe online, and give victims the confidence they need to come forward.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Thank you very much, we managed to get everybody in. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Marie Goldman.

5.6 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing this very important debate.

All of us here recognise that rapid technological change is creating new risks and contexts for the exploitation of women and girls. The speed, anonymity and ease of communication provided by social media, combined with increasingly sophisticated AI tools, have led to new forms of sexual abuse emerging at alarming rates.

In 2025, the Internet Watch Foundation discovered 3,440 AI videos of child sexual abuse, a vast increase on the previous year, when only 13 such videos were found. That is why this debate, and our swift action, are so important. Far more needs to be done to keep women and girls safe online, and doing so is becoming at once more difficult and more urgent by the day. If we do not act swiftly, we cannot be surprised when new technologies exploit our lack of urgency.

Lola McEvoy: Does the hon. Member have any observations on the fact that technology has always outstripped legislation, and that this is actually about accountability and the enforcement of regulation?

Marie Goldman: Absolutely, and that has always been the case. Equally, we need to learn from the fact that it has always been the case and not be surprised when these things happen. We must not wring our hands and say, "There is harm being done—what could we possibly do about it?" We need to think smarter than that and bring in legislation that is much more forward-thinking and adaptable, and enables swifter action.

As hon. Members have already pointed out in this debate, digital abuse and exploitation are overwhelmingly targeted at women and girls. Research from Internet Matters found that 99% of new deepfakes are of women and girls. Moreover, according to the Revenge Porn Helpline, 98% of intimate images reported to its service were of women and 99% of deepfake intimate image abuse depicts women. It has also been discovered that many AI nudification tools do not actually work on images of boys and men.

We have now reached a point where AI tools embedded in major platforms are capable of producing sexual abuse material, demonstrating serious failings in our current framework. X's AI tool, Grok, is a case in point. We have talked about this many times before. Grok facilitated the illegal generation and circulation of non-consensual sexual images, yet Ofcom's response was, I am sorry to say, woefully slow. The executive summary of the violence against women and girls strategy states that it will

"ensure that the UK has one of the most robust responses to perpetrators of VAWG in the world."

I agree with that intention, but we must recognise that Ofcom's response was not wholly robust. We must do something about that; we owe it to women and girls in this country to act sooner and stronger. We need more effective legislation and a regulator with the capability and confidence to take appropriate and, crucially, swift action.

I welcome the move to make the creation of non-consensual intimate AI images a priority offence under the Online Safety Act, but that will be effective only if online platforms and services are held accountable under that Act. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have called on the National Crime Agency to launch an urgent criminal investigation into X, which should still happen, and to treat the generation of illegal, sexual abuse material with the seriousness it demands. We must act decisively when social media platforms refuse to comply with the law.

It is also time that we introduce age ratings for online platforms and limit harmful social media to over-16s. How can we expect to tackle violence against women and girls when the next generation is being drip-fed misogynistic content on social media?

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Member is right. Does she agree that online pornography remains an issue that needs to be tackled? The statistics show that more than 50% of young boys aged 11 to 13 have already seen porn, and that it is shaping their minds about what consent is.

Marie Goldman: There are so many aspects to this problem. What we, the parents, saw in the fledgling days of social media is not at all what our children are seeing now. We need to recognise that and act against it. What our children see online is already affecting their worldview. Internet Matters research from 2023 found that 42% of children aged nine to 16 had a favourable or neutral view of the well-known misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate, and that older teenage boys were particularly susceptible. That is incredibly worrying. Decisive action to tackle the digital exploitation of women and girls is needed across the board. Online harm is genuine harm, and we must treat it as such. There is a lot of work to do, but I am keen to work cross-party to get it done. I hope the Minister is too.

5.11 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. Digital exploitation does not affect women and girls exclusively, but, given that four in five victims of online grooming are girls, it is an issue that we must focus on. As MPs, we are all aware of the risks and threats that

women face in the online sphere. It is no surprise that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that only 9% of girls feel safe in online spaces. The accounts of stalking given earlier are terrifying, especially those using Ring doorbells, which are designed to keep people safe; that they would be manipulated in that way is horrific. The case of Holly that involved Snapchat in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) is frankly horrifying.

There is no doubt that the complexity of the online world has resulted in significant digital exploitation. At this very moment, online content is being produced that takes advantage of women for financial gain. That is particularly worrying given that, according to Ofcom's 2025 report on the time people spend online, women are spending more time than men across an array of websites. The issues around the digital exploitation of women and girls are particularly prominent on social media sites: over half of girls and women report receiving sexist comments about themselves online. This is a problem on an industrial scale.

The recent Grok sexual imagery debacle brought this into sharp focus. It demonstrated the dangers posed to women who had not even engaged with the technology. People merely used an existing image to take advantage of the technology and spread it using the power of social media. I welcome steps to stop it, but are we equipped to handle the changing digital landscape in the future? The Online Safety Act introduced key changes to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and criminalised sharing intimate images of another person without their consent. The Government are now adding provisions to the Act to make it a criminal offence to create non-consensual intimate images. Do the Government believe that that will be sufficient, and that Ofcom has the necessary powers to stop this abhorrent practice?

What I have seen from the Government so far is a reactive approach to AI and how it relates to women and girls. The technology is undoubtedly here to stay, but given the uncertainty of its development, is the Minister confident that the Government's approach is sufficiently agile to prevent people from taking advantage of the technology to exploit women and girls?

As we have heard, AI is only one part of the problem: social media is driving much of the digital exploitation of women and girls. Data from 44 forces provided to the NSPCC showed that the police recorded 7,263 "sexual communications with a child" offences in the last year—a number that has almost doubled since the offence came into force in 2017-18. Data from the crime survey of England and Wales showed an increase of 6% in child exploitation offences compared with the previous year, and that comes on top of evidence that these platforms are linked to the fact girls are twice as likely as boys to experience anxiety. Recent data shows that girls who use social media at the age of 11 report greater distrust of other people at the age of 14.

The problem is only growing. Every day that the Government delay is another day that millions of girls are left at risk. We do not need further reviews or consultations; we need a ban on social media for under-16s. It is time to grip this issue.

Lola McEvoy: Will the hon. Lady elaborate on her definitions of "social media" and "ban"?

Sarah Bool: In terms of social media, I mean platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat; I am not talking about WhatsApp, which is a communication platform that many families use, although we have to be careful how it is used, because images can be shared on it.

A ban is about ensuring that children cannot access these platforms. The issue has been raised at different levels. The problem is the content that children can see, and especially the way the algorithms are used. I recognise that the companies also need to take responsibility for what is being accessed and how people are accessing it, because this is going on at a scale larger than any parent could imagine. This is not the social media that we grew up on, where we used to post a little note on a wall for our friend's birthday or upload photos from a night out—that is definitely not what children are seeing.

Lola McEvoy: My problem with the hon. Lady's argument is that we have constantly said that our legislation is lagging behind technological advances, but the proposed solution is to name a number of platforms where there is evidence of exploitation, crime and damage. I agree that we need to do that, but is it not better to make evergreen legislation, as some Members have argued, than to have a list of examples that somebody else has come up with?

Sarah Bool: I agree, but we need to take action now on the ones that we are aware of. Our legislation absolutely needs to be much more agile for the future, and I am not saying that a ban will be a silver bullet, but it will protect many girls from digital exploitation. That is why I am asking the Minister to follow the policy set out by the Conservative party, which was accepted in the House of Lords, and prohibit those under the age of 16 from using social media. If we do not put our children into those arenas, they will be far less likely to experience the opportunities for exploitation that stem from the internet and target the young and the vulnerable.

If the Government support those measures, they could move fast and take action without delay. Let me be clear: the challenges posed by digital exploitation will not vanish if we prohibit the use of social media, but that would be a bulwark against the dangers that social media poses, particularly to young people. If we allow people to access these platforms when they are more mature and more educated, we can hopefully achieve reductions in exploitation.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): As others have said, it is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) for securing the debate, and to all Members who have spoken.

From the get-go, I want to set out my stall and talk about exactly how I feel about this issue. If someone makes their money through harming women, and if part of their business model is sharing terrible, sexualised, faked images of people like me—well, I am not really allowed to say what I think about that, but I want to make it completely clear that it is totally and utterly unacceptable. Discussions like this are essential, especially as we know that the technology is developing more quickly than we can write legislation.

[*Jess Phillips*]

The hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) asked why we cannot ban these things now. I remember the Online Safety Act going through Parliament, and I have to say that it is a triumph of hope over experience to think that I could just say, “Ban it now,” and that by tomorrow it would be banned. If only I wielded such a great ban hammer, I would be banning stuff all over the shop—no one would be listening to their phone out loud on the train any more. But that pace of change is not one that legislation easily keeps up with, and I say to other hon. Members who have spoken that we need to find backstops and ways to make our legislation more agile, so that it can change without having to go through some of the processes we have—I gave 10 years of my life to the Online Safety Act.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not enforcement that is really lacking? Should legislation make enforcement the prime tool?

Jess Phillips: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. She is absolutely right that we need to make sure these things are enforced. To Members who spoke about pornography, I would say that there are reasons to be cheerful about the enforcement by Ofcom. I could dance a jig because Pornhub has reported a 77% reduction in traffic since age verification stopped young people being able to access it so easily. We are in the foothills of what that legislation can do. Where pornography companies have not been undertaking age verification, Ofcom has issued £1 million fines, and changes have been made to companies’ roles in the UK, so that they meet our laws. So there are reasons to think that there is some enforcement, but I absolutely agree that we need to grapple with the agility, scale and scope of that enforcement.

I must come to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Preston. Before I came to the debate, my colleague the Minister for victims was telling me how amazing my hon. Friend and his office have been in Preston in handling online abuse. People in our constituency offices often do not get praised for these things, but I hear that my hon. Friend has a legend working in his office.

My hon. Friend talked about the importance of education in this space, and about this being a country-wide push for change, and I could not agree more. The Government have invested in this issue, and it will be an absolutely fundamental part of the violence against women and girls strategy.

The National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection will do exactly what my hon. Friend talked about, so that the good standards, for example, in Cheshire—it is not far from him, and the anti-stalking practices are amazing and world-leading—are the same for people in the west midlands and everywhere else. My hon. Friend used the example of stalking legislation and making sure there are standardised systems and standards that police forces have to live by, which will absolutely include upskilling, when policing the digital elements of these crimes, whether it is domestic abuse or online. Stalking online is as illegal as stalking in real life—just to be clear, they are the same crime.

My hon. Friend talked about the richest man in the world. I am not sure there are many people in this building who have quite such a claim against the richest man in the world as me. What happened is unacceptable, and anyone who has existed online will know about the Grok outcry.

Some hon. Members mentioned Meta glasses. If I had been in the meeting where they floated the idea of making Meta glasses, the very first thing I would have said would have been, “These are going to be used to abuse women.” Why is that not being baked into the design of such products?

One of the things the violence against women and girls strategy has absolutely committed to is working on safety by design. In the car industry, we now take safety features for granted. If we are talking about what it was like when we were kids versus now, my dad used to put us in the back of the car and purposefully go round the corners fast so that we would smack into the window. These things are not acceptable now.

We have to go on a journey with this technology. To me, a Ring doorbell is such an obvious way to stalk somebody, as is an AirTag. I see cases again and again. It does not matter what the new technologies are; perpetrators of these abuses will find a way to use them for that purpose, so we need to design in safety functions. On the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) about planning, I will take that away and work with him.

The Government obviously took a strong stance—I felt pleased about this—against Grok. We can see that when we stand together and people speak up, we can make change in this area, but we need to make sustainable change. We absolutely are always looking at legislative changes. As people have said, there have been a number of those. There is the issue of Grok being added into the Online Safety Act, so that there can be accountability on that basis.

In the Crime and Policing Bill, we are also banning nudification apps. I have also had it shown to me that they do not work on men and boys, which I am glad about for men’s and boys’ sake, but if you are designing something that will nudify only women, you have a problem. I do not know who I can talk to, but there is something wrong with you. Have a word with yourself; otherwise, we will have a word with you. The ban will target firms and individuals providing and supplying tools that use AI to turn images of real people into fake nudes.

There is a raft of other legislation that we are putting through and that we hope will shift the dial. Obviously, in the violence against women and girls strategy, we have made a very clear commitment to ensuring that we make it impossible for children to take and share naked images of themselves—we will make it impossible for them to do that. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) and others talked about children being taken from social media and on to other platforms. I have to say that encrypted spaces are the most dangerous for child abuse imagery. But to the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire, who was talking about that, I say this: 91% of all child sexual abuse images are self-made; they are made by children themselves. People have groomed them—exploited them—to make those images. It may be their peers.

We will not stop this just by looking at the issue of new AI. There is an issue with where our children can go and who has access to them. I agree with the hon. Lady's sentiment. We have to make sure that we get this right. Even with the 10 years of work on the Online Safety Act, and with the level of detail and, I have to say, the arguments that went into it, it still has all the gaps that we are talking about, so we need to make sure we get this right and legislate in a way that can be agile for the future. That is why I think the Government need to take the time—not too much time, I agree—to make sure we do that.

Others talked about accountability and whether anyone ever actually gets punished for these things. As part of the work we are doing in the Home Office, we are expanding the use of covert officers to address violence against women and girls, and improving the capabilities to counter and reduce the highest harms. We operate a similar system with regard to child abuse online. We are now doing that also for women and girls online, recognising the level of organised crime that is behind this. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about people who are asleep and being filmed, like Gisèle Pelicot.

These issues deserve a police force specifically looking at the covert aspect, and that is what this Government are doing.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call Sir Mark Hendrick to wind up the debate extremely briefly—in about 5 seconds.

5.29 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick: Thank you, Ms Jardine. I thank the Minister and all my colleagues for an excellent debate. I think we had a brilliant response from the Minister. I am sure she is determined to ensure that the digital space can be as safe as possible for women and children, and for everybody else as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling the digital exploitation of women and girls.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 27 January 2026

TREASURY

Charter for Budget Responsibility

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): At Budget 2025, the Government strengthened the fiscal framework in order to deliver on their commitment to holding one major fiscal event per year, supporting the economy with greater policy certainty.

Responding to recommendations made by the International Monetary Fund, the Government set out that they would legislate to ensure that the Office for Budget Responsibility assesses performance against the fiscal rules once a year at the Budget.

The Finance (No. 2) Bill includes an amendment to the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, the underlying primary legislation that sets out the requirement for fiscal rules assessments.

The draft “Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2025” has been published on gov.uk. The charter already set out the Government’s commitment to hold one major fiscal event per year. This update to the charter makes technical changes to deliver the policy announced at Budget 2025 relating to fiscal rules assessments, complementing the changes being made to the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act. The updated charter will be laid before Parliament, and a debate and vote will be scheduled in due course.

A copy of the document is available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-charter-for-budget-responsibility-autumn-2025>

[HCWS1275]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Grassroots Sports Facilities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Grassroots sport plays a vital role in bringing communities together across the country. The Government are committed to supporting the growth of grassroots sport by investing in facilities, ensuring that communities benefit from the opportunity that sport provides.

Today, the Government have announced we are investing £85 million to build and upgrade grassroots sport facilities across the UK in 2026-27, as part of a £400 million boost for grassroots sport facilities across 2025 to 2030. The funding will continue to remove barriers to physical activity, ensuring we deliver new and upgraded grassroots sport facilities in the areas that most need them, so that people can participate in sport regardless of where they live. This funding is going to artificial grass pitches, goalposts, floodlights and community hubs through the

multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, with a further £15 million to be invested in England in 2026-27. This includes the previously announced £5 million for basketball—the second-most-popular team sport for young people behind football—which will be invested alongside £5 million from the NBA. Further details on £10 million funding for innovative facilities models is due to be set out in the coming months.

The programme will deliver funding for pitches and related facilities through our delivery partners: the Football Foundation (a partnership with the English FA and Premier League) in England, the Cymru Football Foundation in Wales, and the Football Associations in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In addition, we have today published updated lists of 991 projects funded by the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme so far in 2025-26. Projects funded through the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme are designed to increase participation for under-represented groups such as women and girls, disabled players and deprived communities. Moving forward, we will ensure that 50% of investment will target the 30% most deprived areas. In order that as many people can participate in sport and physical activity as possible, 40% of funding will also support projects that have a multi-sport offer. A full list can be found here

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/multi-sport-grassroots-facilities-programme-projects-2025-to-2026>

and I will place a copy of this list in the Library of each House. Lists will be further updated in due course.

Clubs and organisations across the UK are now being urged to come forward and apply for funding available in 2026-27, which they can do by contacting the relevant partner in their country. Further detail can be found on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-and-upgraded-grassroots-sport-facilities-to-get-the-uk-active>

The Government’s future investment in grassroots sport will take into account a range of funding options, following engagement with the sports sector and local leaders to understand the demands of regions across the country. We will ensure that funding reaches a wider range of sports so that as many people as possible are able to participate in physical activity.

[HCWS1273]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Heat Networks (Mark Framework) (Great Britain) Regulations 2025

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): Today I am announcing the commencement of heat network regulation.

Remaining sections of the Heat Network (Market Framework) (Great Britain) Regulations 2025, as amended, will come into effect, introducing protections for both existing and future heat network consumers as we seek to grow the sector. These protections build on the introduction of statutory advice and advocacy through Citizens Advice and Consumer Scotland and statutory redress through the Energy Ombudsman, introduced from April 2025.

Heat networks are a decentralised energy distribution technology, which circulates heating, cooling and hot water from central sources to multiple points of use. The scale of these networks can vary significantly, from single building, communal networks to multiple building district networks. Heat network consumers have not, until now, enjoyed similar regulatory protections to those in gas and electricity markets. This unregulated state has led to a large variation in consumer experiences, including limited transparency on pricing. Where there are no consistent rules on prices, supplier behaviour or technical operation, this has meant some consumers can experience unfair high prices, poor customer service and frequent outages with limited routes of redress.

That is why the Government have taken steps to regulate the market, acting on recommendations from the Competition and Markets Authority and appointing Ofgem to act as the heat network regulator. Ofgem will operate an authorisation regime, which heat networks are bound to comply with to maintain their right to operate in the market. Ofgem's powers will enable it to collect information from heat suppliers that will help it to assess whether regulations are proportionate and to take decisive action if necessary to address regulatory non-compliance.

Existing heat networks have been automatically deemed as holding an authorisation until the end of the transitional period on 27 January 2027. These heat networks, and any heat networks that commence operation from now until the end of the transitional period, will need to submit a lighter-touch registration to Ofgem before the transitional period ends.

Ofgem authorisation conditions include rules on how prices are charged, requiring that prices are clearly explained, bills are transparent and that prices charged are fair. Once Ofgem has collected a full year's worth of sector data, it will set benchmarks of acceptable prices for different network characteristics, which will be a basis for more systematic action to tackle examples of unfair high pricing. Ofgem will also have powers to introduce guaranteed standards of performance once market data becomes available. This will set out the standards of service that heat networks will be expected to provide to consumers, and networks will be required to pay compensation when these standards are not met. In addition, we have published a consultation on proposals for minimum mandatory technical standards to help drive improved heat networks' efficiency and performance.

The regime that is commencing today is set out through the first comprehensive utility regulations in the heat network sector's history. We will monitor the market closely, working with Ofgem and other statutory partners to ensure that the regulatory regime works effectively and that it is fit for the purpose of protecting heat consumers.

[HCWS1274]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

People with a Learning Disability and Autistic People: Eighth Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): I would like to acknowledge today the publication of the updated eighth

report on "Learning from lives and deaths—People with a learning disability and autistic people" (LeDeR) produced by King's College London. This replaces a previous version of the report which was retracted in December 2025 due to a technical issue with the LeDeR data. I will place a copy of the revised report in the Library of both Houses.

This Government are committed to improving care and reducing health inequalities for people with a learning disability and autistic people. We understand how important the timely and accurate release of information on LeDeR is in achieving this goal.

Following urgent investigation, the errors were found to be caused by an automated data-processing issue, which meant that some data on causes of death was missing at the time of analysis. This affected the conclusions originally published. I recognise how concerning the retraction will have been for bereaved families and stakeholders who place great trust in the LeDeR process. NHS England has worked with its data processor to correct the automated processing error so that it cannot recur. King's College London has also strengthened its data checking protocols to prevent similar issues in the future. I am assured that this issue has now been resolved, and these improvements have been applied to the revised report published today.

The headline findings of the updated 2023 LeDeR report remain consistent with those previously published. The updated analysis reaffirms that people with a learning disability continue to experience significant health inequalities: on average, they die 19.5 years younger than the general population and are almost twice as likely to die from an avoidable cause of death. This remains unacceptable, and tackling these disparities continues to be a priority for this Government.

NHS England sets clear expectations for local systems, requiring integrated care boards to prioritise LeDeR reviews in their delivery plans and produce an annual report demonstrating how learning from those reviews has driven action. In addition, there is wider, significant work under way to reduce health inequalities for people with a learning disability and autistic people—including mandatory training on learning disability and autism for health and care staff, continued uptake of annual health checks, and roll out of a reasonable adjustment digital flag.

The updated report contains the following specific changes:

Review of lives and deaths (2021-23)

The proportion of deaths classed as avoidable is now higher than originally reported, particularly in 2023 (40.2% v. 38.8%), although the downward trend over time remains. Influenza and pneumonia remain the leading avoidable cause but account for a smaller share, while ischaemic heart disease contributes a larger share. Cerebrovascular disease replaces digestive cancers among the leading avoidable causes. The ranking of overall causes of death has also changed, with diseases of the circulatory system now the most common cause.

Ethnicity

There are small changes in the proportion of deaths classified as avoidable by ethnic group, with slightly lower percentages among ethnic minority groups and a slightly higher percentage among white adults. There are small shifts in the relative contribution of leading causes of death by ethnic group. These changes do not

alter the overall conclusions, with avoidable mortality remaining higher among several ethnic minority groups than white adults and the general population.

Level of learning disability

Avoidable mortality is higher than originally reported for both adults with a mild or moderate learning disability and those with a severe or profound learning disability. The difference between these groups is now considerable. While there are small changes in the proportions of overall and avoidable causes of death, the ordering of causes remains unchanged, and the overall interpretation of differing mortality patterns by level of learning disability is not altered.

Autistic adults

There are small changes in the proportions of causes of death among autistic adults without a learning disability. The largest shift is in deaths by suicide, which increase from 29.1% to 31.5%. This does not alter the overall interpretation of findings. Evidence on causes of death for autistic adults without a learning disability is emerging. The number of deaths notified to LeDeR remains small, meaning findings are unlikely to be fully representative of the population of people who are autistic.

[HCWS1276]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Regulator

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon):

Today, the Building Safety Regulator moves from the Health and Safety Executive to become a new non-departmental body of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We are also launching the first phase of work to improve the implementation of the higher-risk building regime, so that the regulator can become more proportionate while continuing to deliver the highest safety standards for residents.

The Grenfell Tower tragedy exposed multiple systemic failures across the built environment. The BSR was created to help ensure those failures do not occur again. It has worked with others to begin a deep culture shift across the sector, improve safety standards across the built environment and deliver a major shift in how buildings are regulated, constructed, and managed.

The Government demonstrated last summer that they are prepared to act decisively to support the regulator and make sure it can work effectively, by bringing in Lord Roe as chair and setting up the BSR as a separate organisation. Today's change in how the regulator is governed will ensure it remains dedicated to building safety and standards, with greater operational flexibility and clearer accountability to the Department. It pursues a renewed mission to uphold and advance safety standards across its areas of responsibility with rigour and expertise. This marks an important step in our programme of reform for the sector and a key milestone on the journey towards a single construction regulator.

We must go further and build on the progress already made. Today we are announcing the first phase of work to ensure the higher-risk building regime is applied in a

proportionate way, and that regulatory requirements are fit for purpose and complement the operational progress made by the BSR. Strengthening safety across the system remains our overriding priority, and these measures are designed to reinforce the safeguards that underpin the regime.

We are launching a consultation on how building control, both within the higher-risk regime and in some cases across the wider system, should apply to telecommunications building work. Our aim is to ensure residents can access modern digital infrastructure quickly, without compromising safety. By refining the approach to high-volume, lower-risk telecoms building work, we can improve decision making and safety outcomes, reduce pressure on the system, and enable the BSR to focus its expertise on the most complex and highest-risk activity. This will help maintain the rigorous safety standards rightly expected, while allowing essential works to proceed at pace.

We will also be consulting on further proposals to refine the application of the regime for high-volume, low-complexity work and to ensure that the system operates in a proportionate manner. Later in the spring, we will bring forward consultations on minor building work within homes and on existing fire doors. Building homes quickly and building them safely are not in conflict; that is why we are consulting on making the system more proportionate while keeping safety at its core. Throughout this process, we remain firmly committed to ensuring safety standards and oversight of the highest-risk work are not diluted. We will engage closely with the BSR, industry, technical experts, local authorities and residents as these proposals are developed.

The consultation can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-proportionality-and-safety-outcomes-in-building-control-telecommunications-work>

These proposals reflect a commitment to appropriate levels of oversight, while freeing up regulatory resources to ensure the safe delivery of vital homes, and the refurbishment and remediation work this country needs.

[HCWS1279]

Woking Borough Council and Thurrock Council: Best Value Duty

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness

(Alison McGovern): This Government are committed to taking the action necessary to fix the foundations of local government. Today, I am updating the House on the steps we are taking to support two councils to recover and reform: Woking borough council and Thurrock council.

Woking borough council

Woking borough council has been under statutory intervention since May 2023 and, in December 2025, I published the commissioners' fifth report, together with my response. I welcomed their assessment of continued progress in governance, housing, and commercial restructuring, and shared their concerns about the significant challenges ahead. To maintain stability and the council's improvement progress, the Secretary of State reappointed Richard Carr as managing director commissioner, and Barry Scarr as finance commissioner. Sir Tony Redmond

also remains as lead commissioner. Their appointments are in place until 24 May 2028 as a backstop, when the directions are set to expire. In practice, these appointments will lapse when Woking borough council is planned to be dissolved in 2027, as part of local government reorganisation in Surrey.

As the commissioners also note, local government reorganisation in Surrey adds urgency and complexity. In their next report, I would welcome their reflections on this process, including how Government can best support new councils in meeting their best value duty from day one and any urgent issues beyond the commissioners' remit.

This report is published at an important stage for the council, following the Government's announcement to provide in-principle £500 million of debt repayment support for the council in 2026-27. This is a difficult position for Government representing a significant and unprecedented commitment, made necessary in the context of Woking's acute financial failure. The announcement of debt support reflects that Woking borough council holds exceptional unsupported debt linked to historic capital practices, and that there is a value for money case for acting to protect local and national taxpayers. Any support is subject to continued assurance of the council's financial position; the council's commitment to reduce debt locally as far as possible within its local capacity; and value for money for the local and national taxpayer.

Thurrock council

I am today publishing the commissioners' most recent report which I received in November 2025. I am pleased to see the continued progress made by the council and that there has been a smooth transition to the new leadership. The report notes that financial management has improved, with more transparency in reporting and that the council is embracing external reviews and public engagement, indicating a cultural shift toward greater transparency. I am pleased the council continues to take the necessary steps locally to reduce its level of debt and to support financial improvement. Government are committed to providing debt repayment support to Thurrock and Woking councils, given their significant and exceptional unsupported debt linked to historic capital practices, and the value for money case for acting to protect local and national taxpayers. Any support for Thurrock council is subject to continued assurance of the council's financial position; the council's commitment to reduce debt locally as far as possible within its local capacity; and value for money for the local and national taxpayer.

The commissioners' latest report also highlights some of the risks to improvement. It is important that the council maintains its focus on improvement and transformation alongside the broader transformation programmes of local government reorganisation and devolution.

I also note that the commissioners support the council's desire to be given the opportunity to appoint its own chief executive rather than the role being filled by a managing director commissioner. I am writing today to the leader of the council to confirm that I am content for the council to initiate a recruitment process for a chief executive. This is on the understanding that a suitable, experienced candidate can be recruited and that the commissioners will continue to support and

guide the council throughout this process; and with the expectation that the progress made so far is embedded throughout the council and that the pace of improvement continues.

If a suitable candidate is appointed, I would expect a period of overlap with the existing managing director commissioner to enable a smooth transition and handover to take place. It is evident that ongoing commissioner support will be critical to ensure the council's improvement trajectory is maintained. Following the conclusion of the recruitment process, I intend to review what further changes would be needed to ensure the commissioner team has capacity to provide sufficient support to the council, and assurance to Ministers.

Conclusion

I am committed to working with these councils to ensure their compliance with the best value duty and the high standards of governance that local residents expect. This Government are working to deliver a consistently fit, legal and decent local government sector that provides good quality essential statutory services for all residents.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS1277]

Commonhold and Leasehold Reform

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): As a Government, we made a clear and unambiguous commitment in our manifesto to act where previous Governments had failed by finally bringing the feudal leasehold system to an end. We did so on the basis of a firm conviction that it is only by extinguishing fully the historical iniquities on which the present leasehold system rests that we can ensure that the dream of home ownership is made real for millions of households across the country.

Today the Government have published the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. This historic moment marks the beginning of the end for the feudal leasehold system that has tainted the dream of home ownership for so many.

The draft Bill will transform the experience of home ownership for millions of leaseholders across the country, modernise property law and deliver a modern housing market. It includes the following key provisions:

- A new legal framework for commonhold to reform and reinvigorate this radical improvement on leasehold ownership;

- A statutory restriction on new leasehold flats to ensure that in future commonhold is the default tenure;

- A new process for converting to commonhold, aligned with wider enfranchisement processes to make conversion possible when at least 50% of qualifying leaseholders agree;

- The abolition of leasehold forfeiture as a means of ensuring compliance with a lease agreement and its replacement with a fairer system;

- The repeal of draconian powers relating to rent charges on freehold estates; and

- The capping of ground rent for older leases at £250 per year, changing to a peppercorn after 40 years.

Reinvigorating commonhold

The draft Bill builds on the publication of the commonhold White Paper in March last year, which confirmed the detail of our commonhold reform programme and responded to the Law Commission thorough and expert review of commonhold law.

Commonhold is a modern home ownership structure that is used widely around the world. It is not merely an alternative to leasehold ownership, but a radical improvement on it. At the heart of the commonhold model is a simple principle: the people who should own buildings, and who should exercise control over their management, shared facilities and related costs, are not third-party landlords but the people who live in flats within them and have a direct stake in their upkeep.

In enabling flats to be owned on a freehold basis, commonhold ensures that the interests of homeowners are preserved in perpetuity rather than their value depreciating over time as it does under leasehold, and it transfers decision-making powers to homeowners so they will have a greater say over how their home is managed and the bills they pay, as well as flexibility to respond to the changing needs of their building and its residents.

Commonhold was introduced in England and Wales in 2004 through the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, but for a variety of reasons it failed to establish itself and, as a result, there are fewer than 20 commonhold developments in existence today. The 2002 legal framework also quickly became outdated, owing to the fact it was ill-suited for use in larger or mixed-use developments.

The draft Bill will reinvigorate commonhold through the introduction of a comprehensive new legal framework based on the vast majority of the recommendations made by the Law Commission in its 2020 report. It will enable commonhold to be used in the widest possible range of settings, enhancing the rights and protections of consumers while also supporting the needs of developers and lenders.

Banning new leasehold flats

To ensure that commonhold becomes the default tenure, the draft Bill also includes provisions to ban the use of leasehold for new flats. Once enacted, this will ensure that, other than in exceptional circumstances, all flats are provided as commonhold, as is the case in large parts of the world. The provisions in the draft Bill are intended to work in tandem with the ban on the use of leasehold for new houses contained in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

Alongside publication of the draft Bill today, we have published a “Moving to commonhold” consultation, seeking input from industry and consumers on precisely how we implement the new ban. The feedback received will ensure that we can proceed with a smooth transition to commonhold for new flats, while at the same time protecting the supply of new homes and determining whether there is a case for any justified exemptions.

Facilitating commonhold conversion

The draft Bill also includes measures to make it easier for existing leaseholders to convert their buildings to commonhold. The relevant provisions respond to proposals made by the Law Commission to make conversion more accessible by reducing the consent threshold for conversion.

The existing law sets out a process for conversion, but it is one that requires consent from everyone with an interest in the block. This sets an unacceptably high bar and means that commonhold is not achievable if even a single unit owner, lender or the existing freeholder objects. The draft Bill will introduce a new process for conversion—one that brings conversion into line with wider enfranchisement processes and will make conversion possible if at least 50% of qualifying leaseholders agree.

Abolishing forfeiture

The draft Bill also contains a number of vital reforms to the existing leasehold system that the previous Government’s Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 left untouched. Chief among them are provisions to end the disproportionate and draconian threat of forfeiture as a means of ensuring compliance with a lease agreement.

For too long, outdated forfeiture laws have allowed landlords to threaten people with losing their home and hard-earned equity over small debts of as little as £350, or any amount if left unpaid for three years. The draft Bill contains provisions to abolish forfeiture and introduce a modern, proportionate lease enforcement system that addresses breaches fairly, with appropriate safeguards and judicial oversight.

Repealing draconian powers relating to rent charges

To better protect homeowners on freehold estates, the draft Bill will repeal draconian enforcement powers that apply to estate rent charges on them. These powers, often difficult to find in deeds and poorly understood by buyers, can lead to rent charge owners taking possession of or granting a lease over a freehold home as a result of small sums outstanding. That is not just unfair, but creates real barriers to home ownership and property sales. The draft Bill will remove those powers and the unnecessary obstacles that drive up costs and uncertainty for freehold estate homeowners.

Capping ground rent

The Government are acutely aware that the cost of living remains a pressing concern for leaseholders across England and Wales and that those who remain subject to unfair and unreasonable practices need urgent relief.

That is why last summer we consulted, jointly with the Welsh Government, on a range of proposals to hold landlords and managing agents to account for the services they provide and the charges and fees they levy. At the heart of that consultation were measures to increase transparency over service charges and enhance access to redress, but it also included proposals to reform the section 20 “major works” procedure and strengthen regulation of managing agents. We thank all those who responded to the consultation and will set out details of how we intend to implement the measures in question as soon as possible.

However, the Government are determined to go further to alleviate the cost of living pressures facing leaseholders. In our manifesto, we committed to tackling unregulated and unaffordable ground rent charges, and the draft Bill honours that commitment.

Historically, ground rents, which often entail no service being provided whatsoever, were of low or nominal value. However, over the past two decades a practice has developed of freeholders including high and escalating

ground rent clauses in leases. Such clauses are causing leaseholders considerable financial strain, and some are unable to sell or remortgage their properties as a result.

The draft Bill will cap ground rents at £250 per year initially, changing to a peppercorn after 40 years. This approach, which will apply to most long residential leases not already covered by existing legislation, will provide immediate financial relief for leaseholders with high and harmful ground rents, helping to support leaseholders currently struggling to get a mortgage, and removing unnecessary blockers to buying and selling. The longer-term change to a peppercorn cap will eliminate the two-tier market between new and older leases, delivering a fair and efficient modern housing market.

These reforms will necessarily have effects on existing contractual arrangements and investments, something that this Government do not undertake lightly. However, the Government have a mandate to tackle unregulated and unaffordable ground rent charges, and our approach has been designed to strike a fair balance between the

interests of leaseholders, freeholders and investors, maintaining the reputation of the UK as a safe place to invest.

Rectifying flaws in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024

As set out in a previous written ministerial statement I made on this subject—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 24WS.]—(HCWS244), the 2024 Act contains a small number of specific but serious flaws that prevent certain provisions from operating as intended and that need to be rectified via primary legislation.

Although this is not included in the draft Bill, our intention is to rectify those flaws in primary legislation. Among other things, this will allow us to commence the 2024 Act's enfranchisement provisions. Valuation rates used to calculate the enfranchisement premium will be set by the Secretary of State in secondary legislation. We will consult on valuation rates as soon as possible, ahead of commencing the relevant provisions.

[HCWS1278]

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**not later than
Tuesday 3 February 2026**

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